English 12 – *A Lesson Before Dying*

Essay Topics

1. Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian are used to taking care of themselves and others. Explain the role of women in the novel. What was their function in this society? Was their contribution and sacrifice recognized?

2. Education is very important in this novel, both its attainment and the lack of it. Tante Lou continually refers to Grant as “the teacher.” The other men call him “Professor.” Yet Grant hates teaching, echoing the feelings of his own teacher, Matthew Antoine. Contrast the opinions of education presented in this novel. Why do some seek it and others consider it a burden? What role does it play in the characters’ lives and the life of the community?

3. Reread the description of Vivian from Chapter 4 (pp. 27-28) and the passage in Chapter 15 about Vivian’s marriage (pp. 111-112). What was the cause of conflict between Vivian and her family over her marriage? What causes the conflict between Vivian and Tante Lou over her relationship with Grant? Why does Grant say that the conflicts are not the same, as Vivian believes?

4. Find specific examples of how Gaines uses different levels of language and non-verbal communication to make his characters realistic. How does the manner in which they speak or don’t speak enhance the story? How would the novel change if everyone spoke as Grant does, or as the older people in the quarter do? Or as Jefferson writes?

5. Grant’s fight with the mulatto sharecroppers demonstrates his anger and frustration. Why are the sharecroppers’ comments about Jefferson particularly hurtful? Would Grant have reacted in the same way if a black man had made similar comments? A white man? What might this scene teach us about the racial tensions in Louisiana in the 1940s?

6. On the morning of Jefferson’s execution, Grant leaves his classroom to stand outside, alone, to wait for news. He asks himself, “Why wasn’t I there? Why wasn’t I standing beside him? Why wasn’t my arm around him? Why?” (p. 250). Attempt to answer these questions, referring to the text of the novel for examples of Grant’s strengths or weaknesses.

7. Paul earns Grant’s respect through his treatment of Jefferson and his visitors. How is Paul different from the other jail keepers? How do his actions at the end of Jefferson’s life demonstrate Paul’s goodness? Why might he have chosen to attend the execution even though it was not part of his job? Why did he choose to drive out to the quarter to tell Grant the news personally?