



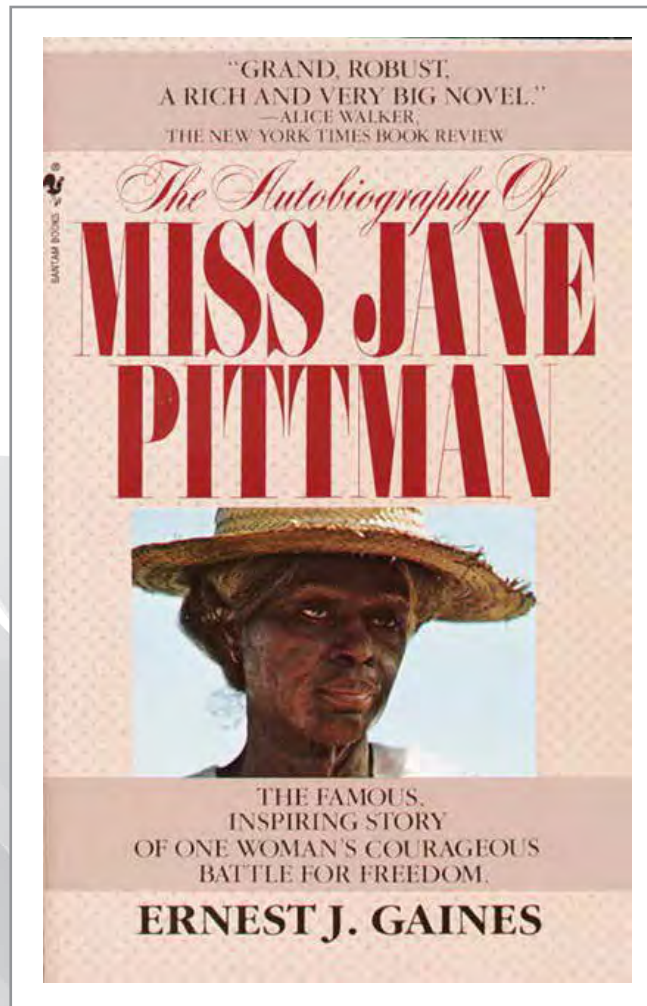
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Ernest J. Gaines



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

Ernest J. Gaines

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Thinking

Predicting, analyzing,
evaluating, researching,
inference, compare/contrast

Comprehension

Literary terms and application

Writing

Description, compare/
contrast, diary and journal,
letter, poetry, newspaper
article, eulogy, monologue,
short story, extending
the story

Listening/Speaking

Monologue, personal
experience, discussion

Across the Curriculum

Math; Science; Art—collage,
design, photography;
Drama—skit; History—
slavery, Reconstruction,
Civil Rights, famous African
Americans, family history;
Geography

Genre: historical fiction in the form of an autobiography

Setting: rural southern Louisiana from the 1850s to 1960s, spanning across 110 years of Jane Pittman’s life from slavery to the Civil Rights movement

Point of View: first-person participant

Themes: slavery, independence, faith, standing up for what one believes in, proving oneself, freedom and its limitations

Conflict: person vs. science/nature, person vs. society, person vs. person, person vs. self

Tone: reflective, scattered

Date of First Publication: 1971

Summary

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a fictional story disguised as fact. In it, an ex-slave traces 110 years of her life, beginning with her childhood as a slave girl on a Louisiana plantation, where she must fetch water for the Sesech and Yankee troops during the Civil War. As her freedom is announced, she and other slaves leave their plantation for Ohio. Along the way, her fellow travelers are killed, excluding a boy named Ned. At approximately age 12, Jane adopts Ned and cares for him as her own. Together, they travel for miles until they end up at the Bone Plantation, where they stay for ten years. After raising Ned, Jane finds the love of her life in Joe Pittman—a horse-tamer known as “the Chief”—and moves to Texas. After Joe’s tragic, daring death, Jane returns to Louisiana to live out the rest of her destiny. In each phase of her life she tells humorous and tragic stories of the blacks and whites who intersect along her journey. At the novel’s end, she defies her plantation owner by attending a Civil Rights demonstration.

