The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman Study Guide

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Ernest Gaines

BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Introduction....5

Book 1: The War Years (Soldiers – Heading South)....6

Book 1: The War Years (Shelter for a Night – Rednecks and Scalawags)....9

Book 2: Reconstruction (A Flicker of Light and Again Darkness – A Dollar for Two)....11

Book 2: Reconstruction (Man's Way – The Chariot of Hell)....14

Book 3: The Plantation (Samson – Miss Lilly)....17

Book 3: The Plantation (The LeFarbre Family – Robert and Mary)....20

Book 3: The Plantation (The Samson House)....22

Book 4: The Quarters (Part 1)....24

Book 4: The Quarters (Part 2)....26

Characters....27

Objects/Places....32

Themes....35

Style....37

Quotes....38

Topics for Discussion....39

Plot Summary

Published in 1973, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman follows the tradition of the Deep South slave narrative and chronicles the experiences of the title character over the course of nearly a century of living. With its intimate and revealing portrayal of the lives of blacks from slavery through the civil rights movement, the novel has received numerous accolades and was made into a popular television series starring Cicely Tyson as Miss Jane Pittman.

Before the opening of the first section, or Book, of the novel, there is an introduction from the “editor,” a teacher who has been attempting to convince Jane Pittman to tell him her story. Finally, in 1962, the old woman finally opens up to him and, with the help of several friends who aid in filling in the spaces left by faults of memory, she recalls the various events of her past.

Born as a slave named Ticey, Jane spends her early years without her parents, working in the Big House on a Louisiana plantation. As the Civil War draws to a close, the young girl meets a Union soldier who informs her that she will soon gain her freedom. He offers her the new name Jane Brown, which she refuses to abandon even when her owners insist, with force, that she retain her given name, “Ticey.” For her disobedience, Jane is exiled to the fields.

After they are emancipated, Jane and the other former slaves leave the plantation, led by a woman named Big Laura. The group is discovered by a party of white “hunters,” and everyone is massacred except for Jane and a young boy named Ned. The two continue their journey to Ohio alone, set on Jane’s goal to reach the home state of the Union soldier who had given Jane her name. After a few weeks of travel and assurances by several people that Ohio is beyond their reach, Jane and Ned find themselves in the care of Job, a poor white man who offers them shelter and takes them to a nearby plantation for their safety. Mr. Bone, the plantation owner, puts Jane to work at reduced wage and sets aside a portion for Ned’s education. Jane and Ned move into a cabin and, after a short while, Jane sees her pay increase to reflect her workload.

The pair’s work on the plantation eventually comes to an end when the original owner, Colonel Dye, buys his property back and re-institutes most of the violent, segregationist practices of the slavery life. As a result, there is a northern exodus of blacks who wish to escape the changing situation. Ned, now a teenager, begins to help organize the transition, much to the disapproval of the white landowners. With the Ku Klux Klan threatening his life, Ned unwillingly parts company with Jane, who refuses to leave, and journeys to Kansas, where he receives an education and soon enlists in the army.

It is not long before Jane finds a husband in a man named Joe Pittman. The two leave the plantation and settle close to the Texas border, where Joe finds employment as a horse breaker on a ranch. After a time, Jane becomes concerned that Joe, getting up in years, is becoming unfit to work with horses. Haunted by dreams of his being thrown,

followed by the emergence of a new black stallion which resembles the animal in her nightmares, Jane does her best to convince Joe to back down, even going so far as to ask a local hoodoo woman for advice. In an effort to save her husband, Jane intentionally lets the stallion escape from the corral. Despite her best intentions, Joe is killed by the horse in the recapture effort. Jane eventually leaves and settles in another part of Louisiana.

Ned returns to Jane with a wife and three children. He sets up residence and opens a school to educate blacks. Ned's lessons on politics and civil rights anger the local whites, who hire a Cajun associate of Jane's named Albert Cluveau to kill him. When Cluveau accomplishes this deed, Jane tells the man that he will die a miserable death, a prediction which later comes true.

Jane finds her way to a plantation owned by Robert Samson. Robert's affair with a black woman has left him with a son named Timmy, a situation that causes trouble within the man's family, especially with his wife and other (white) son, Tee Bob. Timmy, who resembles his father in looks and mannerisms more than Tee Bob does, is eventually banished from the plantation for his rebellious spirit.

After a number of years, Tee Bob becomes enamored with Mary Agnes LeFarbre, a Creole teacher. His forbidden love for the mixed-race woman leads him to secretly ask for her hand in marriage against the advice of his family and friends. After she rejects him, Tee Bob commits suicide. Tee Bob's godfather quells the fury of those asking for the blood of Mary Agnes, acknowledging that they and their system of segregation are to blame for Tee Bob's bitter and frustrated end.

In the closing Book of the novel, Jane tells the story of Jimmy Aaron, a boy whom everyone believes will lead them to salvation. After spending many years beyond the confines of the plantation, he returns, educated in the ways of the civil rights movement and ready to protest. Jimmy Aaron is shot before he can lead the charge to the courthouse. Jane, with the help of another young man, takes up the fallen Jimmy Aaron's cause and leads the march in his stead.

Introduction

Summary

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Miss Jane Pittman follows the life of a former slave woman who recounts her life's story over a century of Unites States history. Beginning from her time as a slave and extending into the 1960s, she describes the many hardships and lessons that have come to define her life in the South.

In the short introduction, the novel's editor explains that he finally convinced Jane Pittman to share her life's story during the summer of 1962, after years of pleading for the opportunity. As an educator, he acknowledges the value of the glimpse of history that she could provide from over one hundred years of living, a history that has been excluded from textbooks. By recording Jane Pittman's words, and also using the collective knowledge of her associates to fill in the gaps left by lapses in the woman's memory, the editor puts together a story that he believes reflects the experience of an entire people. After she passes away and the editor has an opportunity to meet many more of the people who knew her, he is even more certain of the universal impact of her story.

Analysis

With the introduction, the following story is set up as Jane's oral narrative affording the author the opportunity to tell events from a single perspective while still sharing the collective vision of everyone involved. By giving a brief glimpse into the world surrounding the old woman near the time of her death and showing the way in which people responded and contributed to her story, Gaines establishes that the rest of the narrative is in many ways a universal experience, a living history that touches the lives of many people in the black community. Through the use of her oral account, Gaines then allows his subject to speak through the written word in a manner by which she would otherwise have been incapable due to her lack of education. More than anything, the introduction promises the delivery of a work which will give voice to a people long silenced by the biases of history.

Vocabulary

plantation, parish, incredulously, reckon, halt, narrative, contradict, ridiculous, repetitious, autobiography

Book 1: The War Years (Soldiers – Heading South)

Summary

Chapter 1. In “Soldiers”, the first chapter of Book One, Confederate troops are fleeing across a plantation on a summer day. A young slave girl called Ticey is ordered by her mistress to provide water for the troops known as Secesh, a derivation of the word secession. While performing her duties, the girl hears one of the men express his opinion that the war effort should be abandoned and the slaves freed. The men soon depart as the enemy Yankee army advances. Upon the arrival of the other troops, the girl is again sent to deliver water and meets a soldier by the name of Corporal Brown. He goes on to tell the girl that the slaves are about to be freed and that she is invited to come visit him in Ohio once she is able to leave. To mark her impending liberation, Brown offers her his daughter’s name, Jane Brown, to claim as her own. Accepting her new identity, Jane refuses to be called Ticey once the Union soldiers leave, even after she is beaten bloody for her disobedience. No longer welcome in the Big House as the caregiver of the children, Jane is exiled to the fields.

