A Lesson Before Dying

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST GAINES

Ernest Gaines was born on a plantation, the fifth generation of his family to live there. He had eleven younger siblings, and was raised by his aunt. When he was fifteen years old, he moved to San Francisco to live with his mother and father, who'd left Louisiana to find work when he was a young child. In his mid twenties, he served in the military, and afterwards won a prestigious scholarship to study literature at Stanford University. During the 1960s, he published three novels: *Catherine Carmier*, *Of Love and Dust*, and *Bloodline*. While these works received good reviews, it was only in 1971 that Gaines achieved both critical and financial success with *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. On the success of this novel, he was awarded the highly prestigious Guggenhein Fellowship, and began teaching creative writing at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, near the plantation where he was born. While teaching in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, Gaines continued to write prolifically, publishing many short stories, as well as the novels *A Gathering of Old Men*, and *A Lesson Before Dying*, the latter of which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. While it failed to win either award, the novel's great popularity and critical acclaim led to Gaines being awarded a Macarthur "Genius Grant." Gaines continues to teach occasionally, though he has not published a novel in more than twenty years. He resides with his wife in Oscar, Louisiana, only a few blocks from the house where he was born.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A Lesson Before Dying alludes to a huge number of events from black history in the 19th and 20th centuries. To begin with, Grant is descended from slaves, as are most of the families of the people in his community. Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, four million slaves were declared free by the 13th Amendment. (The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had only freed slaves in the Southern colonies, and made no claims about the unconstitutionality of slavery itself.) Despite the 13th Amendment, most slaves continued to live much as they always had; because they had no money with which to leave the South, they continued to work on the same plantations where they had previously been imprisoned. Blacks were paid much less than their white counterparts, which forced them to continue living in the same places and perpetuated the cycle of black poverty. Ernest Gaines himself is descended from slaves; to this day, he lives only a few minutes away from the plantation where his ancestors were once held as slaves. *A Lesson Before Dying* paints a bleak picture of the court system in the South: blacks were tried in courts run by white judges, jurors, attorneys, and bailiffs, meaning that they often faced enormous racism. During the period when the novel takes place, many blacks accused of a crime were lynched—captured by whites and hanged—before they could ever appear in court. Ida B. Wells, who documented lynching in the South until her death in the 1930s, said that the court system was no different than lynching, as far as blacks were concerned—either way, blacks were treated like animals and given the harshest possible sentences, without any assumption of innocent until proven guilty. Jefferson's death sentence, then, is a mark of his jury's racism, not his guilt.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

It's likely that the direct literary inspiration for *A Lesson Before Dying* was the sonnet, "If We Must Die," by the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, with its imagery of hogs and imprisonment and its language of heroism and "fighting back." Like Gaines, McKay was reacting to the persecution and dehumanization of black people by white America and American culture. Also like Gaines, McKay endorses heroism and self-improvement as weapons for fighting persecution against blacks. The image with which *A Lesson Before Dying* begins, that of the meek black defendant being defended by an eloquent white attorney, has appeared in so many books and films that it's become a cliché. Surely the most famous example of this scene appears in Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in which the heroic Atticus Finch defends the quiet, innocent Tom Robinson. Gaines's novel is a rebuttal, of sorts, to Lee—while the defense attorney is the hero in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the defense attorney in *A Lesson Before Dying* is a condescending, belittling figure who makes Jefferson despise himself even as he's defending him from execution. Finally, Gaines spends much of his novel describing the career paths available to blacks in the first half of the twentieth century. For a better understanding of these issues as they would have appeared to blacks in the 1940s, the two most important texts are *Up From Slavery* (1901), by Booker T. Washington, and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), by W.E.B. Du Bois, Washington's rival. Du Bois sees the future of African Americans in terms of the liberal arts education; by studying culture and history, blacks can improve their minds and gain a foothold in American society. Washington objects to Du Bois's ideas on the grounds that a liberal arts education alienates blacks from their communities and each other; he argues that it is careerism and hard work, not the study of Shakespeare or Dante, that will save African Americans from persecution. Both of these points of view show up in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Lesson Before Dying*
- **Where Written:** 1989-1993
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Realist fiction
- **Genre:** Novel of education
- **Setting:** 1940s Louisiana
- **Climax:** Jefferson's execution
- **Antagonist:** Henri Pichot, Sheriff Sam Guidry
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

For once, a great made-for-TV movie: In 1999, *A Lesson Before Dying* was adapted as a film for HBO. Don Cheadle played Grant, and Mekhi Phifer played Jefferson. The film was a success, winning the Emmy for Best Made for Television Movie.

They Don't Have Creative Writers in France? In 1996, Ernest Gaines spent a semester in France at the University of Rennes. There, he taught the first creative writing class ever to be offered in the French University system.

PLOT SUMMARY

In southern 1940s Louisiana, near the town of Bayonne, a young black man named Jefferson is tried for the murder of an old shopkeeper, Alcee Gropé. The white prosecutor accuses him of accompanying two other black men to murder Gropé, stealing Gropé's money, and celebrating by drinking a bottle of whiskey. The defense attorney, also a white man, argues that Jefferson was in the wrong place at the wrong time: the two killers gave him a ride into town, and he was caught in a shootout. Ultimately, the defense attorney urges the jury, twelve white men, to spare Jefferson's life on the basis that he is black and poor, and killing him would be like killing a hog. Nonetheless, the jury finds Jefferson guilty and sentences him to death, at a date to be determined later.

The novel's narrator, Grant Wiggins, is a black schoolteacher who lives with Tante Lou, the aunt who has raised him since he was a child. Lou is a close friend of Jefferson's grandmother, Miss Emma Glenn, who has raised Jefferson since he was a baby. Though Emma says that Grant needn't do anything he doesn't want to do, Lou insists that Grant visit Jefferson in his jail cell and teach him how to die like a man, instead of a hog. Grant refuses on the grounds that Jefferson is basically already dead, but Lou is so persistent and forceful that he agrees to help her negotiate with the sheriff to allow Jefferson to have visitors. Emma, Lou, and Grant go to the house of Henri Pichot, a wealthy white man for whom they used to work, and ask him to allow Jefferson visitors. Pichot responds irritably that he will speak to the sheriff. Several days later, Pichot summons Grant to his house, where Pichot and Sheriff Sam Guidry, both of whom are highly bigoted against blacks, tell Grant that he can visit Jefferson, but that he mustn't cause any trouble.

In the weeks leading up to Grant's first visit, he continues teaching first through sixth-graders at the segregated school he runs in the local church. Winter is coming, and the community is going through the annual practice of sending kindling to the schoolhouse so that it can stay warm for the cold months. As Grant watches old men deliver wood, he thinks to himself that his students will end up working just like these men and never use any of the knowledge he's giving them. He thinks back to his childhood, when he was a student at the school where he's now a teacher. Grant fears that he'll end up like his old teacher, Matthew Antoine: cynical, disillusioned, and left with nothing to show for a lifetime of teaching others. Grant spends many of his afternoons with his beautiful girlfriend, Vivian Baptiste, at the Rainbow Club in nearby Bayonne. Vivian is still married, and has children, but she is in the process of separating from her husband. She and Grant are very much in love.

During Grant's earliest visits to Jefferson, he's accompanied by Tante Lou and Miss Emma. Jefferson is almost completely unresponsive, even though Emma has cooked him delicious food, and his silence causes Emma great pain. Grant becomes familiar with the process of visiting Jefferson: he's searched, sometimes mocked by Sheriff Guidry for believing that he can teach Jefferson anything, marched past the other prisoners, and then given an hour to speak to Jefferson. On Grant's first visit alone to Jefferson, he brings Jefferson Miss Emma's food, and Jefferson eats it like a hog and says that he's being fattened up like an animal before he's slaughtered.

For the next month, Grant continues to visit Jefferson, though these visits are almost as unproductive as the first one. Grant notices, though, that while Jefferson doesn't talk, he's desperate for Grant's company. Grant also develops a friendship with Paul Bonin, the young white deputy who often escorts him to Jefferson's cell. While Paul is white, he doesn't disrespect Grant or Jefferson.

Tante Lou, Emma, and the community's minister, Reverend Ambrose, convince Sheriff Guidry's wife, Edna Guidry, to convince the sheriff to allow them to visit Jefferson together, meaning that they have to sit in the jailhouse's dayroom rather than in Jefferson's cell. Meanwhile, Grant introduces Vivian to his family, and we learn that Grant doesn't attend church anymore, causing great pain to Tante Lou, who, like nearly everyone in the community, is Catholic. Tante Lou is polite around Vivian, but she is displeased to hear that she is getting divorced, and tells Vivian to remember God. Afterwards, Grant tells Vivian that he doesn't know what he's doing with Jefferson, and suggests that they move to another city, far

away. Vivian refuses to do so, reasoning that she cares too much about the children she teaches. She also encourages Grant to continue talking to Jefferson, suggesting that Jefferson is changing, even if he doesn't seem to be.

In December, Grant puts on the annual school Christmas play, which the entire community attends. Though everyone has donated food and clothing to the play, and enjoys singing Christmas songs, Grant is privately depressed, since he organizes the same show year after year, never seeing any change. Then, in early February, Grant learns from Henri Pichot that the judge has set a date for Jefferson's execution: the second Friday after Easter. With Vivian's support, he offers Miss Emma his comfort and support, and she tells him that he and Ambrose must make Jefferson a man before he's killed.

On his next visit to Jefferson's cell, Grant learns that Jefferson would like a radio so that he has some form of entertainment while he waits to die. He buys a radio, borrowing money from the owner of the Rainbow Club, Joe Claiborne, and gives it to Jefferson the next day. Reverend Ambrose is furious that Grant has given Jefferson a "box of sin," but Grant insists that Jefferson needs to take his mind off his death. On his next solo visit to the jail, Grant brings Jefferson a bag of pecans that his students have gathered, and tells Jefferson that he's going to give him a notebook and pencil so that Jefferson can write down his thoughts. At the end of this visit, Jefferson stands up and tells Grant to thank his students for the pecans. Grant senses instantly that he's made a "breakthrough."

Shortly after his breakthrough, Grant, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, and Miss Emma visit Jefferson together in the dayroom. Miss Emma has made a large pot of gumbo for the visit, but Jefferson refuses to eat any of it. Grant and Jefferson slowly pace around the room. As they walk, Grant tells Jefferson that he must be a hero—more of a hero than Grant himself could ever be—and stand up to the racist whites who have sentenced him to death by being brave and strong. He says that Jefferson must be good to Miss Emma by eating some of the gumbo she's made him; Jefferson sits down and eats some of the gumbo, bringing joy to Miss Emma.

Later, Grant celebrates in the Rainbow Club, and gets into a fight with two "mulattoes" (men of mixed race) who think that Jefferson should have been executed long ago. Vivian takes Grant back to her home, where Grant tells her that he loves her and needs her support while he visits Jefferson. Vivian suggests that Grant doesn't know what love is, and Grant is about to leave when he realizes that he has no one else to turn to—he goes back inside Vivian's house and embraces her.

Only a few weeks before Jefferson is to be executed, Reverend Ambrose visits Grant and tells him that he is endangering Jefferson's soul by giving him a radio and never mentioning Heaven. This leads to a heated argument between the two of them, in which Grant says that he believes in God but not in Heaven. Ambrose replies that he's had to lie to his congregation, filling their heads with hope and optimism. Grant is a fool, he concludes, for not understanding that people need hope and Heaven to be strong. On Grant's next visit to Jefferson, he tells Jefferson that he doesn't believe in Heaven, but that God says that humans must be good to one another.

The following chapter consists of excerpts from the notebook Grant gave Jefferson to use as a diary. In broken English, Jefferson writes that Henri Pichot and his friend gave him a penknife; though Jefferson is unaware of this, we understand that Pichot has made a bet that Jefferson will kill himself before he's executed, and gave him the penknife as a potential weapon of self-harm. Jefferson also writes about saying goodbye to Miss Emma. He concludes by thanking Grant for teaching him, noting that no one else has ever been so good to him.

The next chapter is written from the point of view of various characters who witness aspects of Jefferson's execution. Reverend Ambrose prepares to read Jefferson the 23rd Psalm; meanwhile, black and white workers see a truck carrying an electric chair pull up to the courthouse. In the jail, Sheriff Guidry says that Jefferson must be shaved so that the electric chair will work. Paul arranges for him to be shaved. When Paul is about to leave Jefferson's cell, Jefferson asks him if he'll be there at the execution. Paul says that he will.

Grant doesn't attend Jefferson's execution, but he leaves his classroom, telling his students that they must stay on their knees and pray until he receives news that Jefferson is dead. He walks outside and thinks to himself that he was wrong to disagree with Reverend Ambrose: Ambrose has far more strength than Grant will ever have, and this is because Ambrose believes in God and Heaven. Grant senses that Jefferson has been killed, and he goes back to the schoolhouse. As he walks there, he meets Paul, who has just come from the execution. Paul shakes hands with Grant and tells him that Jefferson was the bravest man in the room when he was executed. Paul says that Grant must be a great teacher; Grant replies that Jefferson taught himself. Paul gives Grant Jefferson's notebook, and Grant walks back into the schoolhouse in tears.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Grant Wiggins – The local schoolteacher, narrator, and the protagonist of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins is initially reluctant when Miss Emma Glenn and Tante Lou give him the task of talking to Jefferson before he's executed. Grant is a college-educated black man, but he's returned to his childhood home, where his ancestors were slaves, to teach at the segregated primary school where he was once a student. He is often frustrated with the lack of progress he sees in his students and in his community, and he fears that he isn't

accomplishing anything at all for his students by teaching them "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." While Grant believes in God, he questions his faith throughout the novel, and disagrees with Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose for being so concerned with Jefferson's soul. Grant finds it difficult to follow the tenets of Catholicism because he believes that Christianity promotes meekness and the acceptance of one's fate. Grant despises the condescension and outright hostility of whites like Henri Pichot to members of the black community; it's for this reason that he struggles to accept Christianity, as he sees it as causing blacks to accept their terrible treatment. As Grant spends more time with Jefferson, he begins to see signs that his new student can change; this inspires him and makes him feel validated as a teacher. His beautiful girlfriend, Vivian Baptiste, is also instrumental in encouraging him to spend more time with Jefferson and see the signs that Jefferson is growing braver and stronger. By the novel's conclusion, Grant regards Jefferson as an enormously brave man. He continues to question the virtues of Christianity, but nonetheless respects religion for its ability to inspire hope in its believers.

Jefferson – The defendant at the trial for the murder of Alcee Gropé, Jefferson is sentenced to death by electrocution. During the trial, his defense attorney argues that the jury should show Jefferson mercy because killing Jefferson would be like killing a hog. This drives Jefferson's grandmother, Miss Emma Glenn, to want to find some way to help and teach Jefferson to face his death as a man rather than as a "hog," both for his sake and for the sake of the black community. It's for this reason that she goes to Grant for help. For the first half of the novel, Jefferson is a callow, despairing young man, and has internalized the idea that he is an animal who need not abide by the rules of human society. When Miss Emma visits him, he shows no signs of love or affection for her, causing her to become ill and deeply depressed. Through his interactions with Grant, however, Jefferson begins to behave in a more civilized fashion, thanking Jefferson for his gifts, being polite to his grandmother, and writing his thoughts in a journal that Jefferson buys for him. Ultimately, Grant's attention and respect inspire Jefferson to behave courageously on the day of his execution, proving to himself, to Emma, to the black community, and to the racist whites who believe he'll kill himself, that he is a man, not an animal. His bravery shows Grant that education can change a community, and provides a symbol of hope and virtue to his friends and family in the plantation community. Jefferson is a Christ-figure, dying for the greater good of his community and "living on" through the impact of his actions and memory.

Tante Lou – Grant's maternal grandmother, though he calls her his aunt. Tante Lou raised Grant's mother, and after Grant's parents moved to California, she raises Grant, as well. She is a pious woman and a devoted churchgoer, and Grant's refusal to attend church with her gives her great pain. Her frequently stubborn insistence that Grant visit Jefferson in his jail cell is Grant's sole reason for doing so during the first half of the novel.

Miss Emma Glenn – Jefferson's elderly grandmother, or "nannan," as he calls her, Miss Emma Glenn loves Jefferson to the point where his conviction and sentencing make her seriously ill, as does the fact that he has taken the defense attorney's words to heart and sees himself as more animal than man. She desperately wants Jefferson to learn to be a man before his execution, to face his death as a man. It is Emma who first suggests that Grant speak to Jefferson before his execution; despite her obvious desire that Grant do so, she often says that Grant needn't do anything he doesn't want to do. Emma's love for Jefferson also inspires her to talk to Henri Pichot, for whom she worked for many years—it's only after she asks Pichot for permission to see Jefferson that she—and Grant—begin visiting the jailhouse.

The defense attorney – The white attorney who is charged with the task of defending Jefferson from execution for the crime of killing Alcee Gropé. The attorney paints a picture of Jefferson that Grant, Emma, and Reverend Ambrose spend the remainder of the novel refuting: he calls Jefferson an animal and a "hog," and tries to convince the jury to spare his life on the grounds that it's immoral to kill a mere animal. For much of the novel, Jefferson believes the defense attorney's words, calling himself a hog and behaving like one.

Henri Pichot – The wealthy, bigoted white man who reluctantly agrees to the sheriff to allow Miss Emma Glenn and Grant to visit Jefferson. For many years, Pichot employed both Tante Lou and Miss Emma in his mansion; Emma reminds him of this fact when she begs him for the right to visit Jefferson. Pichot is revealed to be a cruel, bloodthirsty man near the end of the novel, when Gaines makes it clear that Pichot made a bet with his friend that Jefferson would kill himself before the day of his execution—he even offers Jefferson a penknife, thinking that Jefferson will use it to hurt himself. In many ways, Pichot stands for the racist white establishment: he's openly hostile to blacks, but also strangely weak in his need to see blacks demonstrate their own weakness. For Jefferson to stand proudly on the day he dies, then, is a major victory against Pichot.

Vivian Baptiste – Grant's beautiful girlfriend, Vivian Baptiste, is a schoolteacher in Bayonne, the nearest town to Grant's home. Vivian is also a mother, and has a husband, though they are in the process of getting divorced. She provides near-constant love and affection for Grant during the months he spends visiting Jefferson. There are many times when Grant is ready to give up and move away from his home—on these occasions, Vivian always encourages Grant to stay and continue helping Jefferson and teaching his students. Though Vivian and Grant argue and bicker throughout the novel, their love for each other is never in any doubt. At many points, Grant finishes a difficult session with Tante Lou or Jefferson and goes to the

Rainbow Club in Bayonne, where Vivian is usually waiting to talk to him.

Deputy Paul Bonin – A white deputy sheriff at the jail where Jefferson is held, and the only guard who treats Jefferson and Grant with respect. Paul shows many signs that he wants Grant to succeed in inspiring Jefferson to be brave. He is present when Jefferson is executed at the end of the novel, and he tells Grant that Jefferson was the bravest man in the room. He also shakes Grant hand. (In line with the Christian symbolism of the book, Paul's name may allude to St. Paul, the loyal servant of Jesus Christ who spread the message of Christianity after Christ's death. Paul, too, spreads the word of Jefferson's bravery in death at the end of the novel.)

Reverend Moses Ambrose - An influential minister in Grant and Jefferson's community, and a champion of faith and humility, Reverend Moses Ambrose takes an active role in Jefferson's life from the moment Jefferson is sentenced to death: he visits Jefferson in his jail cell and encourages others to visit as well. Ambrose is suspicious of Grant's religious values, and frequently tells Grant that he must improve Jefferson's soul, not just his life. Ambrose is also skeptical of the merits of higher education, and tells Grant that college has made him more, not less ignorant. Toward the end of the novel, Ambrose reveals that he sees himself as a "liar": a minister who uses his influence to propagate Christian stories of transcendence and hope that, while not literally true, give people the courage to live their lives and thus take on a kind of metaphysical truth. While Grant spends most of the novel in disagreement with Ambrose, he comes to see that Ambrose's strength and integrity, stemming from a sincere belief in God and Heaven, far exceed his own.

Edna Guidry – Sam Guidry's wife. She is one of the only white characters in the novel who shows respect for blacks, though even her respect is less than what one might desire. Edna is instrumental in convincing Sam to allow Jefferson to have visitors, and she continues to show great concern for Jefferson throughout the novel. At the same time, she wishes aloud that the whole thing would just be finished, which seems a callous way to think about a process that will end in the execution of a man.

Matthew Antoine – The Creole man who taught Grant when Grant was a child, Matthew Antoine is a bitter, remorseful man who secretly despises Grant for daring to believe that he could use education to better himself. At the end of his life, Antoine coldly concludes that education changes nothing. Throughout the novel, Grant is in danger of becoming another Antoine; in other words, descending into cynicism.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sheriff Sam Guidry – The white, racist sheriff who allows Grant, Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose to visit Jefferson in the months leading up to his execution. Guidry dislikes Grant because Grant refuses to act stupid or humble in Guidry's presence.

Farrell Jarreau – A black errand-runner and messenger who worked for Henri Pichot. Grant notes that, while Pichot tells him nothing, Farrell is highly skilled at gleaning information from Pichot's conversations with other people.

Alcee Gropé – The owner of a store, Gropé is murdered shortly before the time when *A Lesson Before Dying* begins. Jefferson is tried and convicted of his murder, though it seems evident that he is innocent. The time between Jefferson's sentencing and his execution takes up the majority of the novel.

Brother – One of Gropé's two murderers.

Bear – One of Gropé's two murderers

Inez Lane – Henri Pichot's maid.

The two mulattoes –The two men with whom Grant fights at the Rainbow Club after overhearing them say that Jefferson's execution should have happened much sooner.

Louis Rougon – Wealthy friend of Henri Pichot.

Joe Claiborne – Owner of the Rainbow Club.

Thelma Claiborne – Joe Claiborne's wife.

Irene Cole – Grant's student teacher. She may be in love with Grant.

Estelle – Jefferson's young cousin, and one of Grant's students.

Dr. Joseph Morgan – The white superintendent of the school district in which Grant teaches.

Louis Washington, Jr. – An inarticulate, sloppy-looking student of Grant's.

Gloria Hebert – A young, bright student of Grant's.

Henry Lewis – One of the old men who delivers wood to Grant's school at the beginning of the winter.

Amos Thomas – One of the old men who delivers wood to Grant's school at the beginning of the winter.

Peggy – One of Vivian's fellow teachers.

Joe Louis – The legendary black boxer whose athletic success continues to provide inspiration for the African American community.

Jackie Robinson – The legendary black baseball player who broke the color-barrier by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Like Joe Louis, his athletic success inspires blacks in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Miss Eloise Bouie – An elderly woman who is friends with Tante Lou and Miss Emma Glenn.

Frank – A fat man who is friends with Henri Pichot and a coworker of Sam Guidry's.

Chief Deputy Clark – A bigoted white guards who watches

Jefferson.

Bok – The mentally challenged grandson of Rita Lawrence, who has spent time in a mental institution.

Rita Lawrence – An elderly woman, the grandmother of Bok, who donates a sheet for Grant's Christmas play.

Henry Williams – A local man, mentioned only twice in the novel, who acts as a witness for Jefferson's execution.

Melvina Jack – A black worker at Edwin's Department Store.

Juanita deJean – A white worker at Edwin's Department Store.

Fee Jinkins – A petty criminal who's spending a month in jail at the time when Jefferson is executed.

Clay Lemon – A worker at Weber's Café and Bar and Bait Shop.

Felix Weber – The owner of Weber's Café and Bar and Bait Shop.

Claude Guerin – A special deputy assigned to help Sheriff Guidry on the day of Jefferson's execution.

Oscar Guerin – A special deputy assigned to help Sheriff Guidry on the day of Jefferson's execution.

Murphy – A prisoner who Sheriff Guidry orders to shave Jefferson before his execution.

Henry Vincent – The executioner who pulls the switch at Jefferson's execution.

Ofelia Jarreau – Farrell Jarreau's mulatto wife.

Julia Lavonia – a local woman with two children in Grant's school.

Sidney de Rogers – A local worker who notices the black carrying Jefferson's electric chair.

George Jarreau – A local man, presumably related to Farrell Jarreau, though the novel never says how.

Lucy Jarreau – George Jarreau's wife.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM

From its first page, *A Lesson Before Dying* portrays a racist society in 1940s Louisiana. Bayonne, Louisiana is a plantation community in which the descendants of slaves work on the same plantations where their ancestors worked; while they are paid for their labor, they're paid far less than white workers. The legal system is similar. While it's true that a black person in the era of slavery would never have received a trial at all, Jefferson's murder trial, the novel implies, is little better: the all-white jury never takes Jefferson's defense that he did not commit the crime seriously—it treats Jefferson as guilty until proven innocent. The racism inherent in the trial is perhaps made most obvious by the defense attorney whose job it is to represent Jefferson. This attorney urges the jury to acquit Jefferson on the grounds that Jefferson is more similar to a hog than to a man, and deserves mercy for that reason. It is the defense attorney's comparison of Jefferson to a pig that causes Miss Emma, Jefferson's grandmother, to approach the schoolteacher Grant to ask him to help Jefferson to die like a man rather than like a hog. (Note the possibility that Jefferson might appeal and overturn the verdict against him is never even considered; it's simply out of the realm of possibility in the racist world of the novel). The novel can be seen as depicting the struggle of not just Jefferson, but also Grant and other black characters, to live or even to die like humans – with dignity and self-respect – in a brutally racist world.

At the same time, the novel also shows how the black characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* have themselves absorbed the racist ideas of which they are the victims. For instance, Vivian is lighter skinned than most of the black people in Bayonne, which immediately attracts the interest of the other black characters. And, later, Grant thinks to himself that mulattoes—people of mixed racial heritage—despise dark-skinned black people as much as white people do. Even though mulattoes are equally the victims of racism—banned from white bars and restaurants, forbidden from holding high-paying jobs—they try to act more like whites in their hatred of darker-skinned people.

In part, Grant agrees to Miss Emma's request that he "educate" Jefferson because he wants Jefferson to fight racism. As Grant puts it, Jefferson will challenge the racists who sentenced him to death when he walks into the courthouse like a man. Grant's advice is truer than he knows: as Henri Pichot's bet makes clear, white racists are counting on Jefferson killing himself before he's electrocuted. We can assume that Jefferson's pride and courage on the day of his execution displeases Pichot and upsets his racist beliefs, if only a little.

Ultimately, one man's behavior can only alter a racist society so much, but in the novel Gaines suggests how racism might be fought in the long term. He suggests this first in the way that Jefferson matures and comes to serve as a dignified representative of his people who commands respect. He also suggests how racism might be fought through the friendship that develops between Grant and Paul Bonin, the white deputy guard at the jailhouse where Jefferson is being held. During Grant's visits, Paul gradually develops respect for Grant and Jefferson, and wants to believe that Grant will succeed in his mission to help Jefferson become a man. After Jefferson is executed, Paul shakes Grant's hand and says that he'd like to be

a friend to Grant. If racism is a collection of false information about other races, then, the novel suggests, the antidote is education and mutual understanding, of the kind that Paul gradually receives while watching Grant and Jefferson.

