

# 1

## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Ernest J. Gaines was born into a family of sharecroppers in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. He attended grammar school in the plantation church and was primarily raised by his aunt. *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of a young black man convicted of participating in the murder of a white man and consequently sentenced to death in Louisiana in the 1940s. Although a work of fiction, this novel reflects the racial discrimination and stereotypes Gaines would have encountered in the pre-civil rights South.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. What do they learn about Ernest J. Gaines? Based on what they learned about the novel, ask them to identify ways Gaines used elements of his own life to create the world of the novel.

Distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel," "Ernest J. Gaines (b. 1933)," and "Historical Context: The South Before Civil Rights." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

### Writing Exercise

Gaines believes that all great writers are regional writers but that their works are universal. Ask your students to choose a favorite book. Have them write a paragraph on how a novel about a particular place can cross regional boundaries and appeal to readers who have never lived in that period or place.

### Homework

Read Chapters 1–4. Prepare your students to read three to four chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. In the novel's opening lines Grant says, "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be." Ask your students to consider why Gaines might open the novel in this way.

# 2

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*A Lesson Before Dying* is set in the 1940s, a gap between two very important eras in American history—the period of Reconstruction following the U.S. Civil War but before the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest in the 1950s. The economy of the South was still primarily based on agriculture. Sharecropping—tending a portion of another person’s land in exchange for a percentage of the crops—was common among both black and poor white families.

### Discussion Activities

Distribute Handout One: Sharecropping and Handout Two: The Pre-Civil Rights South, and have your students read them in class. Gaines has said that one of the reasons he started to write was so he could memorialize the Louisiana of his boyhood and the people who lived there. Grant describes the fictional setting of the novel:

Bayonne was a small town of about six thousand. . . . The courthouse was there; so was the jail. . . . There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored. Bayonne’s major industries were a cement plant, a sawmill, and a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs.

Ask your students to locate other descriptions of the setting in Chapters 1–4. Based on what they learned from listening to the Audio Guide and reading the handouts, how accurate are Gaines’s depictions of a small Southern town in the 1940s?

### Writing Exercise

Many of the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* live on a former plantation that is farmed by sharecroppers. Ask students to write a one-page essay on the way Henri Pichot treats Inez and Miss Emma in Chapter 3. Does he treat them with respect? Based on what students learned from the handouts, can they understand why Inez and Miss Emma defer to him? What can we learn about the culture of 1940s Louisiana from reading their exchange?

### Homework

Read Chapters 5–9. What differences do you see between Grant’s classroom and yours? How does his role as a teacher influence the way he views himself and others?

# 3

## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

*A Lesson Before Dying* is told from the first-person point of view of Grant Wiggins, schoolteacher for the black children in the quarter. His hesitancy to become involved in the events of the novel establishes one of the major conflicts in the story—his reluctance to visit Jefferson versus his aunt’s determination for Grant to help Jefferson die with dignity.

### Discussion Activities

Grant tells his aunt and Miss Emma, “Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks, maybe a couple of months—but he’s already dead. . . . And I can’t raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep the others from ending up like this—but he’s gone from us.” Why does Grant lash out like this? How does his reluctance to help affect the way he views the situation? How do his views on his own life and teaching as a profession affect the way he tells the story?

Ask students to discuss the following questions: Why do you think Gaines chose Grant as a first-person narrator rather than Tante Lou, Miss Emma, or Jefferson? How would the novel have been different if it were told from the perspective of one of these characters?

### Writing Exercise

Have your students choose one of the two writing exercises below. Invite them to share their writing by reading it aloud to the class.

- Write a description of the trial from the first-person point of view of one of the other characters.
- Write a description of the trial from an objective third-person point view as it might be reported in the local newspaper.

### Homework

Read Chapters 10–13. Make a list of the primary characters and what motivates each of them.

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

### Discussion Activities

Grant Wiggins is the protagonist of the novel, but his life becomes inextricably tied to Jefferson's. Ask your students to examine how Jefferson acts during the visit with Grant in Chapter 11 and how he later acts when Miss Emma visits, as depicted in Chapter 16. Grant tells his aunt, "He treated me the same way he treated her. He wants me to feel guilty, just as he wants her to feel guilty. Well, I'm not feeling guilty, Tante Lou. I didn't put him there. I do everything I know how to do to keep people like him from going there." Why is Grant offended by Jefferson's behavior? Does Jefferson want Miss Emma or Grant to feel guilty, or is he simply unable to cope with his fate?

### Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write three paragraphs on a character other than Jefferson or a situation that serves as an antagonist to Grant. What is the conflict? How does Grant respond? Is his response appropriate? Have students support their ideas using examples from the text.

