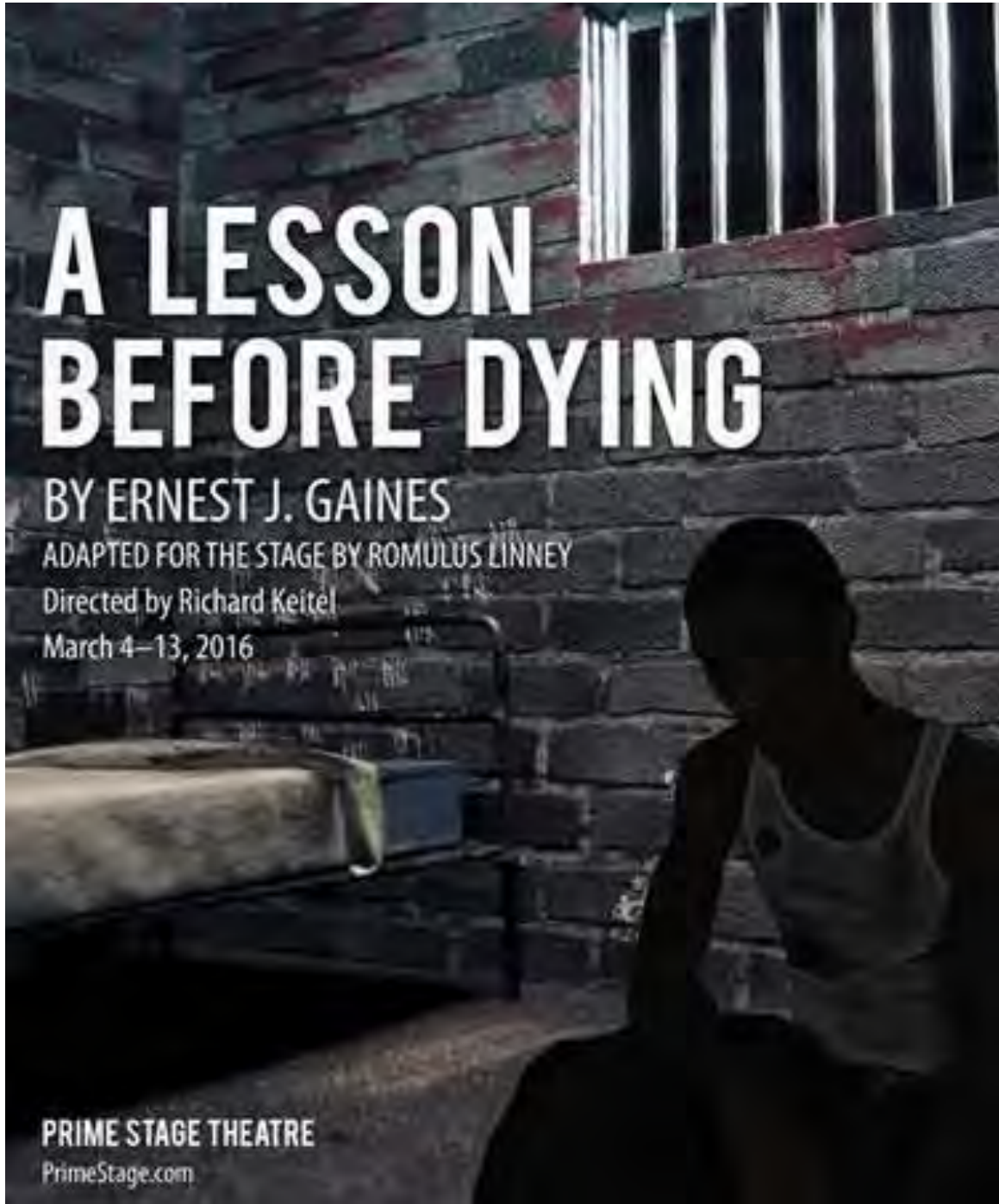




Prime Stage Theatre Resource Guide



Prime Stage Performances are located at The New Hazlett Theater Center for Performing Arts

Bringing Literature to Life

Our Education Programming is funded in part by the following:

Literacy in Action

Student Matinee Field Trips

Theatre Mentor/Interns

Professional Development

Education Director

Teen Dating Awareness



The Heinz Endowment



LAUREL FOUNDATION



Massey Charitable Trust



Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre: **Bringing Literature to Life!**

Dear Educator,

Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre's 2015-2016 Season!

We are pleased to bring you *A Lesson before Dying* by Romulus Linney as our second production of the season. The play, which makes a bold and moving statement about the link between learning and dignity, is an adaptation of Ernest J. Gaines' book of the same title, which won the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award. There is a narrative that states:

It's not power, not position, not clothes that makes the man. It's education.

All literature produced by Prime Stage is always drawn from middle and secondary Reading Lists and themes are in the curriculum.

This Resource Guide is designed to provide historical background and context, classroom activities and curricular content to help you enliven your students' experience with the literature and the theatre. We encourage you to use the theatrical games and creative thinking activities, as well as the Theatre Etiquette suggested activities to spark personal connections with the themes and characters in the story of *A Lesson before Dying*.

If you have any questions about the information or activities in the guide, please contact me and I will be happy to assist you and I welcome your suggestions!

Linda Haston, Education Director, Teaching Artist
lhaston@primestage.com

The activities in this guide are intended to enliven, clarify and enrich the text as you read, and the experience as you watch the literature.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

It has been a pleasure directing for Prime Stage over this past decade. Working on A Lesson before Dying has been an incredible experience. I have been reading a lot of books to prepare me for directing this show. A few of the most powerful have been Between The World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates, The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander, and Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?, by Beverly Tatum. I am also reading multiple books on Ernest Gaines, the author of the book A Lesson before Dying. It is a pleasure working with such a diverse cast of talented actors. It is a very powerful, emotional story and we have been discussing issues about race, racism, poverty, and the justice system in rehearsal. The story of Jefferson and Grant learning a "Lesson" on how to be a hero, and how to strive to face adversity with strength and dignity has been an uplifting and powerful reminder to all of us who are working on the show to strive to improve ourselves and the world. ~ Rich Keitel, Director

Theatre Etiquette and House rules

Going to a play is a special experience, one that you will remember for a long time.

Everyone in the audience has been looking forward to seeing the performance. The production team put in many long hours and hard work to mount this performance. If you keep in mind common courtesy for the performers as well as your fellow audience members, everyone's theatre experience will be terrific.

A few reminders for attending the theatre.

- When you arrive, stay with your group at all times, and wait for the ushers to help you find your seat.
- Gum, food, drinks, or candy, are never allowed in the theatre.
- Please go to the bathroom before seating for performance or at intermission.
- TURN OFF ALL cell phones, pagers, beepers, alarms, anything that can disturb the production, actors and the audience during the performance.
- Lights will dim just before a performance and then go dark. Show your knowledge by sitting quietly and calmly.
- Do not talk during the performance. The actors on stage can hear you which is why you can hear them so well. Laughter is permissible at appropriate times.
- No taking of pictures or video recording is allowed.
- Stay in your seat until the cast has taken their curtain call at the end. Show your appreciation by clapping. The actors love to hear applause. This shows how much you enjoyed the performance!

All Prime Stage productions *and* Resource Guides address the following PA Common Core Standards for *A Lesson Before Dying*:

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking

CC.1.3.9-10.A: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.9-10.C: Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CC.1.3.9-10.D: Determine the point of view of the text and analyze the impact the point of view has on the meaning of the text.

CC.1.3.9-10.E: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect.

CC.1.3.9-10.F: Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.

CC.1.3.9-10.G: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

CC.1.3.9-10.H: Analyze how an author draws on and transforms themes, topics, character types, and/or other text elements from source material in a specific work.

CC.1.3.9-10.K: Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

CC.1.5.9-10.A: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grades level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CC.1.5.9-10.G: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English when speaking based on grade 9-10 level and content.

CC.1.6.11.A: Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations. Respond with grade level appropriate questions, ideas, information or opinions.

CC.1.6.11.C: Demonstrate awareness of audience using appropriate volume and clarity in formal speaking presentations.

CC.1.6.11.D: Listen to and acknowledge the contributions of other students well introducing ideas and opinions to enrich the discussion

Plot Overview of *A Lesson before Dying*



Grant Wiggins has been teaching on a plantation outside Bayonne, Louisiana, for several years when a slow-witted man named Jefferson is convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Jefferson claims he is innocent of the crime. He says he was on his way to a bar, but changed his mind and decided to tag along with two men who were on their way to a liquor store. Upon arriving there, the two men began arguing with the storeowner, and a shootout ensued. The storeowner and the two men died, and Jefferson remained at the scene of the crime. He was arrested and tried for murder. Jefferson's lawyer argues in court that Jefferson is nothing but a poor fool, hardly more worthwhile than a hog, and therefore incapable of plotting such a scheme. The jury quickly brings back a guilty verdict.

Upon hearing the lawyer's speech, Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, resolves to help Jefferson die like a man, not a hog. She asks Grant to help her, knowing that he will resist. Grant left many years prior to attend college, and he returned an educated man. He deplores the injustices done to his fellow black men, but he does not want to get involved in Jefferson's case. However, after considerable pressure from his aunt, Tante Lou, he agrees to try to help Jefferson. Grant, Miss Emma, and Grant's aunt go to visit Jefferson in his cell, and they discover that he too heard the lawyer's words and has taken them to heart. Silent and moody, Jefferson resists Grant's feeble attempts to reach him. The three visitors spend an uncomfortable hour in the cell and then leave.