EDUCATION

Grant Wiggins, the narrator of *A Lesson Before Dying*, is a teacher. And education plays a key thematic role in the novel. Yet the novel's portrayal of education is not the simple "education is good" that you might hear from a politician. In fact, in the beginning of the novel, there seems to be no evidence that education, as traditionally understood, yields any long-term results whatsoever.

Grant runs a schoolhouse, filled by poor black students, out of the local church. There, he and his student teacher, Irene, instruct children in grades one through six in the three R's: "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." Yet Grant can't think of a single student who has used education to improve his or her life. Students that survive into adulthood have no option but to take menial jobs that aren't any different from those filled by the old black men who drop off firewood to the school for the winter. Put bluntly, the things taught by "education" have no relevance to the kind of work society permits black people to do. Then there are people like Grant himself, who use their education to get a job teaching to the next generation of students. But the supposed "fruits of education" seem to be either nonexistent or, at best, perpetually deferred. As Grant himself puts it, he teaches the three R's to black students because whites *tell* him to—the implication being that this kind of education has no empowering function whatsoever, and thus white racist society doesn't view educating blacks as a threat.

Yet when Miss Emma and Tante Lou enlist Grant to help educate Jefferson into being a man before he's executed, the novel grapples with what education can and should be, beyond the simple transference of facts and skills. As Grant acknowledges, the education he's being asked to give to Jefferson can't be anything like the kind he gives to his schoolchildren. Not only does Grant not have time to prepare Jefferson for a brighter future; Jefferson has no future. Grant is teaching Jefferson morality, not arithmetic. When Grant visits Jefferson in his cell, he tells him that there is value in acting kindly to one's family and one's friends, a proposition that Jefferson finds ridiculous, at least at first. Here, Gaines captures an old problem that goes back at least to Socrates: how can morality be taught? It's significant that the major breakthrough Grant makes with Jefferson arrives when Grant is about to leave Jefferson's cell: Jefferson stands up and asks Grant to thank Grant's children for donating the bag of pecans Grant has just dropped off.

Out of that moment, and for the remainder of the novel, Gaines suggests a more complicated model of education than the one we get in the early chapters set at the schoolhouse. Not only can education be moral as well as practical; education need not consist of a teacher *giving* information to a student. A better analogy for the process of education appears in *A Lesson Before Dying* itself: a rough piece of **wood** can be carved and polished into a beautiful, smooth piece. In other words, the role of teacher—Grant or anyone else—isn't necessarily to give information to the student, but rather to help the student unlock his innate moral knowledge, knowledge that Jefferson proves he already has when he thanks Grant for the pecans.

Grant also discovers that education is a two-way-street. Even as he teaches Jefferson, Grant learns to be a more moral person himself, sacrificing his own dignity for the betterment of Jefferson, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma. Grant's moral transformation is only possible because he rejects the model of education whereby the all-knowing teacher passes on knowledge to the student. Thus, the novel's "lesson before dying" refers both to what Grant teaches Jefferson about bravery and morality, and what Jefferson teaches Grant, Miss Emma, and the entire black community.

RELIGION, CYNICISM, AND HOPE

Throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant, a Catholic living in a largely Catholic community, grapples with questions of religion. Although nearly all of his peers and family members are Catholic, Grant distrusts organized religion, at least as the people around him practice it. In large part, this is because Grant distrusts the concept of Heaven: the notion that all misery and suffering is strictly short-term, because good people will receive an eternal reward for their good behavior. He distrusts this concept because he sees it as a way of keeping the poor and powerless in line. As he tells Jefferson during a visit to the jailhouse late in the novel, white people are comfortable with the black community's minister, Reverend Ambrose, because Ambrose, by getting his congregation to focus on their reward in the *next* life, encourages his congregation to be docile and accept their inferior position to whites in this one.

In a sense, what Grant distrusts isn't religion so much as *hope*. (Grant actually says that he believes in God, but not Heaven.) And yet, while Grant's logic seems sound, the novel portrays the impact of Grant's distrust for Christianity/hope very clearly: he lives a lonely, cynical life. Even as a schoolteacher—a job that would seem to require the hopeful belief that one's students will grow up to succeed—Grant is cynical. He can't think of a good reason why he's still in Louisiana teaching, and thinks about how few of his students—if any—will go on to use the knowledge he's teaching them. Even though it's his job to change his students, Grant himself refuses to change—and rues his life.

A turning point for Grant's understanding of religion and hope

comes when Reverend Ambrose confronts him after Grant has given Jefferson a radio. Ambrose tells Grant that, in fact, Grant is the uneducated fool and Ambrose the educated man. While Grant thinks that he understands the truth, Ambrose does something far more sophisticated: he lies. Ambrose lies in his sermons, in his conversations with members of his congregation, and even when he talks to Miss Emma about Jefferson. Ambrose tells these lies because lies can have value: they can inspire hope and optimism, while also bringing momentary peace and contentment to people who are in pain. Grant comes to see how such hope and optimism can provide a strength that Grant himself doesn't have: while Grant is too afraid to attend Jefferson's execution, Ambrose does go, and reads Jefferson the 23rd psalm.

At first, Grant believed that religion and the belief in heaven was a kind of trick, designed by people in power to make the powerless accept their suffering. He begins to see that heaven, even if it's not literally true, has a kind of spiritual truth: it brings people the strength to overcome their suffering. By the end of the novel, while he never admits to believing in heaven himself, Grant's experiences with Jefferson and Ambrose have convinced him that hope and belief aren't to be scoffed at: they bring people peace and strength, both the strength to endure injustice and, perhaps, to take the small, slow steps to bring about change.

HEROISM AND SACRIFICE

During one of Grant's visits to Jefferson near the end of the novel, he gives Jefferson his definition of a hero: "A hero is someone who does something for other people." The broader implication of Grant's definition is that heroes sacrifice their own interests for the interests of other human beings. Grant insists that he himself is not a hero—in fact, he says that he's only looking out for his own interests as an educated black man—but that Jefferson is capable of being a hero.

Gaines explores the ethics of heroism and sacrifice in *A Lesson Before Dying*. In his earliest encounters with Grant, Jefferson rejects heroism, personal sacrifice, and all morality—there's no point in caring about others, he tells Grant, since he's going to die soon. It's up to Grant to convince Jefferson that he does have the desire and the ability to be a hero.

Throughout the novel, Gaines is careful to show us the small and large sacrifices the characters make for each other. The schoolchildren's families donate wood in order to keep the school warm through the winter, and the entire community donates clothes, presents, and food for the annual Christmas play that Grant organizes. Emma and Tante Lou make enormous sacrifices for their children: Emma cooks and cares for Jefferson's every need, and Tante Lou works harder than ever to pay for Grant's college education, even after she sustains wounds on her feet and knees. Even Grant, who tells Jefferson that he's a selfish man, has devoted his adult life to teaching children, for reasons he can't entirely explain. The reason Grant does this, Gaines suggests, is the same reason that people donate their wood to the schoolhouse: humans have an innate, illogical desire to help others.

By showing sacrifice in its ordinary, everyday forms, Gaines steers us toward the conclusion that it's human to care about others, and to sacrifice. If heroism is sacrifice, this would suggest that all people are capable of heroism. Indeed, Jefferson attains heroism by putting Miss Emma's interests before his own and walking bravely to his death, making Emma happy and proud. It may be that all people are capable of such displays of heroism, even if only a few of them ever prove it.

Ultimately, Gaines implies that sacrifice and heroism aren't lofty ideals; they're acts that all humans can perform with the proper encouragement. Even if few of us will become martyrs, it's possible to be a hero in other ways—with this in mind, Gaines points us to the quiet heroism of Emma, Lou, and even Grant.

WOMEN AND FEMININITY

Dozens of times in *A Lesson Before Dying*, we hear Emma and Tante Lou say that Grant must teach Jefferson to die "like a man, not a hog." This suggests that *A Lesson Before Dying* is about how a man should die, and more importantly, what a man should be. This raises the question: what's Gaines's idea of what a *woman* should be? More to the point, how should a woman live?

Especially in the first half of the novel, Gaines shows us how women live in 1940s Louisiana. Black women like Emma and Lou selflessly care for their family members. Even though Jefferson and Grant aren't their maternal children, they treat them like their children, cooking for them, sheltering them, working to pay for them, and, in Lou's case, paying for their education. Edna Guidry, the sheriff's wife, sympathizes with Miss Emma's pain after Jefferson is sentenced to death, and convinces her husband to let Emma, Lou, Grant and Reverend Ambrose visit Jefferson in the dayroom. Edna is white, but her sympathy for Jefferson seems closely tied to her understanding of his grandmother's pain and anguish. This suggests that gender, for women, while not overcoming racial allegiance, at least creates bridges across it. Vivian cares for her schoolchildren far more than Grant cares for his. There are many times when Grant is willing to move away from his home, taking Vivian with him, and Vivian convinces him to stay for the sake of their students. Though we never see Vivian with her children, we know that she has continued taking care of them after her husband left her, and wants to continue caring for them after she finalizes her divorce. Taken together, these examples of feminine behavior fit Grant's definition of heroism: Emma, Lou, Vivian, and Edna sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of others. Women seem to be more in touch with the

innate human instinct to help others than the men in the novel.

But it's not enough to classify women's behavior as heroic; while it certainly is, their behavior is motivated both by the desire to help specific people and by the more abstract desire to keep their communities stable. At one point in the novel, as Grant sits with Vivian at the Rainbow Club, he tells her that women are terrified that the men in their lives—their husbands, boyfriends, children, and grandchildren—will leave them for a new life somewhere else. We see ample evidence of this in *A Lesson Before Dying*: Vivian's husband leaves her, Emma's husband leaves her, Jefferson's father leaves him, etc. Thus, it becomes extremely important for women to take care of those who remain behind: they're trying to ensure that their communities won't be fractured any more than they already have been. When Grant explains this to Vivian, he's being dismissive of women—he finds it obnoxious and suffocating that they're trying to keep him and other men from moving away. But he gains more respect for women when he learns that Tante Lou, who's raised him since he was a child, actually injured herself working extra hours to pay for his food and college education, but never complained to him about her pain.

What Grant comes to understand, and what *A Lesson Before Dying* portrays, is the way that women sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others without even the promise of being recognized as a hero, or at all. In this way, the heroism of women in the novel is revealed as truly selfless, truly heroic.

ROOTS, CONNECTIONS, AND MORALITY

Many times in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson and Grant are told that they should help other people, or that they owe other people their respect and service. These "other people" include family, members of the plantation community, and even strangers. In the novel, Gaines explores the way that interpersonal connections compel people to behave morally to one another.

For Gaines, the interpersonal connection begins with the family. Both Grant and Jefferson are impacted by those who fail to live up to this bond—they are both abandoned by their parents—and benefitted by those who take the bond seriously: Grant is taken in and raised by his aunt Tante Lou as if he was her own, while Jefferson is similarly taken in by his grandmother. As Grant and Jefferson grow up, their families try to instill in them a more abstract feeling of connection with their community and their "roots." In many cases, this feeling takes a religious form. Tante Lou takes Grant to church until he goes to college, and Miss Emma raises Jefferson as a Catholic; they do so to make their children better people, but also to connect them with the other people in the plantation community.

As the novel begins, both Grant and Jefferson resent the connection between themselves and their families and roots—they treat it like a burden they must drag with them. Their resentment (and in Grant's case, his sense of being "trapped" in his obligations) makes them feel lonely and cynical. Grant has gone off to college and when he returned to Louisiana, felt no connection to his church or community. When Tante Lou urges him to talk to Jefferson, he's irritated to have to get involved in what he sees as a lost cause. His cynicism about his family and community is so great that he dreams of leaving Louisiana altogether. Much the same is true of Jefferson. Though Emma showers him with maternal affection, cooking him his favorite foods and visiting him frequently, Jefferson doesn't return this affection, and certainly doesn't show any affection to Grant.

While moral connections begin with a familial, even biological bond, Gaines suggests that feeling of connection to one's family and one's roots is ultimately a choice. Grant reluctantly chooses to help Jefferson because of his obligation to Tante Lou. Yet as Grant spends more time with Jefferson, he begins teaching him out of a desire to help him, not a sense of obligation. At the same time, he begins to feel a stronger connection to other members of his community, such as the students at his school. Ultimately, he also comes to feel a bond of friendship with the white prison guard Paul Bonin, who isn't a member of his community at all. Much the same is true of Jefferson. Over the course of the novel he freely chooses to be a moral being, telling Grant to thank his children for their pecans, and later embracing Miss Emma, his godmother, before he's executed. By extending their sense of moral connection to their families, their communities, and to strangers, both Grant and Jefferson battle their own cynicism. Grant captures the relationship between morality, emotion, and connection immediately after Jefferson breaks down in tears with Miss Emma: Grant says that Jefferson is crying because he feels that he's part of a whole.

The novel suggests that the moral bond begins with the family, but ultimately it doesn't stay there: the moral person must freely choose to get in touch with his family, his roots, and with unfamiliar people. Gaines ends *A Lesson Before Dying* with a poignant image of the connection between unlike people: Grant and Paul shake hands, showing how people can move beyond the boundaries of race, class, and experience.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FIRE, HEAT, AND WARMTH

Throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*, there are images that mention heat, warmth, and fire. The most obvious such image is that of the schoolhouse, which can only

remain open during the coldest months of the year when everyone in the community donates firewood to power the church heater. In general, Gaines associates warmth and heat with optimism, hope, and inspiration: when Grant is on the point of abandoning Jefferson, he visits his girlfriend Vivian Baptiste and feels the warmth of her body, inspiring him to remain where he is. Conversely, when Jefferson visits his old schoolmaster, Matthew Antoine, he learns that Antoine has lost all the heat in his body—a process that parallels Antoine's complete lack of optimism about the future of the schoolchildren and the black community. Hope, then, is the fuel that drives Grant's community. The fact that Grant continues to arrange for the classroom to be heated suggests that he still has some hope for his children's futures—perhaps they'll be able to use their knowledge and education to improve their lives, and the lives of others.

WOOD

In addition to the kindling the old men bring to the church to warm the schoolhouse through the winter, wood makes one other symbolically loaded appearance in *A Lesson Before Dying*. When Grant visits Jefferson in the dayroom, accompanied by Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, and Miss Emma, he tells Jefferson that he must become a better man, and compares the process of self-improvement to that of polishing a rough piece of wood. While the wood may seem ugly and splintered at first, the woodworker's care and attention reveals the beautiful object trapped beneath a rough exterior. In this analogy, we can assume that Grant is the woodworker and Jefferson is the rough piece of wood. It's important to keep in mind that the woodworker in the analogy doesn't add anything to the wood; by the same logic, Grant doesn't give Jefferson new information about good and evil. Instead, Grant reminds Jefferson what Jefferson already has: the ability to be courageous and moral, for the sake of Miss Emma and for his entire community. Polishing a rough piece of wood, then, represents the process of education and self-discovery that Jefferson embarks on in Gaines's novel.

FOOD AND MEALS

A significant number of the key events in *A Lesson Before Dying* either happen directly because of **food** or happen while the characters are eating a **meal**: most of Miss Emma's early interactions with Jefferson in jail consist of her offering Jefferson food; Grant shows (or denies) his love for Tante Lou by eating her cooking; Grant's breakthrough with Jefferson occurs when Jefferson thanks Grant for the pecans he's brought; Jefferson first shows love for Miss Emma by eating her gumbo; Jefferson eats his last meal the night before his execution and declares it the best he's ever eaten.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *A Lesson Before Dying* published in 1994.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.

Related Characters: The defense attorney (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Jefferson's defense attorney offers an incredibly cynical argument in a last-ditch effort to keep Jefferson from being sentenced to the electric chair for the crime of killing a shopkeeper. Basically, the attorney is saying: "He's guilty, but he's not even human, so it's not right to execute him for the crime he committed." In the end, the attorney's arguments have no effect on the result of the case: Jefferson is sentenced to death, setting in motion the events of the novel. As Gaines shows us later on, Jefferson is deeply traumatized by his own attorney's words: he comes to think of himself as a mere "hog," unworthy of any love or respect.

It is crucial for us to notice that Jefferson's own defense attorney, not his prosecutor, is the one who makes such a racist argument and has such a negative impact on Jefferson's self-esteem. This suggests an even bigger point: during this era, the institutions that are supposed to support all Americans, such as courts, schools, etc., actually wind up keeping Black Americans in an oppressed state and suppressing their dignity.

In general, this is the single most important quote in the novel; the one to which Grant and Jefferson will keep returning. Grant's project is to convince Jefferson that the attorney is wrong: i.e., Jefferson is more valuable than a hog, because he is a human being with dignity, self-respect, and responsibility. Furthermore, by establishing the depth of racism in Louisiana at this time, the quote reminds us of the deeply-ingrained prejudices that Grant and Jefferson are fighting against.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"What can I do? It's only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe. What can I do that you haven't done the past twenty-one years?"
"You the teacher," she said.
"Yes, I'm the teacher," I said. "And I teach what the white folks around here tell me to teach— reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. They never told me how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store."

Related Characters: Miss Emma Glenn, Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote establishes the setup for the plot of Gaines's novel: Emma is trying to convince Grant to teach Jefferson, recently sentenced to death, self-respect in the face of societal racism and dehumanization. At this point in the novel, Grant is pessimistic about his project: he doesn't think he can possibly bring Jefferson any kind of enlightenment or self-respect. In part he believes that it is impossible to impart such lessons in just a few weeks, but more profoundly Grant believes that he himself is unable to teach such lessons, or that such lessons can be taught at all.

Grant is sure that he'll have little success with Jefferson, because he doesn't really believe in the power of education to begin with: years of working in a poor black school have convinced him that none of his lessons really matter in the end, because none of these lessons address the root causes of the black community's pain and suffering. Instead of genuinely helping his students, Grant's work as a schoolteacher just reinforces his subservience to the racist white establishment in Louisiana. Even when Grant is teaching his students how to read and write (empowering them, one might think), he feels that he's just obeying "white folks," and may be preparing his students for a lifetime spent obeying "white folks," too.

Grant's cynicism here shows us that the arc of the novel is twofold: on one hand, Jefferson will have to learn to respect himself; on the other, Grant will have to learn that he *can* make a difference with his teaching—in other words, he'll have to learn some self-respect, too.

"He don't have to do it," Miss Emma said ...

Related Characters: Miss Emma Glenn (speaker), Grant Wiggins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Emma wants Grant to try to teach Jefferson, her beloved grandson (who is, for all intents and purposes, her child), to respect himself before he's executed. But she's also too proud to ask Grant, point-blank, if he'll do so. For this reason, she begins a passive-aggressive battle of wills with Grant. She never actually asks Grant for his help, but she says of him "He don't have to do it" so often that it's perfectly clear that she *does* want Grant to do it, and that Grant himself will either have to explicitly agree or refuse to do so.

While Grant finds Miss Emma's "catchphrase" irritating in its passive aggressiveness (and perhaps it is, a little), we also recognize that there's something noble about Emma's refusal to beg Grant for his help. She's a proud woman, who's lived a long, independent life. She's not about to beg anyone for anything, even at the point where her grandson is about to die. And ironically, Miss Emma's persistence in enlisting Grant's help—even if the way she goes about asking for this help seems unusual—proves that she really does care about Jefferson.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Before I left for the university, my aunt sat me down at the table in our kitchen and said to me, "Me and Emma can make out all right without you coming through that back door ever again." I had not come through that back door once since leaving for the university, ten years before. I had been teaching on the place going on six years, and I had not been in Pichot's yard, let alone gone up the back stairs or through that back door.

Related Characters: Jefferson (speaker), Henri Pichot, Miss Emma Glenn, Tante Lou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As a young man, Grant had to work for Henri Pichot, a bigoted, unfriendly white man who treats all black people with condescending disrespect. Like so many African

Americans of the era, Grant resents his employer's racism, but has no choice but to continue working for him: his financial neediness is a prison. It's for this reason that Grant's aunt encourages and helps him to educate himself. As his aunt Tante Lou sees it, education is a way out for Grant; a way for Grant to support himself without sacrificing his dignity or suffering the humiliation of working for a man like Pichot.

It's hard to deny that Tante Lou has a point: as a schoolteacher, Grant has more autonomy and dignity than he would as Pichot's servant (although, as we see, he still has to be subservient to white superiors). But the irony of Grant's situation is that he's only able to become an educated man because of his family's hard, humiliating work for Pichot: in other words, he's only able to become semi-independent because his loved ones become especially dependent on Pichot.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "Suppose I was allowed to visit him, and suppose I reached him and made him realize that he was as much a man as any other man; then what? He's still going to die. The next day, the next week, the next month. So what will I have accomplished? What will I have done? Why not let the hog die without knowing anything?"

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Grant is still reluctant to do what Miss Emma and Tante Lou are urging him to do: he doesn't see the point in teaching Jefferson about the importance of self-respect and dignity, because Jefferson's going to die, anyway. As Grant sees it, it would be better to keep Jefferson "blissfully ignorant" until the day he dies: teaching Jefferson the importance of life, family, and friendship would only cause him additional pain, since, he'll soon be unable to enjoy these pleasures in any form.

This is a revealing quote, because it suggests very strongly that Grant doesn't really believe in God or an afterlife.As far as Lou and Emma are concerned, it's vital to teach Jefferson some things about self-respect so that he can enter Heaven as a pure, righteous man. Grant seems not to share these assumptions, and partly for this reason he sees Jefferson's education as a fool's errand. Of course, this doesn't mean that you'd have to believe in God to think that it's worthwhile to educate Jefferson: as Grant will later realize, it's worthwhile to teach Jefferson self-respect, even if there isn't a Heaven. After all, everyone is destined to die eventually, and so knowing the date of one's demise doesn't make it any less worthwhile to educate and improve oneself. Furthermore, Jefferson's dignity can act as an example for other depressed, suffering black men and women, and his courage can inspire others to behave courageously.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Edna turned back to me. "Grant, please tell Emma how sorry I am about Jefferson. I would do it myself, but I'm just too broken up over this matter. I ran into Madame Gropé just the other day; Lord, how sad she looks. Just dragging along. Poor old thing. I had to put my arms round her." Edna drank from her glass.

Related Characters: Edna Guidry (speaker), Jefferson, Grant Wiggins

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Gaines gives us a window into the personality of Edna Guidry, one of the few white characters in the novel who shows sympathy for black people. Edna knows that Jefferson is going to be executed for his supposed crimes, and she seems to grasp at least some of the injustice in this: she recognizes that Jefferson's death is going to affect the lives of other people, such as Miss Emma and Tante Lou. It's surely not a coincidence that Edna, one of the only compassionate white characters in the novel, is also a woman: Gaines implies that Edna's own position of subservience to white men makes her sympathetic to black men and women who are also subservient to white men.

And yet, in spite of Edna's sympathy for Jefferson, she's not nearly as compassionate as we might expect her to be: note that Emma is still drinking from her glass as she speaks to Grant, and that she's supposedly too "broken up" to talk to Miss Emma herself. Put another way, Edna is concerned, but her concern also seems a bit like a performance to make herself feel like a good person. Her concern doesn't drive her to action; it's just a condescending concern. Perhaps it's fair to say that Edna is a naturally kind and loving woman,

who's nonetheless partly blinded by the bigotry of her society. No matter how hard she tries, she can't quite conceive of Jefferson as a full human being who's deserving of her sympathy.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth. Open wide, say "Ahhh"—and he would have the poor children spreading out their lips as far as they could while he peered into their mouths. At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle. At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Dr. Joseph Morgan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Joseph Morgan, the school superintendent, is an old, grumpy white man who plainly dislikes black people, and regards black students as second-class citizens, barely human beings at all. Here, he's inspecting the black children in Grant's classroom. But instead of spending lots of time examining the children for their intelligence or creativity, Morgan chooses to focus on their physical healthiness. Morgan's behavior immediately implies that black children are subpar thinkers, and that they're more like animals who need to be examined for physical defects—in other words, playing into some of the oldest and most offensive stereotypes about minorities.

The scene is narrated from Grant's perspective, meaning that the indignity and absurdity of the moment are crystal clear. (It doesn't get any more sarcastic than Grant complimenting Morgan for his "humanitarianism.") But Grant isn't just being sardonic: by comparing Morgan to a slave master, he's also making a serious point: very little has changed for black people in the United States since the days of slavery 100 years ago. Although the black community has gained the semblance of freedom and independence in this time (for example, black children can go to school), it's still under the thumb of powerful white people, like Morgan, who consider blacks to be barely human.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ It was he, Matthew Antoine, as teacher then, who stood by the fence while we chopped the wood. He had told us then that most of us would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told us that there was no other choice but to run and run. That he was living testimony of someone who should have run. That in him—he did not say all this, but we felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself as well as contempt for us. He hated himself for the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being, and he hated us for daily reminding him of it.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Matthew Antoine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The old schoolteacher Matthew Antoine is one of the most interesting and complicated characters in this novel, and in this scene, Grant tells us about him. Antoine is a "mulatto" man, half-black and half-white. Although he's been tasked with teaching black schoolchildren, Antoine doesn't have any of the enthusiasm or affection one would usually associate with a schoolteacher. On the contrary, he thinks that his schoolchildren have nothing but misery and poverty ahead of them, and their education in his classroom won't get them anything in life.

In a way, the "ghost" of Matthew Antoine haunts Grant throughout the entire novel. Grant is terrified of becoming like Matthew Antoine: becoming an old, bitter schoolteacher who hates himself and hates what he does. In part, Grant's fear reflects his racial anxiety about his relationship to his community. Grant's higher education and relatively privileged position as a schoolteacher distances him from the black community, without endearing him to white people like Dr. Joseph Morgan. In other words, one could argue that Grant thinks of himself as being "half black, half white," just like Matthew Antoine; he's caught between two worlds, and doesn't fully belong to either one. Grant knows that he's wrong to be so cynical about his profession and the future of his children, but he can't help it—without a strong community behind him, or any evidence that things will actually improve for his students, he can't help the fact that he's growing more like his old teacher.

"We got our first load of wood last week," I told him.
"Nothing changes," he said. "I guess I'm a genuine teacher now," I said. He nodded, and coughed. He didn't seem to want to talk. Still, I sat there, both of us gazing into the fire. "Any advice?" I asked him. "It doesn't matter anymore," he said. "Just do the best you can. But it won't matter."

