

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

*This Special Edition was prepared by the Spring 2005 Introduction to Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues Honor's Class and dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jill Miller—a truly wonderful human being and an inspirational teacher.*

## For the Sake of Duty: Education in *A Lesson Before Dying*

By Jamie Busbin, Lakin Smith,  
Arrie Dunlap, & Tina Lee

Is education a moral obligation? In Gaines' novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, this issue is explored through Grant, a central protagonist. Using Kant's rules of a categorical imperative, we will determine whether or not education is a moral law. And, based on whether or not it passes the test, it can also be determined whether or not Grant fulfills his duty as an educator.

According to Kant's rule of the categorical imperative, education is a moral obligation. It passes the tests of contradiction of will and thought, and presents a practical world in which this law is applied. In the United States today, there are hundreds of laws governing the correct application of education in society, many of which provide that teachers must have extensive training and levels of higher education themselves before they can pass on their knowledge to others. It is also against the law for parents to keep their kids out of school. These examples provide us with a number of conclusions. It cannot be a contradiction of thought: it is obviously not impossible to

imagine a world with this moral law, and the law cannot refute itself. Passing on knowledge cannot harm or destroy other knowledge or another's education. It cannot be a contradiction of will: this is a type of world we moral beings would want to be in, because education is a continuous cycle of benefit.

Therefore, it can be concluded that education is a moral obligation

Throughout *A Lesson Before Dying*, there are constant examples of an educator who fulfills her duty and an educator who does not. Vivian provides the readers with a constant on which to base their judgment of Grant. Vivian acts as an educator for no other reason than to teach. She knows it is her moral duty, and she has no extraneous motives or ends, other than education itself. "Some people can {leave}, but we can't... We're teachers, and we have a commitment." (29) Grant provides readers with a number of examples of his reasons for teaching, most of which have an alternative motive that strays from the rules of duty. "I teach, but I don't like teaching...I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for no body else." (191) He stays to teach in order to be near Vivian. He does not stay to teach for the sake of teaching, but because he wants something else, and he has no other means of attaining it otherwise. According to the definition of a

categorical imperative, a moral duty must be fulfilled for no other end than the action itself. Education must not be performed as a means for attaining something else, but for the sake of education. Therefore, it can be concluded that Grant does not fulfill his duty as an educator.

## Vivian's Struggle in *A Lesson Before Dying*: A Brief Look at Vivian Through the Teachings of Epictetus and Aristotle

By Eva Glasgow, Ashley Cyr, Felix Montanez-Resto, & Sharon Stricklin

One of the prevalent themes in Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* is the necessity to make decisions based on controllable and uncontrollable factors; Vivian's character embodies this conflict. By taking an Aristotelian and Epictetic approach to Vivian's struggles, we are able to better understand Gaines' message that happiness can be found through positive choices despite negative conditions.

From an Aristotelian viewpoint, Vivian does not possess most of the external goods and goods of the body that are conducive to a good life: high social standing, wealth, a healthy marriage, and a good upbringing.

Her detrimental situation can be traced to her socio-economic status, which stems from her race and gender. However, she fulfills the goods of her soul by choosing to act under principle. She is both obedient to reason and initiates reason in others; she uses logic in her profession, social relationships, and decision-making. Although Vivian has not lived a full life, she aims at happiness.

Vivian lives well. She understands that she has no control over her social status. Her acceptance of this undesired inheritance and her realistic approach to the decisions that confront her permit Vivian to live a good life according to Epictetus, who advises us to “not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.”

According to Aristotle, Vivian does not meet the prerequisites for happiness. However, in Epictetus’ view, she accepts her socio-economic status and strives for happiness. Gaines teaches us that despite the uncontrollable influences in our lives, happiness can be found through optimistic decisions.

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## Why Wiggins Kant Leave

**By Carmen Cobb, Rob Oldham, Sarah Beth Link, Chris Shirley, & Chris McCormick**

Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most influential Enlightenment philosopher, understood our moral intuitions as more than arbitrary preferences, but as a proof of our manifest understanding of certain universal laws. Grant Wiggins in *A Lesson Before Dying* is a showcase of conflict between the conscious or unconscious understanding of

what Kant would call an objective, universal maxim versus Grant’s subjective maxim. The subjective maxim that Grant adopts is to be accepted as an educated and rational human being, but only in adopting the objective form of this maxim is the subjective fulfilled.

Wiggins repeatedly states that he is being choked by the life of the quarter that appears stagnant and hopeless. He wants to run away with Vivian by his side, but instead she anchors him, acting as a sign of his duty to the African American race and to prove that all people are created equal. He must help Jefferson stand up to the “white man” and prove that skin color does not determine rational ability, the very thing that makes them all human. Grant strives for this without actually knowing what the achievement will be; little does he know that he is striving for an objective maxim that clarifies purpose in his own life.

The objective maxim that Grant follows is that all rational beings should be treated with respect and dignity by all other rational beings. Grant’s actions in following this maxim of good will reflect back on his own moral worth because they are done in accord with duty. Grant’s duty to the community was to stay in town and put forth the effort to help Jefferson. He did this despite the powerful desire to abandon it all. By doing his duty through supporting his community he fulfilled a universal maxim and satisfied Kant’s form of duty with the best intent. In the end, Grant had taught Jefferson to stand like a man with dignity in front of all the others, but what Grant did not count on was another man looking at him with dignity and respect like Paul did.

## Our Lesson Before Dying

**By Mike Carson, Ashley Blakely, Hayley Thompson, & Keely Collette**

*A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines is a well-written first person narrative that takes a sharp turn when the voice behind the story becomes Jefferson. Jefferson, a twenty-one year old uneducated, easily manipulated black male, is being executed for a crime he did not commit nor completely understand (the killing of a white man). Unlike the others, the 29th chapter within this novel, the author aims to give the reader a new perspective of the accused through Jefferson’s own words.

Writing grammatically flawed sentences, Gaines forfeits his masterful writing skills in order to capture Jefferson’s persona. The writing style becomes sloppy, broken, and lacks punctuation and form. This creates a controversy among readers who either appreciate the insight that only Jefferson’s words (and all their flaws) could contribute to the understanding of this man, while others feel that the writing is out of place, distracting, and ineffective. Some readers, even with prior knowledge of the plot, had difficulty deciphering Jefferson’s written monologue “i dont kno what day it is las nite i coudn sleep an i cud yer ned down the way snoin ...” this particular line some could not interpret. Where as, other lines like “...thank you for sayin im doin b+ work an you know the a aint too far” give valuable insight to his education level and what he did aspire to become.

regodles o wethr or not you aprshiate the shif in ritin stile, the significants and the understanding of Gaines’s novel is not lost.

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**Dr. Joseph Weaver**  
Faculty Advisor and Honor’s Teacher  
weaverjo@mail.armstrong.edu