

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?

BOOK I – THE WAR YEARS

Soldiers

1. Define Secesh. Why is the Confederate Army referred to as the “Secesh Army”?

2. Why is it ironic that the exhausted Confederate troops gripe, “ ‘Just left to me I’ll turn them niggers loose, just left to me’ ”?

3. After the Yankee troops leave, why does Tacey insist that her name is Jane Brown?

4. Why, at the young age of ten or eleven, is Jane sent to work in the fields?

Freedom

1. What was the Emancipation Proclamation? What choices do the slaves have after the master reads them the papers?

2. Why do some of the freed slaves decide to remain on the plantation?

3. What do you think the “blood” might represent in this passage?

“They got blood on this place, and I done stepped all in it. I done waded in it to my waist. You can mend a broken heart, you can’t wash blood off your body.”

Heading North

1. Briefly describe Big Laura.

2. What can you infer about the life of female slaves in the incident where Big Laura must prevent Jane from being taken into the bushes?

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.

Heading South

1. At the beginning of this chapter, Jane remarks that “When we came round the bend I saw niggers strung out all over the place just eating and resting. I had never seen so many happy black faces in all my life before.” What does this passage imply about the way the white mistress in charge of the group treats her black workers?

2. After listening to Jane’s story about how the patrollers killed Ned’s mother some of the “... niggers started looking a little scared.” Why do you suppose they are scared?

3. What useful information does Jane get from the white mistress? What does she try to tell Jane that Jane refuses to believe?

4. Cite incidents from the story to prove or disprove the following statement: There is nothing wrong with freed slaves remaining with their former white masters, so long as they are well treated by the masters.

Shelter for a Night

1. Who is the Yankee that helps Jane and Ned cross the river?

2. The man takes Jane and Ned to a home for displaced black children. They are given food, a bath, and a bed for the night. Why do you suppose that, at the end of the chapter, Jane tells Ned, "Tomorrow morning when nobody looking, we getting out of here"?

3. What might Ned's flint represent or symbolize in the story?

All Kinds of People

1. At first, Jane considers staying at the home for a few days. What happens to make her change her mind?

2. How does Colonel Brown treat Jane and Ned when they enter his office? Why do you suppose he fails to do anything to help them?

3. How does the woman at the farmhouse feel about Jane and Ned? What is ironic about her reasons for giving the children a drink of water?

The Hunter

1. What lesson does the hunter think the Secesh are trying to give to the freed slaves?

2. Some critics describe Jane as a memorable female character who possesses both wit and wrath. If wit in this instance is defined as the ability to make clever or satirical remarks, find a passage in this story which demonstrates Jane's wit.

3. Give two possible reasons why this chapter is titled *The Hunter*.

4. What does the hunter's story reveal to the reader about the impact of slavery on black families?

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?

Rednecks and Scalawags

1. Define redneck and scalawag.

2. There are many Biblical references in this story. The man named Job in the Bible is a man who is tested by God. Everything is taken away from him, yet he maintains his belief in God and in the end is rewarded for his faith. What qualities does the character named Job in this story have in common with the Biblical Job?

3. Where does Job take the children?

4. What incident from this chapter helps the reader understand that Jane is a strong, intelligent, and courageous young girl?

5. What indication is given that lets you know that even though *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman* covers over 100 years, much of the time Jane's life is similar to what she has known previously?

BOOK II – RECONSTRUCTION**A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness**

1. The Republican and Democratic parties during Reconstruction have different views concerning the best way to rebuild the South and what kind of South is in the best interests of the freed slaves. Briefly discuss the differing opinions, the way Jane sees them.

2. The title of this chapter is *A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness*. In what way does the debate between the Republicans and the Democrats relate to the title of this chapter?

3. In what ways do the Secesh prevent freed slaves from striking out on their own to make new lives for themselves?

4. Why do the Yankees fail to provide troops to protect the slaves they fought a war to free? What is the “deal” the Yankees and the Secesh make?

5. After Bone leaves, why does Jane decide to stay on the plantation instead of continuing her journey North to Ohio?

6. Jane states, “It was slavery again, all right.” What evidence is there to support Jane’s opinion? What, if anything, is different about her life on the plantation after the War?

Exodus

1. Why is the Bayou called the "Dirty Bayou?"

2. Define oral tradition. In what sense is this novel an example of oral tradition?

Ned Leaves Home

1. What is Ned's job with the committee of colored soldiers from the war? What name does he select for himself?

2. Why does Ned leave home? Where does he go?

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?

Another Home

1. Why does Joe Pittman want to move to a place on the Louisiana-Texas border? What roadblocks does Colonel Dye put in his way to try and keep Joe on the plantation?

2. How do Jane and Joe feel about their move?

Molly

1. Why is Molly mean to Jane?

2. It is clear that Molly wants to remain in the house and that Miss Clare wants Molly there. Why then does Molly move out and refuse to return home?