During the next few visits, Jefferson continues to frustrate Grant's attempts to communicate. When Grant attempts to teach Jefferson about dignity, Jefferson insists that dignity is for "youmans," not hogs. He eats and snuffles in imitation of a hog and tries to anger Grant with stubbornness and malice, but Grant maintains his patience. Each hour-long visit ends in failure, but Grant continues to try to reach Jefferson. On his fourth visit, Grant sparks a conversation with Jefferson about his final meal. Jefferson admits that he wants a gallon of vanilla ice cream because, although he loves ice cream, he has never had more than a thimbleful at a time. This admission begins to break down the barrier between the two men. Grant borrows money from some townspeople and buys Jefferson a small radio. On his next visit, he brings Jefferson a notebook and asks him to write down whatever thoughts come to his mind. Jefferson promises to do so, and by Grant's next visit, Jefferson has filled most of a page with thoughts concerning the difference between hogs and men.

Grant's relationships with his girlfriend Vivian and with Reverend Ambrose begin to intensify. Despite her love for Grant, Vivian dislikes his tendency to think only of himself, showing little regard for her needs. Grant uses Vivian to escape the troubles of his life, and he continually suggests that they run away from their hometown and their past in the South. The Reverend Ambrose, himself unable to reach Jefferson, urges Grant to put aside his atheistic beliefs and help save not just Jefferson's character, but his soul. The Reverend declares that Grant must learn to tell lies for the good of others.

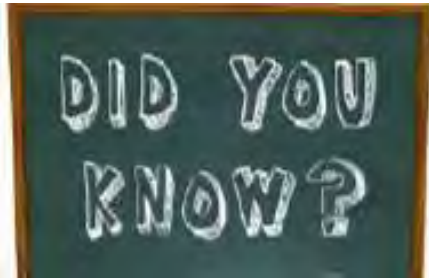
Grant focuses his energy on Jefferson and tries to explain the importance of Jefferson's death. Jefferson asks Grant if he believes in heaven and Grant replies that he does not, although he qualifies this remark by saying that his atheism does not make him a good man. In fact, Grant says, Jefferson will save even Grant's atheistic soul if he carries the cross for the sinners on earth. Grant explains that the black community in the quarter has spent centuries enslaved to white men, and that when Jefferson's attorney called him a hog, he attacked the will and intelligence of the entire black society. In consequence, Jefferson now has the opportunity to stand up for his community. He has become a symbol to his people, and the manner in which he faces his death will bear on their self-confidence and potential.

Over the next few weeks, Jefferson continues to write in his journal. In March, the governor of Louisiana sets the execution date for two weeks after Easter. As news of Jefferson's impending death spreads through the town, more and more people begin to visit him. Young children and old men, strangers and friends, all come to Jefferson's cell to speak to him. The onslaught of attention makes Jefferson begin to understand the enormity of the task that Grant has given him.



He realizes that he has become much more than an ordinary man and that his death will represent much more than an ordinary death. Elated by Jefferson's progress, Grant nevertheless dreads the execution day, when that progress will be tested.

Grant cannot bring himself to attend the execution, for he has grown very close to Jefferson. At the time the execution is scheduled to take place, he orders his students to kneel by their desks in honor of Jefferson. He steps outside the classroom, distressed and bewildered. He knows he should have attended the execution. A few minutes later, a deputy comes down from the courthouse and informs Grant that the execution is over. He assures Grant that Jefferson was the bravest man in the room that morning. Grant looks out over the town, numb and heavyhearted, and discovers that he is crying.



The South Before Civil Rights

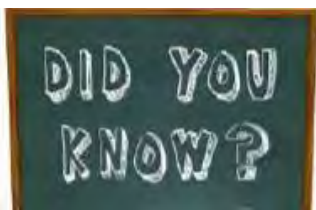
Between the atrocities of the Jim Crow South and advances of the civil rights era, the 1940s Louisiana of Ernest Gaines's youth forms a crucial bridge. Gaines had used that era before in three other books, and he has written that *A Lesson Before Dying* didn't begin to crystallize in his mind until he made a relatively late decision to set it then. In his essay "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," Gaines says, "If I put my story in the forties, there was so much material I could use.... I knew the food people ate, knew the kind of clothes they wore, knew the kind of songs they sang in the fields and in the church."

During the Jim Crow era, local officials had instituted curfews for blacks and posted "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs in parks, schools, hotels, water fountains, restrooms, and public transportation. Laws against miscegenation or "race-mixing" deemed all marriages between white and black not only void, but illegal. Compounding the injustice of Jim Crow laws was the inconsistency of their application. Backtalk would rate a laugh in one town, a lynching just over the county line.



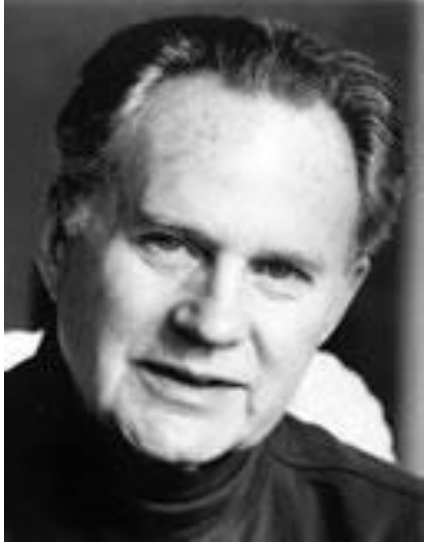
"We had the great landowners, the sharecroppers, the small towns, uptown, and back of town, the swamps, the bayous—there's a story behind every tree."

—Ernest J. Gaines in a 1994 interview



The Life and Times of Ernest J. Gaines

1. **1930s**
 - 1933: Ernest J. Gaines is born in Louisiana.
 - 1935: Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, creator of populist "Share Our Wealth" program, is assassinated in Baton Rouge.
 - 1937: Joe Louis becomes champion, both in pro boxing and in the hearts of African Americans.
2. **1940s**
 - America enters World War II, 1941; all-African-American Tuskegee Airmen help win the air war, 1942-45; the Axis surrenders in 1945.
 - 1947: Jackie Robinson integrates pro baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers.
 - 1948: Gaines moves to Vallejo, California, the year *A Lesson Before Dying* is set.
3. **1950s**
 - 1954: Thurgood Marshall successfully argues against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.
 - 1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man.
4. **1960s**
 - 1963: Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his *I Have a Dream* speech.
 - 1963: A six-month return to Louisiana invigorates Gaines's career.
 - 1964: Congress passes Civil Rights Act.
 - 1967: President Lyndon Johnson names Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court.
5. **1970s**
 - 1972: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* wins the California Book Award, the same year Gaines receives a Guggenheim grant.
 - 1972: Rep. Shirley Chisholm, the first woman and first African American to run for president, receives 152 delegates, but loses the Democratic nomination.
6. **1980s**
 - 1981: Gaines takes a professorship at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, and is later made Writer-in-Residence.
 - 1983: Gaines publishes *A Gathering of Old Men*.
 - Jesse Jackson wins five Democratic presidential primaries in 1984 and 11 in 1988.
7. **1990s**
 - 1990: After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela is released; his policies of reconciliation help to heal the wounds of apartheid in South Africa.
 - 1993: Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize in Literature, the same year Gaines publishes *A Lesson Before Dying*.
 - 1997: Oprah Winfrey selects Gaines's novel for her book club.
8. **2000s**
 - 2000: Romulus Linney's play *A Lesson Before Dying* premieres at New York's Signature Theatre.
 - 2005: Gaines retires from teaching.
 - 2005: Hurricane Katrina devastates southern Louisiana.
 - 2008: Barack Obama elected first African American president.



(1930-2011)

ROMULUS LINNEY (Playwright) was the author of three novels, many short stories, and five anthologies of plays, staged throughout the United States and abroad. They include *The Sorrows of Frederick*, *Holy Ghosts*, *Childe Byron*, *Heathen Valley*, "2" and an adaptation of Ernest L. Gaines's novel *A Lesson before Dying*, which has been produced in New York and in numerous regional theatres, and an adaptation of Tim O'Brien's novel *Going After Cacciato*, which was commissioned by the Epic Repertory Theatre. He has won two Obie awards, one for sustained excellence in playwriting, two National Critics' Awards, three DramaLogue Awards, and many fellowships, including grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller

Foundations. Stories appear in many literary journals and in the anthologies *Pushcart Prize*; *New Stories From The South*; and *Best Of The Year*, 2001 and 2002. Mr. Linney was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Science, the Ensemble Studio Theatre, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers. He is the Founding Playwright of Signature Theatre. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which gave him both its Academy Award in Literature and its Award of Merit Medal for Drama. He has taught at many universities, including Columbia, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania and the Actors Studio Drama School at New School University. Mr. Linney lived in Germantown, New York and New York City. He passed away in January 2011 at the age of 80.

