

QUESTIONS ABOUT
A LESSON BEFORE DYING

Earnest J. Gaines has written a novel about a young African-American accused unjustly of murder in the deep south of the USA in the 1940s. The narrator is a young African-American schoolteacher. Dialog is hard to understand because the African-Americans in this community speak a dialect, and figuring out some words may be difficult. Questions are listed for specific chapters, but answers may include topics from throughout the book.

Chapter 1

1. The narrator Grant Wiggins is not at the trial but has no doubt of the verdict, which is not based on guilt or innocence. On what is the verdict based? What is the verdict?
2. What defense does Jefferson's lawyer give? What is the court's sentence?

Chapter 3

3. What is the relationship between Grant and the two women Tante Lou and Miss Emma? What is Grant's relationship with Henri Pichot? What signs show that this second relationship is very one-sided?

Chapter 4

4. What are some differences between the black part of town and the white part?
5. What do Tante Lou and Miss Emma ask Grant to do? If you were asked to do this, how would you respond?

Chapter 5

6. Describe the school and its resources. How effective is such an environment for learning? How does Grant discipline students? How effective do you believe this is?

Chapter 6

7. Grant relates that he is hungry when he visits Henri Pichot, but he refuses to eat at Pichot's table. Explain why. If you were in Grant's shoes, how would you feel? What would you do? How does Grant behave when he meets the sheriff?

Chapter 8

8. Why does Grant's former teacher feel superior to him? What does this reveal about the structure of the African-American society?

Chapter 9

9. How does Jefferson respond to his visitors on their first visit?

Chapter 11

10. What happens when Grant visits Jefferson by himself?

Chapter 12

11. Bar patrons discuss baseball player Jackie Robinson who reminds Grant of boxer Joe Louis. What do these two have in common? Why are they important to bar patrons?

Chapter 13

12. What message do Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose want Grant to take to Jefferson? Why won't Grant do it? Do you think it would be an effective message?

Chapter 19

13. The school puts on a Christmas pageant for the black community. Are children and audience proud of their performance? Is Grant? For whom is their single gift?

Chapter 20 - 21

14. How is the date set for the execution? What do Miss Emma and Tante Lou want Jefferson to do at the execution? Are their expectations reasonable?
15. What is the basic problem Grant sees between blacks and whites in American society? Is Grant right? Do you see evidence today that this problem is not resolved?

Chapter 22 - 23

16. What does Grant promise to bring Jefferson? How does the black community help? What do Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose think of this gift?

17. What other items does Grant say he will bring Jefferson?
18. What does Jefferson want Grant to tell the “chirren” after they send him pecans?

Chapter 24

19. According to Grant, what is a hero? How can Jefferson be a hero?

Chapter 28

20. How does Jefferson change in this chapter? How does Grant change?

Chapter 29

21. Jefferson’s notebook is copied verbatim into this chapter. He writes of his last days using his own creative grammar and spelling. You may have trouble deciphering his thoughts, but you should try. What is his attitude toward the community and his impending death? What is his last meal?

Chapter 30

22. When he is executed, does Jefferson become the hero the black community needs?

Extra

23. What role does Vivian play in this novel?
24. Grant and Vivian are almost the only educated people in the community, either black or white. Could an uneducated person have understood the motivations and actions revealed in this story? Explain your answer.