Chapter 2. This chapter, “Freedom”, sees the field slaves halting in their work at the sound of the signal bell. They approach the main house, where their master waits clutching a piece of paper. He announces to them that they have been freed, and after an initial celebration, the slaves are at a loss as to what they should do next. Offered the option to stay on as wage earners or leave to fend for themselves, those slaves, including Jane, who are not afraid of the world beyond the plantation decide to try their luck elsewhere. Having no family to depend on—her father is unknown and her mother is dead—Jane decides that she will attempt to make her way to Ohio and take Corporal Brown up on his offer. After taking some of the food offered by her former master and his wife, Jane collects her limited possessions and joins the others to leave.

Chapter 3. In “Heading North”, the group of ex-slaves struggles to find their way and understand the implications of liberation. As they make their way through the swamp, the imposing woman named Big Laura takes the lead and guides them until they set up camp for the night. When the slaves start to rename themselves, Jane takes offense at one slow-witted man’s decision to take her adopted last name of Brown, attacking him with a stick. In fending her off, the man’s aggression becomes sexual in nature, and Big Laura comes to young girl’s rescue bearing a stick of her own. Big Laura beats the offender to the point of tears and orders him back to the plantation unless he can refrain from forcing himself on the girl. When the group starts to walk again, they find their bearings using the North Star. They spend the night in the bushes.

Chapter 4. In “Massacre” the group awakens to discover that they are being set upon by “Patrollers,” a group of poor whites who make it their job to track down slaves. Jane and Big Laura’s son Ned take to the bushes and hide while the other members of their party

are discovered and slaughtered by the Patrollers. When the screams finally subside and the killers leave, Jane and Ned emerge from their hiding places to discover everyone dead, including Ned's mother, who apparently, judging from a body and the remains of bloody clothes, was able to subdue two of her attackers before she was brought down. Jane goes about collecting food and hands Ned the flint his mother used to light fires. The two walk on throughout the day and night until they come to a river that cannot be crossed. Ned lays down to rest, leaving Jane alone with thoughts of death and an uncertain future.

Chapter 5. In "Heading South", Jane and Ned continue their journey by attempting to find a way across the river. They stumble upon a group of blacks, the lot of whom mock Jane's plan to reach Ohio. A white woman traveling with the group, who fled to Texas during the war, tells Jane to return to her former home on the plantation. After Jane describes to her how her mother was beaten to death by her former master, the woman feeds Ned and Jane and offers to let them live on her plantation without fear of being beaten. Jane, in her determination to join Mr. Brown in Ohio, adamantly declines the invitation to stay with the group even after the woman insists that crossing the river will be impossible without money to board the ferry. Jane and Ned go on their way alone, leaving the woman crying at their departure.

Analysis

Jane's narrative voice is established in these early chapters as a hybrid of her native Louisiana dialect and the formal constructs of English grammar. While her language does ignore some of the traditional rules of speech, the intimate quality of Jane's tone and delivery, along with the use of colloquialisms and the occasional miscommunication of words, adds an endearing aspect to the narrative that provides a relatable touch to a series of events largely foreign to most readers. Her personalized view, in all its imperfections, serves to demystify the slave experience early on so that the full impact of its brutality is all the more potent in later chapters.

One aspect concerning the theme of self-identification appears in these early chapters with the acquisition of new names by the ex-slaves. Although they are forced to rely on the examples set by white society in their selection, Jane and the others take a huge step in redefining themselves by taking on their new, post-slavery names. The adoption of the title of "Miss" is especially important to Jane because it places her on a level previously only reserved for whites when such titles were required to be used by a slaves when addressing their white superiors. Her insistence on being referred to as Miss Jane Brown represents the sort of cultural defiance that inspired fear and hatred from white society.

The violence demonstrated by the Patrollers is just one manifestation of this type of fear, and it emphasizes the lasting influence of the old system even after slavery ends. With the coming of new competition for jobs from the recently freed slaves, what was once simply racial animosity reemerges as virulent malice from the economic desperation of poorer whites. In their own way, these whites, especially the Cajuns,

undergo their own sort of redefinition of self, one which depends heavily on their ability to suppress black advancement. In a less overt manner, this type of suppression is also what Jane senses from the white woman who invites her and Ned to return to her plantation. Though presumably well intentioned considering their situation, Jane sees the woman's offer as being counter to the true freedom represented by Mr. Brown's suggestion to come to Ohio. In that moment, Jane makes a choice to avoid falling back into a merely refurbished form of slavery and decides, instead, to follow the path that promises a completely new life.

Vocabulary

mistress, chinaball, gourd, wringing, keen, reckoned, sassed, Proclamation, quarters, colic, bots, chattel, thicket, squabbling, pallet, thrashing, bend, overseer, cat-o'-nine-tails

Book 1: The War Years (Shelter for a Night – Rednecks and Scalawags)

Summary

Chapter 6. In the chapter called “Shelter for a Night”, Ned and Jane are denied passage on the ferry due to their lack of money. After hours of sitting by the river, the two are approached by a white man, who is an investigator with the government and helps them gain passage across. Assuring them that their freedom in Louisiana will soon be just as guaranteed as it would be in Ohio, the man proceeds to escort Ned and Jane to a shelter where they can eat and rest for the night. Before bed, Jane informs Ned that they are leaving the next morning.

Chapter 7. In “All Kinds of People”, Ned gets involved in a fight with a boy who tries to steal his flint. When the white man who is looking over the children attempts to take away the flint, Jane interjects and is able to get the man to leave Ned alone. The next morning, Jane is disgusted to discover that playtime is dependent on her learning the alphabet. She and Ned collect their things and continue their journey to Ohio. On their way, they encounter a group of Union soldiers and learn that there is a man named Brown among them. When he turns out to be someone other than her Corporal Brown, Jane and Ned quickly depart before they have to answer questions. After this, they meet a white woman on the road who gives them water to drink despite an obvious resentment towards blacks and the Union Army that helped free them. The two continue walking and stop for rest at sundown.

Chapter 8. In the next chapter, called “Hunter”, Jane and Ned stumble upon an old black man in the dark cooking a rabbit. He gives them some of his food and explains that he is attempting to find his father who was purchased over in Mississippi. He teases Jane about her quest to reach Ohio and suggests that she and Ned return to the plantation they came from. They attempt to leave but are drawn back in from the cold by the warmth of the fire, much to the amusement of the man. When the two awake the next morning, the man is gone.

Chapter 9. Jane and Ned’s journey continues in the next chapter “An Old Man.” After trudging through the swamp, the two find a house with a white man sitting on the porch. He takes them inside, feeds them, and then shows them a map of the U.S. He also insists that Ohio is too far away, but Jane remains dedicated, even though (they joke) her plan to avoid Mississippi will likely prolong their journey by about thirty years. Jane and Ned leave the house and travel for another week, covering a lot of similar terrain. Finally, exhausted, the two ask a white man they encounter for a ride in his wagon. The man, named Job, helps the tired duo.

Chapter 10. In the final chapter of Book One, called “Rednecks and Scalawags”, Job brings Jane and Ned home, much to the displeasure of his wife, who does not wish to

endure the presence of blacks. She berates Job by listing off his inadequacies as a man. Job gives Jane and Ned something to eat and lets them stay in an empty food crib on the exterior of the house. As Job's wife continues to emasculate him, Jane questions the sanity of post-war white women.

The next morning, Job takes Jane and Ned to the plantation of a Mr. Bones, who is initially hesitant to employ Jane in the fields because of her size. He eventually bends to her urgings and hires her on at six dollars per month, minus school expenses for Ned. She and Ned are shown to their small cabin, a place where they are to live for the next ten years. After a little more than a month of work, Jane proves herself worthy of receiving the regular wage of ten dollars a month.