Related Characters: Matthew Antoine, Grant Wiggins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Grant interacts with Matthew Antoine, his old schoolteacher, and gets some pessimistic advice. Mathew Antoine has spent decades teaching schoolchildren how to read and write—by all rights, he should take more pride in his profession than almost anyone else in the world. And yet Matthew is deeply cynical about teaching: as he sees it, educating black schoolchildren simply doesn't matter. No matter how much the children learn, they're still going to grow up to be second-class citizens, oppressed by racist whites. As Gaines makes clear in this moment, Antoine's advice has a deep impact on Grant's behavior: Grant finds it impossible to shake the suspicion that his own work as a teacher matters no more than Antoine's work did. By teaching Jefferson about dignity and self-respect, then, Grant is actually trying to prove Antoine wrong: he's trying to prove that he can genuinely empower the weak and the poor, rather than just disappointing them.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"Everything you sent me to school for, you're stripping me of it," I told my aunt. They were looking at the fire, and I stood behind them with the bag of food. "The humiliation I had to go through, going into that man's kitchen. The hours I had to wait while they ate and drank and socialized before they would even see me. Now going up to that jail. To watch them put their dirty hands on that food. To search my body each time as if I'm some kind of common criminal. Maybe today they'll want to look into my mouth, or my nostrils, or make me strip. Anything to humiliate me. All the things you wanted me to escape by going to school. Years ago, Professor Antoine told me that if I stayed here, they were going to break me down to the nigger I was born to be. But he didn't tell me that my aunt would help them do it."

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Tante Lou

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Grant lays out the paradox of his mission to educate Jefferson. Grant has worked very hard under the assumption that education will "save" him—that it will free him from his dependence on racist white people like Henri Pichot. But now, Grant's training as an educator has once again made him subservient to Pichot and his racist friends: Grant is forced to beg before Pichot in order to continue visiting Jefferson in his cell. Furthermore, Grant's aunt, who'd always worked hard to make Grant independent, is now pressuring Grant to be submissive to Pichot once again.

While it's certainly possible to see this situation from Grant's point of view (it *is* unfair that Grant has to behave this way just to help his friend) it's also clear why Lou is pressuring Grant. Humiliating though it is, begging is the only way Lou can accomplish the greater good of educating Jefferson. Furthermore, Grant's speech suggests that he's learned to value independence *too* highly: he thinks he can be independent not just from white people but also from his friends and family. By pressuring Grant to talk to Pichot, Lou is reminding Grant that nobody is truly independent: Grant owes a tremendous debt to the black people in his community. Strangely, begging before Pichot once again is the price Grant must pay for rediscovering this important truth.

Chapter 13 Quotes

There was no one thing that changed my faith. I suppose it was a combination of many things, but mostly it was just plain studying. I did not have time for anything else. Many times I would not come home on weekends, and when I did, I found that I cared less and less about the church. Of course, it pained my aunt to see this change in me, and it saddened me to see the pain I was causing her. I thought many times about leaving, as Professor Antoine had advised me to do. My mother and father also told me that if I was not happy in Louisiana, I should come to California. After visiting them the summer following my junior year at the university, I came back, which pleased my aunt. But I had been running in place ever since, unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to leave it.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Matthew Antoine, Tante Lou

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Grant writes frankly about his relationship with God, Christianity, and his community. Although he was raised to believe in Jesus Christ, Grant has had a crisis of faith some time during the course of his adulthood. As he explains it, he became so concerned with his studies and academics that he simply didn't have any more time or energy for religion. Furthermore, Grant's increasing education makes him doubt his relationship with his community, his friends, and his family.

Grant's situation is tragically familiar for impoverished minorities. Because he's been lucky enough to go to college, Grant doesn't feel that he "belongs" to his own community—a place full of uneducated people. Yet Grant doesn't feel that he belongs to any other place, such as California, either (in real life, Gaines studied at Stanford for a number of years before returning to his childhood town in Louisiana, where he still lives). As we can see, although Gaines's novel seems to be about Jefferson's struggle for dignity, it's also about Grant's struggle to find an identity and a community for himself. This quote helps us understand what the nature of his struggle has been so far.

Chapter 17 Quotes

"I don't know when I'm going to die, Jefferson. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe today. That's why I try to live as well as I can every day and not hurt people. Especially people who love me, people who have done so much for me, people who have sacrificed for me. I don't want to hurt those people. I want to help those people as much as I can."
"You can talk like that; you know you go'n walk out here in a hour. I bet you wouldn't be talking like that if you knowed you was go'n stay in here."
"In here or out of here, Jefferson, what does it benefit you to hurt someone who loves you, who has done so much for you?"

Related Characters: Jefferson, Grant Wiggins (speaker), Miss Emma Glenn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving scene, Grant discusses the prospect of death with Jefferson. Grant's speech is simple, unadorned, and free of any mentions of Christ or an afterlife. Grant is trying to convince Jefferson that the two of them aren't so different: even though Jefferson is going to die much sooner than Grant (probably), they're both going to die soon (in the grand scheme of things). For this reason, Grant tries to argue, the two of them (and all human beings) have a responsibility to be kind and respectful to the people around them.

Grant is making one of the oldest arguments in Western thought: the argument that virtue is its own reward. For the time being, however, Jefferson refuses to believe this. He refuses to believe that humans have any "reason" to be good in the face of death, and even suggests that Grant himself wouldn't be so moral if he too was about to die. It's revealing that Grant doesn't have a good response to Jefferson's challenge: at this point in the novel, Grant is conscious of not being a particularly moral person himself. Later, Grant will learn to embody the values he's trying to teach Jefferson, rather than merely listing these values.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"I'm not doing any good up there, Vivian," I said. "Nothing's changing."
"Something is," she said.

Related Characters: Vivian Baptiste, Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Grant's quest to teach Jefferson about dignity, he has the support of a group of strong, compassionatewomen, including Emma, Lou, and Vivian, his girlfriend. In this scene, Grant has come from a particularly challenging session with Jefferson: he's tried to impress upon Jefferson the importance of being good, but Jefferson has refused to believe him. Grant is genuinely frustrated that Jefferson refuses to listen to his advice—and this is what Vivian is referring to when she says that "something" is changing. Although Vivian has never met Jefferson before, she can see that Grant's attitude toward Jefferson is changing very quickly: while at first Grant was cynical and indifferent to his new pupil, he's become genuinely

interested in trying to help. Ironically, whether or not Grant is succeeding in teaching Jefferson a thing, the very fact that Grant is beginning to care about teaching means that he's making some progress of his own: he's becoming a more compassionate, caring person. Furthermore, the fact that Grant himself is becoming more compassionate might suggest that he really is going to sway Jefferson's opinion: instead of just talking about virtuous behavior, Grant is modeling it. In short, Grant is becoming a better man and therefore a better moral teacher.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ I was not happy. I had heard the same carols all my life, seen the same little play, with the same mistakes in grammar. The minister had offered the same prayer as always, Christmas or Sunday. The same people wore the same old clothes and sat in the same places. Next year it would be the same, and the year after that, the same again. Vivian said things were changing. But where were they changing?

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Even at this late point in the novel, Grant is still having doubts about his work as a schoolteacher and a teacher for Jefferson. In this scene, for example, Grant surveys the annual Christmas pageant that he organizes for his community. Every year, the pageant is exactly the same: the same cheap decorations, the same inane carols, etc. While some in the community might think that the "sameness" of the pageant is a comforting tradition, Grant finds this tradition depressing. The carols and decorations remind Grant that, for the vast majority of his schoolchildren, nothing will ever change—they'll always be treated poorly by their society's elite, no matter how well-educated they become. Plainly, Grant wants to believe that things are changing, whether for Jefferson or for his schoolchildren, but he still finds it difficult to do so.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious circle—which he never does … What she wants is for him, Jefferson, and me to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years. She wants it to happen so in case she ever gets out of her bed again, she can go to that little church there in the quarter and say proudly, 'You see, I told you—I told you he was a man.'

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Miss Emma Glenn, Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Grant gives Jefferson an eloquent and disturbing account of the relationship between men and women in the black community. Because of the impoverishment and misery of this community, Grant explains, black men often face a tragic dilemma: they can either stay behind to take care of their children and their families, or they can "run away," leaving their loved ones to fend for themselves. Some black men choose to leave their children uncared for, meaning that in the end their children sometimes grow up to become neglectful fathers themselves.

Because of this tragic cycle, many black women are left caring for their children without a father's help—and sometimes caring for their nephews or grandsons as well, like Lou and Emma. Emma thinks that by convincing Grant to remain in Louisiana and help Jefferson, she can put an end to the cycle of neglect and abandonment in her community (much as Grant, as a schoolteacher, is trying to put an end to the cycle of ignorance and disenfranchisement). This shows that Emma, just like Grant, is trying to improve life in the black community. Moreover, Emma seems more optimistic than Grant: in spite of witnessing more "go-arounds" of the cycle than Grant, she continues to try to make life better.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"Last Friday," I continued, "was the first time, the very first time, that Jefferson looked at me without hate, without accusing me of putting him in that cell. Last Friday was the first time he ever asked me a question or answered me without accusing me for his condition. I don't know if you all know what I'm talking about. It seems you don't. But I found a way to reach him for the first time. Now, he needs that radio, and he wants it.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Grant has gone out of his way to improve Jefferson's quality of life in jail: he's purchased a radio for Jefferson, so that Jefferson can have some contact with the outside world during his lonely hours. Lou, Emma, and Ambrose think that Grant was wrong to have bought Jefferson the radio, since Jefferson has now been spending all his time listening to it, rather than talking to his relatives when they visit.

Grant's passionate defense of Jefferson and the radio is illuminating for a few reasons. First, by advocating for Jefferson's use of the radio, Grant is painting a picture of what it means to be a human being. Humans need some contact with the outside world—contact that the radio provides. But even more importantly, Grant argues that humans need possessions and luxuries if they're to feel completely normal. Jefferson has spent his entire life living in poverty, and there have been times when he's been forced to steal just to survive. This constant sense of not being able to afford food—let alone entertainment—is a huge part of Jefferson's feeling of subservience to the white community. By giving Jefferson a radio, then, Grant is "liberating" Grant from his feelings of dependency and poverty, and possibly some of his feelings of racial inferiority.

It's also important to realize how greatly Grant has changed his own attitude toward Jefferson. A few months ago, it would have been hard to imagine Grant arguing so forcefully for Jefferson, let alone buying him a radio. Over the course of his lessons, Grant has grown from a reluctant tutor to a passionate, inspirational teacher.

"Well, I guess I'll be taking off," I said. "Anything you want me to tell your nannan?" I had stood. Now he looked up at me. There was no hate in his face—but Lord, there was pain. I could see that he wanted to say something, but it was hard for him to do. I stood over him, waiting. "Tell—tell the chirren thank you for the pe-pecans," he stammered. I caught myself grinning like a fool. I wanted to throw my arms around him and hug him. I wanted to hug the first person I came to. I felt like someone who had just found religion. I felt like crying with joy. I really did.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins, Jefferson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the major turning points" in the novel. Grant has just had (what he believes to be) another futile lesson with Jefferson. He's brought his pupil a sack of pecans that his students at the schoolhouse have offered. Just as Grant is about to leave, Jefferson asks Grant to pass on his thanks to the children.

Why is this such an important moment for Grant and Jefferson? First, Grant can tell right away that Jefferson's behavior has changed. He's no longer being sullen or cynical: on the contrary, he's stammering and trying to speak carefully, suggesting that for once he's genuinely concerned with passing on the right message to other people.

The scene is also a key moment in Jefferson's development as a human being, because it shows that he's finally come to recognize the importance of respect, kindness, and politeness. Throughout Grant's lessons with Jefferson, Grant has tried to convince Jefferson that he owes it to his family and friends be a virtuous, respectful person; in other words, that Jefferson should return the love and respect other people give him. After weeks of receiving (and ignoring) gifts, letters, and care packages, Jefferson's gift from the schoolchildren finally sets him over the edge. He gives into his natural human instinct to return the schoolchildren's gift with a show of thanks. For Grant, Jefferson's gratitude is a miracle: it proves to Grant that his lessons haven't been in vain, and that his teaching can make a difference.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"Do you know what a hero is, 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. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them." I lowered my voice again until we had passed the table. "I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don't like it; I hate it. I don't even like living here. I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else. That is not a hero. A hero does for others."

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

During a visit to Jefferson's cell, Grant paints a picture of the kind of man he wants Jefferson to become before being executed: a hero. The key part of Grant's definition of heroism is self-sacrifice: Grant believes that a hero must be a model to other people, "performing" generosity and integrity as an example to others. As we've seen, Grant—along with Tante Lou and Miss Emma—wants Jefferson to be a role model for the black community in Louisiana, and a symbol of the strength of this community. By being strong and "noble" during his execution, Jefferson can act as a beacon of hope for black people by proving that blacks are not weak, childish, or animalistic: on the contrary, they're strong, determined, and even heroic.

The explanation Grant gives of himself is just as important as the definition of heroism he offers to Jefferson. Grant is modest about his own abilities: he claims that he's too selfish and scattered to ever be a hero. He even tells Jefferson something he'd previously been unwilling to admit to anyone: he hates being a schoolteacher. While there's some truth in what Grant is saying (he's certainly had fantasies of running away from Louisiana for good), it's important to recognize that Grant is being modest. He claims that he's selfish, but Grant has become increasingly selfless and kindhearted as he spends more time with Jefferson. He willingly sacrifices his time for Jefferson, and even buys his pupil a radio. In the process of teaching Jefferson how to be a hero, Grant has become heroic himself.

"Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?" I asked him. "A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth—and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth. They would no longer have justification for having made us slaves and keeping us in the condition we are in. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me. They're safe with Reverend Ambrose. I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

During his visit to Jefferson's cell, Grant tells Jefferson that he must act as a role model and a beacon of hope for the black community in Louisiana. But in this section, Grant goes further and tells Jefferson that he has another job. By standing proudly for his execution, Jefferson will prove to the racist white society of Louisiana that blacks aren't animals or second-class citizens.

Grant's explanation suggests that white racism in the South is a constant process, during which executions are a reminder of the black community's subservience and inferiority. Jefferson's execution, Grant implies, is designed to prove to whites that blacks are weak, thereby preserving a myth of white superiority. As a result, Jefferson can challenge white racism simply by standing proudly and going to his death without displaying fear.

Grant's explanation of the "myth" effectively answers the question that Grant himself posed earlier in the novel: What's the point of educating Jefferson? As Grant now recognizes, educating and empowering Jefferson has tremendous value for the entire black community. As a strong, empowered man, Jefferson can act as a "warrior" against racism, proving that whites' assumptions about his race are vicious lies.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ I knew that like so many of the mulattos in this part of the state, they did bricklaying or carpentry, and possibly some housepainting. All this by contract. And all this to keep from working in the field side by side with the niggers. Since emancipation, almost a hundred years ago, they would do any kind of work they could find to keep from working side by side in the field with the niggers. They controlled most of the bricklaying business in this part of the state. Even took that kind of work from the white boys, because they would do it so much cheaper than the white boys would. Anything not to work alongside the niggers.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

At a bar, Grant notices a group of "mulatto" (mixed-race) men and muses about their relationship with the black community and the white community. Ironically, he notes, mixed-race people often despise black people even more than white people do. And yet "mulattoes" are just as alien to the white community as fully black people are: as far as someone like Henri Pichot is concerned, there's no real difference between someone who's half-black and someone who's full-black.

Grant's observations about the mixed-race men are important to the novel because they reflect Grant's own uncertain relationship with his community in Louisiana. One could even say that, metaphorically, Grant is racially-mixed. As an educated black man, he's been given access to resources usually reserved for the white community (such as higher education). Grant's education and training make him dislike his black community in Louisiana: he considers his church ignorant and foolish, and he often treats his family with barely-disguised contempt. And yet in spite of his education and dislike for aspects of his black community, Grant certainly doesn't belong alongside white people in Louisiana. College education or not, he's identical to any other black man, as far as Pichot is concerned. Grant is trapped between two worlds, and he's not entirely comfortable with either one.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ I went to the front door and jerked it open, and there was the screen. And through the screen I could see outside into the darkness, and I didn't want to go out there. There was nothing outside this house that I cared for. Not school, not home, not my aunt, not the quarter, not anything else in the world. I don't know how long I stood there looking out into the darkness—a couple of minutes, I suppose —then I went back into the kitchen. I knelt down and buried my face in her lap ...

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker), Vivian Baptiste, Tante Lou

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Grant is furious to learn that Vivian's husband, from whom she's separated, won't agree to a divorce unless she lets him see their children on weekends. Technically, Grant has been having an affair with Vivian, and he's been looking forward to the time when he can spend time with his girlfriend without the fear of legal repercussions. The fact that Vivian will be locked in divorce proceedings for longer than she thought infuriates Grant, and he seems to be considering leaving Vivian, both tonight and possibly forever.In spite of Grant's anger, he's smart enough to realize that he has nowhere else to go: he doesn't feel any deep connection to his family, his community, or his job. Because of Grant's cynicism about his community, as well as his education, Vivian is the only person with whom he feels he can be himself.

Grant is torn between two options: remaining in Louisiana or abandoning his community for somewhere new. Grant's behavior in this scene suggests that he's finally reaching a decision. Although he continues to have his doubts about his church, his neighbors, and his family, Grant refuses to conform to the stereotypes of the absentee black male: he refuses to run away from his problems. Instead, Grant chooses to remain with the woman he loves. In this way, Grant finds a compromise: he continues to question his community without turning his back on it altogether.

Chapter 27 Quotes

"She been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That's how you got through that university—cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she's all right. I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I've seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themself, lied to themself—hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain."

Related Characters: Reverend Moses Ambrose (speaker), Tante Lou, Grant Wiggins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Grant has treated the Reverend Moses Ambrose—the head of the black church in Grant's community—as a figure of ridicule; an impossibly naive man who encourages his churchgoers to accept their status as second-class citizens in the delusional hope that their submissiveness will get them into Heaven. But in this scene, Grant begins to see that Ambrose isn't as naive as he'd believed. In fact, in some ways, Ambrose is much more perceptive and cynical than Grant. Even though Ambrose doesn't know Tante Lou remotely as well as Grant does, he knows that she sacrificed her health and happiness while working hard to send Grant to college. Ironically, Ambrose is more "educated" about the realities of life than Grant the college boy.

Grant's clash with Ambrose is important because it dispels the myth of independence, a myth that Grant has subscribed to for most of his adult life. Grant believes that he survive on his own; that he doesn't need a family, a church, or a network of friends. As Ambrose makes clear, however, Grant's attitude of rugged independence is only possible in the first place because his aunt worked for years to send him to school. Grant has been lying to himself, patting himself on the back while trying to forget that he was totally *dependent* on his aunt. Tante Lou is then also a testament to the strength of black women: without drawing attention to themselves, they work hard for their loved ones.

Chapter 30 Quotes

Jefferson continued to look at Paul, a long, deep look, and the deputy felt that there was something else he wanted to say. Murphy and the other deputy were still waiting. "Well," Paul said, and started to walk away. "Paul?" Jefferson said quietly. And his eyes were speaking, even more than his mouth. The deputy looked back at him. Murphy and Claude did too. "You go'n be there, Paul?" Jefferson asked, his eyes asked. Paul nodded. "Yes, Jefferson. I'll be there."

Related Characters: Deputy Paul Bonin, Jefferson (speaker), Murphy, Claude Guerin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248-49

Explanation and Analysis

With only a few hours left before his execution, Jefferson prepares himself by asking Paul, the kind, white prison guard, if he'll be present for Jefferson's death. Jefferson's behavior in this scene of the novel illustrates just how far he's come since being sentenced to death. Although Jefferson's question, by itself, could be interpreted as frightened (he's scared of dying, and wants the support of a friend, Paul), Jefferson doesn't betray any outward signs of cowardice; on the contrary, he is calm and quiet. Based on how Murphy and Claude (who'd previously been rude to Jefferson) treat Jefferson in this scene, it's plain that Jefferson projects an image of pride and strength. Murphy and Claude are described as looking deep into Jefferson's eyes, suggesting that, in spite of their racist attitudes, they're viewing Jefferson as a human being for the first time. Murphy and Claude's behavior suggests that Grant's point about "myths" is true: by teaching Jefferson to be brave, Grant is fighting the dehumanizing effects of racism.

Chapter 31 Quotes

Several feet away from where I sat under the tree was a hill of bull grass. I doubted that I had looked at it once in all the time that I had been sitting there. I probably would not have noticed it at all had a butterfly, a yellow butterfly with dark specks like ink dots on its wings, not lit there. What had brought it there? There was no odor that I could detect to have attracted it. There were other places where it could have rested—there was the wire fence on either side of the road, there were weeds along both ditches with strong fragrances, there were flowers just a short distance away in Pichot's yard—so why did it light on a hill of bull grass that offered it nothing? I watched it closely, the way it opened its wings and closed them, the way it opened its wings again, fluttered, closed its wings for a second or two, then opened them again and flew away. I watched it fly over the ditch and down into the quarter, I watched it until I could not see it anymore.

Related Characters: Grant Wiggins (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255-56

Explanation and Analysis

As Jefferson is executed, Grant notices a butterfly flying near his schoolhouse. The butterfly has all sorts of symbolic overtones, and symbolizes different, contradictory things at once. First, the butterfly seems to symbolize Grant himself. The butterfly has come to "rest" in a place that offers it nothing; in much the same sense, Grant has returned to an impoverished, uneducated Louisiana community that, at least in his view, offers him almost nothing. And yet when Grant describes the butterfly, he's not in the least bitter or cynical, perhaps suggesting that he's come to terms with his own community. And just as the butterfly continues flying away instead of remaining on the little patch of grass, Grant may one day leave his Louisiana home—his future is still uncertain.

In another sense, the butterfly may symbolize Jefferson's soul "flying to Heaven" after his execution. Gaines seems to be suggesting that Grant has put aside some of his objections to Christianity and his church. While Grant doesn't necessarily subscribe to any one organized religion, he seems to believe that there is a God who has a plan for him; i.e., a God who directs him through life like the butterfly, moving from flower to flower.

"I don't know what you're going to say when you go back in there. But tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so."

Related Characters: Deputy Paul Bonin (speaker), Jefferson, Grant Wiggins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

After Jefferson's execution, Paul goes to Grant to tell him about the event. The fact that Jefferson was proud and brave throughout the ordeal proves that Grant has succeeded as a teacher. Grant has not only taught but *embodied* bravery and self-respect, thereby giving Jefferson the dignity he needed to "stand tall," acting as a hero and a symbol for the black community.

In this scene, Paul's behavior takes on religious overtones. Paul—one of the few white characters in the novel who's portrayed positively—has always treated Jefferson with respect and even friendliness. But after Jefferson's execution, Paul will play the part of a messenger: first witnessing Jefferson's death, then spreading the news of Jefferson's strength and courage across town. In this sense, Jefferson comes to resemble Jesus Christ, and Paul comes to resemble his own Biblical namesake, who spread word of Christ's strength and divinity across the world. In this way, the novel ends on an optimistic note. Grant wanted Jefferson to act as an example of African-Americans' courage and humanity: Jefferson was supposed to be a warrior, fighting racist whites' assumptions about blacks. Now that Jefferson has died with dignity, Gaines implies, it becomes Paul's duty to spread word of Jefferson's heroism through his own white community. With Paul's help, Jefferson will continue to fight racism even after he's dead.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

An unnamed narrator describes the proceedings of a trial. The narrator was not present for the trial, because he knew in advance exactly what the verdict would be. The narrator's aunt and the accused's godmother were present for the trial; they provided the narrator with many of the details that appear in the chapter. The godmother of the accused, like the narrator, doesn't pay attention to the details of the trial, because she already knows what the outcome will be. She does, however, hear one word: "hog."

The novel begins on a note of hopelessness: everyone who attends the trial knows what's going to happen to the accused, and the narrator knows without going. Gaines establishes a pattern, according to which the narrator of his novel describes events that he doesn't personally witness. This will become important later on, as the scope of the novel gets larger and larger. It's also important to note that before we learn the name of the accused, we hear the word "hog." The dehumanizing effects of language will be a recurring theme in this book.

The accused is a young man who was walking to a bar when two other men, Brother and Bear, drove up to him in the road and offered him a ride into town. In the car, he says, Brother and Bear ask the accused if he has any money; the accused replies that he has no money at all. Brother and Bear talk about buying a drink on credit from an old storekeeper named Alcee Gropé. When the three of them arrive at Gropé's store, Brother and Bear ask Gropé for drinks; Gropé refuses to serve them, because they're already drunk and don't have enough money. Bear and Brother argue with Gropé. Suddenly, Bear draws his revolver and "started shooting." There is more gunfire (the accused does not say from whom, exactly), and when the gunfire is over, only the accused is left standing.

Even in his own version of events, the accused is weak and passive. He only goes to the store because his two companions want to go there. In the process of describing the crime, the accused paints a glum picture of life in the South for African Americans at the time—men are driven into poverty and take refuge in alcohol, turning to crime when they don't have enough money to pay.

The accused wants to leave the store, he testifies, but he is paralyzed with fear. He realizes that old Gropé is still alive, and frantically tells him that he must tell the police that he (the accused) was not involved in the shooting. Even as the accused explains this to Gropé, he dies. The accused doesn't know how to use a telephone, and he is still very afraid. To calm himself, he takes a bottle of whiskey and drinks half of it. He notices the store's cash register, which is full of money. Although he knows stealing is wrong, he needs the money, so he stuffs it in his jacket and is about to walk out of the store with the whiskey in his hand when two white men walk in and see him.

More pathetic details of the accused's story emerge: he can't use a telephone, he resorts to alcohol under stress, and steals the money because, it is implied, he is so poor he can't imagine not stealing it. This story is supposed to save the accused's life, but it also suggests that his life is pathetic and barely worthy of consideration. It is this suggestion against which the accused will fight for the remainder of the book.

The prosecutor's story of the crime is different. He says that the accused—whose name is Jefferson—went to the store with Brother and Bear with the intention of robbing and killing Gropé. After surviving the shootout, Jefferson stole money and celebrated his theft by drinking whiskey.

The prosecution's version of the accused's behavior sounds like a combination of the racist stereotypes of black people that whites circulated at the time of the story. Thus, in the prosecutor's story the accused is not only a thief and a murderer; he also gloats over his victims' bodies.

The defense attorney argues that Jefferson was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He wasn't involved with Brother and Bear, and this explains why Gropé didn't shoot him. In his summary to the jury, the defense attorney argues that to kill Jefferson would be like killing a boy or a fool, not a man. The attorney urges the jury to look closely at Jefferson: he has a flat skull that suggests that he has no intelligence at all, and if the jurors were to ask him even the most basic questions about poetry, the calendar, or civics, he wouldn't know what to say. The attorney urges the jury to think of Jefferson's godmother—killing him would be depriving her of her reason for living. In conclusion, the attorney says that killing Jefferson would be as immoral as killing a hog.