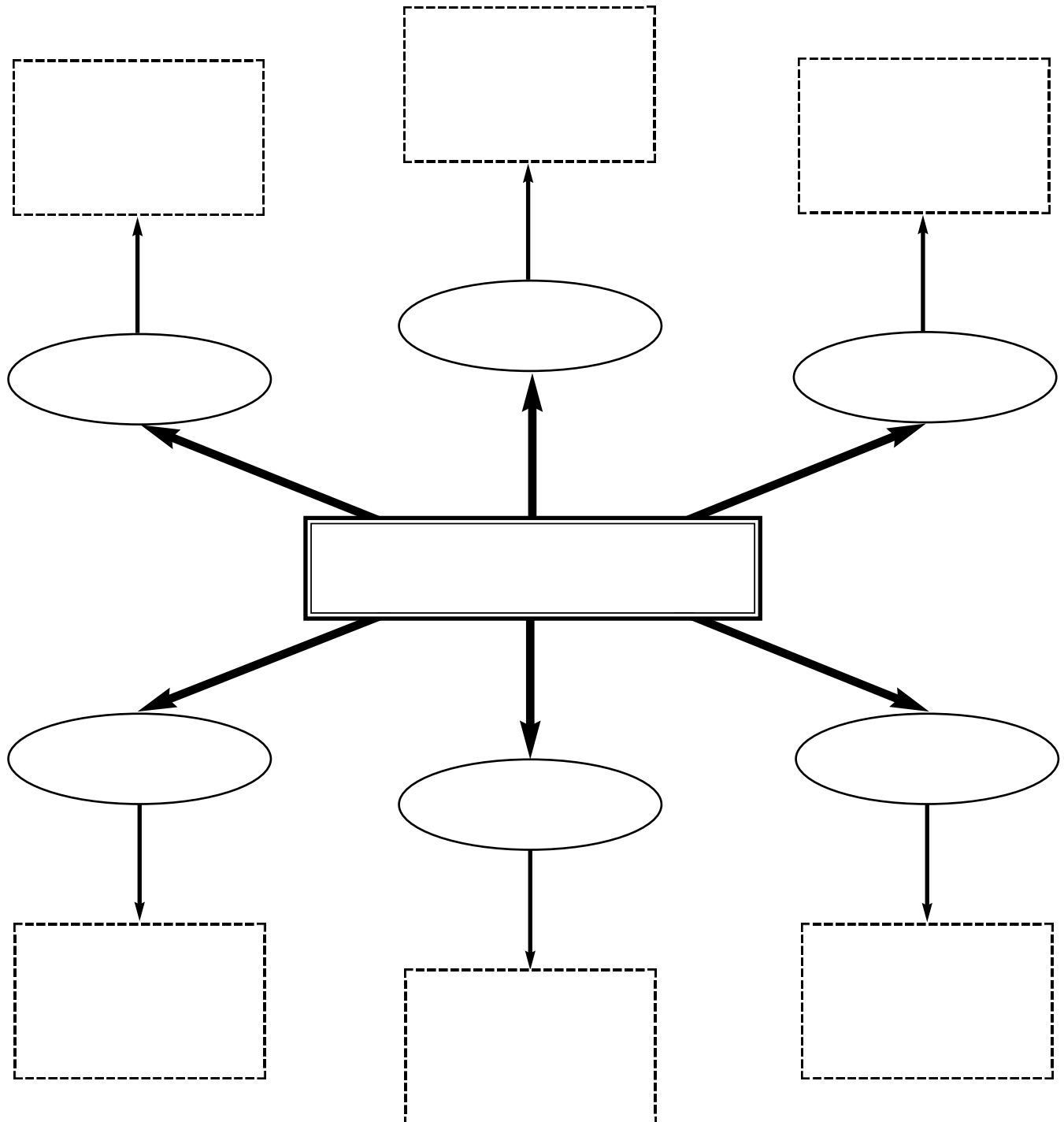
About the Author

Personal: Ernest James Gaines, born in 1933, grew up on the River Lake Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, where he received a limited education and worked in the cotton fields. The eldest of 12 children, Gaines lived with his maternal aunt Augusteen Jefferson until he was 15 years old. At age 16, he went to live with his mother and stepfather in California, where he completed his high school education. After graduation he served in the U.S. Army. Following his military career, Gaines attended San Francisco State College, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature in 1957. He won a creative writing fellowship to Stanford University due to his writing talent, and in 1983, he became a visiting professor in his field of creative writing. Eventually, Gaines became the writer-in-residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana Lafayette, now called the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He and his wife Dianne, a lawyer, spend part of the year living in their home in San Francisco and the rest in Lafayette, Louisiana, where they have built a house on a section of Gaines’ childhood plantation.

Professional: Gaines’ love of writing began in his teens. Fascinated by the works of European writers who wrote about the poverty and suffering of their people, Gaines became determined to serve as the voice for his own people. His first piece of writing—a short story called “The Turtles”—was published in his university’s literary magazine, and supplied Gaines with the confidence to pursue a professional career in creative writing. Gaines’ first professional work of fiction was *Catherine Carmier*, published in 1964. Many novels and short stories followed, earning him important awards and a place in American literature. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*,

