

A GUIDE TO

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Ernest J. Gaines

How long will it take? How could I know? He works in mysterious ways; wonders to perform.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a historical novel cast in the form of an autobiography. The author's use of regional dialect and historical events, as well as his thorough research into social conditions throughout a century of American life, contributes to the work's authenticity.

Setting: Several parts of rural Louisiana, 1864–1962.

Protagonist: Jane Pittman was born as a slave named Ticey in the early 1850s on a Louisiana plantation. Through the story of Jane's 110-year life, the novel traces part of the history of black Americans.

Conflicts: External conflicts of enslaved blacks and their owners and of free blacks vs. white racists; conflict among blacks over how best to achieve economic and social progress; Jane's internal struggles against grief, anger, and despair when she loses her husband, Joe, her adopted son, Ned, and the promising young leader Jimmy Aaron; general social conflicts, such as justice vs. injustice, love vs. hate, and rich vs. poor.

Climax: Jimmy Aaron, born on the Samson plantation and nurtured by the black community there, is assassinated at a civil rights demonstration.

Resolution: Jane, aged 110, defies the plantation owner Robert Samson and risks her livelihood to join the demonstration organized by Jimmy Aaron.

Themes: Love, faith, and hope will eventually triumph over hatred and racism; violence and guilt are the bitter inheritance of slavery and racial intolerance; freedom brings responsibilities as well as privileges; the struggle for equality demands sound leadership and courageous sacrifice.

Of Special Note: The structure and style of the novel incorporate many elements typical of narratives that stem from **oral tradition**. Among the most important are **dialect**, **prose rhythm**, **metaphor**, **slang**, and **repetition**.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman should pose no comprehension problems to upper-level students once they are adjusted to the book's diction. However, several episodes may be troubling to some readers because of explicit cruelty and violence. Likewise, students may be offended by the racial and ethnic slurs that appear occasionally in the narrative. There are also some sexual situations. Remind students that these features stem directly from the novel's realism. The author never sensationalizes violence or hatred. On the contrary, the novel's major themes clearly emphasize the triumph of peace over war, mutual respect over intolerance, and love over hate.

BACKGROUND

Freedmen's Bureau. Agency established by the United States government in 1865 to provide food, shelter, farming supplies, and educational materials to refugees and freed blacks after the Civil War.

Reconstruction. Period of readjustment (1865 to 1877) in the South after the Civil War, involving acute social, economic, and racial tensions. Although blacks enjoyed substantial political and economic rights early in the period, by the later 1870s their freedom had been sharply curtailed. White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan often terrorized blacks.

Frederick Douglass (c. 1817–1895) and **Booker T. Washington (1856–1915).** Influential black leaders who had contrasting philosophies. While Douglass urged black Americans to join together to demand social equality, Washington focused on education and the attainment of economic independence. Both men wrote eloquent autobiographies.

Cajuns. Descendants of French-speaking people who moved from Acadia (in modern Nova Scotia, Canada) to Louisiana in the mid-eighteenth century, after Great Britain took Canada from the French. Cajuns speak a mostly French dialect and have retained a distinctive culture.

Creoles. In Louisiana the term “Creole” refers either to French-speaking white descendants of early French or Spanish settlers or to people of mixed descent who speak a hybrid version of French and Spanish.

Huey P. Long. A fiery, populist Louisiana politician whose slogan, “Every man a king,” epitomized his program of economic and social reform. He served as both governor and U.S. senator. He was assassinated in 1935.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Renowned minister and orator, who was a major figure of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. King modeled his philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience on the teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi. He was assassinated in 1968.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Jane Pittman, the novel’s protagonist; born into slavery in the early 1850s, she spends all her life on various Louisiana plantations and reaches the age of 110 in 1962; becomes common-law wife of Joe Pittman around 1878 and moves to the Texas-Louisiana border; adopted son, Ned Douglass, is killed around 1899; Jane spends the remainder of her life on the Samson plantation. Jane is a **dynamic character** who grows in wisdom, religious faith, and insight.

Ned Douglass, son of a former slave named Big Laura; protected and adopted by Jane after Big Laura is brutally murdered by patrollers. At first named Ned Brown, he changes his surname to Douglass because of his great admiration for the black leader Frederick Douglass. He is gunned down by Albert Cluveau around 1899 for preaching justice and racial equality.