### Homework

Read Chapters 14–17. Ask your students to pay close attention to the way Grant describes the scenery during his walk with Vivian.

# 5

## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language. Imagery can also project emotion, enabling the author to imply a mood without disrupting the narrative to inform the reader of a character’s emotional state.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Gaines vividly describes the Louisiana countryside throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*. Imagery assists the reader in understanding the time and place where the novel is set.

### Discussion Activities

One of the most beautiful descriptions of the plantation occurs in Chapter 14 when Grant takes Vivian on a walk down the quarter. Ask students to close their eyes while you read aloud to the class. What emotions are evoked by the images of “a low ashen sky,” “a swarm of blackbirds,” and the plantation cemetery? How does the mood change once Grant and Vivian turn on the road that leads to the field of sugarcane?

### Writing Exercise

The defense attorney compares Jefferson to a hog by saying, “Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.” Have students write a few paragraphs on why that image backfired as a defense argument. What was the attorney’s purpose in using that characterization? Why did the remark affect Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Jefferson so deeply? Even though Jefferson suggests it, why won’t Miss Emma bring him corn to eat?

### Homework

Read Chapters 18–21. Have students pay close attention to Grant’s actions during the Christmas program. As the schoolteacher, he is in charge of this event. Why is this an uncomfortable situation for Grant? How does he respond?

# 6

## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

An author does not always include symbols intentionally. Sometimes, they develop organically as part of the writing process. In a 1998 interview with *Humanities* magazine, Gaines said, "Students come up now and ask me, 'Did you know you put those symbols in there?' You never think of symbols." Gaines does not intentionally insert symbols into his writing; they evolve as part of the creative process.

### Discussion Activities

There is a great deal of religious symbolism in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Like Gaines, many Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Katharine Anne Porter, and Zora Neale Hurston use religious symbolism to reflect the moral ideals of a story's characters or to highlight the conflict between characters whose religious views differ. Ask your students to consider the way religion permeates the society in which Grant lives and the way it influences the actions of Vivian, Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose.

Grant's classroom is in a church. How is this appropriate for his role in the black community? Does this contribute to Grant's conflict with the Reverend? Does Tante Lou expect more out of Grant as a teacher than helping children learn to read and write? If so, what?

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose a character from the novel whose name might serve a symbolic function. Explain how the name as a symbol relates to the character. Does the person reflect or contradict the values of his or her namesake? Why might Gaines have chosen to depict the character in this way?

### Homework

Distribute Handout Three: Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis. Ask students to read the handout and Chapters 22–24. Ask them to pay close attention to the scene in Chapter 24 when Grant describes a hero.

# 7

## Lesson Seven

### FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant must teach Jefferson how to die like a man. In doing so, Grant examines his place and purpose in the community and Jefferson learns to act with dignity and pride while facing his own death.

### Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three: Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis. What qualities did these men possess that made them cultural heroes? In Chapter 12, the old men in the bar reenact highlights of the baseball games of their hero Jackie Robinson. Grant later tells Jefferson, "A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do. He is different from other men. He is above other men." Ask your students to consider the rest of Grant's comments. Do they agree with his definition of a hero? Can Jefferson be the role model Grant wants him to be?

Consider the ways Grant is a hero to his students and his aunt. Does he ever disappoint them? If so, what do we learn about Grant's character in these moments?

Can small actions be considered heroic? Are there opportunities for personal heroism in the world of *A Lesson Before Dying*? If so, who are the heroes of the novel so far? Do they possess any of the same qualities as Jackie Robinson or Joe Louis?

### Writing Exercise

Grant's speech to Jefferson seems to imply that only men can be heroes. Ask your students to write a brief essay on one of the women in the novel whose actions could be considered heroic. What is most admirable about her? How do her actions affect others? Do those who benefit from her actions realize it?

### Homework

Read Chapters 25–27. Ask your students to pay close attention to the scene in Chapter 25 where Grant fights with the mulatto sharecroppers. How does Grant describe the mulattoes' racism? Are his remarks about them equally racist? Ask your students to consider the ways this scene advances the plot of the novel.

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The events leading to Jefferson's execution shape the way Grant views himself and others. While Jefferson's fate is strongly foreshadowed throughout the novel, Gaines chooses to show us Grant's transformation slowly, creating tension that might not otherwise exist. In Chapter 25, Grant fights with the mulatto sharecroppers. This is a major turning point in the novel because it demonstrates how deeply Grant is affected by his relationship with Jefferson.

Grant's journey toward self-discovery defines the novel's pacing as much as Jefferson's impending execution.

