

Literary devices – antithesis – a lesson before dying essay sample

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Example: “ I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there. I was there as much as anyone else was there.”

Function: In Ernest Gaines', *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is stuck with the difficult task of transforming a thoroughly dehumanized black named Jefferson back into a human being. Grant's opening lines – “ I was not there, yet I was there” illustrates the concept of opposites and contradictions. This deceptively simple statement introduces the ironies and contrapositions that pervade the novel, where things are not always what they seem, and what is defined as “ truth” is actually “ myth.” Already, we get a taste of the narrator's (which we eventually learn that it is Grant) cynicism, sarcasm, and innermost self. Gaines opens the novel with antitheses to illustrate the confining situation Grant and the other blacks are put in and the oppressive reign of the whites over the black community. They also portray how the whites during that time period would purposely distort and manipulate their laws and system of government to elevate the whites and suppress the blacks.

The opening lines, like the typical laws back in that time period, are ambiguous, contradictory, confusing, and illogical. A good example would be the literacy tests administered to potential black voters back in the 1890s up until the 1960s. The infamous Louisiana literacy test of the 1960s effectively barred blacks from voting because of its ridiculously difficult and absurd questions that often defied logic and coherence. Gaines' use of antithesis from the very outset of the novel immediately presents the reader with some

of the novel's most important themes, the cynical character of the narrator, and the overall injustice and burden the characters face in the novel – though the readers do not realize that until they are well into the story. Gaines also effectively draws attention from the reader by beginning the novel with an oddly powerful yet contradictory statement. Gaines cleverly plays around with antitheses in the beginning of the novel to hook the reader in, to present the reader with the grave issue at hand, and to give insight on the narrator's inner psyche.