Book Reviews

"This majestic, moving, novel is an instant classic, a book that will be read, discussed and taught beyond the rest of our lives." — **Chicago Tribune**

"A Lesson before Dying reconfirms Ernest J. Gaines's position as an important American writer."
— **Boston Globe**

"Enormously moving ... Gaines unerringly evokes the place and time about which he writes."
— **Newsday**

"A quietly moving novel (that) takes us back to a place we've been before to impart a lesson for living."
— **San Francisco Chronicle**

"The lesson is valuable and apt, presented in the modest but forceful terms that we have come to expect from Ernest J. Gaines." — **Washington Post**

"Gaines has a gift for evoking the tenor of life in a bygone era and making it seem vivid and immediate as something that happened only yesterday." — **Christian Science Monitor**

Read more: <http://www.oprah.com/oprahbookclub/About-A-Lesson-Before-Dying-By-Ernest-Gaines#ixzz40XQAohtu>

Ernest J. Gaines



Ernest J. Gaines is a widely celebrated Louisiana **author**. His recognition includes a National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Humanities Medal, and induction into the French Order of Arts and Letters as a Chevalier.

Considered among the most important southern writers, Ernest J. Gaines is an award-winning fiction writer whose work often features the region where he grew up: rural and small-town south-central Louisiana. In novels such as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson before Dying*, Gaines excels at depicting familial, generational, and racial struggles in the lives of mid-twentieth-century Louisianans, especially from the perspectives of African American men. Known primarily as a novelist, Gaines has also written several noted short stories and had his work adapted for television and film. He is the recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship and the National Humanities Medal, among other awards and honors.



Ernest Gaines (Copyright Joseph Sanford)

Childhood and Early Adulthood

Ernest James Gaines was born January 15, 1933, in Pointe Coupée Parish, the son of African American [sharecroppers](#) Manuel and Adrean Gaines. He spent his childhood and received his rudimentary early education in plantation quarters that would later figure prominently in his fiction. A formative presence during these years was his aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, who cared for her family without the use of her legs. Gaines dedicated *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* to, among others, his “beloved aunt” “who did not walk a day in her life but who taught me the importance of standing.” When he was fifteen, Gaines moved to California to join his mother and stepfather. There he attended junior college in Vallejo before being drafted into the US Army. After two years of military service, he completed a bachelor’s degree from San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1957, attended Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship, and initiated his literary career.

Written By [GaryRichards](#), University of Mary Washington

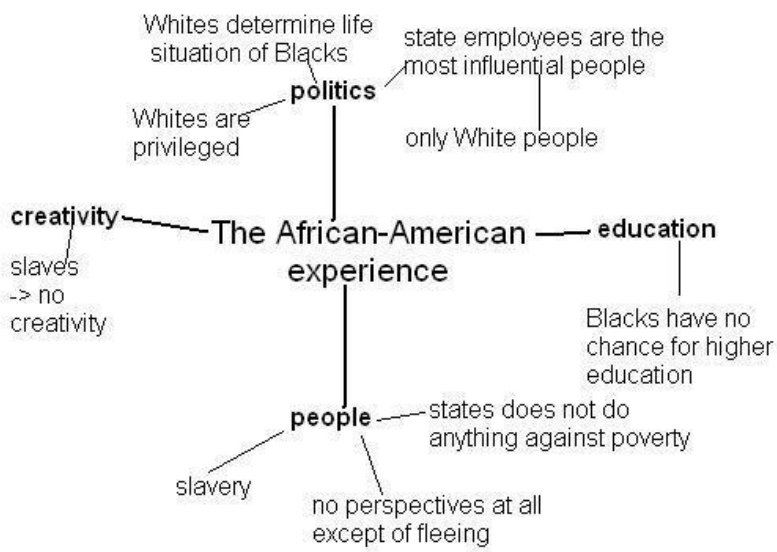
Published » July 7, 2011 | *Last Updated* » December 10, 2013



Ernest J. Gaines at home in Pointe Coupee



1940'S LOUISIANA



Rare photos depict lives of African-American sharecroppers during World War II



The home of African-American tenant farmers in Louisiana. (Photo: Marion Post Wolcott, 1940)



Farm workers in the Southern U.S. pause for a respite. (Photo: Marion Post Wollcott, 1940)



THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Following this historic act, the Assembly called upon all Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and "to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories."

Civil Rights Speech, 1948

President Truman lists objectives for improving civil rights in America.

January 2, 1948



President Truman speaks from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Harry S. Truman Library

“In the State of the Union Message on January 7, 1948, I spoke of five great goals toward which we should strive in our constant effort to strengthen our democracy and improve the welfare of our people. The first of these is to secure fully our essential human rights. I am now presenting to the Congress my recommendations for legislation to carry us forward toward that goal.

This nation was founded by men and women who sought these shores that they might enjoy greater freedom and greater opportunity than they had known before. The founders of the United States proclaimed to the world the American belief that all men are created equal, and that governments are instituted to secure the inalienable rights with which all men are endowed. In the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, they eloquently expressed the aspirations of...mankind for equality and freedom...

We believe that all men are created equal and that they have the right to equal justice under law.

We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and of expression and the right to worship as they please.

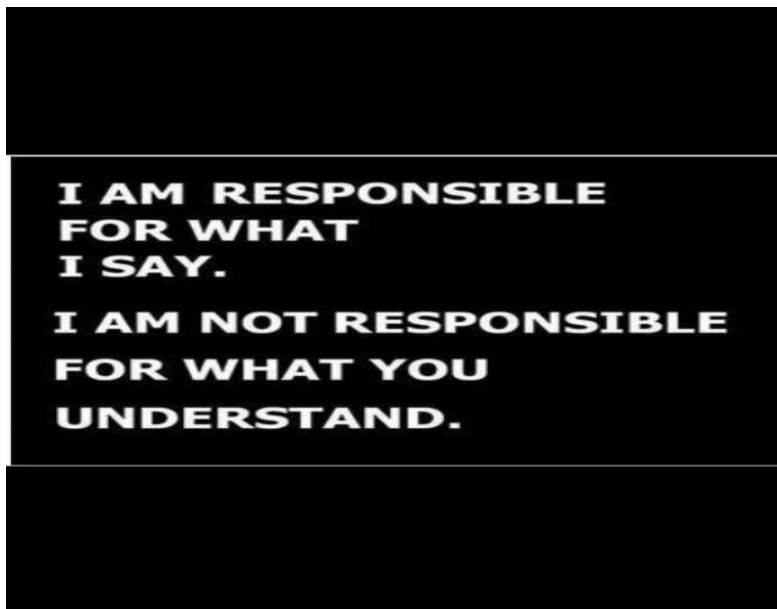
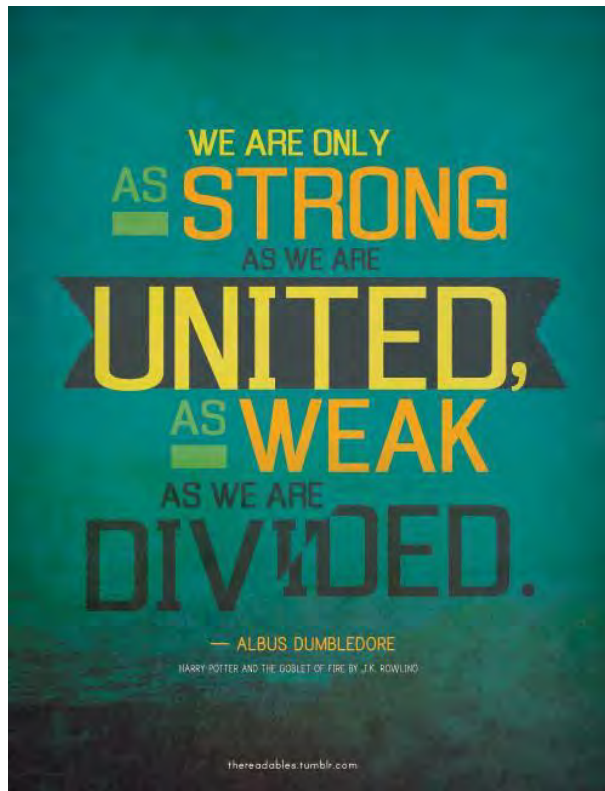
We believe that all men are entitled to equal opportunities for jobs, for homes, for good health and for education.

We believe that all men should have a voice in their government and that government should protect, not usurp, the rights of the people.

These are the basic civil rights, which are the source and the support of our democracy.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZdOj5vK7Kw> - Hear President Truman’s speech.

**How does his speech compare to Martin Luther King’s Speech in 1963
also at the Lincoln Memorial?**





The Pinchot Plantation

Cajun Culture and History

Although Gaines often pauses the narrative of *A Lesson before Dying* to explain the harsh realities of segregation, he rarely gives such explication of Cajun culture, which may be unfamiliar to most readers. Nevertheless, the Cajun backdrop is an important element of the novel, and helps to explain how the characters behave. The Cajuns are a discrete ethnic group, primarily in Louisiana, who are the modern descendants of the Acadians, who were expelled from Nova Scotia in the nineteenth century by the British monarchy, which then ruled Canada.

Cajun pronunciation and slang is used by many characters in the novel, despite the fact that most of them identify with African-American rather than Cajun culture. Examples of this include Jefferson's name for Miss Emma, Nannan, and Grant and Vivian's habit of speaking to each other in Cajun-inflected French. The Roman Catholic Cajuns also influence the religious atmosphere in which the novel takes place. Especially in the early- to mid-twentieth century, some Cajun Catholics had an aversion to Protestantism. This can be traced back to the Great Expulsion, when the Cajuns were forced to leave Canada. This atmosphere of religious strife helps to explain the tension when Tante Lou finds out that Vivian is Catholic. It also helps explain the defensiveness of Reverend Ambrose around the agnostic Grant, even though Reverend Ambrose is Protestant.