3. What is surprising about her death?

A Dollar for Two

1. In the following passage, Joe talks about why he continues to ride the hard horses:

“Maybe some little young buck’ll come along and take over Chief from me and I won’t have to ride the terrible ones no more. But till that day get here I got to keep going. That’s what life’s about, doing it good as you can.”

State a lesson about life based on what Joe says.

2. Why is Jane frightened by the stallion?

Man's Way

1. Who is the “hoo-doo”? Why does Jane go to see her? What would you assume the name “hoo-doo” comes from?

2. In the following passage Madame Gautier explains to Jane why men insist on doing dangerous things like riding that stallion:

“I have told you the horse is just one. If not the horse, then the lion, if not the lion, then the woman, if not the woman, then the war, then the politic, then the whisky. Man must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him.”

What do you think Madame Gautier is saying when she tells Jane, “...he don't know everything is already inside him”?

3. Some critics believe that Jane tells the story of her life in a detached way because time has softened the wounds. Find a passage in this chapter to illustrate her detached manner. Do you agree or disagree with the critics' conclusion about why Jane seems to be unemotional and detached? Cite incidents and/or passages from the story to support your answer.

4. Where is Jane living at the end of this chapter?

Professor Douglass

1. What is the difference between the teachings of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass? Which of these philosophies does Ned embrace?

2. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

3. Approximately how old is Jane now?

Albert Cluveau

1. Briefly describe Albert Cluveau. How does Jane feel about him?

2. Why do you suppose Cluveau warns Jane that the white people want Ned killed?

3. Why do Ned and his wife refuse to leave?

4. In what way are Ned and Joe Pittman alike?

The Sermon at the River

1. How does Gaines' style and the way he portrays Jane affect the beginning of this chapter?

2. List some of the important points Ned makes in his speech.

3. What is the difference, according to Ned, between a nigger and a black American?

4. Why does Ned believe that ignorance is to blame for their problems? What solution does Ned offer his people for their problems?

5. Find a passage in Ned's sermon that helps to explain his decision to stay and fight.

6. Find an allusion to a 1968 event at the end of the chapter.

Assassination

1. Why does Ned jump down from the wagon and run toward Cluveau instead of trying to get away?

2. What might the blood mentioned in the following excerpt from the chapter represent in this story? What literary term is used?

“A trail of blood all the way from where Ned was shot clear up to his house. Even the rain couldn’t wash the blood away. For years and years, even after they had graveled the road, you could still see little black spots where the blood had dripped.”

The People

1. How does Cluveau get away with murdering Ned?

2. Discuss the significance of this title of this chapter. Who are the people? What has Ned become?

The Chariot of Hell

1. What does Jane want to say to Albert Cluveau?

2. Jane tells Adeline that she did not put a hoo-doo on her father, yet he suffers for ten years before he dies. Why do you suppose he keeps hearing the Chariot of Hell?

3. What do Jane's feelings about and actions toward Cluveau near the end of his life reveal about her?

BOOK III – THE PLANTATION

Samson

1. How old would Jane be in this section?

2. Briefly describe Black Harriet. In what way is she special?

3. Why does Harriet start leaving grass behind when she hoes, even though everyone knows Katie Nelson is incapable of beating Harriet?

4. Why is Bessie told to leave the Samson plantation?

5. Generally, most authors have a reason for including a specific incident or chapter in their novels. Why do you suppose Gaines includes Black Harriet's story in this novel?

The Travels of Miss Jane Pittman

1. How does Jane feel when she finds religion?

2. What are Jane's "travels"? What might the bricks, the white man, the river and the jet-black man represent in her story?

Two Brothers of the South

1. In what ways are Timmy and Tee Bob alike and in what ways are they different?

2. What aspect of Timmy's personality results in him having to leave the plantation?

3. How does Tee Bob feel when he learns that Timmy is gone?

4. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

Of Men and Rivers

1. Why does Jane talk to trees and rivers?

2. What is Jane's opinion of the levee? State a life lesson based on her views about nature's power in the world.

Huey P. Long

1. Huey Long was the actual governor of Louisiana, beginning in 1928. He is remembered for establishing social reforms that helped the poor. What is Jane's opinion of Huey Long?

2. Long is elected to the U. S. Senate in 1931, and opposes the New Deal in favor of his own social and economic programs. He is assassinated in 1935. What reason does Jane give for Long's assassination? How does her reasoning point to her being an unreliable narrator?

Miss Lilly

1. Why does Miss Lilly leave the plantation?

2. Why does Joe Hardy leave the plantation?

3. What do the last two chapters teach the reader about the lives of black people in the 1930's?

A Flower in Winter

1. What in your opinion is the significance of the title of this chapter?

2. Ethel is with Mary Agnes when Tee Bob comes into the school. Why does Ethel feel like laughing at Tee Bob?

3. Why is Tee Bob interested in Mary Anges?

Confession

1. Jane tries to talk to Mary Agnes about Tee Bob, and she assures Jane that Tee Bob is harmless. Why does Mary Agnes think she can control Tee Bob?