Analysis

These chapters describing Jane and Ned's journey to reach Ohio offer a glimpse into the various types of personalities that inhabit post-war Louisiana. At each phase of their journey, they encounter people who are willing to help them along the way when they are most in need. Oddly enough, even though each new character insists that the trip to Ohio is futile, they collectively help encourage Jane and Ned to believe that perseverance in their journey may yield some ultimate reward. Despite differences in social, racial, and economic standing, most of the people that they encounter are willing to give of themselves and their limited possessions in order to help them advance to the next point in their journey, even if it means temporarily instilling Jane and Ned with a false sense of comfort and security. It is through this inherent, universal sense of kindness that their hopes for something more permanent flourish, allowing Jane and Ned to continue moving forward against unlikely odds. The temptation to stay behind or return to the familiar, as opposed to moving forward, is a recurring theme in the novel. It appears in a more comedic tone in these chapters as a reflection of Jane's youth and inexperience.

By the conclusion of their journey, Jane and Ned end up not exactly where they started, but in a very similar set of circumstances on another plantation. The difference, however, is that they have gained more worldly experience and can approach their need to settle more from a position of choice than from a lack of courage to attempt something better. The spirit to bring about change according to their own strengths has taken root in them both, and it is this willingness to go beyond the boundaries of their given worlds that will continue to define both of their lives in the future.

Vocabulary

flint, giddy, ferry, hail, konked, cush-cush, scrawny, entrails, gashed, gnat, briars, speck, mantelpiece, moggasins, coarse, speculate, pecans, orchard

Book 2: Reconstruction (A Flicker of Light and Again Darkness – A Dollar for Two)

Summary

Chapter 11. “A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness” is the opening chapter of Book Two and finds all things well on the Bone plantation. Each member of the black community takes turns feeding their schoolteacher, having to rotate the same plate and fork between them for lack of any other utensils. Ned has become literate from his teachings, but Jane does not attend classes. Mr. Bone and his anti-slavery Republican Party are aiding local black leaders in the restructuring of the south, but their efforts are being hindered by violent white groups like the Klan and the Camellias of Luzana.

One day, Bone announces that Colonel Dye, the former owner of the plantation, has repurchased the land with the financial help of northerners. Dye’s return provokes the sudden flight of many blacks as well as the various powers of reorganization sent from the north. Despite the fact that wages are still being paid for work, Louisiana reverts back to most of its pre-emancipation practices practically overnight.

Chapter 12. The flight of blacks from the south continues in “Exodus”, although many are reluctant to leave due to the urgings of government departments and prominent black leaders like Frederick Douglass. Labor demands force white landowners to try and retain their otherwise unwanted guests, but many blacks still escape during the night in search of better living conditions.

Chapter 13. In “Ned Leaves Home” the seventeen-year-old Ned, now Edward Stephen Douglass, has begun to help other blacks in the effort to escape, a practice that eventually has the Klan showing up outside of Jane’s cabin one night after Ned refuses Dye’ request to cease his actions. Without Ned to help her, they injure Jane, and when Ned finds out, he insists that he and Jane leave for good. Jane declines his offer and chooses to stay behind. She sees her surrogate son off with tears.

Chapter 14. In “Two Letters from Kansas”, Jane marries the widower and horse breaker Joe Pittman, a man who accepts the fact that she is barren. Joe has his mind set on leaving the plantation in search of better employment, but Jane insists that they wait until there is word from Ned. After nearly a year, she receives correspondence from Ned explaining that he has moved to Kansas to help with the relocation of blacks. Another letter tells of his farm work and night classes. Jane recounts that Ned eventually becomes a teacher and then enlists in the army to help with the war effort in Cuba.

Chapter 15. In “Another Home” Joe finds work at a ranch near the state’s border with Texas. In consideration for him leaving, Dye demands that Joe pay him 150 dollars to

settle up on a debt owned for getting Joe out of trouble with the Klan. When Joe shows up with the money borrowed from his new employer, Dye demands an additional thirty dollars in interest, twenty-five of which Joe borrows from the money Ned sent Jane and the rest acquired from selling off his things. After paying Dye and getting his receipt, Joe leaves with Jane and his daughters from his former wife and heads to the ranch.

Chapter 16. In “Molly”, Jane and her family arrive at the ranch after several days of walking. While Joe breaks horses, Jane takes up work in the house with Molly, an older black woman who is bent on trying to get rid of her for fear of losing the preferred status she holds with the mistress of the house. When the mistress refuses to let Jane go, Molly quits to work elsewhere. She dies a short time after, presumably from a broken heart.

Chapter 17. “A Dollar for Two” picks up approximately ten years into the Pittmans’ residency on the ranch and finds Joe now as the Chief Breaker, unwilling to move into their own place because of his love for the job. Jane has growing concerns about Joe suffering fatal injuries from one of the horses and is haunted in her dreams. She tries to laugh off the notion until a black stallion resembling the one from her dreams appears in the corral. Joe brushes aside her concerns with laughter of his own, but Jane remains uneasy about the horse.

Analysis

The initial chapters of “Reconstruction” show the dismal plight of the former slaves once the political tide turns against them. Their so-called northern white “liberators” leave them to fend for themselves in the “new” south, and the federal government’s promises to create a truly free and equal south ultimately fall flat when northern forces relinquish responsibility for the reconstruction effort. In an ironic turn of events, the north takes a financial stake in the reestablishment of the old southern power hierarchies by providing the money that people like Colonel Dye use to buy back their lands lost during the war. Despite its efforts to tear down the old racist regimes, the north’s actions supports the belief that change must occur as the result of a trickle-down effect; the wealthy are left to determine how resources should be allocated for the benefit of the poor. This shows that, even after slavery, blacks were not completely trusted to be able to govern their own affairs and those in power would rather give the defeated rebels the benefit of the doubt than take a risk in favoring the judgment of ex-slaves.

The idea of social defiance also reemerges in these chapters through the actions of both Ned and Joe Pittman. Both men possess indomitable spirits not inclined to subservience to the white power structure. Each man, however, concentrates on achieving a different goal. Ned’s method of action is a more direct threat, as he attempts a frontal assault against the establishment in helping the former slaves get away from the plantations. He does not bother to take into consideration how the system will maintain itself in their absence. His approach, which is mainly political, also represents the type of opposition that is most likely to receive violent retaliation from groups like the Klan. Joe’s form of defiance is much more passive and personal. In buying his way out

of servitude buy meeting Dye's financial demands, he does not rattle the social order in the way that Ned does, instead he chooses to reintegrate himself elsewhere. Joe's case is personal and serves to promote his own self-identity while Ned's actions are aimed at establishing a larger community-based identity. Consequently, Joe is allowed to leave while Ned is forced to leave.

Vocabulary

scalawag, rations, hot-footing, buzzards, bayou, boggy, wharves, dimples, scorched, bosom, spiting, barren, tot, sprightly, grub, branding, sharecropping, confederate, possum, firehalf, vexed, corral, whinnying

Book 2: Reconstruction (Man's Way – The Chariot of Hell)

Summary

Chapter 18. In "Man's Way", Jane's worries about Joe and the horse lead her to the steps of Madame Gautier, a hoodoo woman from New Orleans. She explains to Jane that men often unnecessarily expose themselves to ruin in the pursuit of being "men." Jane receives powder from the woman to sprinkle around the bed so that Joe will not attempt to break the horse. Jane also attempts to release the stallion from the corral before Joe can break him, but she is discovered by her husband, who rides off to recapture the horse. The following morning the ranch hands return with both the stallion and Joe's dead body, which had been recovered after being dragged through the swamp in a failed attempt to bring in the horse. Joe is mourned by the entire ranch, and the man who finally breaks the stallion marries Joe's daughter. Several years after Joe's death, Jane moves to lower Louisiana and lives with a fisherman by the name of Felton. After three years, he suddenly abandons her. In consolation, however, Jane finds out that Ned will soon be arriving.

