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ERNEST J. GAINES'S 1971 *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN* interrogates the concept of fatherhood. Fatherhood with its multiple ramifications is here the "disease" from which the South suffers. In order to grasp the logic behind the disease, the novelist has assembled signs, or symptoms, that are all linked to the desires of the characters—four males and Miss Jane, the female protagonist. In the novel, desire becomes visible in these males' attempts at transgression. These attempts lead them all to violent deaths, and clearly these men have to die in what seem to be scapegoating processes.¹

The conjure woman Jane visits at one point speaks of "man's way" (93). She refers to the form men's desires assume in the Southern society of her time. It would also certainly be possible to imagine that there is a "woman's way," since the narrator and protagonist of the novel is a woman. Jane is not just a voice. She is telling us about what she did and what she desired or did not desire over the long century spanning the period between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights struggles. What is the specific logic behind her desire or lack of desire? In what way is her desire, or lack of it, connected to the transgressions attempted by the men around her?

¹Some books can be seen as a sort of diagnosis. That Greek word means collecting symptoms and establishing distinctions between them (*dia*) and then producing a body of knowledge (*gnosis*) that can later be used critically in order to enhance life. In books like Gaines's, readers encounter characters who suffer from a recurrent series of problems. The novelist organizes and connects the symptoms for us, so that we recognize that these people are the victims of forces beyond their control and, as a consequence, that they can't make sense of their predicament. The reader is confronted with the characters' confusion. At the same time, Gaines helps us discover patterns that help explain that confusion. Gilles Deleuze suggests that writers should be physicians in his *Essays Critical and Clinical*. See especially the first chapter, "Literature and Life," in which Deleuze briefly gives some examples: Herman Melville, Thomas Wolfe, Kafka and Céline. Gaines could certainly constitute a valuable addition to that list.

of time and the double consciousness

The plot of the novel is simple enough. Given her freedom, Jane Pittman wants to leave Louisiana and go North towards Ohio, but gives up any idea of moving and settles in a place “right in the middle of Luzana” (54). From that point onwards, she travels very little, though she spends a number of years with her common-law husband near the Texas border before returning to central Louisiana. Symbolically, Jane’s story is about the former slaves who remained in the South and did not make it to the North. Finally at the end of the book, Jane changes her mind: she will start traveling again. This time, she goes to Bayonne, a nearby city. She joins a Civil Rights march. As she is about to die of old age, she reenters the mainstream of American history, at a time when African Americans at long last succeeded in asserting their rights. To a large extent, Jane has replaced space with time. Hers is journey through a hundred years of Southern history, from 1863 to 1963. The novel shows that it took the blacks a whole century to start reaching their goal. What was needed was patience: in order to go somewhere, you have to go there indirectly. That is the message Jane learned as a child from the old man that showed her a map when she told him about Ohio (46-54): if you want to head North, you first have to go East! That is not a paradox, that is a lesson. In the same manner, a social group held in bondage can make progress only if it doesn’t antagonize those who are stronger than it is. If it does, it will be destroyed. The alternatives are then either controlling that desire or transgressing a social taboo.²

That necessity explains Jane’s behavior with white people throughout the book. She is submissive. While she never hesitates to talk back, she always retains a very clear sense of how far she can safely go. One is reminded of W. E .B. Du Bois’s notion of “two-ness,” or double consciousness.³ Black people are forced to use their minds on two levels:

²That seems to have been a very important attitude among black people both before and after the Civil War. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Paul D. knows that, if he wants to love and doesn’t wish to be broken, he has to “love small.” Conversely, Sethe chooses the opposite option as she is so thrilled to experience mother love when she finally arrives in Cincinnati. As a consequence, she is virtually destroyed for eighteen years.

³The description applies particularly well to Gaines’s African American characters: the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar

they have to project a reassuring image of themselves for the benefit of the whites, while at the same time they have constructed a different image for themselves inside their minds, an image the whites would never tolerate.