Although he's arguing for the accused's life, the defense attorney's argument is astonishingly patronizing, condescending, and dehumanizing. In a way, the defense attorney is a parody of the figure of the "good white man" as he appears in other novels about black characters. In books like To Kill A Mockingbird, *white lawyers heroically defend black men from the death penalty, but in the process, Gaines implies, they belittle their clients and train them to be victims. It's important that we hear Jefferson's name for the first time in the defense attorney's argument: Jefferson's bases his identity on the attorney's belittling speech, and thus thinks of himself as an animal.*

The jury—comprised of twelve white men—quickly reaches the verdict that Jefferson is guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree. The day is Friday. On Monday, at ten o'clock, the narrator's aunt sits in the courthouse with Miss Emma, Jefferson's "nannan," and Reverend Moses Ambrose, the pastor of their church. The judge, who is red-faced and white-haired, asks Jefferson if he has anything to say before he's sentenced. Jefferson only looks at the floor and shakes his head. The judge sentences Jefferson to death by electrocution, at a date to be set by the court.

The narrator, still unnamed, notes that the entire jury is white. This further calls into question the validity of their decision: we get the sense that they assumed that Jefferson was guilty until proven innocent, exactly the opposite of the usual presumption in American courts. Gaines also offers an allusion to the Bible: like Jesus Christ, Jefferson is "killed" on a Friday. Gaines will allude to the Bible in numerous other ways throughout his book.

CHAPTER 2

The narrator comes home from school on Monday afternoon and sees his aunt sitting in his kitchen with Miss Emma, the last person he wants to see. He retires to his bedroom without either of them seeing him, and tries to think of a way to greet Miss Emma quickly and then leave. He thinks about going to the Rainbow Club in Bayonne to do work.

The narrator is still unnamed, but we still get a sense for the kind of man he is. He isn't sympathetic or emotional as the people around him are: instead of trying to comfort Miss Emma, he tries to avoid her altogether; indeed, he's thinking about doing work, not the trial.

The narrator's aunt, who he addresses as Tante Lou, enters the room. She asks him why he hasn't spoken to Miss Emma, and tells him that Miss Emma needs to talk to him. He replies that he has to go to Bayonne "for school," but Lou insists that he can spare some time today—they look at each other, and silently they both recognize that the narrator knows what's happened to Jefferson.

The wordless communication that goes on between Lou and Grant in this moment establishes the strength of the bond between both characters. Throughout the book, Lou will compel Grant to do things he doesn't want to do. Grant does these things because he respects Lou, and recognizes that she's devoted her life to raising him, even if he does them grudgingly. At this point, that bond strikes Grant as an obligation more than a source of strength.

The narrator, who Lou addresses as Grant, goes to the kitchen to talk to Miss Emma. Emma's full name is Emma Glenn, and Grant thinks that she is about seventy years old. No one has ever called her anything but "Miss Emma," with the exception of Jefferson, who called her "Nannan." Miss Emma tells Grant that the defense attorney called Jefferson a hog. She tells Grant that she wants him to teach Jefferson to be a man, not a hog, before he's killed; though she tells Grant he doesn't have to do it, Grant can see from her expression that she wants him to.

In this section, we're given the basic problem that the plot must solve: Jefferson must learn to be a man before he dies, to find his self-worth and dignity even as he faces death. It may seem strange that Emma and the others don't want to help Jefferson fight the verdict, but in the racist society of the time the white-dominated court system offers no realistic chance at an appeal. And so the black characters are resigned to his death, even if they're optimistic about his self-worth. Emma says Grant doesn't have to do anything, but the bonds of the community make him feel that it is impossible for him to do nothing (even though he really does want to do nothing).

Grant tells Miss Emma that he only knows how to teach what white people have taught him to teach, the "three R's": reading, writing, arithmetic. Nevertheless, his aunt tells Miss Emma that he'll help Jefferson. Lou and Emma tell Grant that they must all go and talk to Henri Pichot, the brother-in-law of the local sheriff. Grant insists, however, that he must go to Bayonne; when Lou protests, he insists that Jefferson is already dead, even if he won't be electrocuted for a month. He says that his job is to teach the young not to end up like Jefferson. Aunt Lou seems to ignore what Grant says, and insists that he accompany her and Miss Emma in the town's "quarter". Grant wants to tell his aunt that he is no teacher, but he knows that she won't listen to him, and prepares to head to the quarter.

We learn that Grant is a schoolteacher, but also that he has no respect for his own profession. It's strange to think that things as basic as reading and writing could be seen as tools of racist oppression, as Grant clearly thinks of them—perhaps they're tools of oppression in the sense that they don't give blacks the skills they need to improve their lives, and thus waste their time. In any event, Grant obeys Lou as he has earlier in the chapter: for all his lack of sympathy for Miss Emma, he respects his family members.

CHAPTER 3

Grant starts his car, a '46 Ford, thinking irritably that he not only has to talk to Henri Pichot but also act as his aunt's chauffeur. He drives Tante Lou and Miss Emma past the school where he teaches, and thinks about all the work he has to do, in particular, finding **wood** to **heat** the school. He teaches about twenty families' children, and he asks each family to send wood throughout the year.

Grant is petty once again: he's thinking about driving when he should be mourning the death of his aunt's friend's godson. Yet at least Grant isn't thinking about nonsense: he has duties to his schoolchildren and his school, and these involve organizing other families in the community.

Grant arrives at Pichot's house, which is large, painted white and grey, and built in an antebellum (pre-Civil War) style. He, Lou, and Emma walk to an entrance on the house; normally, only tractors and wagons go this way. As they walk to the back of the house, Grant reminds Lou that she told him never to go through Pichot's back door again, but Lou insists that this is a special occasion, and the three of them walk through the back door. Miss Emma says that Grant didn't have to come with them, but Grant can see that she wants him to come inside.

The pre-Civil War design of Pichot's house symbolizes his pre-Civil War thinking: for Pichot, blacks are still inferior beings, effectively slaves, fit only to work on his land. Though we don't understand exactly why, we see that Grant is humiliated to have to walk through the back door: already, then, Grant is debasing himself for the sake of others. And Lou's comment that they should go through the back door captures the way that the blacks here realize that if they act in the way Pichot believes they should—as inferiors—they may be able to get him to do what they want him to.

In the kitchen, Grant, Lou, and Emma meet the maid, Inez Lane, dressed in white. She tells them that she heard about Jefferson, and, when Emma asks to speak to Pichot, goes to call Pichot from the library. Grant remembers killing chickens and gathering fruit for Pichot as a child. In those days, Miss Emma worked as a cook in Pichot's house; indeed, she cooked for Henri, his siblings, and his nieces and nephews—Henri has no children of his own. When Grant was older, he went to university, and Lou told him never to come through the back door of Pichot's house ever again. Grant has been a schoolteacher for the last six years, and in that time never returned to the house.

Inez's white uniform symbolizes the white environment in which she must work, even though she's black. We get a clearer idea of why Grant hates Pichot's house: he was treated like a slave when he was younger. Since then, he's used education to better himself and improve his quality of life: the implication is that Grant teaches children so that they may do the same and never have to work for racist people like Pichot themselves. And yet, at the same time, here is Grant once again entering Pichot's house by the back door.

Henri Pichot arrives in the kitchen, followed by Louis Rougon; both men are white, Grant notes. Pichot is in his mid-sixties, carries a drink, and wears a grey suit with a white shirt. Rougon is slightly younger, wears a black suit, and also carries a drink. Grant notes that Rougon's family owns a bank in a nearby town, and Pichot owns a plantation. Pichot asks Emma what he can do for her, but seems annoyed at being interrupted. Rougon and Pichot finish their drinks and hold them out, signaling Emma to refill them. As Emma does so, she asks Pichot for a favor: talk to the sheriff, so that Grant can visit Jefferson in the days leading up to his execution and convince Jefferson that he is a man, not a hog. She reminds Pichot that she's done a lot for his family.

While Grant shows some signs of not caring about Jefferson's death, Pichot and Rougon seem completely unconcerned—they're even drinking when Emma tells them about Jefferson. The way Pinchot casually extends his glass for Emma to fill shows how he continues to think of Emma as his servant, even after she's ceased to work for him. This reinforces how little respect he has for blacks: he thinks of them all, always, as servants. Emma shows her bravery by not only asking Pichot for a favor but also reminding him what she's done for him as a servant.

In response to Emma's pleas, Pichot tells her that he can't promise anything; he looks at Grant. Grant thinks that he's too educated to be of any use to Pichot anymore, but that Pichot respects him because Lou worked for Pichot for many years. Pichot urges Emma to forget her plans, worry about Jefferson's soul, and let Reverend Ambrose visit Jefferson before he dies. Emma refuses, though she acknowledges that Ambrose will visit him—Jefferson is going to die, but he must die a man. Pichot gives in to Emma's requests, saying impatiently that he'll speak to the sheriff but that it's the sheriff's decision, not his own. When Emma asks when Pichot will speak to the sheriff, Pichot replies that he'll speak to him whenever he next sees him, and walks away with Rougon, seemingly oblivious to Emma's words of thanks.

Because Pichot encourages Emma to leave Jefferson to Reverend Ambrose, it's tempting for us to think of religion as a tool of racist oppression (and Grant does think of it that way for much of the novel). There's a plausible argument for this: religion teaches blacks to accept their fate in this world and look forward to their eternal reward in Heaven. This makes it easier for racists like Henri Pichot to assert their power over blacks. Pichot continues to show his disdain and disinterest in all black matters, irritably excusing himself to talk to his guests when Emma asks him reasonable questions about Jefferson.

CHAPTER 4

Grant drives Emma and Lou away from Pichot's house. He drops off Emma at her house, and his aunt gets out of the car, too. She tells Grant she'll be home later to cook dinner; Grant replies that he'll be in Bayonne instead. She walks into Emma's house, and he thinks that he's being very hurtful—he's always supposed to eat his aunt's **food**. Grant drives away from Emma's house, thinking about all the schoolwork he has to do, but also realizing that he won't be able to concentrate on any of it. He needs to see Vivian.

Grant behaves badly in these early chapters, often knowingly displeasing Lou. At the same time, he recognizes that what he's doing is wrong, and knows that he should have eaten her food. (This moment will echo later in the novel when Jefferson eats Miss Emma's gumbo.) It's darkly amusing that Grant only now decides that he won't be able to concentrate on schoolwork—it seemed obvious that he wasn't going to get much done the day a man was sentenced to death.

As Grant drives, he thinks about Bayonne. It is a town of 6000 people, about 3500 of white and 2500 black. There is a Catholic church for whites and a different Catholic church for blacks; there is also a Catholic school and a public school for whites, and a Catholic school and a public school for blacks.

Bayonne is an oddity in the sense that it's mixed almost 50-50 between blacks and whites. Yet it's important that there are slightly more whites than blacks. This suggests the balance of power in Bayonne: blacks may have some strength in numbers, but whites are more powerful nonetheless.

Grant arrives at the Rainbow Club, and sees Joe Claiborne, who owns it and runs the bar. He orders dinner from Thelma, Joe's wife, and uses the phone to call Vivian. Vivian answers and tells Grant that she's feeding children. Grant asks to see her; Vivian replies that she'll try to get Dora, since she can't leave "the children" alone. Grant admits to Thelma that he's in town to see Vivian, and thinks to himself that Thelma and Joe are good people, who don't mind when he drinks and eats on credit.

It's important that Vivian refuses to see Grant when he calls her, on the grounds that she's taking care of her children. As much as Vivian loves Grant, she's loyal to other people, and refuses to turn her back on them. We also get a better sense of the black community in Louisiana: for all the racism and poverty that blacks have to put up with, there are cheerier places like the Rainbow Club, as well.

Vivian Baptiste enters the Rainbow Club. She is tall, well-dressed, and very beautiful—and she knows it. Grant greets her with a kiss and says he loves her. Vivian asks why he had to see her; in response, Grant says that he feels drunk on his commitments to other people, and wants to move somewhere new with Vivian. Vivian reminds him that they're both schoolteachers, and that she is still married, albeit separated from her husband.

Again, we sense that Vivian is kinder, more loving, and more generous than Grant is. Grant complains about his obligations to others, while we've already seen that Vivian has obligations of her own, of which she doesn't complain. We also get more information about Grant and Vivian's relationship: in a Catholic community, Vivian's divorce would be a scandal.

Grant and Vivian dance, slowly, and Grant tells Vivian that Jefferson has been sentenced to death, and that Emma wants him to visit Jefferson and teach him to be a man. He isn't sure what he would say to Jefferson, he tells Vivian, and he's uncertain that teaching his new student that he's a man would accomplish anything. Vivian begins to cry, and tells Grant that she wants to help Jefferson, both for Vivian herself and for "us." Grant agrees to help Jefferson, encouraged by Vivian's assurances that she'll be there for him whenever he needs her. They make weekend plans to see each other in Baton Rouge, where they have friends who let them stay at their place. Vivian and Grant finish their drinks and then leave the Rainbow Club.

Even in this early stage of the novel, Vivian encourages Grant to help Jefferson, using her relationship with Grant to encourage him. In a way, this is exactly what we've already seen Tante Lou do to convince him to talk to Henri Pichot: used her "history" with Grant to convince him to do something he doesn't want to do at all. Vivian's love and encouragement will be crucial to Grant during his dealings with Jefferson in the rest of the novel. It's also worth noting that Grant and Vivian don't go home together. They seem to be limiting their time with each other, recognizing that Vivian is still married to another man, and going through a divorce.

CHAPTER 5

The day after he visits Vivian, Grant is teaching his schoolchildren, who address him as "Mister Wiggins." They begin by pledging allegiance to the flag; afterwards, Grant sends the children to study Bible verses. In the local church, six months of the year (but really only five and a half, he admits to himself), he teaches classes for students from ages six to thirteen. In order to teach as many classes as he can, he assigns his sixth-grade students to teach first and second graders while he teaches third and fourth graders. This is the only way he can give all the children some education.

It's clear from the beginning that Grant doesn't think much of his own profession; what Gaines makes clear at the beginning of this chapter is that Grant hates school teaching in no small part because he doesn't have the resources to do it properly. While white schools enjoy better funding and more attention from the school board, Grant has to make to with limited space, time, and textbooks, even assigning students to teach sections of the class. Nevertheless, he teaches because he seems to recognize that education does have some value: that's why he divides his classes up into groups, so that everyone can learn at least a little.

Grant remembers his night after seeing Vivian. He drove home to his house, and when he went to say goodnight to his aunt, she pretended to be asleep. The next morning, she cooked him a big breakfast, but avoided talking to him whenever possible.

For all the disrespect he shows his aunt in the previous chapters, Grant is moral enough to recognize that he's behaved rudely. Indeed, he seems genuinely pained that Lou isn't speaking to him that day.

As he teaches his students, Grant finds himself getting angry with everything they do. He spanks one of his boys for calculating a multiplication problem by counting on his hands, and tells him that he must use his brains, not his fingers. He scolds the boy for using too much chalk, and tells him that he has to buy chalk for the children with his own money. He also scolds a girl for writing a sentence in a slanted direction instead of a straight line, and tells her to write six sentences in a straight line.

Grant is angry with Lou and with himself for agreeing to talk to Pichot, but he takes his anger out on other people. Yet even when he scolds the children for selfish, personal reasons, he's still doing his job as a teacher: he teaches the boy to do math more efficiently, and teaches the girl to write more neatly. He's making his students behave the right way, but for the wrong reasons.

As the children work, Grant thinks that he knows all the families of his children. The boy he spanked, for instance, has parents who work on a plantation, and the girl has a cruel father and a pregnant sister. He goes to use the restroom while his student teacher, Irene Cole, maintains order. When he returns to the classroom he enters through the back door. He sees a boy playing with a bug and hits him on the head with a heavy book. Grant angrily tells his classroom that the children who play with bugs will end up like Jefferson: executed by electrocution in Bayonne. He goes on to tell the children that he's been asked to make Jefferson a man before he dies. The girl he scolds, whose name is Estelle, begins to cry—Jefferson is her cousin, a fact that Grant knew, but doesn't apologize for.

Once again, Grant behaves unkindly to others, but then recognizes that he was wrong to act this way. The fact that he enters the classroom through the back door alludes to the promise he made his aunt, and the way he entered Pichot's house in the earlier chapter. It's as if his agreeing to talk to Jefferson is humiliating him in every part of his life, even parts that seemingly have nothing to do with Jefferson. The way Grant treats Estelle is arguably the cruelest thing he's done so far: he knowingly hurts her feelings at a time when she's going through emotions that are too much for grown men and women to handle.

At two o'clock, Farrell Jarreau, a messenger for Henri Pichot, arrives at Grant's classroom and tells Grant that Pichot wants to see him in the evening. He asks Farrell if it's about Jefferson, and Farrell replies that he doesn't know. As Farrell leaves, Grant sees in his eyes that he knows about Jefferson, even if he hasn't admitted it. Grant marvels that Farrell is still an errand runner who Pichot never trusts with information, and thinks that Farrell can only obtain information through his own craftiness.

Grant despises the wealthy white people like Henri Pichot who look down on blacks; indeed, he sees evidence everywhere that blacks are treated as inferior. It's absurd, for instance, that Farrell hasn't been entrusted with real information, even after all his years of service. It's especially absurd from the perspective of Grant, a schoolteacher, whose job consists of helping children grow and change. People like Farrell are never given a chance to change, because their masters don't consider them fully human. At the same time, Farrell's ability to figure out the information anyway attests to his intelligence and ability—an intelligence and ability that Pichot completely ignores.

CHAPTER 6

Grant returns to Pichot's house, entering through the back door once again. Inez greets him and Grant sees that she has been crying. She tells him that Louis Rougon has made a lavish bet—a case of whiskey—with Pichot. When Grant asks what the terms of the bet are, Inez replies that Rougon has bet that Grant won't be able to prepare Jefferson to die, adding that Pichot hasn't bet for or against Grant.

It's especially poignant that Inez is weeping in Pichot's house: in other words, Inez has to watch as Pichot drinks and entertains his guests. While we're not yet sure of the terms of the bet Pichot makes (and won't be sure of them until the end of the book), it's clear that Pichot is a cruel man. He's obviously playing games based on Jefferson's life. This makes Inez—and, presumably, Grant himself—more eager to teach Jefferson to be a man.

Inez goes to fetch Pichot, and Grant stands in the hall thinking about his afternoon. He returned from school to find Emma and Lou shelling pecans. He told them he was going to Pichot's house, and neither woman volunteered to go with him, though Lou said that she'd hold his hand if Grant wanted her to do so. Emma repeated that she didn't want Grant doing anything he didn't want to do.

After visiting Pichot with Lou and Emma, Grant is forced to go to Pichot's house by himself. It's interesting that Lou gets Grant to go by himself by ridiculing his manhood, offering to "hold his hand." Black women in this novel wield great power, and they do so by skillfully manipulating men's sense of pride.

Grant waits an hour in the hall while Inez goes to get Pichot. At six o'clock, Edna Guidry, a woman in her early fifties and the sheriff's wife, greets Grant and inquires about Tante Lou. She tells Grant that she's very sorry about Jefferson, and tells him that he can talk to the sheriff about visiting Jefferson after supper. Edna offers to help Inez with cooking, and when Inez says there's nothing she needs help with, Edna pours herself a drink. She offers Grant **food**, but Grant refuses, even though he's hungry—he'll never eat at Pichot's kitchen table again. Inez whispers to Grant that Pichot and the sheriff are talking about Jefferson as they eat—the sheriff says that nobody can change Jefferson into a man. She offers Grant food and coffee, but he refuses.

Edna Guidry is the first white person in the novel who shows any sympathy to the black community after Jefferson is sentenced to death. Yet even Edna only cares about blacks so much—like Pichot, she eats food and drinks as she talks to Grant, as if she isn't really thinking about Jefferson's execution much at all. Perhaps because he recognizes this, Grant refuses to eat anything when Edna offers him food: his sense of pride is so great that he honors the promise he made to himself to never eat in the kitchen again.

At seven thirty, Grant has been waiting for two and a half hours. Pichot, Rougon, Sam Guidry, and a fat man Grant doesn't recognize walk into the hall. Grant decides that he'll speak intelligently instead of acting like "a nigger." Thus, when Guidry, who is the sheriff, greets him by asking how long he's been waiting, he tells the truth, instead of saying "not long" and grinning, as he knows he's supposed to do. Guidry asks Grant to explain why he wants to see Jefferson, even though Grant can see that Pichot and his guests have already discussed this. Guidry seems amused, and Grant realizes that Rougon and the fat man are betting against him. Grant speaks proper English, and thinks that Guidry will accuse him of being "too smart." He half wants Guidry to do so, since this will mean that Grant doesn't have to see Jefferson.

Here, we see what differentiates Grant from the other black people in his community. Where other blacks speak with poor grammar and, perhaps intentionally, try to sound less educated or even less intelligent than they are around white people, Grant does nothing of the kind. He lets Guidry know that he's had to wait for hours, and recklessly answers all of Guidry's questions without saying "sir." It's worth noting, though, that Grant's bravery is based on a kind of selfishness: he's behaving this way in part because he's hoping that Guidry will become angry and refuse to let Grant speak to Jefferson.

Guidry asks Grant what he'd do if he were allowed to talk to Jefferson; Grant replies that he doesn't know what he'd say, but that he'd try to help Jefferson die with dignity. He adds that he would speak to Jefferson as a favor to Emma, and that he wishes he weren't involved in the affair at all. Guidry tells Grant that Edna, his wife, wants him to let Grant talk to Jefferson. He tries to trap Grant by asking him if he or his wife is right; Grant replies that he doesn't want to get involved in family disputes. This display of intelligence visibly irritates Guidry, and the fat man. Guidry tells Grant that he's too smart for his own good, and that, while he'll allow him to talk to Jefferson, he'll call off the talks if Jefferson shows the slightest signs of aggravation.

Grant again refuses to curb his intelligence or eloquence when he's around Guidry and the other white men; indeed, speaking eloquently is a weapon that Grant uses to attack Guidry without ever threatening him or insulting him. It's clear that Edna has convinced Guidry to allow Jefferson to talk to Grant—women in the novel are generally more moral than the men. It's also important to recognize that Guidry only allows Grant to visit the jail because he doesn't think his visits matter at all: Jefferson's going to die, meaning that nothing he does matters anymore.

Grant asks logistical questions, and learns the following from Guidry: he can't see Jefferson for the next few weeks so that Jefferson can get used to his jail cell; he can talk to Jefferson between ten and four every day; he can't bring Jefferson anything sharp or hard in case he tries to hurt himself; Guidry doesn't know when Jefferson will be electrocuted, other than soon. Guidry tells Grant that he's wasting his time. Grant thanks him and leaves.

It'll become important later on that Guidry tells Grant not to bring Jefferson anything sharp; for now, this reminds us that there's a possibility that Jefferson will kill himself before he can be executed. Guidry thinks that Grant is wasting his time, and while Grant privately agrees with him, his dislike for Guidry encourages him to talk to Jefferson in order to prove Guidry wrong.

CHAPTER 7

In the weeks before Grant begins visiting Jefferson in jail, two things happen at school: the superintendent makes an annual visit, and the school gets a load of kindling for the winter. To prepare for the superintendent, whose visit Farrell Jarreau has heard Pichot discussing, Grant preps his students, spanning grades one to six, in civics and the Pledge of Allegiance and tells them to wear their best clothes. He has one of the older boys keep watch so that when the superintendent's car arrives, he'll know a few minutes in advance.

While Grant refused to hide his intelligence in order to make a good impression on Pichot in the previous chapter, here he does try to ensure his school makes a good impression on the superintendent, because he needs the superintendent's support in order to improve the school. Farrell Jarreau proves himself to be a valuable source of information: the fact that he can extract bits of information from Pichot without Pichot telling him attests to Farrell's unrecognized intelligence.

When the superintendent arrives, Grant greets him as Dr. Joseph, and notes that he is an old, fat, red-faced man who visits the district's black schools half as often as he visits white schools. As the superintendent enters the classroom, the students, aged six to thirteen, rise, as Grant has instructed them to do in advance, and Grant introduces them to Dr. Joseph Morgan. Morgan quizzes the students, including a young girl named Gloria Herbert. He asks Gloria to show him her hands and name a Bible verse; her hands are clean and she successfully recites the verse. Morgan tells her that she's a "bright little girl."

We note immediately that Dr. Joseph is out of touch with the people he's visiting: he's white, well-fed (unlike the poor students who have to search for their own food), and presumably wealthy. Morgan quizzes the young student and calls her a bright girl: while this might suggest that Morgan isn't as much of a racist as the other white people we've seen in the novel, this kind of paternalistic behavior was actually quite common among racists at the time (and perhaps still is). Morgan seems to treat blacks like animals: charming, "bright,: but still subhuman.

The next student Morgan calls on is a boy, Louis Washington, Jr., who Grant wishes had stayed home, because he is ill-behaved and a bad student. Morgan asks Louis to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and Louis gives a garbled rendition of the Pledge, leaving out many of the words. Morgan only grunts and moves on. He proceeds in this way, talking to bright-looking students and then foolish-looking ones. He inspects the students' teeth, a practice that was used, Grant remembers, by slave masters at slave auctions. After he finishes quizzing the class, Morgan tells everyone that beans and fish are good for their health, and encourages them to exercise. He compliments Grant, who he calls "Higgins," on his excellent "crop of students."

It's important that Morgan offers no constructive criticism of Washington's Pledge of Allegiance: he only recognizes that Washington is a poor student, and moves on. His attitude toward the students is like that of a collector examining his specimens. (He calls the students a "crop," as if they are a collection of plants, not people.) This is largely what reminds Grant of slave masters buying slaves at the auctions. Further, Morgan's comment about fish and beans being good for the students' health suggests that he cares more about their bodies—as workers, for whites—than about their minds.

While the student teacher, Irene, leads the class, Grant speaks with Morgan outside. He tells Morgan that he needs new books and more chalk for the blackboards; Morgan only replies that all schools, both white and black, are in the same shape. When Grant protests that his books are handed down from white schools, Morgan accuses him of questioning his honesty. Morgan climbs into his car and tells Grant that he has to tell his students to buy toothbrushes. When Grant tells him that the students have no money for toothbrushes, Morgan says that the "lazy" children should be put to work picking pecans from the surrounding trees. He drives away without waving.

Morgan is clearly lying when he says that the school district treats the black and white schools equally. This alludes to Plessy V. Ferguson, the 1896 Supreme Court decision that established the doctrine of "separate but equal." Blacks were allowed to attend all-black schools, under the bogus provision that the schools be comparable to white schools. In reality, black schools were underfunded and given less attention than their white counterparts: this is obvious simply in the fact that the black students get outdated hand-me-down textbooks from white students. It's alarming, then, to hear that Morgan blames the children for their own poverty, calling them "lazy." Grant wanted to try to impress Morgan in order to get more support for his school; but just as the jury that convicted Jefferson saw him as immediately guilty, Morgan was never going to be impressed because he's racist.