Chapter 19. Ned arrives with his wife and three children in the chapter called "Professor Douglass." Inspired by the teachings of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass, Ned tells Jane that he plans to open a school to meet the educational needs of the local blacks. Despite the reluctance of blacks to join in on the project under the ever-watchful eyes of the whites, Ned goes about putting his plan into action, teaching out of his house while setting up recently purchased land to begin construction of a school.

Chapter 20. In "Albert Cluveau" the chapter's title character, a Cajun, is introduced as an associate of Jane's who likes to fish near her house. His conversation is mostly consumed with talk about the number of people he has supposedly killed. Eventually Cluveau informs Jane that he has been enlisted by the whites in town to kill Ned because of his school plans. Jane faints at his earnest intentions, and later goes to warn Ned. He will not back down from teaching, having already accepted that coming back would likely cost him his life.

Chapter 21. In "The Sermon at the River", Ned gathers his family and students for a talk as white men out on the river listen from their boat. Ned encourages everyone present to stand up and be unafraid to chase after their dreams. He claims that they are equal as human beings and as Americans and should not be content with remaining subservient. Ned believes that change can occur if only people will take action. When he finishes speaking, Jane notices a deathly look in Ned's eyes, but she also knows that he is not afraid.

Chapter 22. In "Assassination", Ned and a couple of his students head into Bayonne to collect building materials for the school. On their way back, they are confronted by a

gun-toting Cluveau. Ned prevents his students from attacking, and instead he charges the man on his own. Cluveau first puts a bullet in Ned's knee in an attempt to comply with the white townsmen's wishes to make the man kneel, but Ned keeps coming until Cluveau sends a shot to his chest. After his murder, his students bring the body back to his house. Ned is laid to rest in the yard of the school which is eventually completed by members of the community.

Chapter 23. "The People" chronicles the aftermath of Ned's murder. Once news spreads, people comes to the house of the grieving family to pay respects and lay hands on the wood that supported Ned's body after he was shot. When the students who witnessed the shooting back down out of fear of retaliation for pointing out Cluveau's involvement, the sheriff dismisses the case without justice. Ned's family returns home to Kansas at the suggestion of Jane, and a new teacher arrives on the scene once the school is complete. His lessons do not involve discussions on race or activism. The school remains open until 1927 when it is destroyed in a flood.

Chapter 24. Ned's death leads Jane to search for Cluveau in the chapter called "The Chariot of Hell." The man's daughter constantly denies that he is at home, but Jane spies him hiding one day in back of the house. She eventually meets him down by the river and makes the claim that the Chariot of Hell will take him away screaming. When sickness takes hold of him a year later, Cluveau is haunted by sounds of the chariot, and he beats his daughter, convinced that her sinful ways have brought this misery upon him. The daughter entreats Jane to remove the curse for her sake, but Jane insists that she never put an actual curse on Cluveau. Another ten years pass before Cluveau dies, screaming for three days and then finally falling lifeless into the arms of his daughter.

Analysis

Madame Gautier sums up the popular theme of rediscovering masculinity with her notion of "man's way." She asserts that men bring themselves to their own ruin by trying to constantly prove that they are men. The irony of her particular application lies in the fact that, while Joe's actions to retrieve the stallion ultimately cause his death, Jane inadvertently helps cause the situation by setting the horse free from the corral. In addition to racial and social issues, there are many gender clashes within the novel. The novel paints most of the black women as strong, domineering forces that are capable of taking on the challenges of men. The Louisiana class structure is largely patriarchal, but within the black community, the father figure is often absent, and the women usually have to compensate. Consequently, most of the black women seem to develop a natural distrust when a male force rises to claim status. In her own way, Jane, through her actions with Joe, shows that. like the establishment, she does not fully trust her husband's ability to be a man through his chosen method of development. She would much rather he be inactive than risk sacrificing himself for what he believes in. The deprivation of the right to choose his own destiny is often the catalyst jolting the male characters into action. Jane tries to cheat fate by attempting to save Joe from himself and thereby reinforces the system which he is striving against.

From a plot development standpoint, this section takes full advantage of the oral narration technique. Often stepping outside of the chronological sequence of events, Jane's wandering recollections provide several instances of foreshadowing, particularly concerning death. Her ability to recall certain circumstances and mannerisms in retrospect add to the richness of the text by creating a feeling of suspense long before an event actually occurs. She also benefits from hindsight and is able to develop characters more fully by considering their actions in relation to what she knows to be their ultimate fate.

Vocabulary

hoodoo, mulatto, crepe, grippe, cock, bowlegged, jobbing, derrick, gallery, steep, levee, harping, wake, headland, gigging, beckoning, muscadines, madhouse

Book 3: The Plantation (Samson – Miss Lilly)

Summary

Chapter 25. In “Samson”, Ned’s death has made Jane want to live elsewhere in order to escape from the painful memories, but friends convince her that moving to the nearby plantation owned by Robert Samson will help her just as well. Despite Samson’s concerns about her ability to work due to her advancing years, Jane manages to convince him of her worth and earns a place on the plantation as a field worker.

Jane tells the story of a field worker referred to as Black Harriet and the race between her and a new girl. The pace of the competition causes Harriet to do an inferior job as she leaves weeds and chops up the cotton. The overseer, Tom Joe, beats her for her sloppiness and disrespect and a fight ensues when the other women come to Harriet’s aid. The end of the ordeal leaves Harriet with a disturbed mental state that requires her to be sent away. Many of the other women involved in the fight are fired, but the overseer receives no punishment for his part the events.

Chapter 26. In the chapter called “The Travels of Miss Jane Pittman”, Jane decides that she wants to take an active role in the church, even though, at first, she does not feel moved by the Spirit. Jane has a vision that she is burdened by a hefty sack and while traveling with it, a person who she believes to be God advises her to cross a river to relieve herself of the load. As she traverses the rugged terrain, she is approached by a white man offering to take the load from her. When she refuses his help, the man turns into several men from her past, including Ned, Joe, and Cluveau, each asking if they can take her sack. She turns them all down and eventually reaches the other side where she encounters the savior. In her feeling of renewal, Jane believes she has discovered religion.

Chapter 27. The next chapter is called “Two Brothers of the South”, and it tells the story of Robert Samson and his two sons: the white Tee Bob and the half-black Timmy. The son of a black woman who lives on the plantation, Timmy possesses more characteristics of his father than does his white sibling. The two remain close, despite Timmy being six years Tee Bob’s senior, and undeterred by the racial restrictions that Robert and his wife try to force on them. Jane, now working at the house as Tee Bob’s new nanny, falls victim to one of their jokes when she is tricked into taking an unbroken horse out for a ride. Samson’s wife, Miss Amma Dean, demands that Timmy receive punishment, but the boy’s father laughs it off as good sport.

One day, the overseer, Tom Joe, causes Timmy serious injuries, punishing him for his rebellious spirit. Once he recovers, Robert removes Timmy from the plantation, feeling that his son needs to learn that as a black man he is not equal in station to a white man.

His brother's exile confuses Tee Bob, and Jane reveals that the boy's eventual suicide will prevent him from ever finding the answer to his questions.