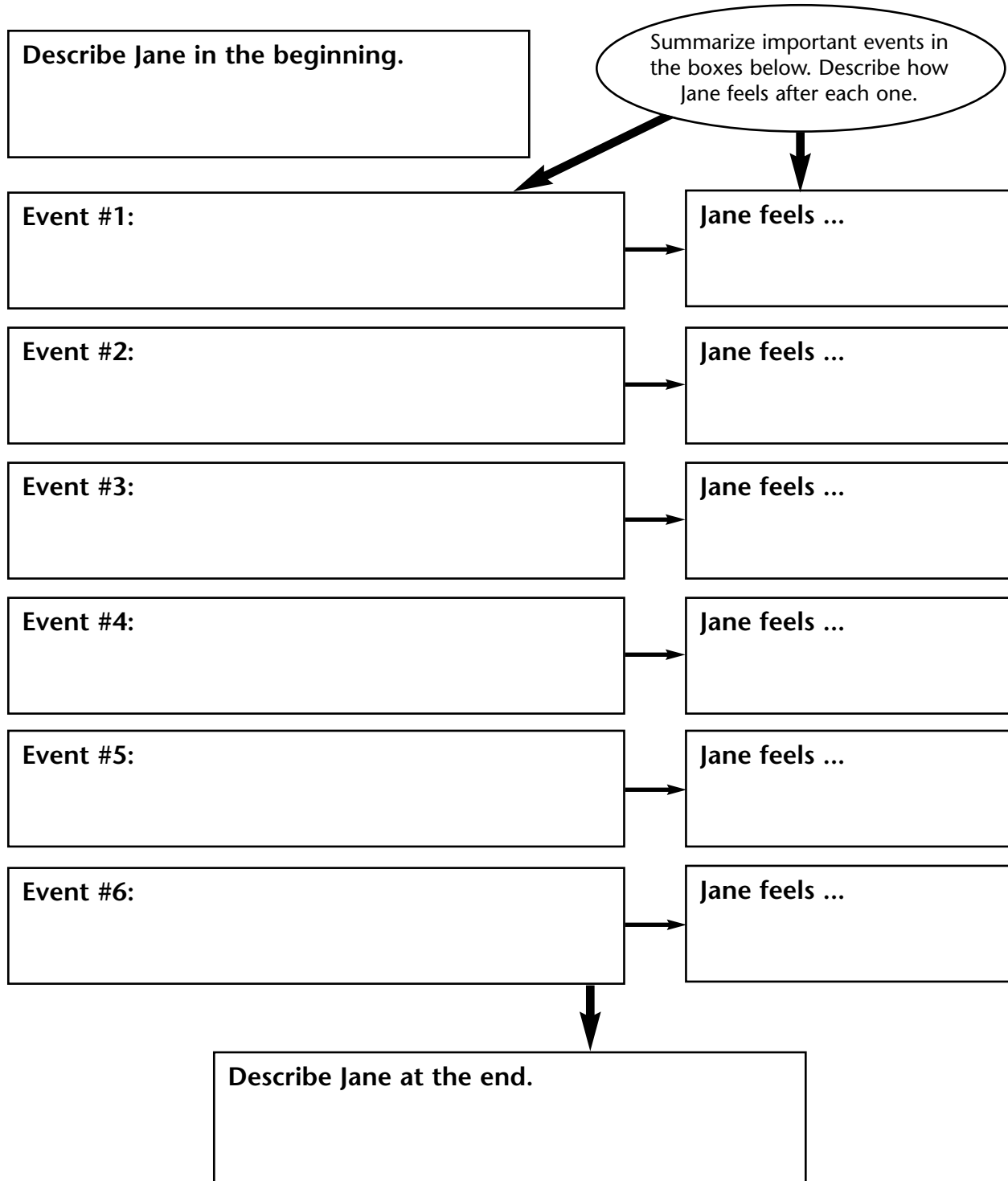
Attribute Web

Directions: In the center box, write the name of a group of notable African Americans (e.g., famous African-American writers, entertainers, athletes, etc.). In each oval, write the name of a person who belongs to that group. List facts about that person in the boxes above, including his/her birthdate, the date of his/her death (if applicable), and accomplishments for which he/she is best known.



Feelings

Directions: Complete the chart below for Jane Pittman.



Introduction–Book I: The War Years, pp. v–31

Miss Jane Pittman begins telling her life story at the age of about 10 or 11 years old, as a slave girl ordered to serve water to both the Secesh and Yankee troops. When the Northern troops pass through, she meets a kind soldier who encourages her to change her name from “Ticey” to “Jane Brown.” Because she will not answer to Ticey, her mistress has her beaten. Within a year, her master reads the Emancipation Proclamation and explains to the slaves that they are free. Some decide to stay on the plantation, but the younger ones decide to leave for the North. No one knows the way, but Big Laura leads the team of traveling ex-slaves. One night, patrollers find and kill most of them; Jane and Ned, Laura’s young son, hide and manage to survive the massacre. Together, they move on and eventually come to a large river where a group of blacks and their plantation mistress have set up camp. The mistress wants Jane and Ned to return to the plantation with her, but Jane is determined to reach Ohio and find Corporal Brown, the Yankee soldier who first gave her a taste of independence.

Vocabulary

parish (vi)
incredulously (vii)
gaping (3)
gallery (5)
cat-o’-nine-tails (7)
wench (9)
quarters (10)
Proclamation (10)
wrenched (12)
shares (12)
colic (13)
patrollers (13)
chattel (14)
bad mark (15)
squabbling (18)
pallet (20)
grub (24)
driver (28)
ravishing (28)
overseer (29)