Cajun identity remains a defining element of Louisiana culture, and recent developments for the group would have been in the news as Gaines was writing *A Lesson before Dying*. In 1980, a discrimination lawsuit was filed that ultimately allowed Cajuns to be recognized as an official ethnic group by the U.S. government. The group's concern about whether it can continue to be cohesive in coming decades certainly parallels Grant's concerns that African-American culture is being eroded. In recent years, concerns about the decline of Cajun culture have become even more grave. Commercial fishing, an economic pillar of the community, has become less profitable due to climate change, international competition, and recently, the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in 2010. This has led some young Cajuns to seek jobs outside of the community and even in other parts of the country.

LESSON PLANS FOR *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

WORKSHOP I

Theatrical Warm-up and Get students engaged!

Objective: Students will develop physical awareness as it relates to self-expression and vocal production. Stretching limbers the muscles and connective tissues so that they can move with the demands of any dramatic situation.

Procedure:

- Begin with movement/vocal warm-up

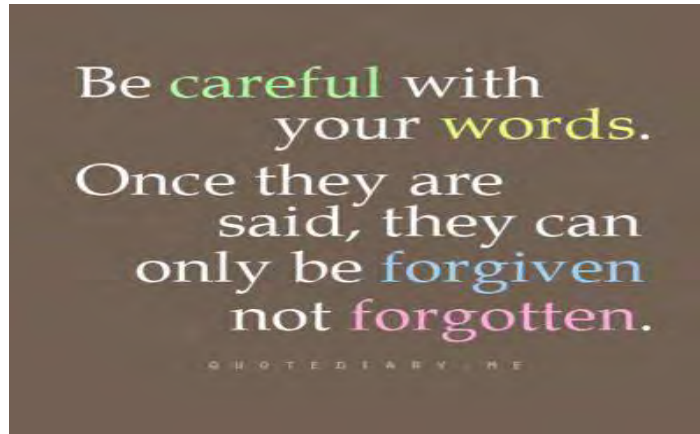
Start with head/neck roles

The Puppet –

1. Stand in a circle with some room around you to move.
2. Imagine a string is attached to each of your shoulders. Let the string pull your shoulders up to the ceiling. Try and touch the ceiling with your shoulders. Really try.
3. Now imagine the string is attached to your elbows. Let it lift your elbows to the ceiling. Try and touch the ceiling with your elbows.
4. Now imagine the string is attached to your wrists. Try and touch the ceiling with your wrists.
5. Now imagine the string is attached to your fingertips. Try and touch the ceiling with your fingertips. Stretch and reach to the ceiling.
6. Release your spine from the waist with a big “uhhh” sound. Hang bent over at the waist like a rag doll, relaxing everything in your body but those few muscles required to keep you on your feet.
7. Breathe a big sigh and let out any tension remaining.
8. Now roll up your spine, stacking one vertebra atop the other. Leave your head, shoulders and arms released until the very last minute when your head will float into place above the spine.
9. Breathe another big sigh and release the tension.
10. Repeat the entire exercise double time.

6-8 minutes





VOCABULARY – READING AND RESPONDING TO TEXT

Objective: Students will strengthen inter-personal skills with knowledge of vocabulary used in different ways throughout their reading and writing. Using and understanding different vocabulary will also expedite comprehension and focus. It allows for **audibility**: projecting your voice so your audience can hear and understand you; **pronunciation**: recognizing words before you say then and pronounce all sounds correctly; **articulation**: using your tongue, mouth and lips to pronounce all the sounds correctly; **vocal variety/expression**: using appropriate pitch, volume and flow.

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking
The following standards are addressed in this lesson plan:

1.6.11.A: Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations. Respond with grade level appropriate questions, ideas, information or opinions.

1.6.11.C: Demonstrate awareness of audience using appropriate volume and clarity in formal speaking presentations.

1.6.11.D: Listen to and acknowledge the contributions of other students well introducing ideas and opinions to enrich the discussion

Vocabulary

Gaine's has a seemingly endless vocabulary to describe the Louisiana Cajun community.

Divide class into teams. Use vocabulary cards and distribute copies to the students for example:

alight – to come to rest, settle

Cajun – French from Louisiana

chifforobe – a piece of furniture having both drawers and space for hanging clothes

shackled – kept in iron fastening around ankles or wrists

Creole – a person descended from French ancestors in southern United States (especially Louisiana)

inclement – stormy, harsh; severe in attitude or action

modicum – a small amount

satchel – a small bag

relented – to have given in

aggravation – an intensification of a negative quality or aspect

vexing – to harass, annoy, bother or anger

burden – a heavy load, physically or mentally

prejudiced – having a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience

Ask students to refer to the definitions they wrote on their vocabulary cards to answer each question below. The questions require them to apply the meaning of the words to their own experiences.

1. What is an experience that you find **aggravating**?
2. When have you seen **inclement** weather?
3. Describe a character who **relents** from a movie.
4. Tell about an **vexing** event from the news.
5. What would you describe with the word **satchel**?

20 minutes -----

Analyze Theme - Small Displays of Power

Grant often criticizes his society. He bitterly resents the racism of whites, and he cannot stand to think of Jefferson’s unjust conviction and imprisonment. For most of the novel, however, he does nothing to better his lot. He sarcastically claims that he teaches children to be strong men and women despite their surroundings, but he is a difficult, angry schoolmaster. Grant longs to run away and escape the society he feels will never change. He believes no one can change society without being destroyed in the process.

Gaines shows how racism pervades every nook and cranny of society, grinding down black people in everyday interactions. Black people are made to feel their inferiority when they are made to wait at a white person’s leisure, forced to enter through the back door of a white person’s house, or treated shabbily by a white salesperson. When Grant must enter Pichot’s house through the back door, it is a symbolic reminder of the days of slavery, when slaves could never approach the front door. When angry, the black Reverend Ambrose wields his power over Grant by calling him “boy,” using one of the pejorative terms usually employed by racist whites when referring to grown black men. Gaines suggests that such small moments of subjugation are impossible to shake off because of their cumulative oppressive effect.

Use the statements above to support students in examining the theme in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Ask them to list the traits and actions of the “characters” as they read. When they have finished the story, ask students to state its theme in one or two sentences using the traits from their list as support. Guide a discussion, encouraging students to share their answers and evidence.

1. Divide students into teams
2. Using all the characters in the *Lesson* distribute “Character” cards to the teams.
3. Allow them to discuss amongst themselves for 4 minutes how the characters contribute to the theme and movement of the play.

