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Literature Teaching Unit

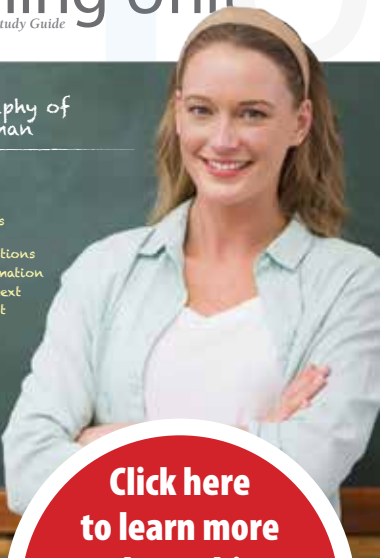
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Autobiography of
Miss Jane Pittman

by Ernest J. Gaines

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define autobiography and discuss why this fictional novel is written in the guise of an autobiography.
2. point out instances of irony in this story
3. discuss the importance of names to the former slaves in the story.
4. discuss the significance of the following symbols: blood, uniform caps, Ned's flint.
5. understand the hardships of daily life on the plantation, both before and after the Civil War.
6. point out the religious references in the story and discuss the importance of Christian values to Jane and to the black community.
7. cite incidents from the story to illustrate the following themes:
 - Despite the injustices of the past, it is important to strive for the future.
 - If people are told something often enough, even if it is untrue, they begin to believe it.
 - Man needs to respect nature and not try to control it.
 - Living in fear is worse than death.
 - People bring forth leaders; leaders do not bring forth people.
8. discuss the restrictions placed on the lives of freed slaves after the Civil War, which curtailed their ability to better their lives, including the patrollers, poor educational opportunities, and the lack of Yankee troops.
9. characterize Miss Jane Pittman; cite incidents from the story to show her strength, courage, intelligence, and humor.
10. discuss the significance of the chapter titles.
11. cite incidents from the story to support or refute the following statement: This novel is a model for the experiences of black people after the Civil War.
12. distinguish between the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass concerning race relations after the Civil War
13. point out examples of foreshadowing in this story.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In what sense is this story a novel, an autobiography, and an example of oral tradition?
2. What kinds of help do Ned and Jane receive on their journey to Ohio? Why is it ironic that the woman who gives them water claims to be a Christian?
3. Why does Ticey change her name to Jane? What name does Ned select for himself? Why?
4. What does Jane give Ned to hold while they are walking to Ohio? What might this item symbolize or represent in the story?
5. Describe Jane's "travels." Comment on their symbolism in her story.
6. Find two examples of Christian doctrine or imagery in this story. If this novel is a model for the experiences and feelings of black people after the Civil War, what do you think these religious reference imply about their religious beliefs?
7. Cite an incident from the novel which illustrates each of the following themes:
 - Despite the injustices of the past, it is important to strive for the future.
 - Living in fear is worse than death.
8. Compare Ned and Joe Pittman. In what ways do they both embrace the philosophy that a man must always strive to do his best work?
9. Why does Jane talk to trees and rivers?
10. List four restrictions placed on the lives of slaves during Reconstruction.
11. Briefly identify each of the following black Americans: Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Jackie Robinson, and Joe Louis.
12. Why does Jane seem to admire Huey Long, even though he refers to black people in a derogatory way?
13. List three major points Ned is trying to make in his sermon by the river.
14. In what ways is Tee Bob a tragic figure? In your opinion could Mary Agnes have done or said anything which might have contributed to Tee Bob's suicide?

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Introduction

1. Who is writing this introduction? Why does he encourage Miss Pittman to tell the story of her life?

2. Geoffrey Wolff of Newsweek describes this story in the following way: "This is a novel in the guise of the tape-recorded recollections of a black woman who has lived 110 years, who has been both a slave and a witness to the black militancy of the 1960's." What do you think Wolff means when he says this story is in the "guise of tape-recorded recollections"? Why do you think he refers to this story of Miss Jane Pittman's life as a novel rather than an autobiography?

3. Why do you suppose Gaines chooses to write this novel in the form of an autobiography?

Massacre

1. Who are patrollers?

2. Find a passage in this chapter which shows that Jane is a Christian who has some knowledge of the Bible. What is it an allusion to?

3. Find a simile in this chapter.

4. How do you think Jane feels when she discovers Big Laura's body?

5. Why does Jane give Ned the two pieces of rock?

6. At the end of the chapter, Jane is reflecting on the terrible day. "I was thinking about them, too; thinking about all the people; specially the slow-wit I had seen them kill; but I looked at it this way, we had to keep going. We couldn't let what happened yesterday stop us today."

State a possible theme for this novel based on the above passage.

An Old Man

1. What might the cap in the following passage represent in this story?

“We came in another thicket where they had had plenty fighting. You could see how cannon balls had knocked limbs and bark off the trees. It had a mound of dirt there about half the size of my gallery where they had buried many soldiers. They had put a cross at one end of the grave with a cap stuck on top of the cross. The weather had changed the color of the cap so much you couldn't tell if it belong to a Yankee or Secesh.”

2. Why does Jane feel like crying after listening to the old man? Why do you think Jane decides to continue her journey?

3. Some critics believe that this novel is a metaphor for the experiences of black people in general after the Civil War. Assuming this is true, what is Gaines saying about the lives of freed slaves when he writes that Jane continues her journey even after being told it is impossible?

Two Letters from Kansas

1. What is the assumed cause for Jane being barren?

2. Who is Joe Pittman?

3. What are some of the problems Ned faces in Kansas? In what ways is his life good?
