

## Doc 1. Asking for mercy



In this scene, Jefferson, a young uneducated black man, is accused of the murder of Mr. Gropé, a white storekeeper.

The prosecutor argued that Jefferson and the other two had gone there with the full intention of robbing the old man and killing him so that he could not identify them. When the old man and the other two robbers were all dead, this one—it proved the kind of animal he really was—stuffed the money into his pockets and celebrated the event by drinking over their still-bleeding bodies.

The defense argued that Jefferson was innocent of all charges except being at the wrong place at the wrong time. There was absolutely no proof that there had been a conspiracy between himself and the other two. The fact that Mr. Gropé shot only Brother and Bear was proof of Jefferson's innocence. Why did Mr. Gropé shoot one boy twice and never shoot at Jefferson once? Because Jefferson was merely an innocent bystander. He took the whiskey to calm his nerves, not to celebrate. He took the money out of hunger and plain stupidity.

“Gentlemen of the jury, look at this—this—this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool<sup>1</sup>. A fool is not aware of right and wrong. A fool does what others tell him to do. A fool got into that automobile. A man with a modicum of<sup>2</sup> intelligence would have seen that those racketeers meant no good. But not a fool. A fool got into that automobile. A fool rode to the grocery store. A fool stood by and watched this happen, not having the sense to run. [...]

“Gentlemen of the jury, be merciful. For God's sake, be merciful. He is innocent of all charges brought against him.

“But let us say he was not. Let us for a moment say he was not. What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog<sup>3</sup> in the electric chair as this. [...]

The jury retired, and it returned a verdict after lunch: guilty of robbery and murder in the first degree. The judge commended the twelve white men for reaching a quick and just verdict. This was Friday. He would pass sentence on Monday.

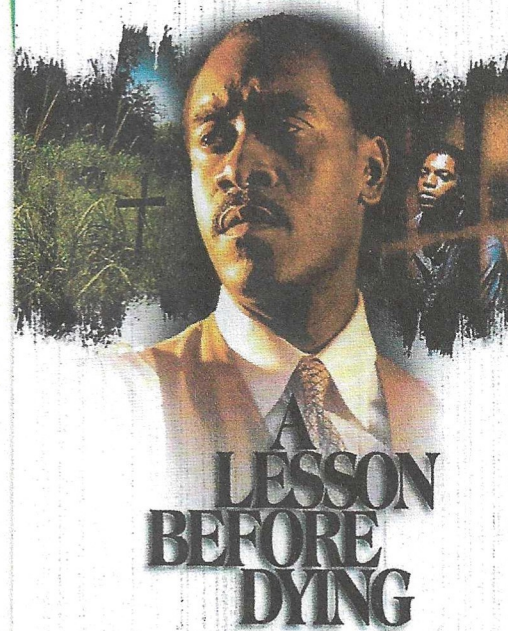
Ten o'clock on Monday, Miss Emma and my aunt sat in the same seats they had occupied on Friday. [...] The judge, a short, red-faced man with snow-white hair and thick black eyebrows, [...] told Jefferson that he had been found guilty of the charges brought against him, and that the judge saw no reason that he should not pay for the part he played in this horrible crime.

Death by electrocution. The governor would set the date.

Ernest GAINES, *A Lesson Before Dying*, 1993

1. stupid person 2. a bit of 3. pig

- Read the text and **sum up** the situation.
- Compare** the prosecutor's and the defense's versions of the story.
- Focus** on the defense's speech and **pick out** the words and expressions that dehumanise Jefferson. **Explain** his choice.
- STYLE** **Focus** on the sentence “Death by electrocution. The governor would set the date.” (l. 37) and **explain** how the use of free indirect speech conveys Jefferson's feelings.
- Pay attention** to the composition of the court and **discuss** the questions it raises.

DON  
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A young man's destiny becomes a teacher's journey.

▲ Joseph SARGENT, *A Lesson Before Dying*, 1999

## WORDS

- ◆ defendant /dɪ'fendənt/ = accused
- ◆ evidence
- ◆ prosecutor = solicitor

- ◆ biased /'baɪəst/ = prejudiced
- ◆ controversial
- ◆ lenient /'liːniənt/ = indulgent
- ◆ unfair = unjust

- ◆ charge sb with = accuse sb c
- ◆ lodge an appeal against
- ◆ reach a verdict
- ◆ serve on a jury