19-20 minutes -----

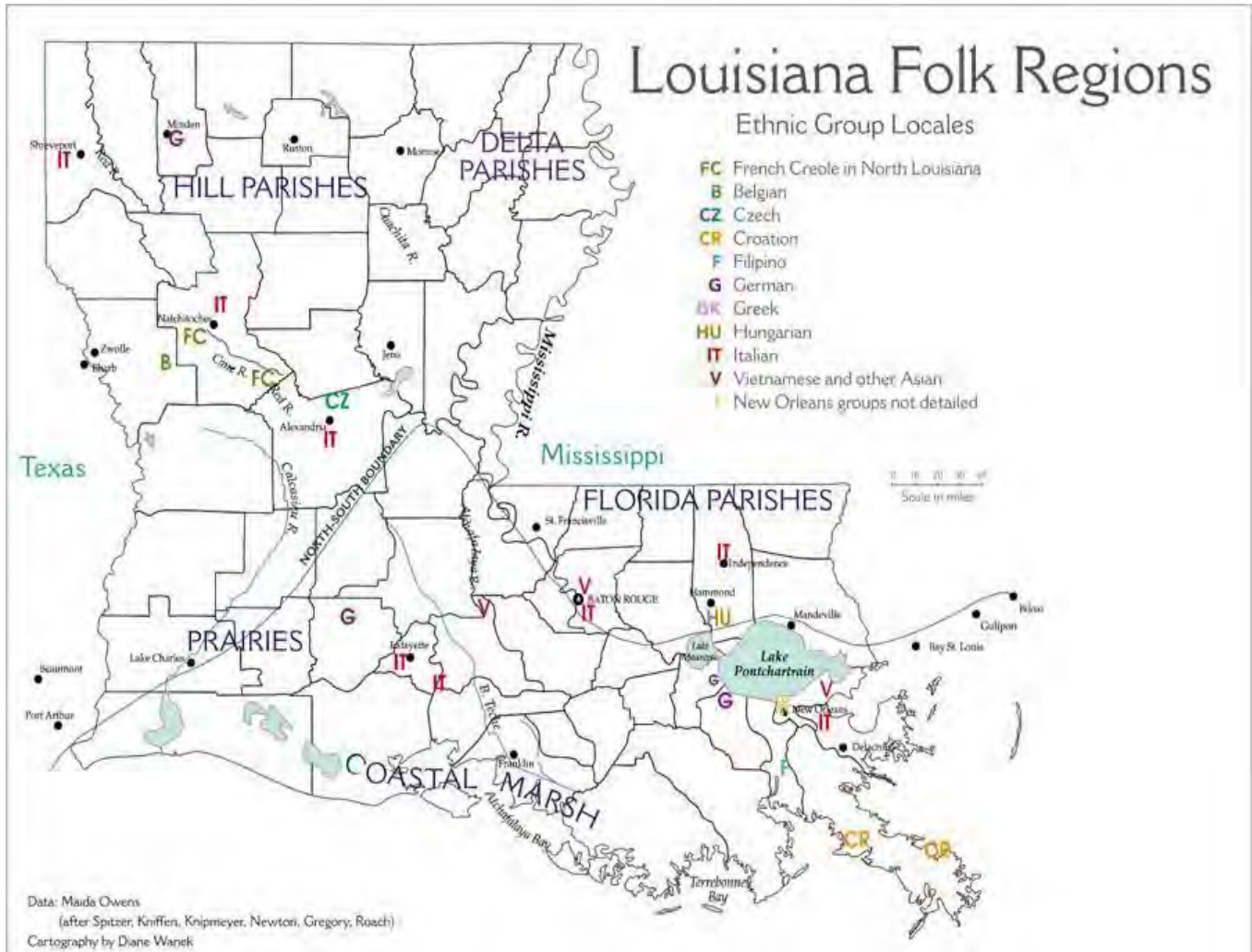
MAPS OF THE LOUISIANA REGION



Louisiana Folk Regions

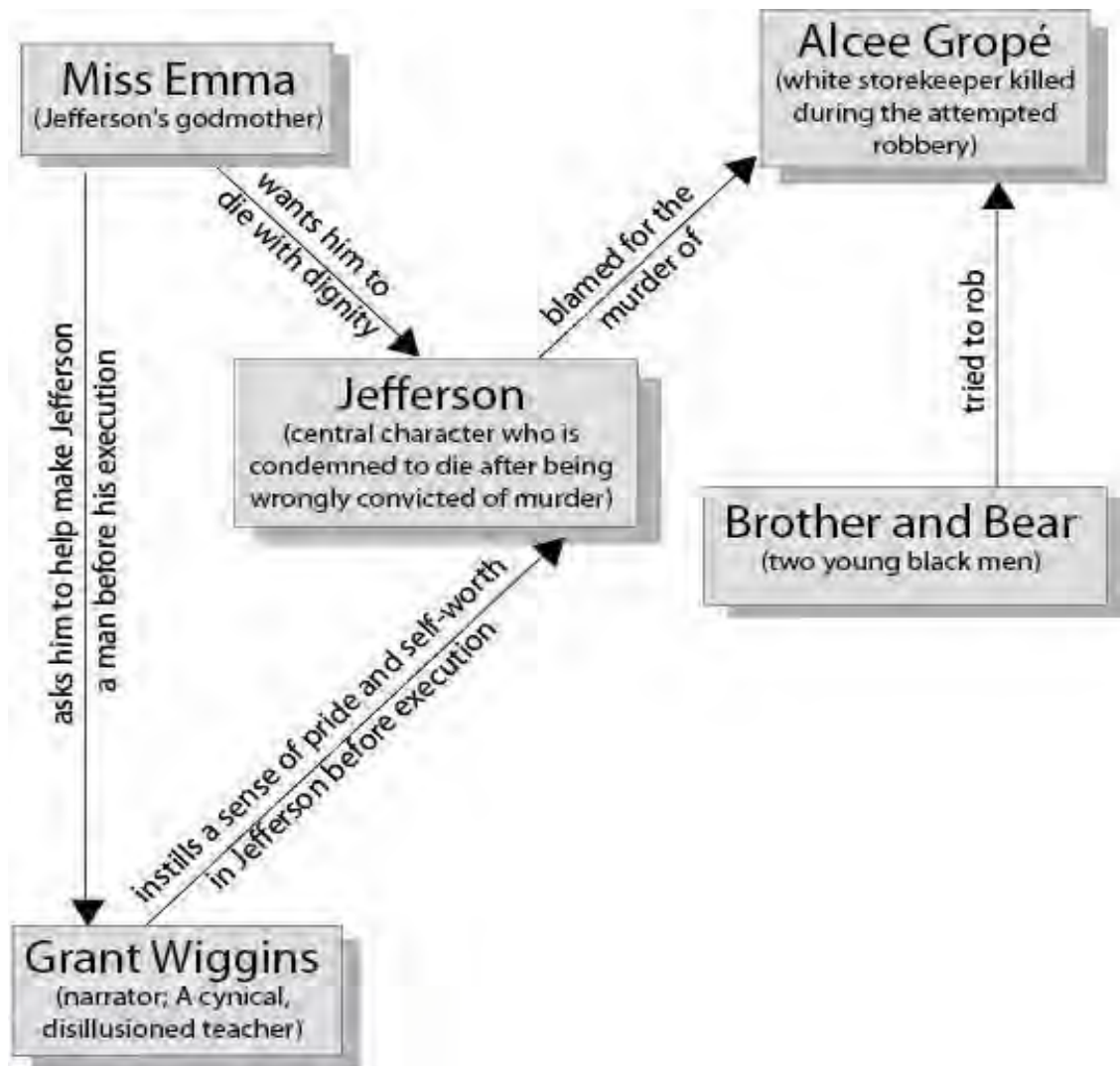
Ethnic Group Locales

- FC** French Creole in North Louisiana
- B** Belgian
- CZ** Czech
- CR** Croatian
- F** Filipino
- G** German
- GR** Greek
- HU** Hungarian
- IT** Italian
- V** Vietnamese and other Asian
- NY** New Orleans groups not detailed



Data: Maids Owens
 (after Spitzer, Kniffen, Knipmeyer, Newton, Gregory, Roach)
 Cartography by Diane Waneke

IMPORTANT CHARACTER INFORMATION IN *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*



MORE CHARACTER BREAKDOWN



Lamar Fields (Grant Wiggins)

What this show means for me? It allows an audience to sit back and wonder about all of these inequalities in the play, and wonder why this still exists today, and what we as a society can do to help change it.

Grant Wiggins, is a plantation teacher in a small Louisiana town. Grant was Jefferson's former teacher. He is recruited by Aunt Emma to help Jefferson realize the importance of dying with dignity. Grant is frustrated with his life in the South, his life as an educator, and the prospects that await his past and present pupils.

Vivian Baptiste is a strong Southern woman, a school teacher and mother of three children. Vivian is sure of herself and her expectations of others. She urges Grant to continue his visits with Jefferson.

Reverend

Moses Ambrose is the minister for the parish, who attempts to give Jefferson spiritual guidance during his remaining days. Reverend Ambrose believes that religion and faith have the power to save any individual, which places him in direct conflict with Grant.

Paul Bonin is a man in his twenties, and the deputy sheriff of Bayonne. Although he rarely admits it aloud, Paul believes Jefferson is innocent, and tries to be as helpful as he can while Jefferson awaits his execution.



Lamont Walker (Jefferson)

Being in this show means that I'm part of possibly getting a message through to someone who may be walking through a troubled life. It's an opportunity to reach out to those who may not understand the world outside of art.

Jefferson

is a young man sentenced to die for the murder of a Caucasian shopkeeper. Abandoned by his parents and raised by Miss Emma, Jefferson turns the racist hatred of his society upon himself and everyone committed to helping him.



TRACEY D. TURNER Tracey Turner (Emma Glenn)

I have the opportunity to teach not only my children, but other children to live and die with dignity while living under oppression. Oppression of a people is not definitive of the oppressed.

Emma Glenn is a woman in her seventies. She is Jefferson's godmother and also helped raise Grant and pay for his education. Emma is a firm believer in her godson's innocence

Sam Guidry is the sheriff of Bayonne with a staunch set of guidelines for the treatment of death row inmates. As a result, Sam is against Grant's visits to the prison and does not see what good they can do.

WORKSHOP II

Objective: Students will develop physical awareness as it relates to self-expression and vocal production. Stretching limbers the muscles and connective tissues so that they can move with the demands of any dramatic situation.

Procedure:

- Begin with movement/vocal warm-up from Workshop I

6-8 minutes

Theatre Game:

Observing Change

This exercise focuses entirely on your power of observation. It becomes more difficult for your partner as your attention to detail improves. This exercise will all also discipline the student to focus and observe the performance for comprehension and clarity.

1. Sit on the classroom floor across from a partner.
2. Spend two minutes observing everything about your partner in as much detail as possible.
3. Turn away. Your partner will then change three small things about his or her appearance.
4. Turn back when your partner is ready.
5. Try and guess the three changes.
6. Switch roles.

This exercise can be done with four students at a time so that the class can observe changes.

20 minutes

Objective: Training students on how to be an “audience” member.

Theatre Etiquette

1. Bring in a playbill – explain the importance of reading the contents of the Playbill.
2. Bring in picture of the set – explain the importance of observing the set and how important it is to the movement and tone of the play.

Explain how important it is to respect performers on stage by being quiet and listening to the performance. Students will learn the proper way to attend a theatrical performance by being observant and focused on the playbill, the set the language and will thus have an enjoyable experience and be able to ask intelligent questions at the Q&A after the performance.

20 minutes END Workshop II

WORKSHOP III

AFTER THE PRODUCTION

Evaluation, Reflection and Comprehension

Objective: To evaluate the learning experience of the play and comprehension quality of the experience. Reflections on student experience.

Procedure: Initiate and participate with students in collaborative discussion on various aspects of the play. A Q & A period on paper and/or verbally for the entire session.

To properly evaluate the learning experience for the students, the Education Director or Instructor can pose questions on paper from Workshops I and II and the theatre experience. This will be distributed at the end or during this Workshop to be picked up at a later by the Education Director.

40 minutes

We encourage you and your students to explore these topics further by checking out the following resources regarding *A Lesson before Dying*:

Resources on Gaines and the Jim Crow South

- Chafe, William H., Raymond Gavis, and Robert Korstad, eds. *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*. New York: New Press, 2001.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. 1940. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.
- Lowe, John, ed. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- Simon, Scott. *Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.
- Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. 1901. New York: Random House, 1999.