Chapter 28 "Of Men and Rivers" is a short chapter telling about the 1927 flood that breaks through the levee and destroys Ned's schoolhouse. Jane ruminates on man's inability to dominate the rivers and examines the differences between the white man's views and those of the Indians when it comes to appreciating the awesome powers of nature. She believes that, despite whatever attempts the white men may undertake to contain them through spillways or levees, the eternal rivers will always prevail.

Chapter 29. In "Huey P. Long", Jane remembers the rise and fall of Long as he tried to help the poor of Louisiana. She feels that his death was arranged on account of a deep desire for the rich to suppress those of lesser economic means, regardless of race.

Chapter 30. In "Miss Lilly", Jane's full-time duties at the Big House lead her to take up residence nearby with Miss Lilly, the new schoolteacher, as her roommate. Miss Lilly has plans to reform the children according to rules of proper social etiquette but constantly argues with their parents about their conflicting methods of discipline. Unable to adjust to the academic environment, Miss Lilly soon leaves and is replaced by Hardy, a black teacher who insists the he is not being adequately compensated for his services. His habit of flirting with the schoolgirls eventually earns him a beating, and he is soon run out of town. The school is then without an instructor until the arrival of Mary Agnes LeFarbre after nearly a year.

Analysis

Jane's settlement on the Samson Plantation marks the first time in the novel that she has been truly stationary. The transition also marks a shift in narrative concentration as Jane begins to focus more on the movement of things and people around her as opposed to dwelling on her role as an active participant. In terms of her mindset, Jane has established much of who she is and what she represents as a person, and many of the characters now turn to her in order to better understand themselves and their environments.

As the struggle between the races continues to be explored, the narrative begins to focus on how differences in race affect families of mixed heritage. The first subjects of observation are the brothers Timmy and Tee Bob. While both are the sons of Robert Samson, Tee Bob is preferred because he is white, even though Timmy resembles his father more than his sibling. Regardless of the differences between them, the brothers form a very close bond. Together, they represent what could potentially be a new social order, one in which race is not a guiding factor in determining relationships. The power of the ruling class, however, proves to be too much, and while Timmy is willing to openly rebel against the system and take his place as an equal, Tee Bob is the model of indecision and remains helpless while the forces of society dictate his actions and eventually destroy his psyche. Tee Bob's inability to take action against the forces opposing him will be revisited later in his relationship with Mary Agnes. In essence, Tee

Boob represents the side of white society, which recognizes the flaws in its own system but is unwilling to do anything about it. Timmy, on the other hand, is the perfect synthesis of race relations and embodies the fighting spirit on both sides of his heritage.

Vocabulary

crocker, bridle, buggy, hyphen, kin, spade, briar, pulpit, mirey, whooping, cuckleburrs, rascality, uppity, spillways, brogans, asafetida, jobo, shrill, dictator

Book 3: The Plantation (The LeFarbre Family – Robert and Mary)

Summary

Chapter 31. In “The LeFarbre Family”, the narrative focuses on the story of Mary Agnes LeFarbre, a Creole schoolteacher who comes to the Samson Plantation. The grandchild of an octoroon, or person who is one-eighth black, and a white man, Mary Agnes’s features barely hint at her mixed heritage. Her family owned slaves, and she sets about working on the plantation as her way of correcting her family’s shameful past, an act for which she has been disowned. Upon visiting his daughter Mary Agnes, her father slaps her for the betrayal of her Creole family’s strict values about not associating with darker blacks. Jane recounts one episode in which blacks were almost hanged for trying to crash a Creole party.

Chapter 32. In “A Flower in Winter”, Tee Bob returns to the plantation from college in Baton Rouge to attend the services for his deceased uncle. This is when he first sets eyes on Mary Agnes. He is immediately taken by her even though he discovers from Jane that she is not white. The young man begins making regular visits in order to see her; he makes a scene with his ogling. He finally works up the courage to talk to her while she is waits for the bus.

Chapter 33. The chapter called “Confession” finds Tee Bob trying harder to win the affections of Mary Agnes, but unknown to him, she is not interested in pursuing anything serious. Tee Bob’s mother grows suspicious about the possibility of her son becoming involved with a black woman and questions Jane about their relationship. The entire time that Tee Bob is visiting Mary Agnes, he is engaged to a girl named Judy Major. At their engagement celebration, Tee Bob confesses to his friend Jimmy Caya that he has feelings for Mary Agnes. Although Caya does not approve of Tee Bob loving the girl because of her race, he does suggest that his friend attempt to have sex with her nonetheless. This comment earns Caya a punch from Tee Bob. Later as Caya leaves the Samson House, Tee Bob raises a glass to his departing friend, a farewell gesture that Caya mistakes as an apology for the earlier strike.

Chapter 34. In “Robert and Mary”, Tee Bob decides to flee from his engagement party to seek out Mary Agnes, who is preparing for her weekly trip to New Orleans. Tee Bob tells her that he wants to run away to New Orleans and marry her. She turns him down, insisting that it is impossible for them to be together, just as Jimmy has suggested. Tee Bob grows frustrated as she continues to pack for her trip. Outside, a young man named Clamp Brown is waiting at the bus stop for Mary Agnes. He decides to investigate when he sees Tee Bob leaving Mary Agnes’s house, and once inside, he discovers her lying on the floor. He immediately seeks help.

Analysis

Even more than the previous chapters in Book Three, this section sees Jane's narrative becoming even more detached from her own experiences as she begins to rely on secondhand information to tell much of her story. In this way the novel becomes more communal. Jane also exercises a larger degree of influence by choosing which parts of the story to reveal and which additional pairs of eyes are best suited to offer the description. As Jane's real life role becomes more important, the narrative approach reflects the amount of control she obtains by allowing her to dictate the pace of events.

Once Mary Agnes is introduced, a new take on the racial dynamic comes into focus by showing a more intimate glimpse into the world of Creoles. Among the various racial designations in the novel, the Creoles seem to have the firmest grip on where they stand in the scheme of things. They seem to have created a class unto themselves, where there is no particular need to connect with either side of their racial makeup. Although Mary Agnes demonstrates a desire to atone for her family's slaveholding past by associating with darker-skinned blacks, she is a rare exception. Through the actions of Mary Agnes's family, it is seen that while Creoles forbid interaction with darker skinned blacks, they do not necessarily encourage the idea of catering to pure whites either. In fact, they seem to be fully aware that such interaction is equally out of the question, as shown by Mary Agnes's acknowledgement that Jimmy Caya is right about her not being able to be with Tee Bob. Unlike the ideas of change promoted by mixed-heritage characters such as Timmy, the Creole concept of racial coexistence does not seek to influence others because it has managed to find a sufficient and desirable, if segregated, balance within itself.

Vocabulary

Creoles, dagoes, spools, Sicilians, settlement, lanterns, copron, hollering, arithmetic, decent, saddle

Book 3: The Plantation (The Samson House)

Summary

Chapter 35. Jane and Tee Bob's parrain (godfather), Jules Raynard, are drinking coffee and discussing Mary Agnes and Tee Bob when the young man dashes into the house and proceeds to lock himself away in the library. Clamp arrives with the news that Mary Agnes has been sexually assaulted. The scene soon turns to panic, and Raynard sends Robert to convince Tee Bob to come from the library. When the young man does not respond, Robert forces his way into the room with an axe, and the group discovers Tee Bob dead inside, the apparent victim of a self-inflicted stab wound to the stomach with a letter opener. Raynard retrieves a letter from the table and slips it into his pocket. He later reveals that the note was meant for Miss Amma Dean.