CHAPTER 8

In the week following the superintendent's visit, two old black men, Henry Lewis and Amos Thomas, bring a load of **wood**, carried by a mule, to **heat** the school through the winter. As they take the wood around the school, Grant continues teaching his class, scolding Louis Washington for staring at the men from the window. Washington protests that Grant was staring at them, too. Grant admits that he was, but punishes Louis for bad grammar anyway.

Washington has a point: Grant was staring out the window. This suggests that he's no more committed to his lessons than his students, in the sense that he doesn't think they have any value. Here we see Grant abusing his power as a teacher, punishing Washington for something other than what he originally wanted to punish him for.

Henry Lewis knocks on the back door, telling Grant that they're dropped off all the **wood**. Grant thanks him and Amos Thomas for their help, and then tells his students that he'll let them out for forty-five minutes to chop the wood. The older boys complete this task, while the younger students stay inside, jealous that the others get to have fun outside. Grant watches the boys laughing as they work, and thinks that they're behaving exactly like the two old men did. He wonders if his teaching will help any of them.

Grant is deeply cynical about his profession: the sight of old and young men doing the same menial tasks reminds him that education won't help any of his students to grow up into better people. In a racist society, blacks aren't allowed to take up a high-paying or intellectual profession: they're forced to take low-paying menial jobs regardless of what they know or learn. Thus, education doesn't do them much good.

Grant remembers being a student in the classroom where he now teaches. He chopped **wood** then, surrounded by students his age who would grow up to live in other towns and often die violent premature deaths. When he was a child, his mulatto teacher, Matthew Antoine, had told the class that they would either die violently or spend their lives being treated like animals. Grant realizes that Antoine was largely correct: his friends and peers grew up to work in the fields or in cities. Nevertheless, Antoine told Grant that he wouldn't grow up to be like his peers, because he was intelligent. Grant remembers the way Antoine taught him: Antoine would look at him almost contemptuously, as if Grant were a fool for wanting to learn. Perhaps Antoine continued to teach him, Grant thinks, because he wanted to pass on the burden of education to someone else.

Grant himself may be the best example of how little education matters—a fact that he himself recognizes, as his education has led him only to try to educate others who will never get to enjoy the fruits of that education by the racist society around them. Whether he recognizes it or not, the disdain with which Antoine looked at Grant when Grant was a child resembles the disdain with which Grant now views his own profession, and even his own students. (It's also proof that Antoine hates himself: he sees a lot of himself in Grant, and thus hates Grant.) Grant paints a bleak picture of education: instead of leading to concrete changes, education is only good for producing new teachers to perpetuate the cycle of uselessness.

Even after Grant went to college and returned to the plantation community, he noticed that Antoine looked at him with hatred. Once, Grant visited Antoine in his home in Poulaya, telling him that he was planning on being a schoolteacher. Cryptically, Antoine replied that everyone—even Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan—had their reasons for doing evil things. When Grant disagreed, Antoine told Grant that he was wasting his time returning to his childhood home to be a schoolteacher: there was no way to save students from three-hundred years of ignorance in only five and a half months. He said that he was **cold**, and would always be cold; he added that God would take care of the black students. This surprised Grant, since he remembered Antoine treating Bible verses with barely-disguised hatred.

As Antoine grows older, he becomes even more cynical, accepting the injustices of the world to the point where he says that Hitler "has his reasons"—in a sense, that Hitler can't be stopped. Antoine becomes cynical because as he grows older, he sees no evidence that education leads to improvement in the real world: thus, he hates his profession and he hates himself for devoting his life to teaching. It's also disturbing to see Antoine turning to God for comfort, since Grant knows that Antoine despises religion. This may be Antoine's bitter way of saying that no one will help the black students—only God, who doesn't exist.

Grant continues to remember his visit with Antoine. He had just finished his college education, and wanted to learn "about life" by hearing about Antoine's experiences. He brought Antoine wine; Antoine drank it, giving the toast, "to flight," but he said that the wine didn't warm him up. It was here that Antoine revealed that he was Creole. He tells Grant that he is superior to him, because he has more white blood in his body. He predicts that Grant will stay in his plantation community for the rest of his life, trying to help his black students. When Grant grows older, Antoine predicts, he'll come to Antoine's grave and admit that he was right: change is impossible.

Antoine is the first Creole character in Gaines's novel—Creole's are half white and half black, putting them between two racial groups. In a sense, Grant is "creole," too—he's caught halfway between the world of education and university life and the world of religion and plantation culture. Just as Antoine hates blacks as much, if not more, than whites do, Grant despises black plantation culture more than whites do. Grant and Antoine's cynicism is based on the common belief that change is impossible: nothing will ever upset the superiority of whites over blacks. Nevertheless, Grant hasn't yet given up all hope, and this is why he continues to teach.

Grant visited Antoine one more time before he died; Antoine was very sick at the time. Grant told Antoine that he had begun teaching and had just received the first shipment of winter kindling. Antoine replied that nothing ever changed. He told Grant to do his best, but also to accept that none of it made any difference.

Antoine leaves Grant with the paradox that teaching doesn't matters, but that one should continue teaching. It's possible to see this paradox as hopeless: Grant is caught in a pointless task where his students never learn anything and never make any real progress. At the same time, it's possible to interpret the paradox in a more positive light. Antoine says that Grant should do his best because, deep down, he believes that change is possible, even if he'd never admit it. It's this glimmer of hope that arguably inspires Grant to teaching— without hope, what's the point?

CHAPTER 9

A short time after receiving the first winter kindling, Grant takes Miss Emma to Bayonne—they are visiting Jefferson for the first time since he was sentenced. Tante Lou doesn't go with them, but she tells Emma to let her know if Jefferson needs anything. On the drive to Bayonne, neither Grant nor Miss Emma says anything. Emma, who's bringing Jefferson a basket of **food**, knows that Grant is reluctant to speak to Jefferson at all.

Gaines establishes suspense leading up to Grant's first visit with Jefferson. It's unclear what Grant will say to Jefferson—even Grant himself seems not to know.

Grant and Emma arrive at the jailhouse where Jefferson is being held. It is a red brick building from the early 20th century, and looks vaguely like a European castle. Inside, Emma tells a guard that she's here to see Jefferson. Grant remembers the bathrooms in the building: blacks have to use the bathrooms downstairs, which are disgusting; whites use the cleaner indoor bathrooms. A young deputy named Paul tells Emma that Jefferson has been very quiet lately. The other deputy goes through the basket of **food** and clothing that Emma has brought, and tells Grant to empty his pockets; Grant notes that he seems like a fairly decent man. The deputy tells Emma that she can't bring Jefferson hatpins or knives, in case Jefferson tries to kill himself. Emma insists that he would never do such a thing, but the deputy responds, "you can never tell."

The architecture of the jailhouse is significant: it harkens back to an earlier time, a time when blacks were even worse-off than they are in the 1940s. Indeed, every aspect of the building's architecture reinforces whites' superiority to blacks. Even the bathrooms testify to this: blacks must use the downstairs bathrooms, which are filthy and never cleaned. Paul the deputy is one of the only white characters in the novel who seems like a decent man—this will become important later. It's also in this section that we get our second indication that Jefferson might hurt himself.

Paul leads Emma and Grant to Jefferson's cell. As they walk there, the other prisoners ask Emma and Grant for **food** and money. Emma says she'll give them what Jefferson doesn't take, and Grant gives them some change. Paul locks Emma and Grant in Jefferson's cell and leaves them alone, saying he'll return in an hour.

Emma and the other visitors are generous to the other prisoners, recognizing that their reasons for being locked up may not be any better than Jefferson's, who was convicted of a crime he didn't commit. Even Grant gives them change, though his "generosity" seems colder and less sincere than Emma's.

Jefferson is quiet, and even when Emma strokes his hair he doesn't speak. Emma shows him the **food** she's brought him: fried chicken, yams, and tea cakes. Jefferson says that none of this matters, bringing Emma to tears. Jefferson asks when "they're gonna do it," and Emma asks him what "it" is. Jefferson stares into Grant's eyes, and he feels that Jefferson knows that Grant knows what he's talking about. Jefferson accuses Grant of being the man who will "jerk the switch," and Emma tells him that Grant is his teacher.

Seen for the first time in his cell, Jefferson can't stop thinking about his own death. His fear of dying is—understandably—so large that he assumes that everyone around him is involved in his execution, even Grant. Jefferson seems utterly unconcerned with Emma's happiness—his comment that none of the food matters, for instance, brings her to tears. We've seen Grant behave in a similar fashion to Lou, suggesting a kind of doubling between Grant and Jefferson based on the rejection of food, which is a rejection of something shared between people—it is a rejection of bonds of kinship and community.

Paul returns and opens the cell door. Emma tells Jefferson that they'll be back soon. She leaves the **food** with him, and asks Paul to give whatever Jefferson doesn't eat to the other inmates; Paul says he will. As Emma and Grant walk out of the jail, Emma calls out for Jesus. Grant makes eye contact with Paul, and Paul silently seems to tell Grant to put his arms around Emma—Grant does so.

Emma remains generous to the other prisoners both before and after she visits Jefferson. Paul, for his part, seems responsible and moral, agreeing to feed the prisoners after Jefferson is done. Even before he knows Paul properly, Grant communicates with Paul non-verbally, much as he's done with Tante Lou. This suggests that Paul is trustworthy and deeply moral, and that there is the possibility for a white and black man to interact in ways that aren't tainted by racism.

CHAPTER 10

Grant's next two visits to Jefferson's cell with Emma establish a routine: Grant drives Emma to the jail; the guards search the two of them; they give change to the other inmates; Emma delivers her basket; Jefferson says almost nothing; Emma weeps; Grant and Emma leave together, instructing the guards to leave the extra **food** for the other prisoners.

Gaines portrays here another endless cycle, where no progress is ever made, but where the people continue doing the same things nonetheless. In this way, he parallels Grant's visits to Jefferson with Grant's school teaching.

On the day of Grant's fourth visit, he leaves Irene in charge of the students, and drives to Emma's house as usual. When Emma doesn't come out, Grant sees Tante Lou emerge from the house. Lou tells Grant that Emma is unable to go, though she doesn't specify why, and tells Grant that he's going alone to talk to Jefferson. Lou brings Grant into the house to pick up the things he's to bring to Jefferson: fried chicken, and warm clothing. Grant senses that Emma isn't as ill as Lou implies: he saw her earlier in the morning in her yard, and he can smell the cooking she must have done that morning.

Clearly, Emma is pretending to be sicker than she really is so that Grant will go to Jefferson by himself. It's not exactly clear why she's doing this: it's not clear, for instance, why she thinks Grant will have any more luck on his own than with Emma and Lou. Perhaps Emma wants Grant to go alone because she recognizes that he has the potential to inspire her grandson and recognizes the way that her own presence causes Jefferson to shut down.

Grant sees Emma sitting in a rocking chair; she gives a theatrical cough, to convince Grant, he thinks, that she is very ill. Emma repeats what she's already said many times: Grant doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to. Grant tries to convince Lou to come with him to the jail, but she insists that he go alone. Angry, Grant picks up the bag of **food** Emma has prepared; it contains enough food to feed the entire jail. He tells Lou that he's gone through great humiliation to teach Jefferson: waiting for Pichot to finish his dinner, being searched every time he enters the jail. He tells Lou that Antoine predicted he'd stay in his hometown and be broken down into "the nigger I was born to be." He condemns Lou for aiding in his being broken down. Emma begins to cry, but Lou responds that while she's sorry for Grant's humiliation, there is no one else she can turn to in order to help Jefferson.

At the end of this chapter, Gaines essentially summarizes Grant's situation so far. He's an educated schoolteacher who's being made to do things he doesn't want to do—talk to Jefferson—that have questionable results. Grant has humiliated himself in front of Pichot and Guidry for Jefferson's sake, so it's not unreasonable of him to wonder what the point of his behavior will be in the end. Nevertheless, Tante Lou insists that Grant continue doing what he's been doing. It's not clear what she thinks Grant can accomplish, but clearly she values Jefferson's dignity higher than she values Grant's humiliations.

CHAPTER 11

Grant walks into the jailhouse, where Sheriff Guidry sits behind a desk. When Guidry sees Grant, he calls Paul, and Paul goes through the usual process of searching Grant. As this goes on, Guidry asks Grant if he thinks he can teach Jefferson anything; Grant replies that he's unsure. Guidry warns Grant once again that he'll shut down the sessions at any sign of aggravation.

Guidry's appearance at the beginning of this chapter is a light reminder of the stakes of Grant's visits: he has to keep Jefferson calm to avoid causing any "aggravation," but at the same time, he has to inspire Jefferson to be a man and, by extension, to resist the casual racist beliefs that Guidry and other whites hold about Jefferson and all blacks.

Paul walks Grant to Jefferson's jail cell; along the walk, Grant gives out small change to the prisoners, as usual. Paul leaves Grant alone with Jefferson, and Jefferson asks Grant if he brought him any corn, since corn is the **food** that hogs eat. Grant insists that Jefferson isn't a hog, and asks him how long it's been since he ate. Jefferson says he can't remember, but Grant senses that Jefferson is manipulating him. Grant has some of the friend chicken Emma made, and Jefferson eats the biscuits, candy, and cakes without using his hands—he calls himself an old hog being fattened up for slaughter.

Here, talking to Grant alone, Jefferson reveals the depths of his self-loathing. Jefferson thinks of himself as a hog, showing that the defense attorney has done more damage than good while defending him in court. Jefferson has internalized the white's sense of his own worthlessness, and so sees himself as worthless.

Grant says he's going to return to Emma and tell her that Jefferson liked the pralines she made him; he will not, however, tell her that Jefferson behaved like a hog. He asks Jefferson if he's trying to hurt him and tells him that if he doesn't talk to him, then white men, especially Sheriff Guidry, will win. Jefferson doesn't reply, but looks defiant. For the remainder of Grant's visit, he and Jefferson sit in the cell in silence, and Grant stares at the half-eaten **food**.

Grant reveals that he's willing to lie for the sake of other people—this will become important when he talks to Reverend Ambrose later in the book. For now, Grant outlines the basic stakes of his lessons with Jefferson: if Jefferson behaves like an animal or a coward, Guidry will win. Even here, though, Grant is more interested in upholding his own dignity than passing dignity to Jefferson—in other words, Grant wants Jefferson to act like a man because Grant wants to wipe the smirk off of Guidry's face.

After an hour elapses, Paul lets Grant out of the cell. Grant asks Jefferson if there's anything he should tell Emma, but Jefferson doesn't answer. Paul asks how the visit went, and Grant replies that Jefferson was happy to get some home cooking. "Can't blame him for that," Paul replies.

Paul's brief remark shows that he at least has a sense of humor, and recognizes that the cooking in the prison isn't any good. It may seem like a minor point—and it is—but it also suggests that Paul can identify with the black prisoners and see things that aren't fair in society.

CHAPTER 12

In the afternoon, Grant isn't sure what to tell Emma about his visit. He could lie and say that Jefferson asked about Emma's health, or that he is a model prisoner. He decides to go to the Rainbow Club to figure out what to say.

Grant seems slightly more concerned about Emma than he was at the beginning of the novel—he's at least bothering to make up a lie. Still, he prefers to run from his problems, and this is why he goes to the Rainbow Club.

When he arrives at the Rainbow Club, Grant orders a beer, and avoids conversation with Joe Claiborne, the barman. There are some old men talking about Jackie Robinson, who's just completed his second year with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The men are reenacting Jackie's athletic feats; this makes Grant think back to the days of Joe Louis, the first black athlete to be nationally famous. When Louis lost a big fight to a white boxer, the entire black community was saddened.

The conversation about Joe Louis is important insofar as it paints a clearer picture of the black community at the time. Black heroes like Louis were a source of inspiration for blacks across the country. Yet it's significant that Grant remember Louis's defeats, not his victories: right now, coming from the jailhouse, he's cynical, and rejects the concept of heroism altogether.

Thinking of Joe Louis reminds Grant of a lecture he once heard while he was in college. The lecturer was an Irishman, and he mentioned the short story "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," by James Joyce, from the collection *Dubliners*. The lecturer spoke of a character named Parnell, and claimed that Joyce's story was universal, crossing all boundaries of race and nationality. Afterwards, Grant tried to find a copy of Joyce's book. He succeeded with the help of one of his professors, who had to go to a white university to find the story in an anthology. Grant read the story, and didn't understand it; it was only years later, when he began spending time in bars, that he began to see the universal of the story, which is about sad, old men who talk about their dead heroes.

Joyce's short story is about Charles Stuart Parnell, an Irish hero who worked toward Irish independence but was brought down by a personal scandal. In part, the point of Joyce's story is that people have more respect for martyrs than they do for the living; put another way, humans would rather lament what might have been than ensure that change comes about. This is a depressing conclusion, particularly for Grant, because it suggests that real change is impossible: change will only ever be "a dream deferred."

Grant finishes his drink and leaves the bar, bidding farewell to Claiborne. He goes to the local school, where Vivian teaches, and walks inside. A teacher named Peggy greets Grant, and he says hello back to her. He goes to Vivian's classroom, where she has just finished a day of teaching sixth and seventh graders. When Grant walks in, she smiles beautifully at him. He suggests that they join Peggy for a drink, but then thinks better of it and suggests that they go somewhere alone. Vivian, however, wants to drink with Peggy.

Here, once again, Vivian shows that she's more invested in other people than Grant is. Vivian's classroom is better-funded and better organized than Grant's: where Grant has to make do with a student teacher and a single classroom, Vivian has other teachers for colleagues, and teaches her classes separately, instead of at the same time. Grant wants to be alone with Vivian; but she has friends, and a broader social life.

Grant tells Vivian about visiting Jefferson, watching him behave like an animal, and having to see Emma later. Vivian is saddened by the news. Grant says he wishes he could leave his responsibilities to his students and to Jefferson, but Vivian replies that he can't—he loves the people to whom he's responsible. Grant and Vivian leave to get a drink with Peggy; as they walk out of Vivian's classroom, Vivian notes that everyone at school, even the students, know that the two of them are in a relationship.

Vivian encourages Grant to remain invested in his students and Jefferson. Yet she doesn't exactly tell *him to change his behavior; she reminds him of what he already feels, deep down. This is part of what Grant loves about Vivian: she sees the good in him.*

CHAPTER 13

It is Determination Sunday, shortly after the events of the previous few chapters. Determination Sunday is the third Sunday of every month, when the churchgoers sing their favorite hymns. Grant is in his home, correcting student papers, and hears a local woman, Miss Eloise Bouie calling for his aunt. Tante Lou goes to church every Sunday, but Grant hasn't gone to church since he returned from college. Lou usually doesn't bring this up, though she's an enthusiastic lover of Determination Sundays.

We learn something new about Grant: he doesn't go to church In a sense, this was already obvious: he's shown no signs of believing in Heaven, he shows no signs of respect for Reverend Ambrose, and he hasn't shown any signs that he hopes that God will help Jefferson. We also see the rift between Grant and Tante Lou that's created by Grant's lack of faith: Lou loves going to church, and it is suggested she is both devout and loves the community of everyone singing together. While Grant refuses to go, he at least recognizes that he's hurting Lou, suggesting that he loves her and feels guilty about hurting her.

As Lou proceeds to church and Grant grades papers, he thinks back to Friday, when he visited Jefferson alone for the first time. Grant returned from Bayonne late in the evening, and found Reverend Ambrose, Lou, and Miss Emma waiting in Emma's home. Tante Lou is furious with Grant for not returning from his visit sooner, and insists that he explain what he and Jefferson talked about. Grant, not wanting to go into much detail, says that he told Jefferson that Emma had a bad cold; he adds, untruthfully, that Jefferson is behaving well and wearing the clothing Emma sent him. Emma is unsure whether to believe Grant or not.

Grant lies to Emma. While this doesn't accomplish much in the long term (as we'll see shortly), it brings Emma less pain and suffering than the truth (that Jefferson thinks he's a hog) would have. However, Grant lies not because he wants to help Miss Emma but because he doesn't want to go home empty-handed; he doesn't want a confrontation with Lou and Emma. Grant may be inching his way toward moral behavior, but he's still a long way off.

Reverend Ambrose asks Grant what he thinks about Jefferson, deep in his heart. Grant is unsure how to answer the question. Ambrose says that he's concerned that Jefferson, like Grant himself, hasn't kept his faith. Grant only replies that he didn't "get around" to talking about God. Ambrose plans to visit Jefferson on Monday, along with Emma and Lou; Grant recommends that they bring him **food** and clothing. When Ambrose asks about a Bible, he replies, "That would be nice, too."

Grant shows more open hostility to organized religion, casually saying that he didn't get around to discussing the church. Based on what we've already seen, Grant seems to dislike religion because it encourages people to accept their fate in life. Grant despises this kind of placid acceptance, because it's the opposite of the change he tries to enact in his students as a school teacher.

On Sunday, as Grant grades papers, he hears Emma, Ambrose, and Lou singing in the church. He thinks about losing his faith during his time in college; it pained him to see his aunt saddened when he didn't go to church. At that point in his life, Grant thought about leaving Louisiana to go to California, where his mother and father lived, but eventually he decided to stay in Louisiana, which made Tante Lou happy. Ever since choosing to stay, he has been in an "in between" state, refusing to leave his old community but also aware that the community is no longer his own.

Grant doesn't describe exactly why he lost his faith, other than that he grew older. This suggests that he doesn't understand exactly why he has stopped going to church. Even here, he shows that he has a sense of right and wrong, and knows that it's wrong to cause Tante Lou pain. Grant also identifies himself as being in an "in-between" state. As with Jefferson, the first step to solving a problem is admitting that you have one: here, Grant identifies his problem.

As Grant listens to singing from the church, Vivian arrives at his house, dressed beautifully in blue and maroon. Grant invites her in.

Vivian presents herself to Grant as a welcome alternative to introspection and cynicism.

CHAPTER 14

Vivian explains that she finished her work and wanted to see him. He asks where her children are, and Vivian says that Dora is taking care of them. Grant shows Vivian around his room, where his parents lived before they moved to California during the war. Vivian likes his home, and calls it rustic and pastoral. Grant tells Vivian that Sunday is the saddest day of the week for him; Vivian replies that it's not sad for the people who work in the fields during the rest of the week. She says that she knows he still believes in God, but Grant doesn't admit to this.

Vivian's observation that Sunday is a day of rest for the people who have to work in the fields shows that she's more in touch with the black people in her community than Grant, even though Grant is surrounded by people who work in the fields, while Vivian lives in a larger town. Her sense of compassion for others seems closely tied to her belief in God. While Grant doesn't admit he believes in God, he doesn't deny it either—again, we see him in an in-between state, unsure what to believe.

After having coffee and cake, Grant and Vivian go for a walk in the area around his home. This is the first time Vivian has seen his community. He tells her that his family worked on the plantation as slaves, and later their descendants worked on the land as sharecroppers. They laugh and eat sugarcane, and when they've wandered into the forest of the plantation, they say that they love each other, and then make love.

Grant's description of his family's history is depressing: his ancestors were slaves, and now he lives in the same area where they used to work. One again, we see an absence of any progress. Yet Grant and Vivian's lovemaking session is an act of defiance, in a sense, a diversion from the nightmare of history that Grant remembers as he walks through the plantation. There is love, too.

After making love, Grant and Vivian talk, half-seriously, about raising children in the plantation area. They'll name their children Paul and Paulette, they decide.

Grant and Vivian think of the future, showing that there is some change in Grant's life, and some reason for him to look ahead to the future. It's also curious that Grant wants to name his child Paul, the name of the security guard who treated Grant with decency. Grant and Paul will establish a closer connection later on, but for now, this is a clear indication that a friendship is growing, albeit slowly.

CHAPTER 15

Immediately after Grant and Vivian make love in the previous chapter, they discuss their students. It is almost Christmas, and Vivian is beginning a Christmas program with her students. Grant, by contrast, has been so distracted with Jefferson that he doesn't know what his curriculum will be that month. Vivian asks Grant if he has any idea, but doesn't specify what she means; Grant replies that it's up to the boss in Baton Rouge.

Grant began by not caring about Jefferson—indeed, not even attending his trial. Here, he shows the amount of time he's invested in Jefferson, to the point where he doesn't know what he's going to teach his other students. While Grant was forced to talk to Jefferson initially, Gaines implies that he's beginning to sincerely care about helping Jefferson, and that he views this act of teaching as more important than his duties as a teacher. The "boss" in Baton Rouge is the governor of Louisiana, who will decide on when Jefferson will be executed.

As Grant and Vivian walk back to his house, Grant thinks about Vivian's history. She married a dark-skinned classmate of hers at Xavier University in New Orleans, but didn't tell her family about the wedding since she knew they wouldn't approve. When her family members found out about, they were cold to her, even after she gave birth to two children. Even now that she and her husband are separated, Grant thinks, her relatives barely communicate with her.

Gaines alludes to the racism between dark and light-skinned blacks. Instead of accepting each other as equal victims of white racism, light-skinned blacks looked down up darker-skinned blacks, and vice-versa. It's remarkable that Vivian's parents' racism to dark-skinned blacks is powerful enough to make them ignore their own grandchildren and captures how white racism towards blacks has caused blacks to internalize that racism against themselves.

Grant and Vivian walk back to his house and see that his aunt and her friends are returning from church. Grant introduces Vivian to his aunt and Miss Eloise, and they go inside. Grant bickers with his aunt about making more coffee, and he mentions that Vivian is the woman he's going to marry—Tante Lou doesn't protest, but she begins to ask Vivian questions.

It's a little uncertain what Tante Lou's reaction to Vivian will be, especially coming off of Grant's description of Vivian's parents' racism. Tante Lou doesn't say anything outright offensive, but it's clear that she has her misgivings about Vivian, a soon-to-be-divorced light-skinned black woman.

As Grant makes more coffee for everyone, Tante Lou asks Vivian if she's Catholic. Vivian replies that she is. Lou asks Vivian if she's concerned about marrying Grant, who doesn't go to church. Vivian replies that she and Grant will work it out, but that she's prepared to leave her church. After Grant makes the coffee and Lou has some, Vivian says that she must be going, and Lou tells her that she's a lady of quality, and that she mustn't forget about God. Grant walks Vivian outside, and they cross paths with Gloria Hebert and a boy from the Washington family; they both greet Grant politely. Grant kisses Vivian goodbye, but she doesn't kiss him back—jokingly, she says that she has too much quality to do such a thing.

Refreshingly, Tante Lou doesn't say anything rude to Vivian, though she clearly disproves of Vivian, a Catholic, getting a divorce. Perhaps Tante Lou recognizes the influence that Vivian has on Grant; this is why she tells Vivian, not Grant himself, to remember God. It's also significant that Gloria and Washington—the two students Dr. Morgan called out in the earlier chapter—are equally respectful to Grant. In part, this implies that Morgan's facile division of Grant's class into "good" and "bad" wasn't accurate in the least; it also suggests that the people respect Grant for talking to Jefferson.