If you enjoyed *A Lesson Before Dying*, you might want to read:

- Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845
- Richard Wright's *Native Son*, 1940
- Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, 1946
- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, 1952
- Clark, Keith. *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Doyle, Mary Ellen. *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003.
- Gaines, Ernest J. *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2005.

Major Works of Ernest Gaines

Books:

Catherine Carmier (1964)
Of Love and Dust (1967)
Bloodline (1968)
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971)
A Long Day in November (1971)
In My Father's House (1978)
A Gathering of Old Men (1983)
A Lesson before Dying (1993)
Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays (2005)

Short Stories:

The Turtles (1956)
Boy in the Double-Breasted Suit (1957)
Mary Louis (1960)
Just Like a Tree (1963)
The Sky is Gray (1963)
A Long Day in November (1964)
My Grandpa and the Haint (1966)

[A Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines by Lawrence Bridges](http://www.lawrencebridges.com)

<http://www.lawrencebridges.com>

A conversation with Ernest J Gaines about "A Lesson before Dying"
youtube.com

An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines

On August 16, 2007, Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Ernest J. Gaines at his home in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Dan Stone: When did books first become important to you?

Ernest J. Gaines: As a child in Louisiana, there was no library that I could go to. But when I went to California, I found myself in the library. And at 16, I started reading and reading. I especially read anybody who wrote about the land. I'd look at the dust jacket, and if there was a tree or lake or field on it, I'd flip through. I especially liked to read the 19th-century Russian writers—Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Turgenev—because they wrote about the land and peasant life.

DS: What experiences from your own life did you work into *A Lesson before Dying*?

EG: The first six years of my education were in my plantation's church, and I used that as Grant's school. We worked and picked pecans to buy our clothes, and we went to school about five and a half months of the year because we had to begin to work in the field at age eight, from mid-March until about mid-September.

DS: It's assumed that Jefferson is innocent, but in the beginning, this is never stated. Did you intentionally give two sides?

EG: I don't know whether he's innocent or guilty. The point of the story is how two men would grow to become real men. Jefferson, with only a few months to live; Grant with another 40 years or more to live—what will they do with that time? Neither one is going anywhere in life. Grant wants to get away. Jefferson is just there, doing whatever people want him to do. He never argues, he never questions anything. I wanted the story to be about how both men develop.

DS: Grant gives Jefferson a radio. How is music able to break down those barriers?

EG: Music is very important to me. When I was growing up, there were maybe one or two radios on the quarters here. We'd listen to the music at my grandmother's house, especially late at night when you could hear the blues. It is the blues that reaches Jefferson spiritually. The minister tried to reach him, but I think he was closer to those old blues. So the purpose of the radio was to get Jefferson to open up.

DS: Why is Grant so unable to help Jefferson at the beginning of the novel? What is his deepest struggle?

EG: Grant is struggling with the South at that time. This man was terribly angry. He didn't know who he was—and that's the worst thing in the world that can happen to a man. He hated where he was, but at the same time, he can't leave. I don't know what would have happened to me, had I stayed here. I probably would have ended up teaching in a little school and angry the rest of my life. So the two best moves I've ever made in life were the day I went to California and the day I came back here. My folks took me away from here in 1948 and then in 1963 I came back here.

DS: The California poet Robinson Jeffers wrote about something he called "the inevitable place"—that some people are tied to a place where they inevitably have to return. They can go anywhere in the world, but that's the spot for them. It seems Louisiana is that place for you.

EG: Definitely so. I tried to write about the Army and the year I spent in Guam. I tried to write ghost stories about San Francisco. I can't write about San Francisco! But I can write about that little postage stamp of land in Louisiana. In my case, the body went to California. The soul remained here with my aunt and my brothers and sisters and friends and the old shack we lived in.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN WATCHING THE PRODUCTION

How the different locations are created. How would you create the locations?

What is said to convince Grant (the teacher) to meet with Jefferson and by which character? What would you have said to Grant?

How the costumes portray the personalities of the characters.

How music enhances moments in the story – What music would you use?

How does the lighting in the different scenes enhance the story?

What character(s) do you cheer for and why?

What character would you be in the story and why.

What roles do women play in the story? How important are they to the action?

How the play compares to the novel.



Set designer Johnmichael Bohach's scaled model of the set.



Costume Designer Statement

My costume design work plays directly to the world created by the set designer. I am lucky to have found insight from image "14 of 24" submitted by Prime Stage set designer Johnmichael Bohach.

A set of eight vintage library card boxes, stacked side by side; identical in construction (like human beings by the Creator) and yet each is unique. Eight boxes, each representing a character in the play (I count the children's' voices as one) and each shows a different element of "weathering"; each drawer pull is bent differently and one box (the least weathered or changed) represents the sheriff.

All of the boxes show layers of color and wear, as does the human condition.

The true purity of the wood underneath, the firm structure that weathers the ravages of time, age and abuse, is the same for each character with the contents of each drawer to be revealed if one is interested to look beyond the surface.

Kim Brown
Costume Designer
Prime Stage's "A Lesson before Dying" 1/9/16

Louisiana Foodways in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*

By Courtney Ramsay

The culture that Ernest Gaines presents in his novel, *A Lesson before Dying*, is heavily influenced by a dependence on the land to fulfill essential needs. Food in its acquisition and its preparation not only provides nourishment and a means by which love is expressed but also serves as a medium to exert power, to express other emotions of acceptance or rejection, and to communicate these feelings to others. Specific food define ethnicity. Gumbo, often considered a Cajun specialty, functions as a prominent symbol. The kitchen is easily recognized as the room where meaningful interactions occur around the table. Visitors are entertained with the serving of coffee and, sometimes, dessert. Because of this intimate relationship to the foodways of these people, the kitchen is, without doubt, a room of extreme importance in the homes of the African Americans who live in the quarters on Henry Pichot's plantation, a major setting in *A Lesson before Dying*. Gaines not only reveals the types of foods that this culture prepares and shares during meals and at gatherings, but clearly underlines the central significance of foodways as powerful symbols in this culture and in his novel.

The term "foodways," according to Don Yoder, "includes the study of the foods themselves, their morphology, their preparation, their preservation, their social and psychological functions, and their ramifications into all other aspects of folk culture" (325). Yoder further comments that John Honigman's term "foodways" has become useful in that it includes the entire "cookery complex, including attitudes, taboos, and meal systems—the whole range of cookery and food habits in a society" (325), Paige Gutierrez, in *Cajun Foodways*, agrees:

Folklorists and anthropologists use the term foodways to refer not only to food and cooking, but to all food-related activities, concepts, and beliefs shared by a particular group of people. Many scholars who have studied foodways say that food has a symbolic or expressive dimension, that it conveys meaning.

The African American community in *A Lesson before Dying* has foodways closely associated with the Cajun and Creole Cultures in Louisiana. Louisiana's foodways reflect the cultural diversity of the area and its regional Identity:

South Louisiana enjoys great cultural diversity. The population of the region today includes descendants of many cultural groups. . . . Despite this diversity, a Louisiana brand of French culture held sway throughout colonial times, and the Americanization that began after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 had little influence in some areas until well into the twentieth century.

Definitely Gaines, like the Cajuns as seen by Gutierrez, seems to find identity in both the region in which he grew up and in the foods which he eats. Gutierrez comments further on the relationship between ethnicity,

foodways, and the regional identity: "Regional and ethnic labels used by Cajuns and non-Cajuns indicate that Cajun identity blends with regional identity. . . . Cajuns have a strong sense of place and often describe themselves as uncomfortable or unhappy when away from the region for a long time".

As Michael Jones, Bruce Guiliano and Roberta Krell ascertained through numerous cultural studies, "we in America as individuals have a multiplicity of identities some of which might be associated with particular foods or ways of preparing , serving, or eating food" (Prologue x). Gaines explains the difficulty he had when he was fifteen and left Louisiana to go to California:

It took me all day to pack, unpack, and repack the old brown leather suitcase. I didn't have many clothes. . . but for some reason I could not get it done. Maybe it was the bag of oranges, or the shoebox of fried chicken and bread, or the tea cakes and pralines wrapped in brown paper, or the bag of unshelled pecans—maybe it was one of these or all of these that kept me opening and shutting the suitcase.

Interestingly, all of these foods with the exception of oranges are also named in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

In looking at the reasons for the food choices and behaviors of the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*, it is important to "consider the reaction of man to his basic natural environment". Yoder suggests:

The study of folk cookery covers such subjects as the influences of environment on cuisine, seasonal foods, and local crops and local foods of the various cultural landscapes studied by cultural geographers and ecologists.

How are the characters in *A Lesson before Dying* affected by their environment? The book is set in the late 1940s or early 1950s in rural Louisiana west of the Mississippi and a bit north of Baton Rouge. In *Old Louisiana* Lyle Saxon describes the plantations and life of this area about twenty years earlier:

Old people have died, the young people have realized that it is a losing fight and have abandoned it. The magnificent houses are falling into ruin. . . . Louisiana was essentially an agricultural country; this is still true in a measure, but plantations no longer boast vast acreage and hundreds of laborers.

The area had experience difficult times even before the Depression. Considering Maslows' hierarchy of needs (Weiten and Lloyd 55), this culture is, then, concerned with the fulfillment of its most basic physiological needs, those of hunger and thirst.