Joe Pittman, an even-tempered, philosophical widower who becomes Jane’s common-law husband and moves with her to the Texas-Louisiana border in the late 1870s. Despite his talent for breaking horses, he is killed by a wild stallion in 1888.

Robert Samson, owner of the plantation where Jane spends the second half of her life. He is selfish, cruel, and weak. At the end of the novel, Jane defies his order not to join in civil rights protests.

Jimmy Aaron, born on the Samson plantation around 1938 and raised by his great aunt Lena Washington. A passionate, promising young civil rights leader, he is gunned down for organizing the demonstration against segregation that is the climax of the novel.

PLOT

After a short introduction, *Jane Pittman* is divided into four books. The first three are further subdivided into brief sections with titles. Most of these sections are self-contained, in that they present distinct plot episodes.

Introduction. A fictitious history teacher and editor persuades Miss Jane Pittman to narrate her life history in a series of interviews. The rest of the book resembles

a real autobiography, narrated by Jane herself, who uses **first-person point of view**.

Book I: The War Years. The novel’s **exposition** is given in the opening sections against the backdrop of the final year of the Civil War and the conflict’s immediate aftermath. In “Soldiers,” Tacey, a ten-year-old slave girl on the Bryant plantation in 1864, looks on as Confederate and then Union troops wearily pause there from the fighting. A kindly Union soldier from Ohio named Corporal Brown tells the girl that Tacey is a slave name and gives her the new name Jane Brown. The book’s main **conflict** of white against black begins to develop: When Jane proudly declares her new name to her owners, her mistress punishes the child’s assertiveness by beating her savagely.

A year later, in 1865, Master Bryant belatedly reads the Emancipation Proclamation—promulgated by President Abraham Lincoln more than two years earlier—and the Bryants’ slaves are freed. In “Freedom,” they debate whether to remain on the plantation or to strike out on their own and build a life elsewhere. Jane, an orphan, collects her meager belongings and joins the group that leaves.

“Heading North” focuses on the leadership of Big Laura, the first of a succession of heroic characters in the novel who deeply impress Jane because of their courage and devotion to justice.

In “Massacre” the plot begins to develop **complications** as the former slaves are pursued by patrollers, poor whites who make their living by rounding up blacks. The patrollers brutally massacre Big Laura and her baby, but Jane manages to escape through the bushes and leads Laura’s young son, Ned, to safety. Jane decides to head for Ohio, where she hopes to find Corporal Brown.

In “Heading South,” Jane and Ned meet a white woman on the road, together with a group of blacks, returning from Texas to their ruined plantation. When she is questioned by the woman, Jane recalls the death of her mother, who was beaten to death by the Bryants’ brutal overseer. In “Shelter for a Night,” Jane and Ned meet a Freedmen’s Bureau agent, who pays for their ferry ride across a large river. With a mixture of **humor** and **irony**, “All Kinds of People” further describes Ned and Jane’s wanderings.

In the following two sections Jane emerges as a **rounded character**, persistent yet vulnerable, strong yet self-critical. In “The Hunter” and “An Old Man,” Jane learns from two adults, a black hunter and a well-disposed elderly white man, how difficult it will be to reach Ohio.

In “Rednecks and Scalawags,” a white farmer named Job directs Jane to Mr. Bone’s plantation. Jane finally surrenders the dream of reaching Ohio, and Bone agrees to hire her as a field hand. Jane says that she stayed with Bone for the next ten or twelve years.

Book II: Reconstruction. This part of the novel covers the last third of the nineteenth century. In “A Flicker of

Light; and Again Darkness,” Jane recalls the plantation school and its first teacher, a young man to whom she felt romantically attracted. Meanwhile, the end of Reconstruction brings the blacks new hardships. Bone is replaced by the plantation’s original owner, a former Confederate colonel named Eugene Dye, who shuts down the school and fails to protect the blacks on his land against the violence of groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

In “Exodus,” Jane tells how the persecution of blacks by white supremacists results in a massive exodus from the South. Ned, now nearing eighteen, joins a committee dedicated to improving living conditions for blacks. In “Ned Leaves Home,” Ned changes his surname to Douglass, in honor of the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. **Conflict** with Colonel Dye, who wants Ned to stop working with the committee, results in Ned’s decision to leave for Kansas.