CHAPTER 16

It is Monday, and Grant is walking through the schoolyard when he sees his aunt, Reverend Ambrose, and Miss Emma returning from their visit to Jefferson. Grant quickly goes inside his schoolhouse, thinking that it's almost time to send the children home for the day. Irene has been running the class that afternoon; she tells Grant that she's assigned the children duties for putting together decorations for the holidays. With these tasks assigned, Grant ends class for the day by telling the students to remember "one person" this Christmas—he doesn't name the person, but says that everyone knows who he's talking about. As the students leave, one of the boys tells Grant to stop by Miss Emma's on his way home.

Irene runs the class more and more frequently: this shows that Grant is becoming more and more invested in teaching Jefferson, seemingly of his own volition. It's strange that Grant doesn't name the person he wants the children to remember—it could be Jesus (the person Christians are supposed to remember during Christian), but it could also be Jefferson. Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional: Jefferson has already shown signs of being a Christ-like figure, and these signs will grow more numerous as we approach the end of the book.

Grant goes to Miss Emma's house shortly after he sends his students home. There, Emma confronts him, insisting that Grant didn't tell her the truth about Jefferson: he didn't like the **food** or ask about Emma. Emma knows this because she had to hit Jefferson when she visited today. A few days later, Grant overhears his aunt telling Miss Eloise what happened: Jefferson pretended to be asleep when Emma arrived, and when she showed him the food she brought him, he asked if she had corn, the proper food for a hog. Even when Emma showed Jefferson that she brought him clothing and fried chicken, Jefferson continued to call himself a hog, until Emma became so upset that she slapped him.

Emma didn't fully believe Grant's lie at the time, and now she knows for a fact that it was false. This reinforces how self-serving the lie was to begin with: Grant lied to Emma about Jefferson to avoid a confrontation, not to make Emma feel any better. Now, Grant is having the confrontation he was trying to avoid, except that it's much worse than it would have been. Meanwhile, we're halfway through this novel, and still Jefferson shows little to no signs of improving: it's unclear what's going to happen to him.

On Monday, Grant sits at Miss Emma's kitchen table with Reverend Ambrose and his aunt. Emma bursts into tears and asks God what she's done to deserve this; Reverend Ambrose comforts her by telling her that God is only testing her. Emma insists that Grant must go back to the jailhouse and spend more time with Jefferson. Grant gets up from the table and prepares to leave Miss Emma's house. Tante Lou angrily tells him that he will go back to the jailhouse. Grant objects to returning on the grounds that Jefferson is only trying to make him feel guilty. Nonetheless, Aunt Lou tells him that he must go back. Without assenting to this, Grant leaves Miss Emma's house and goes back to his room.

Ambrose's behavior with Miss Emma is a good example of the kind of comfort that Christianity affords its followers. If God is testing Emma, then Emma has reason to stay strong and brave her fears that Jefferson will be executed like a hog. Though Grant scoffs at the church, there is value in this kind of religious reassurance. Grant's objection to going back to the jailhouse is very revealing: Jefferson is only trying to make other feels guilty. While this isn't a sign of much maturity or self-worth on Jefferson's part, it does suggest that Jefferson cares about other people, even if he only cares about them insofar as he can make them feel bad.

CHAPTER 17

The Friday of the week that Grant visits Miss Emma's house, he goes to see Jefferson at the jailhouse. Before Friday, however, he becomes much less angry than he was on Monday. This happens because it's the Christmas season, and because Grant can never stay angry for very long.

Grant's claim that he can't stay angry for long may well be true, but the result is that he's constantly irritated, instead. Instead of getting angry and then recovering, he maintains a perpetual state of slight irritation, reacting to little things like Lou's behavior, driving, schoolwork, etc.

On Friday, Grant goes through the usual search process before he enters Jefferson's cell. As Paul walks him past the prisoners, Grant asks him how Jefferson is doing; Paul replies that he's doing all right, eating some of the **food** his family sends him. He introduces himself to Grant as Paul Bonin; Grant introduces himself as Grant Wiggins, and they shake hands. Paul tells Grant that he isn't planning on becoming too close to Jefferson, since Jefferson will be executed soon. Grant asks what Jefferson does every day. Paul replies that he eats hot meals, a sandwich, and lots of beans. Jefferson is given a shower every week, and a haircut. He never talks to the other prisoners.

Paul again shows signs of interest in Jefferson. Indeed, he goes beyond the other white people in the novel, such as Edna, and shows genuine respect for Jefferson. Yet even Paul is keeping his distance form Jefferson, refusing to be a close friend to him. This shows that, while Paul may be a good man and a kind guard, he's also a realist: he values his own happiness, and thus doesn't become attached to people who are going to die, anyway.

Paul leaves Grant with Jefferson. Grant offers Jefferson **food**, but Jefferson says he isn't hungry; Grant leaves the food for the other inmates. He tells Jefferson that he's upset Emma terribly, and Jefferson responds that everyone cries sooner or later. Grant says that Jefferson needs to be a better human being before he's executed, showing love and respect for the people who have sacrificed for him. Jefferson replies that Grant is only talking this way because he has a long time left to live—if Grant were on death row, he wouldn't be saying these things.

Jefferson outlines the basic moral problem of the man who is about to die, a moral problem that's as old as Western philosophy: why should we behave virtuously, except for our own self interest? The Christian answer to this question would be: because God wants us to be good, and we owe it to God to honor his wishes. Because Grant dislikes organized religion, he has a difficult time answering Jefferson's questions.

Grant and Jefferson continue to talk. Jefferson threatens to scream and insult Vivian if Grant stays in his cell. But Grant sees that Jefferson won't scream—he wants Grant there for his company, even if he's angry with Grant. Nevertheless, Jefferson makes crude insults about Vivian, and for a split second Grant wants to hit him. Instead, he tells Jefferson that Vivian cares about him deeply. Jefferson replies that manners and **food** are for the living. He kicks all the food off his bed and turns away from Grant. Grant spends the last fifteen minutes of his visit picking up all the food Jefferson has kicked on the floor.

Even when Jefferson insults Vivian, Grant recognizes that he's made some progress with Jefferson: Jefferson wants Grant there to listen to him when he speaks. Even so, Jefferson has a long way to go before he becomes a man: he's still behaving like a hog, rejecting the food (and therefore bonds to society) Emma makes him, and ignoring Grant even when Grant picks the food up off the ground.

Paul leads Grant out of the jail cell. In the front office, Grant notices the sheriff and the chief deputy talking to the fat man, Frank, who Grant saw at Pichot's house. Guidry asks Grant if he's made any progress, and Grant responds that he doesn't know. Guidry asks Grant if he's "planning anything," and Grant answers that he isn't. Guidry reveals that Miss Emma, Reverend Ambrose, and Tante Lou went to Edna Guidry and asked for her help in convincing Guidry to put some chairs in Jefferson's cell so that everyone could sit down at the same time. Later on, Grant finds out what Guidry was talking about: Emma, Reverend Ambrose, and Tante Lou asked Edna for her help in this matter, and Edna said that she would do what she could. Edna tactlessly added that she would be happy when "this whole thing" was over, causing Emma to break down in tears.

In a short section of the text, Grant gets a flavor of the different reactions white people have to Jefferson's death. There are people like Sheriff Guidry and Henri Pichot, who view Jefferson as an irritation, or an "aggravation," to be kept calm and then executed. Then there are people like Edna, who are sympathetic to Jefferson, but nonetheless don't respect him much as a human being—hence Edna's use of the phrase, "This whole thing," which isn't much gentler than referring to Jefferson as a "hog." Finally, there are people like Paul, who seem to show genuine respect for Jefferson.

Back in the jailhouse, Guidry finishes telling Grant about his wife's request for chairs. He asks Frank and the deputy, named Clark, if they think Jefferson deserves chairs in his cell. They agree that Jefferson should be punished for his crimes, but conclude that he can use the dayroom if he's shackled. Guidry sends Grant out of the jail, telling him that he doubts Grant will do a thing for Jefferson. Grant privately agrees.

Even here, Grant is unconvinced that he can do anything for Grant. In part, this is because he's just had a particularly difficult meeting with Jefferson. More generally, though, Grant is living in a state of constant cynicism himself. He doesn't have a good answer to Jefferson's question: he doesn't know why people should behave morally given the unfairness of their society.

CHAPTER 18

After talking with Grant, the sheriff goes to Jefferson's cell and asks him if he wants to appear before his family in the dayroom wearing shackles. Jefferson replies that he'll do it if that's what they want; this reply frustrates the sheriff, but eventually he agrees to send Jefferson to the dayroom when Ambrose, Emma, and Lou and next visit the jailhouse.

In his jailed state, Jefferson wields some power over Sheriff Guidry, because nothing the sheriff does can threaten Jefferson—he's already been sentenced to death. In this way, Jefferson isn't so far from Grant—they both refuse to submit to racist bullies like Guidry.

When Ambrose, Emma, and Lou next see Jefferson, they're shown into the dayroom of the jail. Then, Paul goes to get Jefferson from his cell. He marches Jefferson into the dayroom, wearing shackles on his hands and legs. In the dayroom, Emma shows Jefferson that she's brought him a feast of beef, rice, and biscuits. Jefferson doesn't eat any of the **food**, even when Emma puts the food next to his mouth. Tante Lou sees the pain and sadness in her face.

Jefferson's behavior in the dayroom seems little different from his behavior in his cell: he's disengaged and distant with his guests, even Miss Emma, his own godmother. Yet at least Jefferson doesn't cause any "trouble"—this means that, as per Guidry's instructions—Grant can continue meeting him in the jail.

Grant goes to see Jefferson in the dayroom a few days after Jefferson sees Miss Emma. Grant brings Jefferson bread, pork chops, and baked sweet potatoes, but Jefferson refuses to eat any of this meal. Grant tells Jefferson about his Christmas program at school, and asks Jefferson if he remembers it from his childhood. Jefferson only responds that Christ was born on Christmas and died on Easter.

Even when they're discussing Christmas—a holiday of joy celebrating birth, Jefferson can only think ahead to the death that accompanies that birth: Christ was killed at the age of 33. It's important that Jefferson gets his facts slightly wrong; Easter celebrates Christ's resurrection, not his death. It's as if Jefferson, sentenced to death, has forgotten the entire point of Christianity.

Grant tells Jefferson that he has a moral obligation to be good to his aunt. Jefferson counters that moral obligations are only for humans, and he is not a human at all, but a hog. He adds that he's looking forward to being executed, since he'll get some rest; Grant insists, without any proof, that Jefferson will not be killed on Christmas. Grant is unsure what else to say, but he refuses to leave early, since this would prove to the sheriff that he has failed to help Jefferson. He spends the rest of the visit looking at Jefferson, who has slumped forward in his seat without saying a word.

Again, Grant reaches a stalemate with Jefferson: Jefferson refuses to act morally, because he doesn't think he's a man. At least Jefferson doesn't protest that humans should *act morally—his objection is that he's not human. Again in this section, we see how Grant is motivated by pride and dignity: he refuses to leave the cell early, because this would provide Guidry with proof that Grant isn't teaching Jefferson anything.*

After talking to Jefferson at the jail, Grant goes to the Rainbow Club and has a few beers. He waits for Vivian to end her school day, and then drives to her schoolhouse, where he picks her up and goes back to the Rainbow Club. As they drink together, Grant tells Vivian that he loves her so much that he would gladly leave his community to live with her. Vivian replies that she would never ask him to do that: he needs to stay behind and change things. When Grant says that nothing is changing, Vivian insists that "something is."

Again, faced with the frustration of never seeing any progress or change, Grant shows that he's tempted to leave his community altogether. Vivian is the voice of reason, reminding him that he has obligations to his family and to Jefferson. It's not clear what change she sees in Jefferson—in fact, since her only source of information on Jefferson is Grant, it's likely that she doesn't see any change at all. Rather, Vivian remains optimistic—her optimism may be irrational, but it's an important factor in encouraging Grant to stay.

CHAPTER 19

It is the night of the annual Christmas program that Grant has been organizing all month. Grant has told the children that this year's Christmas program will be dedicated to Jefferson; for this reason, many people who don't usually attend the program go. Reverend Ambrose comes, and everyone wears good clothing, if not quite the best clothing they own.

Gaines reminds us that Grant isn't one man struggling with Sheriff Guidry: there is a larger community behind him, whose other members are highly loyal and supportive of one another. This is also a good reminder that the entire community, not just Emma, Lou, and Ambrose, cares about Jefferson.

Grant has put together the Christmas play using materials donated by various members of the community, some of whom are no longer alive. Rita Lawrence, who donated one of the sheets for the curtain, brings her grandson, Bok, who has spent time in a mental institution. Also in attendance at the play are Julia Lavonia, who has two children in the program, Irene the student teacher's family, Miss Emma and Miss Eloise, Inez, Farrell Jarreau, his mulatto wife, Ofelia, and a man named Henry Williams, with his family.

Gaines proceeds to show us what a community does for itself. Everybody has donated something to the Christmas play. Those who have more to give donate more, and even those who have almost nothing, such as Rita, donate a sheet. While there are things the black community can't do because of the racist society that surrounds them, they can and do support each other. This scene, further, establishes how the entire community has a stake in Jefferson, caring about him and about how he faces the racist society that has put him and all of them in this position.

At seven o'clock, Grant announces the beginning of the program, and invites Reverend Ambrose to walk out onstage to say a prayer. Afterwards, the children sing songs, including "Silent Night," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "Jingle Bells." Grant thinks that the reason the children sound so beautiful is the bad weather—with no time for going outside, they have stayed indoors to practice. After the songs, a girl recites "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," and the children put on a nativity play. After these events, Grant invites Reverend Ambrose back onto the stage, where he tells the audience that no amount of book learning can save a soul, and prays for all those locked up in prison cells.

Even when he's listening to the beautiful sound of Christmas carols, Grant can't help but feel cynical about them. The end of the Christmas play establishes a conflict between Ambrose and Grant: where Grant stresses the importance of book learning (although he doubts it himself), Ambrose celebrates spiritual learning, of the kind that only the Bible can teach. Yet there's nothing disingenuous about Ambrose's beliefs: he cares deeply about Jefferson, and wants him to find dignity.

After the show, Grant stands by himself, and Irene tells him that he looks unhappy. Though Grant denies this, he is privately depressed about putting on the same show year after year, especially after Vivian has told him that things are changing. A Hebert girl gives him some fried chicken, sent from Tante Lou. Grant eats the chicken, sitting near the Christmas tree he has had his class procure. He notices that underneath the tub of dirt that holds up the tree, there is only one present.

Again, Grant confronts the possibility that nothing ever changes in his community. While he has a point, he also seems somewhat impatient—change takes time, and it's perhaps not realistic for Grant to imagine that rapid change—with Jefferson, or with the community as a whole—can happen in a short amount of time. And yet, preaching that "change takes time" can also be seen as a delaying tactic to avoid change entirely.

CHAPTER 20

It is late February, and Grant is busy grading student papers when Farrell Jarreau rushes into his classroom to tell him that the judge has set a date for Jefferson's execution. Farrell doesn't know the exact date himself, but he's come to ask Grant, along with Reverend Ambrose, to come to Pichot's house so that they can tell Miss Emma the date.

When he hears that Jefferson's execution has a date, Grant is reminded of all the injustices associated with the execution: not only the fact that Jefferson is sentenced to death, but also (less significantly), the fact that Farrell isn't entrusted with the date of the sentence himself.

While the end of the school day is still an hour away, Grant leaves school to go to Pichot's house, telling Irene to take care of the children without explaining why he has to go. He arrives at Pichot's house, where Inez offers him a cup of coffee, which he declines. Reverend Ambrose is already waiting in the hall; he asks Grant how his aunt is, but isn't sure what else to say to Grant. Grant hears Sheriff Guidry arrive fifteen minutes later, and shortly thereafter Inez calls the three of them into "the front"—this is the first time Grant has ever been in any part of Pichot's house other than the kitchen.

In a sense, the fact that Grant gets to go to the front of the house could be seen as a triumph: he's moving up in the world, no longer staying in the kitchen. But this victory rings hollow: the front is no better a place for Grant than the kitchen, and he's treated with the same disrespect that he's encountered form Pichot for most of his life. The implication is that Grant is wrong to be concerned with the superficial aspects of humiliation: how Grant views himself, Gaines implies, is more important than which door he walks through.

In the front room of Pichot's house, Pichot and Sheriff Guidry stand by the fireplace. Pichot looks worried, Grant thinks, but he invites Grant and the Reverend to sit down. The sheriff tells both of them that the execution has been scheduled for the second Friday after Easter. Guidry says that he has told Jefferson this news, but he's concerned that Jefferson will become agitated in the future. He also mentions that his wife says that Emma might need a doctor; he'll provide one if she so needs. Grant asks why the second Friday after Easter was chosen, and the sheriff responds that the execution had to happen before or after Easter; Lent was not a possibility. Afterwards, Grant notes, he learned from Paul that the governor originally wanted the execution to occur before Ash Wednesday, but there was another execution at this time; the governor was afraid that the Catholic population of the state wouldn't appreciate so many executions so close to the holy day.

Again, Guidry is more concerned that Jefferson will become agitated than anything else. This is darkly funny: he seems utterly unconcerned that Jefferson is going to die, but he's afraid of "agitation," because it could make Guidry look bad. It's outrageous that the date of the sentence has been moved because of such trivial reasons as the date of another execution. As trivial as the date change may be, though, it suggests that the governor—a white man, no doubt—is a little afraid of the large population of Catholics in the state. Like Guidry, he fears "agitation."

Sheriff Guidry uses Pichot's telephone to call a doctor in the event that Emma needs one, but first he determines from Pichot that the drive through the quarter will be safe and clean. As he talks on the phone, Grant thinks of the injustice of twelve white people saying a black man must die, and later another white man choosing the date of death. Grant overhears Guidry telling the doctor that the drive is "passable," and that the doctor won't ruin his shoes on the way. Guidry also asks about Lucy, the doctor's wife; he then casually hangs up the phone and announces that he has to leave.

Guidry's use of the telephone is a grotesque reminder that Jefferson didn't know how to use the phone—if he had, it might have saved his life. Grant's recognition of the injustice at work here—white men killing a black man—is overshadowed by our recognition of Guidry's casual attitude on the phone. When Emma and Lou are despairing over Jefferson's execution, the doctor is worried about getting mud on his shoes.

Ambrose and Grant leave Pichot's house, escorted out by a tearful Inez. Ambrose says that they must show courage for the sake of Miss Emma, but Grant insists that he can't go to tell Emma that Jefferson is going to die on April 8. Ambrose points out that Grant would have the courage to do so if he had faith in God. Grant refuses to drive back to Miss Emma's house with Ambrose; instead, he walks by himself through the road and down to the river (presumably the Mississippi River). He spends many hours by the river, staring at the mud and water. Eventually, when he's sure that the doctor and the Reverend have visited Miss Emma, he walks back to his school, where he gets the papers Irene has left for them, and roughly stuffs them in his bag.

Ambrose's argument with Grant establishes a conflict between their two points of view: secular education versus Christian faith and Bible study. It's interesting that Ambrose doesn't try to prove that Grant is right or wrong to stay away from church: his point is more pragmatic, that belief in God gives people, Ambrose included, great strength. Grant's rough treatment of the papers Irene leaves for him suggests that he's finding it increasingly hard to focus on school: this is a marked change from his attitude in the first chapter, when he was overly concerned about grading papers.

CHAPTER 21

Grant is standing in front of Miss Emma's house following the events of the last chapter. There are two cars parked in front of the house, one of which belongs to Reverend Ambrose. Grant walks inside, where he sees Inez sitting with Miss Emma, along with Tante Lou and Ambrose. Grant sees Tante Lou, and can tell from her face that Reverend Ambrose has told her what he said after the two of them left Pichot's house. She tells him that she left **food** for him at home, and then ignores him. Grant leaves the house after only ten minutes.

By himself, Grant isn't brave enough to talk to Miss Emma. In this way, he reinforces Ambrose's point: faith in God gives people the strength to do things they're not brave enough to do by themselves. Lou's anger with Grant is palpable, even if she doesn't yell at him: Grant has failed to provide support for a woman who clearly needs it. It's for this reason that Lou leaves Grant food instead of serving it to him hot.

At home, Grant heats up **food** for himself, and is surprised to hear Vivian arrive outside. She tells him that she has heard the news, and that she knew she had to see him. Grant tells her that he was planning to come to her that night. Without being able to explain exactly why, Grant tells Vivian that he has to go back to Miss Emma's, and that he wants Vivian to come with him. Vivian agrees to come, and they walk to Miss Emma's.

Vivian's appearance inspires Grant to return to Miss Emma's house, and to be a better person. He can't put this inspiration into words because it's irrational: he loves Vivian, and wants to be a better person to please her. The women of the novel continue to have a moderating, improving effect on the men around them.

Grant walks into Miss Emma's and introduces Vivian to those who haven't already met her. Tante Lou is very polite to Vivian and offers her coffee, though she continues to ignore Grant. Irene Cole, who is also at the house, greets Vivian politely but a little coldly. Grant walks into Miss Emma's bedroom, where she is lying. Miss Emma is so emotional she's almost unable to speak, but she tells Grant that Jefferson is in Reverend Ambrose and his hands—she hopes he and the Reverend can work together. When he walks out of the bedroom, Grant sees that one of his students is present; the student asks him if Vivian is his girlfriend, and Grant says that she is.

It's clear that Vivian's presence in Miss Emma's house is a source of strength and inspiration for Grant. He calms himself by introducing her to those who haven't yet met her, like Irene, so that when he goes to see Emma, he's able to listen to her and give her some comfort. It's important that Emma wants Grant and Ambrose to work together: despite everything we've seen between them, the two men are headed for a reconciliation.

Grant and Vivian decide to leave Miss Emma's house and go to the Rainbow Club. Twenty minutes later, they're sitting in the club, drinking. Vivian tells Grant that she thinks Irene is in love with him; Grant acknowledges that she probably is, but so is his aunt. Vivian, refusing to drop the matter, insists that Irene has a crush on him; Grant says that she might be right, but he only loves Vivian. He goes on to say that both Irene and his aunt want him to stay in their community instead of moving on. The reason that they want Grant to do so, he explains to Vivian, is historical: for centuries, black men have failed to stand up to white men, and black women are completely aware of this. Black women want their men to be strong and dedicated. Thus, Lou and Irene want Grant to be a strong, loyal member of his community, much as Emma wants Jefferson to stand up to the white establishment like a man before he dies.

Grant's comments on women should be taken with a grain of salt, but they're worth considering. Because the black community in Americas has been impoverished for centuries, black men—with slightly more mobility and freedom than black women—often leave their communities and go elsewhere, much as Antoine does. Thus, the women who stay behind feel they have an obligation to preserve what remains of their communities. It's for this reason that Tante Lou wants Grant to stay in Louisiana and go to church: she's afraid that he'll fly off and abandon the community. While Grant views women like Tante Lou as anchors or obligations and fantasizes about sudden change, black women like Emma and Lou provide something equally valuable: peace and stability that allows children to grow up and communities to survive.

Grant continues to explain his theory of women to Vivian. Lou, he reveals, is his grandmother's sister; she raised Grant's own mother, and when his mother and father left, she raised Grant. Grant is the only man in Lou's life; in much the same way, he is the only man of his kind—educated and articulate—in Irene's. Vivian asks Grant if the "vicious circle," whereby black men leave their families behind to fend for themselves, will ever be broken. Grant responds that that's up to Jefferson.

Grant ends his description of women in Louisiana by linking everything back to Jefferson. This shows how far he's come in the last few months: where before he didn't think of Jefferson as anything but an irritation, he now recognizes that Jefferson is a potential symbol of the strength of the black community. If Jefferson acts like a hog, than all the efforts of women like Emma and Lou, who've tried to provide stability and support for black men, will be for nothing.

CHAPTER 22

Grant has arrived at the jailhouse. Paul searches him, though they both know there is no reason for it. As Paul walks Grant to the cell, he tells Grant that he is the first person to visit Jefferson since the date of the execution has been set.

Paul makes conversation with Grant when he's not required to do so. The conversation may not be very cheery, but it shows that he cares about Jefferson, and about Grant.

In the cell, Grant greets Jefferson and offers him **food**, but Jefferson shakes his head and refuses to eat. Jefferson asks Grant what day it is; Grant answers that it's a Friday. Jefferson begins to talk about the day he'll be executed, and wonders aloud what kind of weather there will be. Grant asks him if he wants different food, or books or clothes for the next visit, and Jefferson tells Grant that he wants to eat a whole gallon of ice cream before he's executed. Grant thinks that he seems unusually calm.

Surprisingly, Jefferson is calmer knowing exactly when he's going to die than he was when he knew that he was going to be killed at some point in the near future. Psychologically, this makes sense: now that the execution has a date, Jefferson can go through his days without being afraid that he'll be killed tomorrow.

Grant proposes bringing Jefferson a small radio, and Jefferson agrees, though he doesn't show any joy at the thought of the music. Afterwards, Jefferson stares into space, reluctant to say anything more to Grant. Rather than leave the cell early, giving the sheriff the idea that the visit hasn't gone well, Grant stands in the cell and waits for the hour to elapse. When Paul comes to get him, he tells him that the visit was better than ever. Paul looks skeptical, but Grant thinks that Paul wants to believe what Grant told him. Paul promises Grant that he'll deliver the radio to Jefferson himself.

Even if Jefferson doesn't show enthusiasm at the mention of a radio, he brings up ice cream independently, showing that he still has material, and thus, human desires. When he speaks to Paul again, Grant honestly thinks that he's seen evidence that Jefferson is improving. Paul shows that he's capable of great hope and optimism, believing that Jefferson is improving because he wants *to believe that it's so.*

After leaving the jailhouse, Grant doesn't go home. He resolves to borrow money from Vivian in order to buy Jefferson a radio. With this in mind, he goes to the Rainbow Club to wait for Vivian to finish her day of teaching. As he waits, he tells Claiborne about Jefferson and his plan to buy him a radio. Claiborne doesn't charge Grant for the beer, and even gives him extra money to buy the radio. Grant thanks him and tells him that he'll pay him back soon. Grant then moves into the café of the Rainbow Club, where he tells Thelma about his plan to buy the radio. As he explains all this, he watches as Thelma's facial expressions change: first she's concerned, then angry that Claiborne gave Grant money, then concerned again when she looks around the café and sees that she has three other customers, meaning that she can spare some money. Thelma offers Grant ten dollars, and though he turns it down at first, he eventually accepts without saying thank you (he thinks that Thelma doesn't want to be thanked).