In the first chapter of *A Lesson before Dying*, Jefferson, a young black man, is accused and convicted of murder. Sentenced to death in the electric chair, he is actually innocent of the murder, but he is guilty of drinking whiskey at the scene and stealing money from the cash register. His actions are justified by their being an attempt to

satisfy his basic physiological needs. His defense claims, "Jefferson was merely an innocent bystander. He took the whiskey to calm his nerves, not to celebrate. He took the money out of hunger . . ." (Gaines 7).

Grant Wiggins, who lives with his aunt and teaches at the plantation school held in the church in the quarters, is the narrator and protagonist of this book. His Tante Lou and Miss Emma, Jefferson's nannan, have encouraged the reluctant Grant to teach Jefferson the virtues of manhood before his execution. Grant has to get permission from the white sheriff of Bayonne, the town nearest the plantation on which Grant works and lives. His series of visits to see Jefferson are central to the story and to the understanding of foodways found in this novel. Jefferson's basic need to satisfy his hunger has always been critical to him and to others in this culture. Jefferson tells Grant why he wants a gallon of vanilla ice cream as a last meal, "Ain't never had enough ice cream. Never had more than a nickel cone. Used to run out in the quarter and hand the ice cream man my nickel, and he give me a little scoop on a cone" (Gaines 170).

When Grant and Miss Emma visit Jefferson for the first time in Jail, the other prisoners stretch out their hands through the bars. Grant says, "Miss Emma stopped to talk to them. She told them she didn't have any money, but she had brought some food for Jefferson, and if there was anything left she would give it to them" (Gaines 71). Food is too important to waste. Miss Emma says, "If he don't eat it all, can you give it to the rest of these children?" (Gaines 74). Food is a commodity to be guarded. During the Christmas program at Grant's school, the food is placed in the back near the blackboards and someone sits "guarding the food until after the program, when everyone would eat" (Gaines 143).

Because these people are so conscious of their basic needs, food and its attainment have a heavy influence on this culture. Food is often the only material asset available to the individual to express love or a giving of oneself to others. Many of the foods in this book are ones that Gaines also mentions in a letter where he names some "soul" food—fried chicken, fried fish, gumbo, chittlin, pralines, pies, and cakes" (Simpson 68-69). The word "soul" carries a connotation of spiritual essence. With special preparations, the food's presentation become even more meaningful. How does the exertion of power and expression of emotion relate to foodways?

In providing pleasure and satisfactions personally and immediately, food can enliven social relations, enrich spiritual affairs, and enhance an individual's sense of well-being, it can be used to threaten, reward, cajole, or punish and in other ways manipulate behavior. (Jones 2)

Nearly every character in *A Lesson before Dying* is portrayed by their employment of emotions associated with food to communicate with others a display of power, love, or anger. By rejecting food, one also rejects the person offering it. Numerous scenes exemplify and aid in the interpretation of this type of behavior.

Information about food native to the Louisiana Region

The food in "*A Lesson before Dying*" symbolizes the black community. The type of food that symbolized the blacks is normally referred to as the Southern hospitality. The foods that are included are things such as shrimp and gumbo. In the novel it separates the whites from the blacks, and shows how Miss Emma and the rest of the community ate that is also relevant to the time period of the 1940's.

Hog - an offensive term that deliberately insults somebody's appetite, consideration for others, tidiness, or cleanliness. Informal insult used in *Lesson*.

A hog symbolizes how the whites in the community treated the blacks and they think about them socially. A hog is a filthy, dirty animal, which in the time period of the 1940's is how most whites viewed blacks, and believed that blacks were good for nothing but to work for the whites.

Seasonings such as [Cayennepepper](#), [TonyChachere's](#), [Tabascosauce](#) and [Zatarain's](#) are prevalent in the cuisine of Louisiana. While the state is predominantly known for both its [Cajuncuisine](#), [Creolecuisine](#), and [NativeAmerican](#) cuisine.

[Creolecuisine](#) is influenced by traditional French cooking with Spanish, [African](#), and Indian influences.^[2] Cajun cuisine is one of the most popular cuisines in the United States. Cajun cuisine has a reputation of being incredibly spicy and dependent on frying. People in Southern Louisiana say that others eat to live, while they live to eat.

Although the food most identified with the state is the [Cajun](#) and [Creole](#) food of [SouthLouisiana](#), [North Louisiana](#) also has its own unique cuisine. Traditionally, southern style [soulfood](#) such as smothered pork chops, chicken and dumplings, candied yams, hot water cornbread, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and black-eyed peas are commonly eaten in North Louisiana. Natchitoches is famous for its [meatpie](#). For many years, crawfish were not eaten outside of [Cajuncountry](#). People north of [Alexandria](#) were more likely to eat fried chicken or barbecue. Fish fries featuring catfish took the place of crawfish boils. Today, boiled crawfish is served throughout the state.

Other foods popular in Louisiana include [Gumbo](#), [Étouffée](#), [Jambalaya](#), [Muffuletta](#), [Po'boy](#), and [RedBeans andRice](#). Seafood is especially popular in Louisiana either as an ingredient or as a main dish such as [Shrimp](#), [Crawfish](#), [Crabs](#), [Oysters](#) and [Catfish](#). [Swamp](#) denizens such as Gator or [Alligator](#), Frog Legs, and [Turtlesoup](#) is popular around the [bayous](#) of south Louisiana.

Famous desserts and snacks include [KingCake](#), [beignets](#), [Pralines](#), [SweetPotatopie](#) and [Pecanpie](#).



Jambalaya



Gumbo



Pecan Pie



Crawfish



Shrimp and Oyster Po' Boy Sandwich



The Electric Chair (circa 1940s)

The History of Capital Punishment in Mississippi: An Overview

By Donald A. Cabana

The first known execution by the State of Mississippi was July 16, 1818, in Adams County with the hanging of George H. Harman, a white male, for “stealing a Negro.” Since then, the state has conducted 794 known executions. Of those executed, 639 have been black males, 117 white males, 19 black females, 2 Indian males, and 16 individuals not completely identified either by gender or by race. No white females are known to have been executed by the state.

Hanging, or the gallows, was the method of execution in Mississippi until 1940, when lawmakers replaced it with the electric chair. The gas chamber replaced electrocution in 1955, and the chamber was replaced by lethal injection in 2002.

Capital punishment – the state or federal government taking a person’s life in retribution for a crime – has been with us in one form or another since the dawn of time. The Old Testament of the Bible is rife with accounts of its use. Virtually every major civilization in history has embraced the use of execution among the legal processes used to control and punish those who commit the most serious of crimes, as well as those not so serious. The Romans made executions a public spectacle so that the masses clearly understood what would happen to those who dared flaunt Roman law. And so it has been throughout history.

Colonial America

As European settlers migrated to the New World colonies from Jamestown in Virginia to Boston in Massachusetts, they brought the principles of English Common Law, including severe forms of corporal and capital punishments. Use of devices such as the stocks, the pillory, and the dunking stool could be found in virtually every community in pre-colonial Massachusetts Bay Colony.

As with the ancient Romans, however, it was the public nature of the punishment that became of paramount importance to the colonial town officials. Though every community kept various forms of corporal punishment devices, few maintained a permanent gallows, a structure from which a rope is suspended with which criminals are executed by hanging. But gallows could be quickly erected should the need arise, for hanging had become the favored method of execution in the colonies. It would remain so until the 1880s when New York instituted the use of a new “more humane” invention called the electric chair.

Public hanging

But hanging would retain its ranking as the most favored form of execution in many states for several more decades, including Mississippi. Mississippi lawmakers supported the notion that public executions were an effective technique for sending a stern warning to other would-be perpetrators.

Although the first state prison would be constructed in Jackson in 1843 where the State Capitol Building sits today, it would be more than another century before any Mississippi executions would be carried out within the walls of the state’s penitentiary. The state penitentiary received extensive damage during the American Civil War. Once hostilities ended, the prison was abandoned for lack of money – the four years of warfare had depleted the state treasury. Thus, for the next thirty-five years, Mississippi operated no state prison at all. Convicts were leased out to private businesses and farmers.

In 1901, however, the legislature purchased 8,000 acres of land in the Mississippi Delta’s Sunflower County, and established the Mississippi State Penitentiary. The prison farm, more popularly known as Parchman (named after the first warden J.M. “Jim” Parchman), now sits on approximately 18,000 acres. Death row, located in the maximum security unit, is at Parchman.

Although the citizens of Sunflower County did not seem to mind having Parchman’s convicts in their midst, they objected to executions being carried out there for fear that their county would be stigmatized as the “death county.”

Thus, public hangings in Mississippi were carried out in the county where the condemned prisoner had committed the crime, although they were not always a public spectacle. The gallows in Greene and Hinds counties, for example, were constructed on the top floor of the courthouse, adjacent to the jail where the prisoner was being held. Crowds would gather around the courthouse nevertheless, awaiting word from the sheriff that the condemned person had been dispatched to the infernal regions, which he (or she) so richly deserved.

Hanging was cheap and effective, though not without drawbacks. Carried out in a slipshod fashion, which was often the case, hanging could become a brutal form of torture rather than a swift punishment. The January 1932 hanging of Guy Fairley was so badly handled that it created a public outcry against hanging in Mississippi. Fairley was executed for the murder of a federal prohibition enforcement officer who had reported Fairley as violating the liquor laws.