### Discussion Activities

Divide your class into two groups. Ask one group of students to examine the plot structure as it relates to Jefferson, the other as it relates to Grant. Students should identify the novel's major events from the perspective of the character they were assigned using passages from the novel to explain why these events are the most significant. Have each group write these events in a column on the board. Draw lines to show where Grant's and Jefferson's lives intersect. Discuss the ways each of them changes during those scenes.

Divide students into groups and have them map a timeline showing the development of the plot as a whole. Students should define the events that constitute the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups should present their timelines, discussing any discrepancies along the way.

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to anticipate the novel's ending. Have them write several paragraphs describing what will happen to Grant and Jefferson. Ask them to consider the ways the actions of these two men might affect the entire community.

### Homework

Read Chapters 28–31. During his last days in jail, Jefferson keeps a journal. Why is Sheriff Guidry concerned about how Jefferson will portray him?

# 9

## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Use the following themes, as well as themes the students identify, to determine the themes of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Which themes seem most important? Why?

### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises.

Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements that *A Lesson Before Dying* makes about the following themes:

**Racial Injustice:** “They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime other than being there when it happened.”

1. Has Jefferson been treated unjustly? Would a young white man in the same situation have been punished as severely? Why or why not?
2. How have Grant, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose suffered from racial injustice? How has each responded?

**Commitment:** “You hit the nail on the head there, lady—commitment. Commitment to what—to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people?”

1. Why doesn't Grant leave? Why did he come back after he left the first time? Why won't Vivian support his desire for both of them to leave?
2. How does Grant explain obligation to Jefferson? Why does he bother? Does Grant practice his concept of obligation?

**Manhood:** “Do you know what his nannan wants me to do before they kill him? The public defender called him a hog, and she wants me to make him a man.”

1. How does Miss Emma define manhood? How does Grant?
2. The final entry in Jefferson's journal is, “good by mr wigin ... tell them im a man ...” How does Jefferson define manhood?



### Homework

Students should begin working on their essays. See the Essay Topics. For additional ideas, see the Reader's Guide “Discussion Questions.” Outlines are due at the end of the next class.

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

#### Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? What are some of the books they consider great? Do any of these books remind them of *A Lesson Before Dying*?

A great novel stands the test of time and is read long after it is written. Gaines published *A Lesson Before Dying* in 1993. The novel is set in the late 1940s. Do you believe this novel will endure the test of time? Is the novel as relevant today as when it was first published? Do you think that its subject and themes will continue to be relevant? Why or why not?

Writers can become the voice of a generation or of a particular group of people. What kind of voice does Gaines provide through Grant? What can this teach us about the concerns and dreams of people of color who grew up in the pre-civil rights South?

#### Writing Exercise

Ask students to consider the following questions: If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Be available to assist students as they work on their essays in class. Have students partner with one another to edit outlines or rough drafts. Provide them with the characteristics of a well-written essay.

#### Homework

Students should work on their essays. Rough drafts are due the next class.

# Sharecropping

The concept of sharecropping evolved in the South out of economic necessity. The South's main industry, farming, only operated successfully with free slave labor. After the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the white plantation owners found themselves "land rich but cash poor," with no one to work their land and no money to hire anyone to do it. The mass exodus of former slaves to the North and the absence of any other profitable industry added to the region's woes.

Many of the freed slaves who stayed in the South knew only one vocation—farming—but they were no longer content to work for somebody; they wanted to own land and support their families. Unfortunately, none of these men had any money, nor owned the things needed to operate a successful farm. Thus, sharecropping became the norm.

Landowners, usually whites, would lease a portion of their land, along with tools, seed, fertilizer, and other necessities, to former slaves or poor whites. In return, the sharecroppers paid their debts with interest to the landowners by giving them a portion of their crops. Since the farmers had no money, plantation owners operated stores that sold needed goods, which the farmers "charged," and the bill was "paid" with another portion of the crops. Whatever portion of the crops was left over after the sharecroppers paid their bills could be sold and the profit kept. However, there was rarely any portion of the crops left over or any profit made. The farmers were obliged to continue this arrangement year after year in vain hope of getting out of debt, creating a never-ending cycle of poverty.

Many sharecropping agreements were verbal. Some of the sharecroppers actually signed written contracts, but, often illiterate, they could not read these agreements to understand that they heavily favored the landowners. Examples of this inequality can be found in samples of old contracts stipulating that the landowners or their agents could specify how the land was cultivated. In addition, those who raised cotton were required to pay to have it ginned on the plantation before turning it over to the owner.

The Freedmen's Bureau was created to regulate this system. It attempted to establish model contracts that protected sharecroppers, proposed a standard payment of one-third of the crops for a year's rent, and created a council to settle disputes between landowners and sharecroppers. The sharecroppers formed organizations such as the Colored Farmers' Alliance and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to aid and support their members. The federal government established the U.S. Farm Security Administration to help stop the abuse of sharecroppers, but still it continued.