“Two Letters from Kansas” recounts Joe Pittman’s courtship of Jane. The two decide not to marry but pledge commitment to each other, with Jane taking the name Pittman as a sign of her love for Joe. Ned writes from Kansas that he is working there for decent people and is studying to become a teacher.

In “Another Home,” Joe and Jane move to the Louisiana-Texas border, where Joe can earn a better living by breaking horses and participating in rodeos. Before the couple leaves, however, Colonel Dye deceitfully extorts \$150 plus interest from Joe. The bitterness surrounding Joe and Jane’s departure is balanced by their happiness in their new home and by Joe’s success in working for Mr. Clyde.

In “Molly,” Jane offers a humorous vignette of the Clydes’ aging, ill-tempered housekeeper, Molly, who tries to make life difficult for Jane because of jealousy and possessiveness.

In “A Dollar for Two,” the **mood** of the novel turns ominous, as Jane starts to fear for Joe’s safety in his physically demanding and often dangerous job. She has repeatedly dreamed of a wild black stallion. The sight of just such a horse along the fence near the corral intensifies this section’s **foreshadowing** of Joe’s premature death.

“Man’s Way” gives other somber hints of tragedy to come. Jane says that she consulted a hoodoo, a fortuneteller named Madame Gaultier, who prophesied Joe’s death. Three days later, Joe is fatally trampled by the black stallion. After Joe’s death, Jane lives with a man named Felton Burkes for about three years, but a part of her dies with Joe Pittman. Jane moves to the St. Charles River area.

In “Professor Douglass,” Ned rejoins Jane. Married and the father of three children, Ned has returned to the South to teach. His preaching of racial equality, however, soon creates a bitter **conflict** with white supremacists in the surrounding area. In “Albert Cluveau,” Jane describes a sinister and ruthless Cajun man who serves white supremacists as a hired gun.

In “The Sermon at the River,” Ned preaches doctrines of racial equality to a crowd of black followers. The strong

foreshadowing of his death—two white supremacists listen to Ned’s sermon from their fishing boat—is fulfilled in “Assassination,” when Albert Cluveau shoots and kills Ned as Ned returns home on the road from Bayonne. In “The People,” Jane relates with heavy **irony** how a corrupt sheriff ignores the evidence of two young eyewitnesses to the murder and perverts their testimony. Finally, in “The Chariot of Hell,” Jane confronts Cluveau and says he will die an agonizing death as retribution for his murder of Ned. The **metaphor** she uses, comparing death to the arrival of a character from hell, is fittingly borne out ten years later, when Cluveau dies, wracked by disease and guilty hallucinations.

Book III: The Plantation. In “Samson,” Jane makes her final move (around 1912), this time to live and work on Robert Samson’s plantation. “The Travels of Miss Jane Pittman” describes her **internal conflict** after Ned’s death, as her soul struggles between despair and faith. Jane recovers faith and hope when she is “born again” and joins the church. This section is especially rich in devices associated with **oral tradition**. For example, Jane uses the **metaphor** of “travels” to describe her spiritual journey from despair to faith. She compares her past troubles to “a load of bricks on my shoulders.” In addition to such figurative language, **repetition** and **prose rhythm** are prominent in Jane’s dream-vision of crossing a river to gain salvation.

“Two Brothers of the South” introduces Robert Samson’s two sons, Tee Bob and Timmy. Tee Bob’s mother is Amma Dean, Robert’s wife; Timmy’s mother is black. When Tee Bob breaks his arm in a riding accident, Robert irrationally blames Timmy and runs him off the plantation.

The next three sections contain noteworthy descriptions of the **setting**. In “Of Men and Rivers,” Jane describes the futile struggle to control floods caused by the river. In “Huey P. Long,” she reflects on the perennial **conflict** between rich and poor. “Miss Lilly” comically depicts an opinionated, inflexible woman who serves as the first teacher at the plantation school.