Jane's attitude towards religion can be considered as a good example of that division. Most of her life, she had been rather indifferent, but, when she is about fifty, she "gets religion." She wishes to enter the local (presumably Baptist) church, but must first relate her "travels" to the congregation in order to convince them that they must accept her. Jane presents her travels as a dream which symbolically tells people how she received divine grace and responded appropriately. The result is that she knows that her soul is saved. Such narrations were understandably extremely predictable in content. The river, often present, alluded to the river Jordan which the Hebrews finally managed to cross in order to enter the Promised Land. Jane claims that she has achieved salvation; but there are two ways to understand what Jane tells the congregation. The first reading of her travels is politically conservative.⁴ Since the scene takes place in the 1910s, that reading would have been the only interpretation available to the community: happiness and real freedom represent a reward that one will get only in the hereafter. In her dream, Christ is a kind of white overseer (136). (The word "white" is indeed repeated.) He orders Jane to carry a heavy load of bricks across the river. From a religious point of view, the bricks can be seen to stand for her sins which she has to acknowledge and dispose of. But it is hard not to look upon the situation as a reenactment of what slavery was like and of the miserable working conditions inflicted upon the black community by the Southern whites after the Civil War. In addition, Jane has to refuse the help offered by two men: Joe Pittman, the one man she truly loved, and Ned, the boy she raised as her son: blacks are not allowed to

sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 17)

⁴Lee Papa offers a very convincing reading of the conservative dimension of Jane's religious beliefs, but fails to stress the power of resistance Jane evinces in that crucial passage. It is difficult to ignore the basic ambiguity of the text.

have a real family life and values like love are associated only with the whites. Former slaves have to recognize that they are second-rate citizens and the only option open to them is work without complaining. There is, however, a second way of looking at the passage. Her narrative may be interpreted as a “*signifyin*” narrative. Jane first learns that not all people with a black skin are to be trusted. Some deceitful people will wear masks and pretend to be who they are not in order to preach fear and submission to the whites. That could be a very apt description of the leaders of the local African American church who won’t do anything to oppose segregation. Second, when in her dream Jane sees Albert Cluveau, the man who killed Ned, standing on the other bank with the very same gun responsible for the death of her son, she is not afraid. She resists Cluveau and those he represents. She walks on across the river and, thanks to her determination, the obstacles disappear and she doesn’t drown. The crucial detail is to be found at the end of the passage: once she has crossed the river and is greeted by the white Christ, she doesn’t bow to him. This very small detail shows precisely what sort of freedom Jane really achieves.

It follows that Jane’s position in her society is two-fold. On the one hand, she defends the status quo. She knows perfectly well that her people’s rebellion would be synonymous with suicide, since the time hasn’t yet come for them to assert themselves. On the other hand, she maintains a vision of what freedom could be like, a vision carefully hidden inside her mind, a sort of precious flame that she keeps burning for practically a century. She works first in the fields on the Dye plantation, then as a cook in the house in the Samson plantation, the two roles usually associated with the black population. Then, when she retires, she chooses to go back to live in the quarters, where the slaves were housed before the Civil War. In this way, Jane asserts her black identity. We belong in the quarters, she seems to be saying, and the quarters belong to us. She always insists on a very clear separation between black and white. The problem will arise at regular intervals when someone tries to transgress that opposition.