Jimmy Caya appears on the scene and, angry over the death of his friend, blames Mary Agnes for the situation. Raynard pleads with Robert not to retaliate against Mary Agnes and slaps Caya when the young man continues his demands for justice. When Raynard accuses him of being responsible for Tee Bob's death, Caya explains that he was merely telling his friend earlier about the social consequences of having an affair with Mary Agnes. When the sheriff arrives and inspects the scene, he sends Caya home in disgust.

The sheriff and Raynard go to ask Mary Agnes some questions. The sheriff is forceful with her, but Raynard manages to coax her more gently into talking. Mary Agnes denies being raped, insisting that she hit her head when Tee Bob tried to stop her from leaving. Raynard tells the girl to disappear from the plantation and not let anyone know her subsequent whereabouts or the details of Tee Bob's death. The following day the papers simply report that Tee Bob took his own life and neglect to mention Mary Agnes's involvement. Raynard later tells Jane that they had all played a part in Tee Bob's death by insisting that he adhere to their strict segregationist principles.

Analysis

The suicide of Tee Bob demonstrates the ultimate self-destructive force present within old southern racial practices. While other characters struggle to repair or build a self-identity, Tee Bob chooses to destroy his own. His death symbolizes the ultimate inability of the segregated order to thrive. Not only is the order shown to separate individuals from each other, it is also shown to separate individuals from themselves. Tee Bob death shows that a larger form of social cohesion is impossible to achieve when the individual's soul is fractured. In the end, it is Raynard who puts all of the pieces together and declares that they are all responsible for what happened to Tee Bob. His statement

recognizes the interdependent nature of the individual and society by pointing out that one cannot possibly exist without the other.

Vocabulary

icebox, christened, serge, loon, ravished, whirled, dirk, rednecks, wench, flinching, scuffling

Book 4: The Quarters (Part 1)

Summary

Chapter 36. Book Four opens with Jane's observation that people are always expecting to be led and that they are constantly waiting for "the One" to come and deliver them. Each child born brings this hope, and the boy called Jimmy Aaron was heralded as a strong candidate to assume the role of savior. When his mother moves away to find work in New Orleans, Jimmy is raised by his great aunt Lena, Jane, and several other community elders on the Samson Plantation.

After Tee Bob's suicide, Jane expresses her desire to return to the quarters, but ultimately remains at the house, as Mr. Samson requests her to continue assisting his wife. Five years later, in the 1940s, Jane leaves to get her own place. In the quarters, Jimmy is seen as special, and by the age of nine, he has already become adept at reading and writing, even helping out the older people by reading to them and composing their written correspondence.

Jimmy proves to be an exceptionally kind and caring person also. At a time when the rise of Jackie Robinson is encouraging blacks to do the impossible, Jimmy Aaron reads reports of his games from the paper and makes sure that only the hero's best achievements reach the ears of his audience. Jane, a fan of baseball, listens to games on the radio and praises the exploits of black athletes like Robinson and Joe Louis who are challenging the establishment with their courage against white opponents.

With the onset of puberty, Jimmy starts to get into more trouble as his interest in girls blossoms, but the elders make certain to correct him severely in order to keep him on the correct path. Although many want him to take an active role in the church, Jimmy does not seem to show much interest until one day when he announces that he has had a vision in which he claims to have found God. Much to the disappointment and confusion of the elders, he denies that this is a call to the ministry.

With the leasing of a great portion of land to the Cajuns, who have decreased the need for other laborers with their tractors, the plantation is quickly becoming a shadow of its former self. Many homes have been abandoned as most of the adults have gone off to find work. Jimmy goes to New Orleans to attend school and over time visits the plantation less frequently. His status as "the One" is called into question when his interests shift from mystical and religious talk to race relations.

As Jimmy departs to pursue his education full time, the civil rights movement arrives in full force. Robert Samson reminds everyone that they enjoy most of the fruits of their life on the plantation at his expense, and if anyone chooses to become active in the movement, then that person can search for a home elsewhere. A later act of protest on behalf of the son of a local woman named Yoko causes their family to get kicked off of

the plantation after fifty years. The son protests Samson's treatment, but even with the help of Jane, his pleas fall on deaf ears.

Analysis

Again the theme of slavery versus freedom emerges in the Fourth Book with the concept of "the One." Here, another type of slavery is explored in the form of stagnation through overwhelming expectation. When Jimmy Aaron is chosen by the plantation elders as their messianic leader, the group attempts to mold him into that image at the expense of denying him a large part of what it means to be able to shape his own destiny. As a part of their beliefs, they maintain that he should live a certain way, even to the point of punishing him severely for the slightest infractions, much like the way the overseer was known to do in slavery times. To conform to their idea of what "the One" should be, they push him toward a position in the church, and when he acts against their expectations in favor of politics, the elders begin to doubt his elevated status and withdraw much of their wholehearted support of his efforts.

From a structural standpoint, the Fourth Book departs from the standard chapter formula and shows a new directed focus in favor of a single view revolving around Jimmy Aaron. Interestingly enough, this single focus seems to coincide with his status as "the One" by not attempting to divide his story.

Vocabulary

obliged, deprived, weaned, chastised, devilment, integrate, loft, pralines, gnawing, takalapala, chifforobe

Book 4: The Quarters (Part 2)

Summary

Chapter 36 (cont.). Months following the departure of Yoko, Jimmy Aaron comes back and reveals during a church service that he has stood alongside and been arrested with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in civil rights protests in Alabama and Mississippi. His desire to bring the protests to Bayonne frightens the old congregation, who are concerned with being removed from their home on the plantation. When Jane is the only one who rallies to his cause, Jimmy walks out. Later on he appears at Jane's house with an unkempt young man and enlists the help of Jane in his plan to stage a protest in Bayonne over the unavailability of an accessible public restroom for blacks and also the white-only drinking fountain. Jimmy tells Jane that on Friday a black girl is going to drink from the fountain, and they plan to use her subsequent arrest to gain more support. The next Monday they will stage a march to the courthouse and demand that she be set free.

Once the girl has been arrested, the women of the plantation meet and decide to accompany Jimmy to the courthouse. Their expected driver, Brady, backs out on the evening before the march and is replaced by a woman named Olivia. They arrive to a large turnout on the morning of the march. The group is suddenly approached by the care of Robert Samson, who delivers the news that Jimmy Aaron has been killed. Samson tells the grieving crowd that they might as well forget the protest. Still determined to carry out Jimmy Aaron's plan, Jane and another young man lead the crowd of protestors to the courthouse.

Analysis

In this final section, Jimmy reestablishes his status as "the One" by attempting to lead the members of his community in organized protest. Ultimately his title takes on greater significance when one considers his ability to unify his community in a way that was practically impossible since the death of Ned Douglass many years before. Although some members are initially reluctant to join his cause, Jimmy's ultimate sacrifice becomes the rallying cry for everyone to stand up and come together. In death, he gives the people the ability to lead themselves.

In the end, the concept of "the One" encapsulates the basic premise of the entire novel. Through the story of one woman, an entire community discovers its voice and is able to share a history that time may have otherwise forgotten.

Vocabulary

raggedy, clodhoppers, overalls, multitudes, bellowed, saloons, gumbo, quilt, termination, vicious, cripple, plenty, deciphering, washstand

Characters

Miss Jane Pittman

Jane is the title character and main protagonist in the novel. A woman of high spirits and boundless determination, she has had many struggles and hardships over a long and eventful life. From her time as a slave through the following years of segregation, she has endeavored to free herself from the physical and emotional confines of society. With her tireless dedication, Jane stands as a pillar of strength within her community and a leader whose story represents the indomitable will and fortitude of her people.