The last five sections of Book III comprise a tightly connected narrative, focusing on Tee Bob’s doomed love for Mary Agnes LeFabre, a young Creole woman of mixed ancestry who teaches at the school. “The LeFabre Family” portrays Creole society as proud, independent, and volatile. In “A Flower in Winter,” Tee Bob, who now attends Louisiana State University, first glimpses Mary Agnes and falls in love with her. In “Confession,” amid mounting rumors about the young people’s relationship, Jane is full of misgivings: She knows that Tee Bob has set himself on a collision course with his own family. When Tee Bob confesses his feelings to Jimmy Caya, his best friend at college, Jimmy is shocked. The end of the section strongly **foreshadows** Tee Bob’s suicide by hinting that Tee Bob makes a final gesture of farewell to his friend.

In “Robert and Mary,” Tee Bob passionately declares his love to Mary Agnes and asks her to elope with him.

When she refuses, he rushes to the main house and locks himself in the library. In the final episode, “Samson House,” Jane skillfully withholds key information, so that **suspense** builds to a **climax**. After the family discovers that Tee Bob has stabbed himself to death, an angry Robert is ready to punish Mary Agnes, who is falsely accused by Jimmy Caya of encouraging Tee Bob. But the dead youth’s godfather, Jules Raynard, forcefully intervenes to protect her. The **themes** of justice versus injustice and the guilt engendered by racism are strongly emphasized at the conclusion of Book III.

Book IV: The Quarters. The novel’s final part, which lacks subdivisions, focuses on a single narrative: the history of Jimmy Aaron. Almost from his birth in the late 1930s, the black community on the Samson plantation recognizes Jimmy as “the One”: a leader destined for greatness. Jane develops the **theme** of leadership, as we follow Jimmy’s education, religious training, and struggle to achieve maturity. His dedication to the civil rights cause is clear when he confesses to Jane that he has “something like a tiger in my chest.”

The principal **conflict** of this section is sharply etched when the aging Robert Samson prohibits everyone on the plantation from becoming involved in civil rights demonstrations. In the early 1960s, Jimmy becomes an energetic and eloquent young leader of the civil rights movement. Returning to the plantation, he urges the community to join the struggle, but the old people’s diffidence and fear of losing their homes cause them to mistrust him. Wisely, Jane explains that “people and time bring forth leaders.” As the main **climax** of the book approaches, Jimmy plans a demonstration to desegregate the drinking fountain in the Bayonne courthouse square. On the morning of the protest, Samson announces that Jimmy has been shot dead. The book’s **resolution** is brief: At the age of 110, calm yet defiant, Jane leads a group of neighbors past Samson to board the bus to town and join the protest.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Researching the Historical Period of the Novel

Discussion groups might select one of the historical eras covered by the novel and focus on political, economic, and social aspects of the struggle by black Americans to achieve equality. Students can then

evaluate the accuracy of the narrative by comparing key findings from the historical record with the conditions of black life described by Miss Jane Pittman.

2. Keeping a Reader’s Log

Students might use their reader’s logs to record reactions to each section of the narrative. When they have finished the novel, students might write a brief evaluation that identifies and analyzes two or three of the most effective sections.

3. Comparing and Contrasting Film and Novel

Discussion groups might view John Korty’s made-for-television film, first broadcast in 1974, and then focus on the following points:

- Which episodes in the **plot** have been compressed or omitted in the film?
- How is the **climax** of the entire narrative altered in the film? Which ending is more effective?

MEET THE WRITER

Ernest J. Gaines (1933–) was born near Oscar, Louisiana, and grew up on a plantation. Educated at San Francisco State College and Stanford University, he published his first novel, *Catherine Carmier*, in 1964. Like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), most of Gaines’s fiction is deeply rooted in rural Louisiana and highlights the destructive effects of racism, the challenges of social change, and the triumph of dignity and endurance over adversity. Gaines has served as writer in residence and professor of English at a number of universities.

READ ON

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The most famous volume of the poet and playwright’s autobiography, recalling both the sweetness and the harshness of her childhood in rural Arkansas.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*. An account of a young black man’s trial for robbery in rural Louisiana in 1948.

***The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.** Award-winning TV film (available on videotape), starring Cicely Tyson as Jane.

Wole Soyinka, “Telephone Conversation.” An ironic vignette in verse, satirizing racial prejudice.

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*. Poignant autobiography of the noted black American writer.

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