

# 3

## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

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

### Discussion Activities

Grant tells his aunt and Miss Emma, “Jefferson is dead. It is only a matter of weeks, maybe a couple of months—but he’s already dead. [. . .] And I can’t raise the dead. All I can do is try to keep the others from ending up like this—but he’s gone from us” (p. 14). Why does Grant lash out like this? How does his reluctance to help affect the way he views the situation? How do his views on his own life and teaching as a profession affect the way he tells the story?

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

### Writing Exercise

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

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

### Homework

Read Chapters 10-13 (pp. 75-102). Make a list of the primary characters and what motivates each of them.