Portable electric chair

Yet the effort to abandon the gallows in Mississippi in favor of electrocution was seemingly stalled. Then, the 1940 legislature hammered out a compromise. A portable electric chair would be constructed that could be transported from county to county. Seemingly a simple enough solution until officials realized that no one had ever used a portable electric chair, or even built one. Finally, a Memphis firm agreed to construct such a contraption, and it was ready for use on October 11, 1940. Executioner Jimmy Thompson, a showman in the style of P. T. Barnum, used the machine for the first time in Lucedale, Mississippi, on wife-killer Willie Mae Bragg, whom Thompson said proudly had died “with tears in his eyes for the efficient care I took to give him a good clean burning.”

The portable electric chair brought distinction to Mississippi, as it was the only state to employ the use of such an amazing machine. But, it too would not be without problems. There were instances when the thing would malfunction, prolonging an agonizing death for the prisoner.

By the late 1940s, efforts began to replace the chair with a gas chamber. It would require a permanent location. Once again, the legislature became bogged down with conflicted politics. Again, residents of Sunflower County were less than enthused at the prospect of executions being carried out at Parchman. No one was more opposed to the idea than the penitentiary superintendent Marvin L. Wiggins. Wiggins was a formidable politician in his own right and successfully fought to keep the gas chamber out of his penitentiary for some ten years. But finally, in September 1954, Governor Hugh White called a special session of the legislature and the old portable electric chair was swiftly replaced by the gas chamber. Wiggins and the citizens of Sunflower County had lost their battle to keep executions out of Parchman.

Gas chamber

Less than a year later, in March 1955, convicted murderer Gerald Gallego became the first person executed in the newly constructed gas chamber at Parchman. Wiggins's worst nightmare come true. Whether due to nervous human error, mechanical failure, or a combination of the two, the execution was botched. Gallego coughed, choked, and wheezed on a less than lethal cloud of cyanide poisoning. Finally, after some forty-five minutes while officials feverishly worked to correct the problem, the repairs were completed and Gallego quickly died. An additional step was then added to the required testing of the chamber prior to an execution: an animal, usually a rabbit, would be placed in a cage in the chamber chair and cyanide gas was released to make sure the mixture was sufficiently lethal. With the passage of time and experience, the chamber would become an efficient killing machine, sending thirty-five men off to their final destinations.

Executions halted

Executions in Mississippi came to a halt in 1964 because of increased litigation challenging the death penalty at both the state and national level. The end result of the legal actions was the June 29, 1972, ruling of the United States Supreme Court in *Furman v. Georgia* which held the Georgia death penalty statute was "cruel and unusual" as applied and therefore violated the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. The impact of the *Furman* decision was to void the death penalty statutes in forty states, including Mississippi.

The Mississippi Legislature then proceeded to adopt a new death penalty statute which it felt answered the constitutional claims raised in *Furman*. Four years later, the U. S. Supreme Court in *Gregg v. Georgia* approved the new death penalty statutes enacted in several states and explained why several other new state statutes still violated the Constitution. The new Mississippi statute was held to still not meet federal constitutional requirements.

In April 1977, another new statute was enacted and remains the statute in use today. Indeed, Mississippi's prison system underwent many changes in the mid-1970s. One other notable change was the legislature's creation of the Mississippi Department of Corrections in 1976.

Because of the litigation regarding the Mississippi statute, no execution was carried out in Mississippi until 1983. The first execution after nineteen years was the gas chamber execution of child-killer Jimmy Lee Gray in 1983. As with the gallows and electric chair, the gas chamber could not just exit quietly, however. The Gray execution raised protest and cries for a new method of execution. Prison officials and witnesses alike watched as Gray's head banged furiously into a steel pole located behind the chair. While prison and attending medical officials insisted that the violent head banging did not matter because Gray was clinically dead, the damage had been done. The Gray execution excited worldwide interest for people opposed to the death penalty.

Lethal injection

The Mississippi Legislature in April 1984 enacted a law that authorized the use of lethal injection in place of the gas chamber. This was the first change in the death penalty protocols since 1954. Under the new law, anyone sentenced after July 1, 1984, was to be executed by lethal injection; those condemned prior to that date were “grandfathered” into the gas chamber. Therefore, three more convicted murderers would die in the chamber – Edward Earl Johnson and Connie Ray Evans in 1987, and Leo Edwards in 1989.

In 1998, the Mississippi Legislature changed the execution law to allow all death row inmates to be executed by lethal injection. Executions in Mississippi occurred at midnight because it gave the state a full twenty-four hours to handle an unforeseen event without having to go back to the Mississippi Supreme Court for a new execution date. The U. S. Supreme Court requested that states change the time of execution to 6 p.m. and Mississippi’s assistant attorney general, Marvin “Sonny” White, recommended to lawmakers that Mississippi follow the court’s request. Executions now occur at 6 p.m.

Lethal injection claimed its first victim, Tracy Hansen, July 17, 2002. Hansen was a convicted killer of a state trooper. It was by all accounts, as executions go, unremarkable except for the fact that it was the first of its kind in Mississippi history. Following quickly behind Hansen, in December 2002, Jessie Derrell Williams, convicted for the murder of a woman, was also executed by lethal injection.

The death penalty laws in America continue to evolve. In May 2002, the U. S. Supreme Court held that a mentally retarded criminal could not be executed; that to do so would be “cruel and unusual” punishment. Thus, at the time of the posting of this article in October 2004, sixty-nine inmates sit on death row at Parchman. The May 2002 ruling has slowed the litigation process for future executions while the state conducts hearings on appeals that claim mental retardation.

Though the wheels of justice turn slowly in capital cases, there will be other convicted killers like Hansen and Williams who are strapped to a table and injected with a lethal combination of drugs. Lethal injection is a relatively peaceful and quiet death.

Mississippians, like the rest of Americans, are divided on the issue of capital punishment. For death penalty supporters, lethal injection offers little satisfaction. It is decreed as “too easy,” “better than they deserve.” For opponents of capital punishment, lethal injection is, in some respects, more fearsome than the gas chamber. In their view, it sanitizes the whole execution process – makes it far too easy, too clean. But benign as it may seem when compared to past practices, there will be accounts of death by lethal injection decades from now that will stir public debate.

Donald A. Cabana, Ph.D., is superintendent of the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman and former chairman of the criminal justice department at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of Death at Midnight: Confessions of an Executioner.

Posted October 2004

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A Lesson before Dying

Anticipation/Reaction Guide

Part I Directions: Prior to reading or seeing *A Lesson Before Dying*, in the “Before” column, respond to each statement by putting a plus sign (+) if you agree with it, a minus sign (-) if you disagree, and a question mark (?) if you are unsure of your belief.

Part II Directions: For one of the statements below, write a Deep Thoughts response of 500 words or more as to why you have the belief you do.

Part III Directions: After reading or seeing the story, in the “After” column respond again to the statements. Then, reply by writing a 500 words or more Deep Thoughts response to a statement where your belief changed since reading the play. If not, write about a different statement than you responded to in Part II.

Before	Statement	After
1. ____	Confessing to a crime you didn't commit in order to avoid punishment is wise.	1. ____
2. ____	The difference between right and wrong is <i>clear</i> .	2. ____
3. ____	It is better to die for what you believe in rather than to lie to save your life	3. ____
4. ____	There is only one correct way to interpret the Bible.	4. ____
5. ____	That which doesn't destroy us only makes us stronger.	5. ____
6. ____	It's more difficult to forgive yourself if the person you have hurt doesn't forgive you.	6. ____
7. ____	Courage means doing something even though it can be difficult and fearsome.	7. ____
8. ____	A person is innocent until proven guilty.	8. ____
9. ____	Belief in opposition to common values should be illegal.	9. ____
10. ____	Justice is best determined in a court of law.	10. ____

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Or you can mail it to us at: Prime Stage Theatre P.O. Box 99446 Pittsburgh, PA 15233

The Resource Guide Student Evaluation Form

YOUR NAME _____

NAME OF SCHOOL _____

GRADE _____ NAME OF TEACHER _____

What part/parts of this story did you enjoy when you were seeing the play?

What part/parts of this play confused you while reading or watching the play?

What part/parts of the stage version helped you understand the book?

What did you learn from reading or seeing this play?

Which character would you like to play?

Please go to our website: www.primestage.com to find this form and send it back directly online!
Or you can mail it to us at: Prime Stage Theatre P.O. Box 99446 Pittsburgh, PA 15233

The Resource Guide Teacher Evaluation Form

Prime Stage constantly assesses the work provided by our education department. Your feedback is vital to our ongoing need for funding for this program. Please fill out the following forms and mail or email them to the address given below. Thank you.

YOUR NAME _____

NAME OF SCHOOL _____

EMAIL ADDRESS _____

Which part(s) of the play and experience you find most helpful for you and your students?

Was the guide useful to you?

Which part(s) did you find most helpful?

How can we improve the theatrical for the future?



A Lesson before Dying: Further Reading Recommendations

Billy by Albert French

A 10 year old boy, accused of murder, must make his way through a judicial system that considers him disposable because of his race.

The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America by Mumia Abu-Jamal

The conversations between death row inmate Abu-Jamal and Marc Lamont-Hill cover a wide range of issues facing African-American men in the 21st century.

Death Penalty: fair solution or moral failure? By JoAnn Bren Guernsey

A thoughtful look at both sides of the death penalty question.

The Other Wes Moore: one name, two fates By Wes Moore

Two men share the same name, but lead very different lives because of their own choices and societal forces beyond their control.

To Sir, With Love by E.R. Braithwaite

The book that inspired the classic 60's movie. A black teacher opens the hearts and minds of a group of unruly teens and teaches them to be responsible adults.