One consequence is that the reality of desire in the South is necessarily two-fold. Limits must be imposed upon it. Freud would have called this the “reality principle.” If, on the contrary, one abandons oneself to the “pleasure principle,” that is, if one chooses to transgress social limits, the punishment is death. Throughout most of her life, Miss

Jane restrains her desires. She has understood that that is an absolute necessity for someone like her. In fact, the book shows very clearly that the whole problem of desire is linked to time: for virtually one century, the white South tried to live outside time. Miss Jane represents the infinite patience of the African American community, whose only option was to wait or to die.

the repetitive logic of scapegoating

The four main male characters in the book challenge the black/white opposition.⁵ Apparently, as a result, they all die violently. To what extent Jane is an unconscious accomplice in their deaths is certainly the most difficult question raised by *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. For different reasons, she loves three of these men. She works for the father of the fourth, the only white one. In the four instances, the problem seems to be identical from a theoretical point of view. These men (i) go away or try to go away and (ii) try to deny the separation between the blacks and the whites. Jane seems to agree that they have to die to avert some sort of disorder whose consequences would be terrible. These men are scapegoats who have to be sacrificed if peace is to be maintained in the community.

Jane brought up Ned as her own son when he became an orphan. When she hears that he is about to be killed if he doesn't leave the area, she hesitates a very long time before warning him of the threats against him. The reasons behind her hesitation are never clearly stated in the novel. It is as if she wanted him not to go away and as if she felt deep down inside herself that he had to die because of his rebellion. Indeed, Ned is a lonely man. When he tries to convince the members of the black community that they have rights and that they should fight for them, they are not interested and certainly not ready to follow him. Most of them are afraid or suspicious. It is obvious that questioning the hegemony of the whites is unthinkable for them. Ned can be seen as an exception. He went away, he lived abroad, he was influenced by foreign ideas. In addition, he is planning to open a school in order to teach black people not only how to read but also that they have rights. The "sermon" he delivers by the river looks very much like a secular version of Christ's

⁵Jackie Thomas's study concentrates on the four principal male characters. I want to develop Thomas's most illuminating intuitions and discover patterns common to these four men.

sermon on the Mount. Like Christ, Ned has to become a scapegoat. He too will have his Passion so that a massacre will be avoided. Jane will then retain his message in her heart, and what Jimmy will preach some sixty years later will be extremely similar to Ned's ideas. Such seems to be Jane's mission in the book: maintain peace, avoid violence, and at the same time keep the faith alive until times are different. Jimmy's case at the end is slightly different. He has returned from his self-imposed exile in New Orleans. He preaches equality. He clearly represents a kind of local Martin Luther King, Jr. Death is necessary for him to become a symbol and for his ideas to prevail. He will become a black Christ whose martyrdom will redeem his people.

Joe Pittman's fate is basically similar, although Jane's motivations are obviously different. He takes Jane away to the Texas border. They are no longer really in the South but in the West. Maybe we should remember that Jane had decided that her life would take place in Louisiana. Joe becomes the "n° 1" horse breaker on the ranch where he works. He has the impression that at long last he is able to assert his own personal value and that things no longer depend on the color of his skin. He is the equal of the mythical Western white cowboys.⁶ Jane as narrator however doesn't hesitate to point out that equality is an illusion. Clyde, the ranch's owner, needs her husband only because of his financial value as an employee and performer at rodeos. Joe doesn't understand that the absence of segregation on the ranch is a façade. For Jane, however, that is not the real problem. Strangely enough, she anticipates Joe's death as she had anticipated Ned's, as if a death sentence had been passed upon them. Jane feels excluded both from Louisiana and from Joe's life. As a matter of fact, now that they have some money, she wants "a little place of our own" (89). She feels that they have no private life on the ranch. Could we go so far as to suggest that she wants to possess Joe? It is undebatable that she is the direct cause of his death, since she opens the door of the corral and the black horse runs away. There is only one thing that Joe can then do: catch the runaway horse and die, since we know that the horse is stronger than he is. Joe knows it too.

