

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

by
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Book Information

Ernest J. Gaines, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

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246 Pages

Book Level: 4.6

Interest Level: UG

From slave to matriarch, a black woman fights prejudice from the Civil War to the 1960s.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Community Life, Prejudice; History, Slavery; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Women's Studies, Women's Studies (All)

Main Characters

Albert Cluveau a Creole who is hired to kill Ned

Big Laura a tough woman who leads a group of former slaves North until she is killed by a group of white men

Jimmy a boy from the quarters whom everyone looks to as a leader, who eventually becomes active in the civil rights movement and dies fighting for the cause

Jimmy Caya Tee Bob's friend from college

Joe Pittman the love of Jane's life, who is killed by a wild stallion

Jules Raynard a close friend of the Samsons

Mary Jane's friend who looks after her in her old age

Mary Agnes LeFabre the mulatto teacher Tee Bob loves

Miss Amma Dean Robert Samson's wife

Miss Jane Pittman the principal character and narrator of the story, who starts out as a slave and lives into the 1960s

Ned Big Laura's son, for whom Jane cares after his mother is killed

Paul Samson owner of the plantation where Jane goes after Ned's death

Robert Samson Paul Samson's son who runs Samson in later years

Tee Bob Robert and Miss Amma Dean's son and future heir to Samson, who kills himself after falling in love with a mulatto woman

Timmy Robert's mulatto son and Tee Bob's half-brother

Tom Joe overseer at Samson

Vocabulary

bayou a marshy body of water connected with a river

gumbo a stew or soup thickened with okra

sharecropping farming someone else's land and paying rent with a share of the crop

Synopsis

Jane Pittman tells the story of her life from her days in slavery to the time of black militancy in the 1960s. At the beginning of the story, she is a slave girl of about ten or eleven. During the war, she recalls serving water to both the Secesh Army and the Yankee troops. One Yankee soldier, Corporal Brown, changes her name from Tacey to Jane Brown. After this, Jane feels a sense of pride and talks back to her mistress. She is sent to the fields to work.

Soon news of freedom arrives on the plantation. Many of the old people choose to stay and work on the plantation, but most of the young ones decide to head North. Jane chooses to head for Ohio to look for Mr. Brown. She joins a group of former slaves heading North. They face many problems along the way, including hunger and angry white men who want to kill them. A tough black woman named Big Laura leads the group. She has two children, a baby girl and a young boy named Ned. In one encounter with the "patrollers," Big Laura and her baby, along with many others in the group, are killed. Jane and Ned manage to evade them. Jane becomes Ned's protector and caretaker even though she is still only a child herself.

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On their way to Ohio, Jane and Ned encounter several white people who help them out. Most of them have never heard of Ohio and try to persuade Jane to stay with them. She is determined, however, to reach Ohio until she meets Job, who takes her to Mr. Bone's place. Mr. Bone is from the North and has taken over a plantation as part of the Reconstruction plan. There Jane works, and Ned receives an education. Things are going well until the government decides to return the plantation to its former owner, Colonel Dye. It is like slavery all over again. Secret groups continue killing black men on the roads. Ned decides to leave and joins a committee that checks up on how the colored people are living all over the state. His job puts him in even greater danger from the secret groups. Jane begins seeing Joe Pittman, and they decide to live together. Joe breaks horses and decides he wants to leave Colonel Dye's place to find a place where he can make more money. Joe, Jane, and Joe's children go to Mr. Clyde's place on the Louisiana-Texas border. There Joe dies trying to recapture a wild horse.

Some time later, Jane moves near the St. Charles River, and Ned comes home with his wife and children. Ned begins teaching Frederick Douglass's beliefs to the colored people and is shot by a hired killer. After his death, Jane moves to the Samson plantation and works in the house there. She joins the church and "gets religion." She tells about the lives of the Samsons and their children.

In the last part of the book, the civil rights movement is in its beginning stages. Jane is over one hundred years old. She tells about a boy born in the quarters at Samson who is "the One." He is the person who everyone thinks is sent to lead them. His name is Jimmy. He lives with his Aunt Lena and is a very bright boy. When he grows up, he becomes active in the civil rights movement. He comes up with a plan to bring equality to his people. A young girl agrees to drink from the "whites only" water fountain. When she is jailed, he plans for other colored people to stage a demonstration outside the jail. He asks Jane to speak at the demonstration.

Because of her age, he knows people will listen to her. Before the demonstration takes place, however, Jimmy is shot by someone in a secret group. Jane and many others decide to go to the demonstration, even though the man they work for has told them to go home.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Miss Jane Pittman accepted many things in her life, and tried to change others. What were some of the things she accepted, and some she tried to change?

She accepted the treatment she received from whites. She accepted the fact that Albert Cluveau would kill Ned. She didn't try to "find religion" until she was ready. She accepted the responsibility of raising Ned. She tried everything she could to save Joe from his prophesied death. She moved on when she felt the need. She left the quarters when she felt it was time. She agreed to meet Jimmy in Bayonne.

Literary Analysis

Miss Jane showed great strength in many instances throughout her life. What were some of the occurrences that illustrated this?

She raised Ned even though she was a child herself. She was determined to save Joe Pittman's life. She wasn't afraid of Albert Cluveau. She spoke her mind to Robert Samson.

Inferential Comprehension

Why do you think Jane decided to go to Bayonne even though Jimmy had been killed?

Perhaps she thought others would follow. She felt she owed it to him to carry on what he started, since she was one who had looked upon him as a leader. She may also have known that change would only come about if someone decided to do something.

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Constructing Meaning

Ned and Jimmy stood up for what they believed in even though it cost them their lives. Discuss people in history who have shown that kind of determination.

Historical figures might include Martin Luther King, Steve Biko, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Cesar Chavez, Thurgood Marshall.

throughout the book unusual spellings of words were used. Some regional terms were used by the author as well. Have students find examples of these unusual words or spellings. Using context clues, discuss what the word might be and what its meaning is. One example is at the beginning of the story when Jane calls the colonel's sword a sable rather than a saber. Electricity is referred to as lectwicity. Some examples are mispronunciations, and others are regional words.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Miss Jane included a short chapter about Huey Long, but she didn't explain who he was. Research Huey Long and write about his impact on the people of Louisiana. Why was Miss Jane so passionate when she talked about him? Why would someone want him dead?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The story of Jane Pittman's life covers many years and many changes in American history. Have students choose one time period in Jane's life and research what was happening in history at that time. For example, she was a slave who was set free. In what year did this probably take place? Jane mentions the time of Reconstruction. What was going on at this time? Find out more about some important figures in history who were mentioned in the story--Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. The students may also enjoy finding out more about the beginnings of the civil rights movement.

Comparing and Contrasting Miss Jane Pittman lived for 110 years and experienced many changes in her life. She saw the development of many new inventions and great advances in technology. Have the students make a chart to show the way Jane's life changed from the beginning to the end. Some examples would be going from horse-drawn wagons to automobiles and from hauling water to having running water inside the house.

Identifying Reading Strategies Many times