Ned Douglass

Ned is the adopted son of Jane. His boldness and ambition make him an inspiration to his community but also a threat to the established order that does not wish to see his people excel. His desire to bring about change leads him to work towards building a school, an action which attracts a great deal of opposition and people willing to end his life because of his efforts.

Joe Pittman

Joe is the strong and likable husband of Jane. His desire to rise up and change his circumstances led him away from the plantation as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Joe's life is defined by the constant struggle to prove himself a man against the emasculating influences of white society. In doing so, he places himself in constant danger through his work as a breaker of horses.

Robert Samson

Robert is Tee Bob's father and a plantation master. Although he now lives in a post-slavery era, he is still a firm believer in the old order of the South and governs his world according to most of its principles. Despite having a child from a black woman, his ideas on racial identity prevent him from accepting responsibility.

Miss Amma Dean Samson

Amma is the wife of Robert and also the mistress of the plantation. Her contempt for her husband's illegitimate black son and the way in which she strives to maintain racial separation is one of the most open and somewhat contradictory aspects of the novel. She represents the repressed condition of the southern white woman, a conflicting existence which is both elevated and disregarded by the patriarchal ways of the old order.

Tee Bob

Tee Bob is Robert Samson's son. Despite having the feeling of superiority granted to him by his status as a white male, he possesses a spirit that is willing to cross over racial lines for the people he cares about. His heart is tested by the love he has for his black half-brother, Timmy, and also for the Creole, Mary Agnes, who rejects his favor. His frustrations with the social order and his setbacks in life and love ultimately prove to be too much for him to endure, and he commits suicide.

Timmy

Timmy is Robert Samson's illegitimate son. Born from a black woman, Timmy resembles his father in appearance and mannerisms but is rejected by his father nonetheless because of his race. His troublesome attitude eventually gets him banned from the plantation. His mixed heritage leaves him in the unenviable and sympathetic position of not being accepted completely by either race.

Albert Cluveau

Albert is the old Cajun man who eventually shoots Ned. Despite his talk about killing people, he first appears to be a friendly person and becomes close to Jane because of his daily fishing activity near her cabin. Because of his inferior social status as a poor white and his inability to stand against the racist order of things, he ultimately proves himself to be a coward through his actions towards Ned and also his daughter, whom he physically abuses.

Mary Agnes LeFarbre

Mary Agnes is the Creole teacher that arrives at the Samson Plantation with the intention to correct the mistakes of her family's past by helping the blacks. Her efforts, which appear very high and mighty, put her at odds with many people on the plantation, except for Tee Bob, who soon falls in love with her. Although she befriends Tee Bob, Mary Agnes has no plans of becoming seriously involved with him, and her final decision to reject his affection is one of the main causes of his death.

Jules Raynard

Jules is Tee Bob's parrain, or godfather. After Tee Bob's death, he stands up to prevent further violence from those who would place sole blame on Mary Agnes for the unfortunate turn of events. He focuses everyone's attention on the part that they all played in his godson's death by maintaining the archaic prejudices that broke his heart.

Jimmy Aaron

Jimmy Aaron is one of the strongest rays of hope for the blacks who live on the plantation. He is a natural leader, and many believe that it is his purpose to become a minister. Jimmy's ultimate goal to become a political figure and the sacrifices he makes to inspire the community bring about a renewed spirit of empowerment in the lives of the people.

Jimmy Caya

Jimmy Caya is a friend of Tee Bob's from Baton Rouge. Even though he is not a member of the land-owning class like Tee Bob, he shares most of the same separatist beliefs when it comes to race relations. Because of this, when he hears the news of Tee Bob's death, presumably inspired by his failed relationship with the Creole woman Mary Agnes, Caya becomes one of the strongest supporters of having her killed.

Colonel Dye

Colonel Dye is the former Confederate soldier who takes over the Bone Plantation where Jane lived after being freed from slavery. He is a strong supporter of the old ways and has no qualms with using violence or dishonorable practices against blacks if it is necessary to maintain the prior ideas of Southern order.

Madame Gautier

Madame Gautier is the hoodoo woman whom Jane consults about Joe. Spiritual competitors from within the city of New Orleans caused her to move out into the country. Her exaggerated mannerisms and theatricality often seem to undermine her place as a true spiritual guide.

Mr. Bone

Mr. Bone owns the plantation where Jane stays after she is freed. His political stance as a Republican leads him to make strides toward helping the blacks on the plantation by hiring a teacher and attempting to provide fair wages. His willingness to move beyond the destructive ways of the past shows a positive side of race relations that is largely eclipsed by the contrary sentiments of the other white landowners.

Job

Job is the white man who shelters Jane and Ned before safely relocating them to Mr. Bone's plantation. Job is a man of little means, but he accommodates them in the best way he can and shows rare kindness in the face of much of the world's hatred.

Big Laura

Big Laura is Ned's mother. She is a strong, dominating black woman who takes the charge to lead the freed slaves as they move out into the world.

Molly

Molly is an older black woman working on the ranch where Joe breaks horses. She works in the Big House and is unable to adjust to ways beyond a slave's mindset. She dies a relatively short time after leaving the house.

Brady

Brady is the older black man working at the Samson Plantation who is charged with taking Jane into town on the day of the courthouse protests. His crippling fear makes him unequal to the task.

Olivia

Olivia is the black woman who takes Brady's place as driver to the protests.

Miss Lilly

Miss Lilly is a schoolteacher on the Samson Plantation. The numerous difficulties and setbacks that she encounters in performing her duties make her resign after a year.

Hardy

Hardy is a black schoolteacher on the Samson Plantation. He constantly begs for money and is eventually beat up and run out of town for flirting with the female students.

Sheriff Guidry

Guidry is the local sheriff. His indifference after the death of Tee Bob is typical of the white official whose sense of justice is only as strong as popular opinion.

Lena

Lena is the great aunt of Jimmy Aaron and the primary figure who raises him.

Corporal Brown

Corporal Brown is the Union soldier who gives Jane her name.

Black Harriet

Black Harriet is described as being slow-witted and ultimately goes insane after attempting to win a field race and being beaten due to the inferior quality of her work.

Tom Joe

Tom Joe is the overseer who beats Harriet for the inferior quality of her work during the race.

Felton

Felton is the fisherman with whom Jane moves to Southwestern Louisiana after the death of her husband Joe. Felton suddenly abandons her after several years.

Judy Major

Judy is Tee Bob’s fiancée.

Clamp Brown

Clamp is the young man who finds Mary Agnes after Tee Bob leaves her house on the night of the engagement party.

Objects/Places

Bayonne, Louisiana

Bayonne is the small Louisiana town where Ned is shot by Cluveau.

The black stallion

Joe Pittman tries to break the stallion as a part of his job and as a test of his manhood.

The hoodoo powder

Madame Gautier gives Jane hoodoo powder to sprinkle around the bed so that Joe will not try to break the black stallion.

Big Laura’s / Ned's flint

Ned continues to carry the flint around after Big Laura’s death to light fires and as a source of strength and remembrance.

Rivers

Rivers appear throughout the novel as a source of nature’s vitality and untamable power.

Ohio

Ohio is the home state of the Union soldier who gives Jane her name. The young girl tries to travel there after she gains her freedom.

The Ranch

Joe and Jane move to the ranch near the Texas-Louisiana border after leaving the Bone Plantation. Joe has a job breaking horses there.

Ned’s uniform

Ned wears his army uniform on numerous occasions when he returns as a teacher. It stands as a mark of bravery and also his commitment to American ideals even when the government seems to act to the contrary.