2. Jane describes the way Tee Bob looks at Mary Agnes in the following passage. “He looked at her with love, and I mean the kind that’s way deep inside of you. I have not seen too many men, of any color, look at women that way.” Why does Tee Bob’s love for Mary Agnes scare Jane?

3. What advice does Jimmy Caya give Tee Bob when Tee Bob confesses that he loves Mary Agnes? What does this situation between Tee Bob and Mary Agnes signify about race relations at this time in the story?

Robert and Mary

1. What do you think about the way Mary Agnes responds to Tee Bob's proposal? Could she have said or done anything else?

2. At the end of this chapter, what is implied about the nature of Mary Agnes' injuries at the hands of Tee Bob?

Samson House

1. What does Jimmy say about Mary Agnes that puts her life in danger?

2. How does Jules Raynard prevent Samson from killing or imprisoning Mary Agnes?

3. Why does Jimmy Caya say, "I didn't kill him by myself...We all killed him"?

4. In the chapter titled *Of Men and Rivers*, Jane explains why she talks to rivers and trees. She also discusses why man's efforts to control the river results in larger floods than if man had left the river alone. Consider this idea when reading the following excerpt from this chapter. In what way(s) are the social rules mentioned in this quotation similar to the rules of nature Jane talks about in the chapter, *Of Men and Rivers*? State a theme for this story based on these passages.

“We all killed him. We tried to make him follow a set of rules our people gived us long ago. But these rules just ain't old enough, Jane.”

“I don't understand you, Mr. Raynard,” I said.

“Somewhere in the past, Jane,” he said, “Way back, men like Robert could love women like Mary Agnes. But somewhere along the way somebody wrote a new set of rules condemning all that....”

5. Tee Bob flings Mary Agnes against the wall and she falls to the floor:

“She was the past now. She was grandma now, and he was that Creole gentleman. She was Verda now, and he was Robert. It showed in her face. It showed in the way she laid down there on the floor. Helpless; waiting. She knowed how she looked to him, but she couldn't do nothing about it. But when he saw it he ran away from there.”

What does Tee Bob see when he looks at Mary Agnes on that floor? Why does he flee to his house, lock himself in the library, and then kill himself?

BOOK IV – THE QUARTERS

1. Why does Jane want to move away from the cook's house to the "quarters"? How old is she by now?

2. Jane says that "Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One." Who is the One they are looking for? Why do they think Jimmy might be the One?

3. Joe Louis (the "Brown Bomber") was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. He defended his title 25 times, including winning his rematch against a German named Max Schmelling. The Nazis believed Schmelling would win, and they hoped to use his victory as proof of the superiority of the white race. In 1938, though, Joe Louis defeated Schmelling. For what reason(s) does Jane think the Lord sent the black people Joe Louis?

4. Who does Jane think the Lord sends the black people after World War II? How is Jane's life interwoven with sports?

5. How does life on the plantation change for the black community after World War II?

6. Find another instance of Jane not being a reliable narrator.

7. In the following passage, Jimmy describes a feeling he has, to Jane. What do you think is causing Jimmy's "gnawing" feeling?

"Miss Jane, I got something like a tiger in my chest, just gnawing and gnawing and want come out. I want rip my chest open and let it free. I pray to God to take it out, but look like the Lord don't hear me."

8. What happens to Miss Yoko that makes Jimmy want to take action against discrimination in Louisiana, just like Reverend King and the Freedom Riders are doing in Alabama and Mississippi?

9. Jimmy stands up in church and asks the congregation to help him fight the injustices heaped on the black community by the whites. How do Elder Banks and the deacons respond to Jimmy's speech?

10. Why does Jane say to Jimmy, "People and time bring forth leaders...Leaders don't bring forth people"?

11. Identify some words which are mispronounced through dialect in this chapter.

12. Briefly describe Jimmy's plan. Who is Rosa Parks?

13. What do the curtain, the quilt, the veil, and the buzzing represent in the following passage?

“And the worse pain, Jimmy, you can inflict is what you doing now—that’s trying to make them see they good as the other man. You see, Jimmy, they been told from the cradle they wasn’t—that they wasn’t much better than the mule. You keep telling them this over and over, for hundreds and hundreds of years, they start thinking that way. The curtain, Jimmy, the quilt, the veil, the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing—two days, a few hours, to clear all this away, Jimmy is not enough time. How long will it take? How could I know? He works in mysterious ways; wonders to perform.”

14. How is Jimmy killed? After his death, why do Jane and the others follow through with their plans to go to Bayonne?