Grant shows that he's committed to Jefferson's improvement by spending his own money on the radio, albeit with help from Claiborne. We've already seen how stingy Grant can be, based on his anger when his students waste chalk. Now, he's voluntarily spending his own money to make Jefferson happy. Thelma's behavior in the Rainbow Room is selfish, if only for a fleeting moment. In a way, this fleeting moment highlights Grant's own generosity: before, he was the selfish one and the Claiborne's were generous. Now, Thelma is selfish, and Grant is the generous one. And yet, both of the Claiborne's also ultimately contribute to buying the radio, again showing how Jefferson has become important to all of the black community. Nobody can do anything about avoiding Jefferson's death. The institutional racism is too powerful for that. But all of the black community is invested in Jefferson showing through his behavior that the underpinnings of that racism are wrong.

With his money, Grant drives to a nearby store, where he finds a radio that gets three channels. He tests the radio by listening to a Baton Rouge station, and decides that it's acceptable. A saleswoman offers him a slightly used radio for 19 dollars, but Grant insists on the full-priced radio, in the original box, for 20. The woman, slightly irritated, finds a new radio, and he buys it.

Grant's desire to give Jefferson pleasure is so great that he accepts no imitations: only a brand-new radio is good enough.

Grant drives back to the jailhouse, where he finds Paul and the sheriff. He tells the sheriff that he has a radio to give to Jefferson; the sheriff says that he'll allow the radio, but that in the future Grant has to check before he brings gifts to the prisoners. Grant intentionally speaks in a stereotypical black dialect, and doesn't talk back to the sheriff. As he walks out of the jailhouse, he makes eye contact with Paul, who is smiling. Grant drives back to the Rainbow Club, where he hopes Vivian will come.

It's surprising that Grant's efforts to get Jefferson a radio work out as well as they do: it would be so easy for Guidry to break Grant's radio or make up a rule saying that prisoners can't have machines. Instead, he allows Paul to give Jefferson the machine. It may be that Edna and Paul have influenced the sheriff to behave more civilly to blacks. In part, though, Grant convinces the sheriff to give Jefferson the radio by doing what he was previously unwilling to do: talk in a black dialect. We see that Grant has begun to care about Jefferson so deeply that he's willing to humiliate himself to bring his student some simple pleasure. Put another way: Grant his sacrificing his ideals for his community.

CHAPTER 23

On Monday, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Reverend Ambrose go to the jailhouse to visit Jefferson. At the jailhouse, Paul searches all three visitors and then lets them into the dayroom. When Paul goes to get Jefferson, Jefferson refuses to go to the dayroom without his radio. Grant later learns that Jefferson hasn't turned off his radio since the Friday when Paul brought it to him.

At first, it seems as if Grant's efforts to give Jefferson a radio haven't made him any better of a man: he ignores his visitors and listens to the radio all day long.

Paul informs Miss Emma that Jefferson refuses to go to the dayroom without his radio; Emma, Lou, and Ambrose decide that they will speak to Jefferson in his cell instead, even though Paul warns them that it will be very cramped. Paul takes the three of them to the cell, and when he returns, he sees that the radio is turned off and Jefferson is lying in bed, facing away from his visitors. As soon as Paul leads the visitors out of the cell, Jefferson turns the radio back on.

Clearly, Jefferson sees his radio is a substitute and a replacement for human contact. It's still painful for him to speak to Emma, and so he turns to music, instead. Gaines creates suspense: it's not clear to us whether Grant's generosity to Jefferson has been in vain or not, a mistake or not.

Sheriff Guidry, who is sitting in his office in the jail, asks Miss Emma if Jefferson is giving them any trouble now that he has a radio. Miss Emma insists that there's no trouble at all, but Guidry points out that the visitors have returned to the cell when before they wanted to visit Jefferson in the dayroom. He stresses that he doesn't want trouble with the prisoner before his execution, and says that Grant needs to be involved. He also threatens to take the radio if there are any more problems with the visits.

Ironically, Guidry has gone from mocking Grant for trying to talk to Jefferson to convincing Grant that he needs to continue teaching Jefferson. It's not abundantly clear what makes Guidry change his mind, though it is obvious that Guidry doesn't care about Jefferson become a "man." Instead, what he wants to ensure is that everything runs smoothly toward Jefferson's execution. Put another way: Guidry wants his own behind covered.

After returning from the jailhouse, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and Ambrose visit Grant and tell him that he's caused a problem by bringing Jefferson a radio. They explain what happened on their visit that day, and Reverend Ambrose tells Grant that he's brought sin to Jefferson at the time when Jefferson needs God more than ever. Tante Lou is furious with Grant, and looks like she wants to slap him. Grant admits that he knows nothing of God, but argues that he has only given Jefferson some much-needed company and prevented Jefferson from thinking about death all day long.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Grant argues that the radio is a good thing for Jefferson. His argument is very simple: people need human contact, and the radio provides some simulation of that contact for the long hours when Jefferson is alone in jail. The fact that Grant makes this argument shows that he cares about Jefferson's happiness: in the beginning of the book, it would be hard to imagine him arguing for anything about Jefferson, let alone buying Jefferson the radio in the first place.

Grant continues to argue with Ambrose, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou. He tells them that his previous visit to the jailhouse was the first time that Jefferson spoke to him without anger, and the first time that Jefferson didn't consider himself a hog. Ambrose isn't convinced by Grant's explanations, and when Grant mentions that Jefferson also wants a gallon of ice cream, he asks Grant if he's sure he reached Jefferson—a question that Grant can't answer.

Ambrose's question suggests that Jefferson's desires at this point in his development aren't fully human: they're still base and animalistic—the gallon of ice cream is fit for a hog, not a person. Perhaps it's fair to say that Jefferson's desires for food and entertainment are necessary but insufficient: he has to progress to higher and more moral sentiments before he can die like a man.

The Wednesday after his conversation with Ambrose Grant visits Jefferson again. The previous day, he enlisted his schoolchildren to pick pecans for Jefferson, which he brings along. He also buys comic books, apples, and candy.

Grant treats Jefferson like a child (the comic books are a dead giveaway). It's as if Jefferson is growing from an "animal" to a child, with adulthood yet to come.

In the jailhouse, Grant greets Jefferson and offers him the **food** and entertainment he's brought. Jefferson remains silent, but Grant sees that he's listening to his radio. They talk about music, and Grant is pleased to learn that Jefferson gets a good signal on his radio, and has been listening to the same station as Grant.

The fact that Grant and Jefferson listen to the same radio station establishes a symbolic connection between the two men. Like Grant, Jefferson is frustrated with his life and his community, and questions his obligations to other people.

Grant asks Jefferson about Lou, Emma, and Ambrose's last visit. He asks Jefferson to promise that when they next visit him, he'll go to the dayroom—Jefferson agrees to do so. He asks Jefferson to write down his thoughts so that he can share them with Grant and Ambrose later on; Jefferson agree to do this as well, although he doesn't shown any signs of enthusiasm. Grant tells Jefferson that he's his friend; he asks Jefferson if he believes this, but Jefferson doesn't answer. Just as Grant is leaving the cell, Jefferson stands up with a look of pain on his face, as if he's struggling to find the words to say something. He tells Grant to thank the children for their pecans. Grant is so happy with this sign of interest that he grins and shakes Jefferson's hand. When Paul asks Grant if everything is okay, he says that it is.

Grant's encouragement that Jefferson write down his thoughts shows that reading, writing, and arithmetic do have practical value: they help people like Jefferson make sense of their thoughts. It's not entirely clear why Jefferson finally thanks Grant for his behavior. Perhaps Vivian was right: he's been slowly changing and growing over the course of the last few months. Just as Grant has gradually become more and more invested in Jefferson's happiness, Jefferson has come to recognize that he does have a friend in Grant. In this way, Jefferson's progress is a slow progression, not a sudden breakthrough, even if it looks like one. The gift of pecans also reminds Jefferson that he's loved—not only by Grant but by a whole community. Thus, Jefferson thanks the children, not just Grant.

CHAPTER 24

Miss Emma proposes that Grant go to the jailhouse with Lou and Ambrose as often as possible, and though Grant doesn't want to spend time with Ambrose after their argument in the previous chapter, his aunt's encouragement makes him agree. Immediately before the group's first visit, Grant goes to Bayonne and buys peanuts, pecans, and a small notebook and pencil. When he arrives at the jailhouse, Lou, Ambrose, and Emma are already waiting, though he doesn't explain that he was late because he was buying things for Jefferson. He sees that Emma isn't angry with him, and this satisfies him.

Grant still isn't exactly sure how to reach Jefferson, so he tries the same thing that worked in the last chapter: bring pecans. In earlier chapters, Grant would have argued with Lou and Emma about being late; the fact that he doesn't, and is content to know that he was right to be late, shows that he's more concerned about Jefferson's happiness than winning arguments with other people.

At the jailhouse, Paul isn't present; instead, the chief deputy escorts them to the dayroom without saying anything. Grant asks where Paul is, and when the chief deputy replies, he calls him "Mr. Paul," reminding Grant how blacks are supposed to address whites.

Paul is a rarity: a respectful, non-bigoted guard in an institution steeped in bigotry and disrespect. In contrast, the chief deputy's behavior reminds us that this is the case: his demand that Grant call Paul "Mr. Paul" is a demand that Grant verbally recognize his inferiority to all whites, Paul included.

In the dayroom, Jefferson doesn't respond when Miss Emma shows him the **food** she's brought, but he answers Grant when Grant greets him. The group eats gumbo together, and Grant almost forgets to say grace before the meal; he notices that Jefferson remembers. Ambrose prays to God for salvation for all the sinners in Bayonne. Grant and Jefferson don't say "Amen" to any of this, but Emma and Lou do. The meal begins, but Jefferson doesn't eat, although he at least says "no" to Miss Emma when she asks if he's hungry. Grant asks Jefferson about the pecans and peanuts he brought, and Jefferson says that he's eaten some of them.

We begin to get a better feeling for Jefferson's thoughts and feelings, even before he begins writing in his notebook. This shows that Jefferson is growing up—in a sense, progressing from hog to child to man. Even if Grant doesn't agree with Jefferson's religious beliefs, he's happy to see Jefferson behaving like an adult.

As the others eat and watch, Jefferson and Grant stand up and walk slowly around the dayroom, with Jefferson in shackles. Grant tells Jefferson that he should be a friend to Miss Emma, and asks him if he'll eat some of her gumbo; Jefferson gives a slight nod. Grant next tells Jefferson about heroism. A hero, he says, devotes himself to other people and gives no thought to himself. Grant says that he himself is not a hero, although he teaches children; he's only become a teacher because it was the one career path available to an educated black man. He's taught the children reading, writing, and arithmetic, but nothing about dignity or self-worth. Jefferson, Grant says, can be a true hero by refusing to be a scapegoat for the white men who have sentenced him to death.

Grant's definition of heroism hinges on individual sacrifice: giving up things so that other people can be happy. While he insists that he is a selfish man, Grant has shown many signs of unselfish behavior recently: he's spent his own money on the radio, bought Jefferson a notebook and pencil, etc. This suggests that while Grant educates Jefferson, he's inadvertently teaching himself to be a better person. This process of self-improvement is intimately tied with fighting racism: it's a racist myth that blacks can't change, that blacks are lazy, that blacks are "animals", and this is the myth Jefferson must disprove.

As they pace around the dayroom, Grant tells Jefferson more about what he wants him to do. Whites believe in the myth of their own superiority to blacks, he tells Jefferson. If Jefferson were to die like a man, it would help to prove that blacks aren't inferior to whites, and thus that blacks shouldn't be treated like second-class citizens, as they are by Sheriff Guidry. He tells Jefferson that whites feel safe with Reverend Ambrose, but that he doesn't want them to feel safe with Jefferson, without explaining what he means by "safe."

Grant's reasons for teaching Jefferson are both personal and public. He wants to help Jefferson become a better man, but he also wants Jefferson to accept his status as a symbol and use it to fight the racist whites. It is important that Grant is explaining this all to Jefferson because it shows that it isn't that Grant wants to use Jefferson as a symbol. Instead, he wants Jefferson to accept and use his own status as a symbol. The nature of the "fight" that Jefferson is making with whites is hard to describe; certainly it doesn't make whites any less powerful or racist. Yet it perhaps establishes the beginning of a foundation for change, proving that blacks are fully human and fully capable of great acts of courage.

Grant sees that Jefferson has been crying softly as Grant has been speaking. Nevertheless, Grant tells Jefferson that he needs Jefferson to be strong. In this way, Grant will find a purpose for himself. He makes an analogy: in his spare time, Farrell takes rough pieces of **wood** and polishes them until they are smooth and beautiful. Human beings are like these rough pieces of wood; they must become the prettier, more perfect thing they have the potential to be. Thus, Jefferson must become a better man, and in the process bring joy and pride to Emma, Lou, Ambrose, and the entire black community. As Grant explains all this, Jefferson continues to cry. Grant thinks that he has touched Jefferson, even if he isn't sure exactly how. Perhaps Jefferson is crying, Grant thinks, because he feels himself to be "part of the whole." With this thought, he and Jefferson sit down to have some of Emma's gumbo.

Grant's analogy is important because the rough piece of wood already contains the beautifully polished final product. By the same logic, Jefferson, despite seeming rough and "unpolished," already contains a moral, courageous being inside of himself: it's Grant's job to remind Jefferson of the basic rules of right and wrong. The process of self-education implied in Grant's analogy is closely tied to a process of interpersonal connection. Thus, Jefferson cries because he feels himself surrounded by love and affection, and recognizes that he loves the people who have come to visit him. And with this realization, Jefferson finally accepts the food that Miss Emma has brought him. He sits down and eats with others. He rejoins the community.

CHAPTER 25

After visiting Jefferson, Ambrose, Lou, and Emma drive back to their homes, and Grant goes to the Rainbow Club to tell Vivian that he is making progress with Jefferson. He thinks about everything he has to celebrate: after pacing the dayroom, Grant and Jefferson sat back down and ate gumbo, making Miss Emma very proud. When the visitors left, Jefferson said goodbye to Emma, and took the notebook and pencil Grant gave him. Grant is secretly proud of the envy on Reverend Ambrose's face, but he decides that he won't tell Vivian about this.

While Grant has plenty to celebrate—he's gotten Jefferson to behave like a man—he's no saint. He secretly relishes the fact that Jefferson responded to him, not Ambrose. This is petty, and not worthy of the courageous man Grant is trying to make out of Jefferson. Grant is right to conceal this aspect of this thinking, then—even if he doesn't always think the right thing, he recognizes when he's done wrong.

It is mid-afternoon when Grant arrives at the Rainbow Club. He thinks that his sex life with Vivian hasn't been as good lately, since he is distracted by Jefferson. Nevertheless, he and Vivian know that things will improve later. As he sits at the club and drinks, he notices two mulatto bricklayers, and overhears them saying "niggers" and commenting that something should have been done a long time ago. Grant notes that he "didn't make the connection at the time."

We get another indication that Grant is invested in Jefferson: he's neglected sex with Vivian (a big personal sacrifice, no doubt). It's unusual that Grant doesn't notice that the mulattoes are talking about Jefferson—we recognize this immediately. Perhaps it's a sign that Grant is less cynical than he was at the start of the novel; he doesn't immediately assume the worst of others.

Grant thinks about the mulattoes he knows. Because they are half-white, they despise "niggers," avoiding them at all costs, even when it means dropping out of school or taking different work that pays less. At the same time, mulattoes aren't welcome among whites, meaning that they have to drink at black clubs like Rainbow. As he thinks about all this, Grant realizes that the two mulattoes are talking about Jefferson's execution. At first, he tells himself that he should let the men talk, rather than let them destroy his feeling of triumph with Jefferson. But after a few minutes of drinking, he is so angry that he stands up and tells the men to shut up. As they stand up, seemingly preparing to fight, Grant hits both of them.

Grant thinks about mulattoes and recognizes that they're "in-between" people, neither welcome in white clubs nor friendly with dark-skinned black people. The fact that Grant can recognize this suggests that he's no longer in an in-between state himself: his respect for Jefferson, and his investment in teaching him, has given him a purpose, and rooted him in his community in a way he hadn't been since going off to college. The fact that Grant is willing to fight for his beliefs again illustrates his passion for teaching and bettering Jefferson, though it also betrays a lack of self-control that stands at odds with the dignity that Miss Emma wants Jefferson to show. At the same time, the fact that the "mulattoes" people use racial slurs to describe black people captures the perniciousness of racism, creating categories that even those who are harmed by it are trained to think in its terms.

A fight breaks out between Grant and the two mulatto bricklayers. Joe Claiborne attempts to break up the fight, yelling that he doesn't want any trouble in his building, but neither Grant nor the mulattoes pay attention to him. Joe tries the wrestle the larger of the two mulattoes, while Grant hits the taller one. Though Grant gains the upper hand, his opponent is so angry that he refuses to submit. The fight gets dirtier, and Grant throws a chair at the tall mulatto. As he does so, he hears Joe shouting, that he's going to get his gun. Thelma Claiborne rushes into the bar and tries to break up the fight, but Joe yells for her to go find Vivian right away. Grant feels a blow to the side of his head, and loses consciousness. When he comes to, Vivian and Claiborne are standing over him. Vivian asks if he's all right, but Claiborne only tells Grant to get out of his club. Grant nods, and Vivian leads him out.

It's significant that the mulattoes are willing to fight and injure themselves further, rather than submit: their hatred for blacks is so great that they don't mind that they're hurting themselves. The fact that Grant is fighting against *the mulattoes distances him from the cynicism, hatred, and in-between-ness they embody; he's found a purpose in Jefferson. Claiborne's behavior is meant to contrast with Grant's: where Grant endangers himself by fighting with the mulattoes because he respects Jefferson, Claiborne is more concerned with maintaining order in his bar, which is to say, he's more interested in himself than in other people. This reiterates how selfless Grant has become.*

CHAPTER 26

After Vivian leads Grant out of the Rainbow Club, she asks him what happened. Grant explains that Claiborne must have been the one to knock him out, since he didn't want fighting in his bar. He explains to Vivian that the mulattoes were talking about Jefferson. When Vivian asks why Grant didn't just walk away from them, Grant says that Jefferson can't just walk away. Vivian insists that Grant should have used words instead of fighting.

Grant thinks of himself as Jefferson's teacher, spokesman, representative, and protector. In a way, he feels connected to Jefferson; he feels as if he's going through the same pains and challenges that Jefferson faces, such as confinement and persecution. It's not clear who's right, Vivian or Grant: Vivian is more sensible, pointing out that the fighting solved nothing, but she doesn't feel the same intimate bond with Jefferson that Grant has developed.

Because Grant is injured, Vivian insists that he stay with her that night. Grant objects, because Vivian's husband could find out about their affair, and as a result he could take his and Vivian's children. Nonetheless, Vivian insists that Grant must come home with her—besides, she argues, everyone in town will already know about the two of them, since Vivian escorted Grant out of the bar.

Grant's interaction with Vivian is meant to contrast with their first interaction in the novel: originally, Vivian was acting on behalf of their children, while Grant "selfishly" wanted Vivian to come see him. Now, Grant is thinking about the future, and about Vivian's children; he's less selfish than he was only months before.

Vivian takes Grant to her home, gives him a towel for his head, and fixes him a meal of red beans and pork chops. Vivian is somewhat angry with Grant for his violent behavior; when Grant asks, half-jokingly, if she still loves him, she doesn't answer. As they sit down to eat, Grant begins to tell Vivian about his success with Jefferson at the jailhouse earlier that day. Before he can get far in his story, Vivian bows her head to say grace over her portion of the meal, and then tells Grant that her husband, who's currently in Texas, won't agree to a divorce unless she agrees to let him see their children every weekend. Upon hearing this news, Grant is angry, and calls Vivian's husband a sonofabitch. He tells Vivian that he needs her as Jefferson gets closer to his execution.

Gaines fills his novel with loving descriptions of cooking; indeed, most of the women in the novel are shown to be excellent cooks, whether it's Emma, Lou, or Vivian. Cooking symbolizes the intimate bond between two people—to make someone a meal is a gesture of love, and thus to eat and enjoy the meal is to return that love. Grant's anger is difficult to interpret: he's angry in part because he wants Vivian to get her divorce over with as soon as possible, and in part because he wants Vivian to focus on helping him while he thinks about Jefferson. He's also annoyed that Vivian says grace, especially on the heels of his argument with Ambrose.

Angry and frustrated that Vivian's divorce will be difficult and lengthy, Grant prepares to leave Vivian's house, not wanting to leave any further evidence of their affair. Vivian tells Grant that he might as well stay. Grant tells Vivian that he loves her, but when Vivian asks him what he means by love, he's unable to answer. He gets up to leave, slamming his towel on his plate of **food**. He opens the door and stares out into the darkness, thinking that he has nothing worthwhile to go home to. After a few minutes of standing, he decides to stay at Vivian's house, and buries his head in her lap.

Grant's behavior in this moment reflects how far he's come since he began teaching Jefferson. At the beginning of the novel, he fantasized about leaving: leaving his family, leaving his school children, leaving the plantation community. Here, he recognizes the truth: he can't leave because there is nothing anywhere else for him. This is a depressing conclusion, but also an empowering one: Grant realizes the value of what he has. His embrace of Vivian, then, is both joyous and melancholy: he's trapped in Louisiana, but he has a woman he loves. Perhaps he hasn't realized it yet, but this realization will broaden over the course of the novel: he's trapped in Louisiana, but this is his community.

CHAPTER 27

It is a Sunday, and Grant is sitting in his bed. Emma, Lou, and Ambrose have just arrived at his house, having come from church. He thinks about the beans his aunt has grown for as long as he can remember, as well as the pecan and peanut trees. As he muses, Lou enters his room and tells him that Reverend Ambrose wants to talk to him. To please his aunt, Grant agrees, puts on his shoes, and tucks in his shirt.

Grant thinks about slow, steady processes. This shows that he's come a long way from the earlier chapters, in which he was exasperated with the slow pace of life on the plantation, because of which progress of any kind seemed impossible. Now, he's realizing that progress is slow, often agonizingly so. One side effect of his realization is that he has more respect for the people who involve themselves in their community instead of trying to leave it; thus, he respects Lou and obeys her.

Ambrose enters the room; though Grant invites him to sit, he says that he prefers to stand. He makes some small talk about Grant's pupils at school, and they agree that they try to do their best. Then, Ambrose comes to the point: Jefferson is to be executed in less than three weeks, and his soul is not yet saved. Though Grant maintains that Jefferson's soul is Ambrose's concern, not his—he can only teach reading, writing, and arithmetic—Ambrose tells him that Jefferson will only listen to him. Grant claims to believe in God, but not heaven. In response, Ambrose asks Grant if he thinks he's educated, and then tells him that in spite of his college degree, he lacks any knowledge of himself or his people. Ambrose tells Grant that he won't let Grant send Jefferson to hell—he'll fight Grant for Jefferson's soul, and win. Yet when Grant offers to stay home and never see Jefferson again, Ambrose insists that he continue visiting.

Ambrose and Grant begin by trying to establish a bond between them: they're both educators, in a sense, and they're both dedicated men who have to struggle against many challenges to reach their pupils. Ambrose makes clear the problem that Grant faces when he says that Grant has no knowledge of his community. This is largely true: Grant has shown many times throughout the novel that he's uninterested in what his neighbors and peers do—he fantasizes about leaving them instead of trying to understand them. Ambrose's point is that Grant can't reach Jefferson if Grant doesn't respect the community that produced Jefferson. In order to respect it fully, Ambrose implies, Grant must embrace God, and Christianity.

Grant is annoyed with Ambrose, and gets up to leave. As he does so, Ambrose puts his hand on Grant's shoulder and calls him "boy," which infuriates Grant. Ambrose tells Grant that Jefferson must be strong for Emma so that she can enjoy her few remaining years; to be strong, he says, Jefferson must kneel as he walks to the electric chair. Grant denies this—he says that Jefferson must walk to his death. Unable to convince Grant, Ambrose tells him that he is lost; Ambrose himself claims to be found.

Ambrose's behavior in this chapter parallels that of the racist whites we've seen earlier. Indeed, many of the things that Ambrose wants of Grant sound like things Pichot and Guidry want; for instance, he tells Grant to tell Jefferson to kneel, which is presumably what Pichot wants Jefferson to do, too. Yet we shouldn't assume that Ambrose is an instrument of white racism. We've seen evidence that humility and modesty do have value, even if they seem to appease or satisfy racists.

Ambrose proposes that Grant tell Jefferson about heaven, even though he doesn't believe it to be real. Grant refuses to tell a lie for Ambrose. Ambrose calls Grant a fool. Ambrose has spent his life telling lies, he says, as a preacher and a member of his community. When people are depressed and in pain, he lies and tells them that they will get better. When Grant was away at university, he goes on, Lou worked hard in the fields to support him, often cutting her hands and knees in the process. Yet Lou lied to Grant and pretended to be in good health. In this sense, Ambrose concludes, Ambrose is an educated man and Grant is a fool: Ambrose understands the people he lives with, and recognizes that it's sometimes necessary to lie in order to bring peace and happiness to others.

Here, it becomes clear how blind Grant really is to his community. After years of living with Tante Lou, he had no idea that she hurt herself to support him—Lou herself never told him. Earlier in the book, Grant sometimes felt that Lou was manipulating Grant to do things he didn't want to do. Here, though, it's clear that she's always acted out of a genuine desire to help Grant and make his life better. Ambrose shows himself to be much more sophisticated than Grant: where Grant believes in the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Ambrose recognizes that there are actually many different kinds of truth. There is literal truth, but also spiritual or metaphorical truth, the function of which is to give people hope and inspiration. Earlier in the novel Grant lied to Miss Emma for his own selfish purposes: to avoid a hard scene he didn't want to face. Ambrose here suggests that lies can also be productive, if they are created not out of selfishness but the desire to support and empower.

CHAPTER 28

Grant walks to Jefferson's cell, carrying a bag of sweet potatoes. He greets Jefferson, and Jefferson tells him that he's doing all right. Grant shows Jefferson the **food** he's brought, and notices that the pencil he gave Jefferson on his last visit has been worn down from frequent use. He asks to see Jefferson's notebook, and Jefferson allows him to do so. In Jefferson's notebook, Grant reads a painful entry about a dream Jefferson had, in which he was slaughtered like a hog. Jefferson writes that men walk on two legs while hogs walk on four hooves. Grant offers to have Jefferson's pencil sharpened; Jefferson accepts the offer.

Grant doesn't read much of Jefferson's diary, but what little he reads suggests that Jefferson is working through terrifying nightmares about his execution. But maybe the very horror of the entry Grant reads proves that Jefferson is improving: it's as if Jefferson is getting rid of all the anxiety and fear he feels by writing it down. Whether or not Grant envisioned Jefferson using his notebook for this purpose—a kind of catharsis—it seems to be the function for which Jefferson is using it.

Grant tells Jefferson that he should talk to Reverend Ambrose. Jefferson replies that on his last visit, Ambrose told him to pray to God. He adds that he hasn't prayed at all. Jefferson asks Grant if he thinks Jefferson will go to heaven; Grant says he doesn't know, and admits he doesn't pray himself. Grant tells Jefferson that he must give up material possessions and strive to make Miss Emma happy before he dies. He tells Jefferson that he believes in God, and that he believes that God makes people love one another. He also admits that he's losing touch with his faith, and that he wants Jefferson to help him find it again.