So why did freed slaves choose to stay despite such a harsh lifestyle? Sharecroppers hoped they could ultimately buy their own farms. This method of farming continued from Reconstruction until the Civil Rights Movement. Falling crop prices, continued black migration to the North after World War II, and more rights and opportunities for blacks finally destroyed this way of life, but not before it left its mark on generations struggling to survive.



## The Pre-Civil Rights South

Life in the pre-civil rights South offered little opportunity and denied its black citizens many of the most basic human rights. Slavery had been abolished in the Confederate States by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1870) gave all men—white and black—the right to vote. However, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) made segregation virtually the law of the land. In light of *Plessy*, it was not illegal to have separate facilities for black and white Americans as long as they were “equal.” This gave rise to the “separate but equal” notion. Unfortunately, “separate” was rarely “equal.”

In the 1940s, the decade in which *A Lesson Before Dying* takes place, the South was still governed by many of the laws enacted after Reconstruction. These statutes, known as Jim Crow laws, were designed to keep former slaves from achieving equality with their former masters. Louisiana, where Ernest J. Gaines was born and the novel is set, had the most such laws of any state.

Jim Crow laws prohibited miscegenation (intermarriage between different races) and made it punishable by harsh prison sentences and steep fines. Many laws made it difficult for blacks to exercise the right to vote, by requiring that they pay poll taxes they could not afford or take tests they could not pass. One of the most ludicrous laws in Louisiana required blind people of different races—who could not even see the color of each other’s skin—to be housed and treated at separate facilities. Neither white nurses nor white barbers were allowed to serve blacks. A black person

accused of any perceived offense to a white person was subject to intimidation, violence, and possible lynching by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Jim Crow laws extended well outside the geographical area known as the Deep South. In Oklahoma, it was a misdemeanor for white teachers to teach at a school that accepted students of both races. Oklahoma also required separate facilities for swimming, fishing, and boating, in addition to separate phone booths. As late as 1948 even California, the state to which Grant’s parents have “escaped,” had laws outlawing marriage between the races.

*A Lesson Before Dying* is set just before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation of public schools unlawful by unanimous decision, after hearing the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Rosa Parks was arrested on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, public bus to a white man. Martin Luther King, Jr., helped organize a bus boycott and was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, making him the official spokesman for the boycott. Still, another decade passed before Congress ratified the Civil Rights Act of 1964, nullifying the country’s Jim Crow laws and ending legalized segregation.



## Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis

Two of the greatest African-American athletes of the twentieth century, Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis, are remembered not only for their groundbreaking achievements but also for personal courage that allowed them to break the race barrier in their sports a full decade before the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest. The two men were born just five years apart in the rural South, both the sons of sharecroppers. Their families ultimately left the region in search of a better life.

Joe Louis Barrow was born in Alabama in 1914. After his father's death, his mother remarried, and in 1924 the family moved to Detroit. When he began boxing as a teenager, he dropped his last name. Known as the Brown Bomber, Louis fought his two most important bouts against the same opponent, Max Schmeling, a German boxer. During their first match in June 1936, Schmeling knocked Louis out in Round 12. This first professional defeat devastated Louis and his fans, causing tears in the dressing room and riots in Harlem.

Although he beat his next opponent, “Cinderella Man” James J. Braddock, a year later and became the heavyweight champion, Louis longed for a rematch with Schmeling. On June 22, 1938, he got his chance. This rematch became a symbolic battle: Nazism—and all Hitler stood for—against democracy and the American way of life. Louis took only 124 seconds to knock out Schmeling and become the hero of all Americans.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born in Georgia in 1919 but grew up in Pasadena, California. He began his sports career as a semi-professional football quarterback but later played baseball in the Negro American League. After meeting with

Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson's life and professional sports in America forever changed.

On August 28, 1945, Branch Rickey subjected Robinson to shouted racial slurs and dramatizations of demeaning situations. When Robinson proved he could handle the pressure, promising silence for three years despite the expected racial abuse, he was offered a contract to play for the Dodgers' farm team. On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the “color line” by walking onto Ebbets Field in a Dodgers uniform wearing number 42. Rookie of the Year in 1947 and National League MVP in 1949, he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962 and posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal and the Medal of Freedom. In Robinson's honor, Major League Baseball retired the number 42 from professional baseball.

In Chapter 12 of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant relates the euphoria of the men in the bar as they relive some of Jackie Robinson's greatest plays. Grant also remembers the heartbreak of Joe Louis's stunning defeat by Max Schmeling and his inspirational victory two years later. Ultimately, each man's victories—in the ring and on the baseball diamond—promised the hope of a world in which people were judged on merits and abilities rather than skin color.