The Bone Plantation

Owned for a time by Mr. Bone, Jane and Ned are brought to the Bone Plantation by Job after they abandon their attempt to get to Ohio. It is eventually repurchased by Colonel Dye.

Samson Plantation

Samson plantation is the primary setting of the latter Books of the novel. It is owned by Robert Samson.

The Swamps

Swamps often appear throughout the novel as places of struggle and danger.

The Sack in Jane's Vision

When Jane finally discovers religion, she has a dream in which she has to carry a heavy sack across a river. The sack represents all of the burdens that she has had to carry throughout her life.

New Orleans

New Orleans is a popular destination for several of the characters. Mary Agnes makes trips there every weekend.

Baton Rouge

Tee Bob attends school at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

The letter opener

The letter opener is the weapon that Tee Bob uses to kill himself.

Cajun tractors

When the Cajuns begin leasing much of the land on the plantation, they use their tractors to help cultivate the fields and cut down on the competition from the blacks.

Ned’s schoolhouse

Ned attempts to build a schoolhouse when he returns to the plantation. It is completed after his death and used until it is destroyed by the 1927 flood.

Themes

Slavery

Slavery, and its lasting impact on the American way of life, play a crucial thematic role in the novel. Jane's story begins with slavery and chronicles the transition of black people after emancipation into freedom –or what passes as freedom. Even after she gains her freedom, Jane continues to live on plantations, a reality which represents the continued subjugating physical as well as psychological condition of many blacks. This proves to be a transformed version of slavery.

Her narrative, spanning close to a century, describes the complexities of a Southern class system so pervasive that the races of people within its confines are unable, and in some cases unwilling or uninterested, to move beyond it. The backbone of this unyielding indoctrination is, in essence, a steadfast fear of change and aversion to losing power socially, culturally, and politically, coming from those who once held absolute power. It is only fortified by those who once had no choice but to submit to it but now lack the fortitude to move forward. Even with those who are willing to aid in establishing change, there is often a sense of foreboding due to the likely onset of violence and death brought about by going against the system, as demonstrated with Tee Bob, Jimmy Aaron, and Ned.

Manhood

As with many of Gaines' works, the notion of having to prove one's manhood is present in "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman". Manhood thus becomes a major theme in the novel. Even though the novel is told through the eyes of a woman, many of the central events revolve around the trials of men like Ned, Joe Pittman, and Tee Bob.

The striving for manhood is seen among all races. The black men in the novel struggle to test their masculinity through physical acts, such as Joe's horse -breaking, and by attempting to cause social and political change, as Ned and Jimmy Aaron try to do. Among the white males, there are internal class disputes arising out of the patriarchal hierarchy of the old south where much of a man's worth was determined by the ownership of land, other material holdings, family, and honor and reputation. When faced with losing a great deal of their clout, many of these men hold on to the older ways for fear of losing power. Gaines shows that a universal element of the masculine struggle is a desire to subdue and control. Whether the opponent is within or without, man demonstrates a need to conquer in order to find purpose and self-definition, and this pursuit often leads to his ruin -such as with the fall of the South in the Civil War.

Class

Another popular theme for Gaines revolves around the divisions within races of people based on social hierarchies developed according to either wealth or skin tone. This is no different of “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman”, wherein class becomes a major theme.

Within the eclectic social and racial tapestry of Louisiana, Gaines has plenty of room to explore the many levels of human drama. The landowning whites, many descendants of the plantation class, are at the top of the socio-cultural political system, and do not favor blacks or poorer whites, like the Cajuns. As a result, the Cajuns often resort to extreme measures to carve out a place for themselves to attain some level of power, standing, and respect, by committing violent acts against blacks in the name of maintaining the old social order.

Blacks fare no better amongst their own people, as differences in skin color separate members within the race in favor of those with lighter tones. Although they are known to regard themselves as being superior to darker blacks, those of mixed heritage, like the Creoles, also become victims of the social scheme when they are not accepted by whites and held in contempt by the blacks they tend to shun. As a result, nothing is quite so black-and-white.

Style

Point of View

“The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” opens with an introduction by the assumed writer or editor of the novel describing the circumstances that led to its creation. For the remainder of the text, Jane takes the role of narrator and tells her story in the past tense from a first person perspective. The point of view helps the reader feel connected and invested in Jane's story and allows the reader to fully understand her experience.

Setting

The story spans nearly a century and goes from slavery times up through the 1960s. The events take place in the Deep South throughout various parts of Louisiana, with a good portion occurring around Gaines’s familiar setting in the small town of Bayonne.

Language and Meaning

The work uses a mix of formal language and local color. The primary narrative tends to employ mostly standard word usage and grammar while the dialogue shifts construction according to the speaker’s race, social status, and education, with blacks having the most broken/altered patterns. Most speakers use some form of dialect which, although excessive at times depending on the speaker, is for the most part easily understandable within the context of the conversation and narrative and helps set the overall intimate tone of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into an introduction and then four main “Books” with separate numbers and titles. Each book is then separated into named chapters, excluding the fourth book, “The Quarters,” which has no named chapter divisions but instead signals important breaks in the narrative with extra spaces between paragraphs.

Quotes

In closing I wish to thank all the wonderful people who were at Miss Jane's house through those long months of interviewing her, because this is not only Miss Jane's autobiography, it is theirs as well. (Introduction)

If I ain't nothing but trouble, you ain't nothing but Nothing. (Book 1: The War Years – Freedom)

He probably rides for many reasons. That's man's way. To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove he is a man. Poor fool. (Book 2: Reconstruction – Man's Way)

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 whiskey. Man must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don't know everything is already inside him. (Book 2: Reconstruction – Man's Way)

But if you must die, let me ask you this: wouldn't you rather die saying I'm a man than to die saying I'm a contented slave? (Book 2: Reconstruction – The Sermon at the River)

His eyes said, 'I'm go'n die, Mama.' But I knowed he had no fear of death. (Book 2: Reconstruction – The Sermon at the River)

I told her I wanted to go farther than that, so I wouldn't be reminded of these memories. She told me even if I moved a hundred miles, I would still be near memories, because memories wasn't a place, memories was in the mind. (Book 3: The Plantation – Samson)

But when you talk to an oak tree that's been here all these years, and knows more than you'll ever know, it's not craziness; it's just the nobility you respect. (Book 3: The Plantation – Of Men and Rivers)

That little Frenchman was long dead when the water broke his levee in '27, and these that built the spillways will be long dead, too, but the water will never die. That same water the Indians used to believe in will run free again. You just wait and see. (Book 3: The Plantation – Of Men and Rivers)

Let the poor work, let the poor fight in your wars, let them die. But you're not suppose to help the poor. (Book 3: The Plantation – Huey P. Long)

People's always looking for somebody to come lead them. (Book 4: The Quarters)

Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One. (Book 4: The Quarters)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is the symbolism behind Tee Bob using a letter opener to kill himself?

Topic 2

How does Mary Agnes's treatment of Tee Bob reflect the overall attitude of the Creoles toward other races?

Topic 3

In what ways does the Introduction establish the narrative approach for the rest of the novel?

Topic 4

Does Joe Pittman's willingness to pay Colonel Dye undermine his position as an opposing force to the white power structure?

Topic 5

How does Jane's final referral to Mr. Samson as simply Robert demonstrate her change in attitude regarding race and social status?

Topic 6

How does Ned's taking of his mother's flint foreshadow his later development as a leader?

Topic 7

How does Jane's trip to Madame Gautier undermine her husband's quest to prove his masculinity?

Topic 8

How does the breaking of the levees fit into the overall theme of slavery and the pursuit of freedom?