Discussion Questions

1. Explain whether Mistress and Master value Ticey as a person. Give examples from the novel. *(It is obvious that they do not value Ticey as a person. The mistress speaks sharply and smartly to Ticey. Both Master and Mistress beat her with a cat-o’-nine-tails, and according to Ticey, are responsible for her mother’s death. The master beats Ticey for wanting to change her own name and later, out of frustration, sends her to work in the fields instead of allowing her to care for the children as usual. The mistress wants Ticey killed or sold, but the master is afraid that one of the Yankee officers might return and grow suspicious of her absence. Master and Mistress’ attitude is one of cruelty and unconcern for Ticey as a person. pp. 1–10)*
2. What events in Ticey’s childhood are particularly sad or grim? *(Answers will vary. Suggestions: She doesn’t know her father—who or where he is. Her mother was beaten to death. She has no family. She is later forced to work in the fields rather than in the mansion as the children’s caretaker. The plantation owners beat her frequently. She leaves for the North not knowing how to get there or what she is going to do once she is there. She trudges through swamps with little food and no shelter. She sees her friends murdered as a result of a brutal beating by patrollers. pp. 1–31)*
3. Describe Ticey/Jane’s will and strength of character at the beginning of this novel. *(Ticey, though young, has gumption. She inherited this from her mother, who was beaten to death for her defiance and refusal to be whipped. Immediately after meeting Mr. Brown, she proclaims that her name is Jane, not Ticey, and although her masters beat her for this, she does not relent. Determined to journey north to find Mr. Brown, she sets out with fellow freemen. After Big Laura is killed, she cares for Ned, even though she is still a child herself. She takes food, clothing, and a pair of flint rocks as she leaves Big Laura’s side. Although a nice lady offers Jane a job on her plantation, Jane is still determined to go north. pp. 1–31)*

Supplementary Activities

1. On a separate sheet of paper, create a Figurative Language chart. As you read, write examples of similes, metaphors, allusions, and personification. Continue this activity as you read. Examples: **Similes**—“opening and closing his mouth like a baby” (p. 18); “he looked more like a wild animal” (p. 19); “the sun streaking through the trees...like a long slide” (p. 23); “his skull busted...like a coconut” (p. 23); “knuckles crack like dry wood” (p. 30); **Allusion**—“when they nailed the Master to the cross” (p. 23)
2. Begin the Prediction Chart on page 7 of this guide. Continue this activity as you read the book.
3. Research the contributions of notable pre-Civil War African-American leaders, such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, and/or Dred Scott, via the Internet or your local library. Use an attribute web (see p. 8 of this guide) to record your findings.
4. Read the Emancipation Proclamation. Discuss the words and the reaction it would have on various groups: Northern Abolitionists, Confederate Army, Northern Army, Southern population, black slaves, freed blacks, plantation owners.
5. Read nonfiction slave narratives and letters. Discuss what you discover about their feelings, their lives, and their ability to express themselves.

Book I: The War Years, pp. 31–64

Jane and Ned continue north. Ned faithfully carries his mother’s flint stones everywhere he goes. A kind man helps Jane and Ned cross the river via ferry boat and gives them food and shelter for the night, but Jane decides to leave the next morning. Next, she encounters a hunter who offers her and Ned food and advice. Eventually, Jane and Ned approach a house where a man feeds them but warns Jane about the many dangers and long time it will take her to reach Ohio. As Jane and Ned continue, a kind man named Job gives them a ride. He lets them sleep in his grain crib and feeds them, and the next day he takes them to Mr. Bone’s place. Here, Jane’s journey comes to a halt. Jane and Ned stay at the Bone plantation for several years while Jane works in the fields and Ned receives an education.

Vocabulary

buckle (31)
sassy (36)
scrawny (42)
entrails (46)
pig-headed (47)
bayou (49)
woolgathered (51)
brutalized (55)
Gaelic (55)
slick (56)
coarse (56)
vulgar (56)
speculate (57)
rednecks (58)
scalawags (58)
crib (58)
pot liquor (59)
spare (62)
firehalf (64)

Discussion Questions

1. What do Jane’s comments about Mr. Brown and her trip tell the reader about her personality? (*Answers will vary. Suggestions: She is naïve and believes anything a Yankee soldier tells her. She has no concept of how far Ohio is and does not realize that there could be many Mr. Browns there. She makes no attempt to find out his first name or where he lives. Her views are provincial because she is a young slave, innocent and trusting. Things are simple to her. She doesn’t understand the complexity of leaving the plantation to find Mr. Brown in Ohio. She travels three days and is still in Louisiana; she has no concept as to the difficulty of her journey. pp. 33–36, 39–41, 46*)