Grant is put in an awkward position: he wants to inspire Jefferson and make him brave and proud for his execution, but he doesn't believe in Heaven. In a sense, Grant's dilemma is just another version of the problem he's confronted throughout his sessions with Jefferson: why is good behavior its own reward? Ambrose might answer that good behavior is worthwhile because God rewards the virtuous in Heaven. Grant, since he denies the existence of Heaven, focuses on something different: the inherent *value of bravery, courage, and dignity. Note also how Grant now reveals how much he is relying on Jefferson. The teacher-student dynamic has become more complicated, as they are both learning and benefitting from each other.*

As Grant tells Jefferson about his beliefs, Jefferson gets up from his bed and walks to the other side of the small cell. He tells Grant that while he's human, he feels that it's unfair that he's being asked to bear a burden for his family and his community, considering that no one ever bore a burden for him—not even his own parents, who left him when he was a child. He questions the existence of the afterlife, and Grant doesn't know what to say in response. Grant tells Jefferson that Jefferson is more of a man than he will ever be, and that his eyes had been closed until this point in his life. He says that he needs Jefferson to be strong, just as everyone else in the community needs him.

Jefferson admits that he's human, showing how much progress he's made with Grant—not too long ago, he was acting like a hog and throwing Miss Emma's cooking on the ground. At the same time, his observations illustrate the frustration of behaving morally: "Why should I be good when no one has ever been good to me?" While Grant doesn't have an explicit answer for Jefferson, he implies that it's worthwhile to be a moral person because other people depend on him. Jefferson doesn't owe it to himself to be brave, then; he owes it to Emma, Lou, Grant, and dozens of other people in the plantation community.

Jefferson stares out of the window of his cell. He says that the view is the prettiest he's ever seen. He asks Grant what his death will feel like, and Grant replies that it will be quick—he has read about electrocution before. After hearing this, Jefferson sits back on his bed and offers Grant a sweet potato from the bag Grant has brought. Grant accepts.

Jefferson's comments about the view seem to symbolize his changing perception of right and wrong. As a free man, Jefferson showed no signs of understanding morality; now, with only a few more days of life left to him, he's come to understand the value of moral behavior. It's also a deft trick on Gaines's part that Jefferson offers Grant a potato, not the other way around. Throughout the book, Grant has offered Jefferson advice—now, Jefferson has become the teacher and the moral exemplar, and Grant is the student. The flip in who offers food to the other represents that shift.

CHAPTER 29

The chapter consists entirely of entries from Jefferson's diary. Jefferson begins by writing that he's unsure what to write; he has never written anything but homework—not even a letter.

With only three chapters left to go, Gaines shows us the world from Jefferson's perspective. The establishment of a clear point of view for Jefferson symbolizes the newfound maturity and self-awareness that Jefferson has discovered under Grant's guidance.

In the following entry, Jefferson describes a nightmare he had the previous night—he tried to write about it that night, but there was no light. Now that it's morning, Jefferson has forgotten half of the dream's contents, though he remembers walking to a door. He goes on to describe a recent visit from Miss Emma, during which she brought him Easter eggs. Also present at the visit was Reverend Ambrose, who told him that Christ died for his sins.

The fantasy of walking to a door seems to symbolize death and the afterlife—just as Jefferson and Grant don't know if there's a Heaven or not, Jefferson doesn't know what lies "beyond the door." We see, via Jefferson's point of view, that Ambrose continues to impress upon Jefferson the importance of religion and the church.

Jefferson goes on to describe his traumatic experiences hauling water in the fields as a child and a younger man—sometimes he and the other workers would pray for relief from their hard work, but no relief ever came. The Lord seems to work for white people, he notes. He writes that he can no longer sleep, because he has a recurring dream in which he walks to a door and then wakes up. Jefferson writes in the notebook to Grant, saying that he has no idea what to write in his notebook.

Jefferson's thoughts as a young man mirror Grant's—both men experience so much hardship that they begin to doubt the mercy of God, and even think that God works for whites, not blacks. It's also important that Jefferson addresses Grant. It shows that he understands how important his notebook is; he knows that Grant will use it to teach courage and dignity to others (and to himself). It's likely that Gaines intends the notebook as a symbol of Scripture; Grant acts as a kind of apostle, passing on Jefferson/Christ's teachings to the community.

The next entry in the diary is from a Monday, just a few days before Jefferson's execution. Jefferson wants to see Miss Emma one more time before he's executed. He has heard from Reverend Ambrose and Lou that Emma is ill; he hopes that he can see her one more time on the earth.

The fact that Jefferson refers to seeing Miss Emma once more "on the earth" suggests that he's at least entertaining the possibility of life beyond the earth. Ultimately, it's not clear if he believes in Heaven or not. Perhaps it's enough that he's hopeful that there is a Heaven.

The next entry describes a visit Jefferson receives from Sheriff Guidry, Henri Pichot, and "Mr. Morgan." Pichot asks Jefferson how he's doing; Jefferson says that he's fine. Pichot offers to sharpen Jefferson's pencil, and when Jefferson gives it to him, Pichot sharpens it using a small pearl knife he carries with him. Pichot offers Jefferson the knife, along with a gold chain, and Jefferson accepts them, saying that Pichot can have it back in only a few days. Pichot looks knowingly at Mr. Morgan and offers to double the bet; Mr. Morgan says that it isn't Friday yet. Deputy Clark stops by Jefferson's cell frequently and asks if he can get Jefferson anything, but Jefferson doesn't feel that Clark is looking out for him. Only Paul treats Jefferson like a human being, Jefferson concludes.

In perhaps the most painful passage in Gaines's novel, we come to understand what the terms of Pichot's bet were. Just as Inez told Grant, Pichot wasn't betting on Grant at all: he was betting on whether or not Jefferson would commit suicide before the day of his execution. It's unclear who "Mr. Morgan" is, but it's likely that Jefferson is talking about the same Dr. Morgan who examined Grant's classroom in an earlier chapter—beneath his veneer of academic impartiality, Morgan is no less of a bigoted villain than Pichot. As horrifying as this moment is, it has a silver lining: it shows how white racists do *have a personal stake in how Jefferson behaves leading up to his execution. Thus, for Jefferson to behave with dignity is a genuine victory against Pichot and against racism. And for Jefferson to seemingly not even recognize that Pichot is giving him the knife in hopes that Jefferson will kill himself with it, Jefferson show's his moral superiority.*

In his next entry, Jefferson describes a visit Grant organized, so that most of the children in his classroom came to the jailhouse to visit Jefferson. Jefferson hadn't realized that so many children would be coming, and when his cousin Estelle kissed him goodbye, he broke down in tears. Afterwards, many of the older members of the community visit the cell to say goodbye. Even Bok gives Jefferson one of his prized marbles, albeit the smallest one, and only after much encouragement from Rita Lawrence. Jefferson cries after his visitors leave, but he's careful to wait until they can't hear or see him. He doesn't sleep much in the following days, but rather takes short naps throughout the day.

We see the selfless sacrifice that the members of Jefferson's community make for Jefferson's sake. Grant organizes the visit, and even the children themselves give Jefferson gifts. It's important that Jefferson didn't realize how many visitors he'd have—Jefferson doesn't realize how many people love him and depend him. He seems to treat this knowledge as an impetus to behave with even more courage and dignity—thus, he waits to cry until everyone's left, showing his self-control and selflessness. He is recognizing and embracing his importance to the community.

A few days later, the guards bring Jefferson to the dayroom to say goodbye to Miss Emma, who is very ill. When she sees Jefferson, she pulls him close to her and embraces him, keeping her eyes closed. Jefferson tells her that he is strong and that she need not worry about him. Emma only lets go of Jefferson when Lou gently tells her to do so.

In a way, Jefferson has been building up to this moment throughout A Lesson Before Dying. *At first, he neglected his godmother, who's raised him since he was a child. Now he lets her embrace him (and embraces her back) for as long as she needs.*

Jefferson uses his diary to apologize to Grant for insulting Vivian. He describes the visit Grant and Vivian make to see him after Miss Emma's visit—he thinks Vivian is the prettiest woman he's ever seen, and enjoys it when Vivian kisses him goodbye. Grant tells Jefferson that he won't see him again, and Jefferson begins to cry, though he apologizes for doing so in his diary. He tells Grant that no one else was ever so good to him—Grant was the first person to make him feel like "somebody."

Here, Jefferson's actions resemble nothing so much as a sinner confessing his sins on his deathbed. (Ironically, this would make Grant, not Reverend Ambrose, the "priest.") His final words to Grant show that Grant has succeeded as a teacher.

Sheriff Guidry asks Jefferson what he wants for his last meal; Jefferson requests pork chops cooked by Miss Emma, with a little ice cream and a moon pie for desert. The guards take Jefferson to clean himself, and when he's returned to his cell, he finds the **food** waiting for him; he eats it, knowing it's the best food Emma ever cooked. He watches the sun going down, writing that he'll never see another sunset but he will see another dawn, since he plans to stay up all night.

Jefferson enjoys the food he eats before he dies—he's finally learned to take pleasure in the physical world instead of rejecting material pleasures and falling into cynicism and self-loathing. He experiences the love and connection Emma is expressing through the food she cooks. With his comments on the sun, he shows that he's hopeful, even on the last day of his life.

Sheriff Guidry walks to Jefferson's cell as he sits writing. He asks Jefferson if he's been a fair guard to him, and lists all the things he's done for Jefferson—allowed him to have visitors, to use a radio, etc. Jefferson acknowledges that the sheriff has treated him well, and Guidry tells him to write this in his diary. He offers to keep the light on that night so that Jefferson can continue to write; Jefferson accepts the offer.

We see how reading and writing can be used as weapons against white racists. Guidry seems afraid of Jefferson's notebook—he doesn't want word of his injustices getting out. Again Jefferson's diary seems to be connected with the Bible, and Guidry doesn't want to be portrayed as a Pontius Pilate.

The final entries in Jefferson's diary are scattered, as Jefferson's mind darts around in his final hours of life He writes that he's unsure if there's a heaven or not—Ambrose says there is but his life has suggested that there's none. He says that he had no business going with Brother and Bear, because they're no good. He also notes that he's no longer listening to the music on the radio because it's for the living, not the dead. He thanks Grant for being good to him and tells him to tell the community that he's been strong in the final hours of his life. He writes that the sky looks very blue, and that he'll pass his diary along to Paul before he's taken to the electric chair.

Jefferson's comment about not going with Brother and Bear shows how he is accepting responsibility for his own actions. That he was sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit is unjust, but he has matured to the extent that he can see the ways that his own immaturity has impacted his own life. Jefferson has progressed from a callow fool to a mature man who understands the repercussions of his actions on his community, and puts the needs of that community first. Paul is identified here as the one who will carry Jefferson's words on after Jefferson has died, just as St. Paul carried the teachings of Jesus after Jesus was crucified.

CHAPTER 30

Chapter 30 is written in Grant's point of view, along with many others. Grant describes Sidney deRogers, a local worker who's on his way to mow the lawn at George Jarreau's house. A black truck with a gray tarpaulin cover drives by him. deRogers later reports feeling cold when the truck drives by. At eleven o'clock, George's wife, Lucy, tells Sidney to drive to the store to pick up some white thread. Sidney drives toward the store in Lucy's car; before he reaches the store, he notices a crowd of people standing by the courthouse. Everyone is staring at the black truck. Sidney drives past the crowd toward the store. Inside, he tells a saleswoman that he needs thread; the woman tells him to find it himself and pay her back later.

The multiple points of view at work in this chapter allude to the gospels of the Bible—essentially, Gaines depicts a modern version of the crucifixion, with many different people offering their perspective on the event. There's a sad poetry in the way people go about their ordinary lives, and yet are all vitally aware that Jefferson is going to die today. The progress of the black truck, which carries the electric chair within it, is akin to the progress of Jesus carry the cross on which he will be crucified.

Tante Lou spends the night with Miss Emma, as do many other members of the community. Lou stays there all night, while Ambrose leaves around midnight to get some sleep, knowing that Sheriff Guidry wants all witnesses to the execution to be present at the courthouse by eleven thirty. Vivian and Grant spend the night at the Rainbow Club—it's both quieter and more full than he's ever seen it. At eleven, Claiborne announces that the place is closing; he and Grant don't look each other in the eye. Grant drives home alone. He stops by Miss Emma's house, but doesn't go inside, thinking that he has nothing left to say to her.

Grant's moral character is still unclear—for all the care he's shown to Jefferson, he's still unwilling to visit Emma in her hour of need. In a sense, this is because he's still afraid of showing his emotions and still reluctant to commit to his community. Grant's alibi—that he has "nothing to say" to Emma—isn't remotely convincing: he doesn't have to say anything, but he could at least be with her, support her. The reality is that he doesn't yet have the courage to build a bond with his community.

The next morning, Reverend Ambrose, who is to read Jefferson his last rights, wakes up and prays that God will give him the strength to do his job today. He eats breakfast and thinks about his duties: he is to read the 23rd Psalm. Meanwhile, Sheriff Guidry eats breakfast and prays that everything will go smoothly that day, thinking that he wishes this day had never come. He tells Edna, his wife, that he spoke to Grant earlier, and asked him if he would be a witness at the execution; Grant declined the offer, and Guidry said that he understood. Guidry also mentions that Reverend Ambrose asked to be a witness, and that the other witness will be Henry Williams, a local man who Guidry knows is not a troublemaker. Some members of Alcee Gropé's family will also be in attendance at the execution. He doesn't look directly at his wife as he tells her all of this.

Ambrose shows that, while he disagrees with Grant about the afterlife, he's a man of great integrity and bravery. Guidry's behavior is less clear: his hope for a "smooth" operation is clearly his professional desire trumping any compassion, yet his wish that this day never came is, perhaps, a show of compassion for Jefferson. Even white racists, Gaines suggests, are capable of remorse and compassion for people who aren't like them. The man Ambrose gets to be a witness at Jefferson's death, previously almost absent from A Lesson Before Dying *(he was at the Christmas play, and that's about it) makes us think of the person who, by all rights, should be at the execution: Grant. Grant is still unwilling to commit to his community: he still lacks the courage he's taught Jefferson.*

Melvina Jack is working at Edwin's department store when the black truck drives by her. Juanita deJean, a white worker at the store, asks Melvina if she knows what's in the truck; when Melvina says that she doesn't, Juanita tells her that she will before the day is over. Melvina sees that the truck is parking near the courthouse, and she says, "No, no." Juanita responds, "Yes, yes." Melvina can barely stand as she sees an electric chair being taken from the truck. Juanita comments that she wishes the event could take place farther from school; Melvina knows she means farther from the white school, not the black school that is even closer by.

For all the compassion we've seen in the novel, Gaines reminds us that the color line continues to trump humans' natural ability to feel sympathy. Thus, the white store workers are less interested in the execution, but more informed about it, than the black workers are. Juanita is clearly more concerned about the execution's effect on white people than on the man being executed.

Fee Jinkins is a petty criminal who spends a month in jail during the time when Jefferson is to be executed. He cleans the sheriff's office and the white people's restrooms. He is cleaning when he sees men in suits bring the electric chair into the courthouse. One of the men carrying the chair says that it's called Gruesome Gerty, and jokingly threatens to put Fee in it if he misbehaves. Another man carrying the chair says that the execution will occur between twelve and three that afternoon, and that anyone working in the jailhouse can leave during this time if they don't want to see it. Someone whom Fee doesn't know says that Christ was executed at the same time of day on a Friday; someone else says that two thieves were executed then as well.

It's "gruesome" to see how cavalier and jocular the guards are when they bring the electric chair into the courthouse. It's as if the constant presence of death has desensitized these men to death, but it also seems unlikely that they would be behaving this way if the condemned man was white. The guard's conversation about Christ and the two thieves also makes the stakes of the execution explicit. Jefferson, in his behavior, has the chance to show himself a Christ or a thief. Showing himself to be a Christ could profoundly change the way these white guards view him, and blacks in general.


Clay Lemon works at Weber's Café and Bar and Bait Shop, running errands for Felix Weber, the owner. He is walking to the bank when he hears a loud noise. Inside the bank, he finds a white man and woman complaining about the noise, which they say is coming from the courthouse. The man and woman talk to a clerk, who tells them that her child asked about who was going to be killed; the clerk told the child that an "old bad nigger" was going to die, and the next day, the child had forgotten all about the incident. When it's Clay's turn to go to the clerk, he's forgotten what he's come to the bank for; the clerk irritably asks if he's from Felix's, snatches the check he's brought out of his hands, and gives him change in return for it.

Gaines here continues to show the society of racism in Bayonne. The clerk's story about what she told her child, and her child not even remembering it, shows how racism is passed down from one generation to another. To the child, Jefferson's unjust execution isn't even something to remember. Gaines is not sugar-coating the situation. Jefferson's death is not going to magically transform anything. But the juxtaposition of the clerk and her child's racism has stunned Clay Lemon, and perhaps that is a beginning. Gaines also includes these details to challenge readers to be better people themselves.

Paul stands in the sheriff's office in the jailhouse discussing the execution with Sheriff Guidry and two special deputies, Claude Guerin and Oscar Guerin. The executioner's name is Henry Vincent. Vincent tells Paul that he must shave Jefferson before the execution, so that there's not a hair on his head, his wrists, or his legs; Paul says that Jefferson barely has any hair on his body to begin with. Sheriff Guidry assures Vincent that Paul is up to the task, but also that he's nervous, since this is his first execution. Guidry tells Paul that he should find the prisoner named Murphy and release him from his cell so that he can shave Jefferson.

It's confusing that the sheriff would enlist another prisoner to shave Jefferson—surely a more trustworthy person could do that job. But maybe this is the point—Guidry, racist to the end, doesn't want to shave a black man. Ultimately, Guidry is one f the most complicated characters in this novel—inspired by his wife, he seems to show at least some remorse for his behavior to Jefferson, but he also continues to display racist behavior.


Paul carries a safety razor and pair of scissors to Murphy's cell and tells him that he must shave Jefferson; Murphy is confused, but agrees, and Paul sends him to get a piece of soap and some warm water from the shower room. Paul then goes to Jefferson's cell with Claude, and tells Jefferson that Murphy will need to shave his hair. Paul can see that Jefferson hasn't slept the night before. He also notices his blue denim shirt, his notebook, which is lying by the wall, and his radio, which is off. As the three of them wait for Murphy to return, Jefferson asks Claude about Miss Bernice and little Roy, Claude's wife and child; Claude is reluctant to respond at first, but with Paul's encouragement, he answers Jefferson—they're both fine.

It's perhaps not a coincidence that Jefferson's shirt is blue. Blue is a highly evocative color in Christian iconography—it's the color most often associated with the Virgin Mary, and thus a symbol of Christ. Jefferson's behavior toward Claude shows his calm, even Christ-like bravery. He has only hours left to live, but he shows concern about others—even the family of the white guard who will escort him to his death. Claude's hesitance to interact with Jefferson likely stems from both racism and discomfort about connecting with a man about to die. Paul, who also earlier in the novel was not connecting with Jefferson, has moved past: he respects Jefferson as a person, and treats him like one.

Murphy returns with the soap and the water; he goes to work shaving Jefferson's head, cutting holes in his pants and shirt, and shaving his ankles and wrists. As Murphy works, Jefferson sits on his bed, as if in a trance. When Murphy is finished, Paul motions for Claude and Murphy to leave the cell. As Paul locks the cell door, Jefferson asks Paul to give Grant his diary and Pichot his knife and gold chain; Paul says that he will. Jefferson gives Paul a long look and asks him if he'll be at the execution that afternoon. Paul nods and says that he will.

Here, Gaines clearly alludes to the crucifixion: Jefferson sustains "wounds," of a sort, on his head, hands, and feet, just as Jesus did on the cross. It's important that Jefferson establishes a bond with Paul before his death, showing that even unlike people—a black prisoner and a white prison guard—can form a connection based on trust, respect, friendship, and even love. It also again marks Paul as a witness of Jefferson who can bring word to others, just as St. Paul carried the word of Christ to the world.

CHAPTER 31

It is the morning of execution, and Grant is teaching his students as usual. He tells them that they'll be dismissed early to go home to eat; then, they must return to school and get down on their knees while he goes to the courthouse. The children must remain on their knees, Grant insists, until he returns. When Louis Washington, Jr. asks to be excused from the time spent on his knees, Grant says that he'll have to make up that time later on. He assigns Irene Cole to run his class, and leaves the classroom. It is a beautiful day, and Grant notes that no blacks are working in the fields—every one of them has taken the day off to go to the courthouse.

Grant's instructions to his classroom show that he's come to recognize the importance of Jefferson's execution to the entire community, not just Miss Emma. Jefferson's bravery is meant to inspire the children; conversely, the children are supposed to feel some small part of Jefferson's pain by getting down on their hands and knees. It's strange, though, that Grant doesn't kneel himself. His moral development is still incomplete, even if he's succeeded in helping Jefferson become a moral man.

Grant walks around to the back of the church and thinks about the time he spent there as a child playing handball. He wonders if Jefferson ever hit a homerun in handball; to hit one, strength isn't enough—you need speed and luck, too. He thinks about the other children he played with; since then, some have been killed. At 10:55, he sees Ambrose driving to the courthouse with Henry Williams. He goes into the church and dismisses the children. Alone in the classroom, he thinks that he wants to telephone Vivian, but knows that there is no telephone nearby for him to use. Nevertheless, he will see Vivian that night—he needs her, because he loves her.

Grant's thoughts parallel his thoughts on the same subject in an earlier chapter. Before, Grant focused on his classmates who left Louisiana and died, or stayed behind and forgot their schooling. Now, Grant acknowledges that these people have had hard lives, but he also thinks of everything he has to be grateful for, especially Vivian. Grant is no more ignorant than he was before; he's just become less of a cynic, recognizing that pain and tragedy aren't the whole story.

Grant wonders if God is with Jefferson. God is with Ambrose, he is certain, because Ambrose believes in God. Grant thinks that Ambrose is much stronger than he is—he could never summon the courage to see Jefferson executed that afternoon. Grant thinks that his faith is with Jefferson.

Grant shows signs that he's gravitating towards God and the church. He's gained respect for Ambrose, in marked contrast to his dismissive attitude toward Ambrose and his church in earlier chapters. By showing respect for Ambrose, Grant shows that he's come to understand what Ambrose does for his community, and that he's come to value hope and optimism, the two feelings that Ambrose passes on to his congregation.

Shortly before noon, the children return from their homes, and Grant instructs them to get down on their hands and knees and silently pray until Grant tells them they may stop. Louis Washington, Jr. asks Grant if he plans to pray, too—Grant only says that he'll be outside. He goes outside, walking away from the church and wondering why he isn't inside praying with his children.

Even if Grant's moral development isn't complete, he shows signs that he knows *it's incomplete, hence his frustration with himself for not praying with the children.*

As Grant walks farther from the church, he looks at Henri Pichot's enormous house. Grant thinks that it would be absurd if he believed in the same God as the men who sentenced Jefferson to death, or if he believed that God blesses America, or if he believed that men are judged by a jury of their peers—Jefferson wasn't judged by any of his peers. Nevertheless, Grant concludes, it's necessary for people to believe in something in order to attain freedom.

Here, Grant spells out his position on God. He doesn't necessarily follow any organized religion, but he's an immensely spiritual person, especially compared with himself at the beginning of the book. Where before Grant looked at Louisiana cynically, he now sees that belief—irrational, optimistic belief—is important because it helps people be strong and overcome their struggles.

Grant looks at Henri Pichot's house and wonders why Pichot hasn't come outside. He notices a butterfly landing on a sprig of bull grass. Grant wonders why the butterfly has landed there—the bull grass is useless to it, and there are far more attractive flowers and plants for it to explore. As he thinks this, the butterfly flies away until Grant can't see it anymore. Without understanding exactly why, Grant feels that "it is over." He looks to Pichot's house, but still no one has come outside.

Grant feels an almost mystical connection to Jefferson, sensing immediately when Jefferson has died. Even more important here is the butterfly Grant sees—while its symbolism is never spelled out, the butterfly is connected in Grant's mind to Jefferson (note that butterflies, too, undergo a transformation in their lives).. Like Jefferson in prison, or in racist Bayonne, the butterfly comes to a place of that provides it with no value; but the butterfly provides beauty and meaning within that context, just as Jefferson does. The emptiness of Pichot's house, in contrast, marks the emptiness and cowardice of Pichot and his society's racist beliefs.

Grant walks back to the church. When he is almost back, a car drives by. The driver is Paul. Paul emerges from the car and asks to speak to Grant. Grant quickly goes into the church and tells the students to stand up; then he runs back outside to speak to Paul. Paul tells him that Jefferson's execution went as well as it could have gone. According to Paul—and, Paul insists, everyone else in the room—Jefferson was the strongest man in the room when he was killed. Jefferson asked Paul to tell Emma that he was "walking" to his grave.

Jefferson's bravery proves that Grant has succeeded as a teacher, but more important Jefferson has heroically proved himself a man and so doing stood up to the racists and inspired his community. Paul, a white man, is now spreading the word of Jefferson's dignified bravery—just as St. Paul, was converted to spread the word of Jesus.

Paul tells Grant that Grant is an excellent teacher, but Grant denies this—one must believe to be a teacher. Paul insists that Jefferson changed enormously because of Grant, but Grant suggests that it was God, or Jefferson himself, who did the work. Grant tells Paul that he's unsure what he'll do from now on—it depends on Vivian—and Paul tells Grant that he's a lucky man. He gives Grant Jefferson's notebook, which he says he hasn't read.

Grant remains humble about his abilities, and rightfully so: it's not that Grant taught Jefferson anything new. Instead, Grant helped Jefferson access his own abilities to be a good man. Again, this process resembles Grant's own description in Chapter 24 of education as mirroring the process of carving wood to find the beauty it already held. It's also relevant that Grant is willing to credit God with some of his success—perhaps Grant is toward the end of his crisis of faith. He's found an interpretation of God that satisfies him.

Paul offers Grant his friendship. He shakes hands with Grant and tells him to tell his students that Jefferson was the bravest man in the room where he died. Grant suggests that Paul tell them himself one day, and Paul says he would be honored. Grant walks into the classroom to talk to his students. As he prepares to talk to his students, he is crying.

Gaines's novel closes with the image of two unlike people—-a black man and a white man—becoming friends. Grant is no longer a lonely cynic—he's learned to feel connected to others, even people who are altogether unlike him. Gaines reminds us of how far Grant has come with the final lines of the book. While Grant remained stoic and unfeeling when Jefferson was sentenced to death, he cries when he hears about Jefferson's death. Like Jefferson himself who was moved to tears as he recognized his connection to the community and therefore his responsibility to it, Grant finally sympathizes with other people, and feels like he's "part of a whole."

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