

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman

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Notes

This novel is the life story of a 110 year-old woman. The story begins with an account of her childhood as a slave on a Southern plantation, it continues through Reconstruction, and it ends with the beginnings of to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The novel is fiction, but it written as if it were an autobiography. No one named Jane Pittman who had these experiences ever existed.

In the Unit, we have used the non-capitalized “b” on “black” and “w” on “white,” the same as they are used in the book. The term “nigger” is used throughout the novel but in a way that is appropriate for the times, situation, and narrator.

All page references come from Bantam Books edition of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, copyright 1971.

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Background Information

Emancipation Proclamation – President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation on Sept. 22, 1862, that promised freedom for slaves held in any of the Confederate States. The Confederacy and the slaveholders paid no attention to the proclamation. The slaves in these states were freed as the Northern armies captured a region. The remaining slaves in the United States were freed by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution Dec. 18, 1865.

Ku Klux Klan – The Ku Klux Klan was a secret group operating in the South during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. Its goal was to return the control of the South to the prewar Southerners. They beat and killed freed slaves, intimidated white sympathizers, and burned crops. The organization still exists.

Frederick Douglass (1817 - 1895) – was an escaped slave whose many speeches, books, and newspaper articles helped to encourage blacks to strive for freedom and equality. Douglass fought for the 15th Amendment which gave blacks the right to vote. He also supported the women's suffrage movement.

Booker T. Washington (1856 - 1915) – was a former slave who graduated from the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. He became the principal of a training school for blacks in Tuskegee, Alabama. Washington believed that the best way for black people to rise above the restrictions of slavery was to learn a trade and impress the whites with their economic and moral successes. The whites liked Washington's ideas and financially supported his school. However, many black activists disagreed with his policies. They wanted higher education instead of training schools.

Huey Long (1893 - 1935) – was governor of Louisiana and a U. S. Senator. He supported many public welfare programs and educational programs aimed at helping both poor black people and poor white people. Long was assassinated by a political enemy on Sept. 10, 1935.

Jackie Robinson (1919 - 1972) – was the first black American to play baseball in the major league. He played in his first major league game in 1947.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968) – was born in Atlanta, Georgia. He attended Morehouse College and in 1955 earned a Ph.D. in theology from Boston University. King believed in nonviolent resistance. He spearheaded the nonviolent boycott of segregated buses, which resulted in the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1956 to force the desegregation of buses. He went on to peacefully campaign for the desegregation of public facilities in Alabama. In 1964, King received the Nobel Peace Prize. On April 4, 1968, Dr. King was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee.

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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.

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Terms Used in this Novel

Creole – a person with both white and black blood.

Levee – is an embankment built along side a river to prevent high water from flooding the land.

Patrollers – The patrollers are poor white trash that capture runaway slaves for the masters. They are men who torture and kill black people without any remorse.

Redneck – a derogatory term for a poor white rural resident of the South.

Scalawag – a white Southern Republican during the Reconstruction.

Secesh – a secessionist; The Confederate Army is referred to as the Secesh Army because the Confederates want to secede from the Union.

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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?

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.”

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?