The role Jane plays in Joe's death is highly ambiguous. To begin with, she doesn't use the allegedly magic powder she purchased from the

⁶See Valerie Melissa Babb's excellent "From History to Her-Story: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*" for some very interesting remarks on "black cowboys."

conjure woman. She understandably feels that the woman is a fraud only intent on making money. Yet Jane insisted on buying that powder, which reveals that there is something deeply ambivalent and nonrational in her attitude towards Joe. She doesn't want him to die, and, at the same time, she doesn't use the powder. The same ambivalence can curiously be discovered in the importance she attaches to her dreams. She sees the black horse in her dreams even before she hears of its existence. For Jane, who is usually so critical of everything that is even slightly irrational, the dreams seems to be synonymous with the truth. Jane has in fact three different dreams: Joe is killed by being thrown against a fence, by being thrown against a tree, and by being dragged across the swamp. The first dream is the one Jane recurrently experiences. That seems to be the reason she opens the gate of the corral: she appears to believe that if the horse runs away and disappears, Joe's life will be saved, since she envisions him in her dreams as being thrown against the corral fence while attempting to break in the new, indomitable horse. On the face of it, she is right. Yet, it is extremely surprising to note that she so blatantly ignores "man's way." She should know that her husband will relentlessly pursue the horse if it escapes. It seems that Jane's unconscious had foreseen Joe's death, except that it was not in the most important of her three dreams, but in the one that describes the most unlikely possibility: Joe dragged across the swamp by the horse, which is precisely what happens. Could we conclude that her mind has censored her true desire, the death of her husband? Indeed, she seems to have ignored not only "man's way" but also "woman's way," that is the nature of her real wishes. Joe had to die because he tried to overstep the limits imposed on him by nature and society.

The same logic must be applied to whites. Tee Bob's death can also be looked upon as a sacrifice. He was planning to run away with a white woman who had some "black blood." As far as he is concerned, that meant betraying the South, that is to say escaping in order to negate the black/white opposition. He too had to die to preserve peace. In his case, being a scapegoat was the only way to avoid destroying a lot of innocent lives. His case is actually rather similar to that of Marie-Agnes, the octoroon he is in love with. She also committed a transgression. She left New Orleans and her family because she objected to the fact that her ancestors had been given slaves. She feels that she has to atone for that crime and she has chosen to live away from the aristocratic black creole

community. She believes that her duty is to serve ordinary blacks and she now works as a teacher in a poor rural school. In her case, exile and her refusal of the black/ white opposition are also prominent. In the end, she doesn't die. She is just expelled from the area. It would seem that in the novel being a scapegoat put to death is a fate reserved for men.

The theory of scapegoating is explicitly spelled out by Jules Raynard after Tee Bob's death. He is seated with Jane in his car somewhere between the black quarters and Robert Samson's house, a most symbolic space indeed. It is as if a neutral territory was suddenly possible and the truth about the whites and the blacks could finally be expressed by those two people, one white man and one black woman. Raynard maintains that they are all guilty of Tee Bob's suicide, Jane included. That statement sounds exceedingly surprising, not to say shocking. What Raynard is saying is probably that the young man's death was necessary for preserving the peace of the whole community. If Tee Bob had managed to marry Marie-Agnes somewhere, very far from home and his family, the consequences would have been appalling and many more deaths would most certainly have ensued. He died for "our sins" (196), concludes Raynard. What he is basically saying is that one cannot escape history. He suggests that love between people from two different races might have been possible a long long time before in some mythical past. That hypothetical Garden of Eden, however, no longer exists and today one cannot opt out of society, however unfair its laws may appear to some of its members.

That also seems to be Ernest Gaines's diagnosis. Blacks and whites suffer in the same manner. When Adeline Cluveau goes to see Jane, she realizes that Jane did not place a hoodoo on her father. Suffering is something social, not religious nor supernatural, and they all share in it. Indeed, Cluveau hits Adeline just as he hit Ned. She is lucky to escape death. We also discover that Adeline had to become a cook for her father instead of getting married and having the freedom she deserved. In this respect, she looks exactly like Jane, a black woman who had to work as a cook at Samson House. Adeline suffers from a modern form of slavery for a young white woman. In addition, Jane loses her two putative sons, Ned and then Jimmy, just as the white man Robert Samson loses his two sons, Timmy and then Tee Bob. Is Gaines alluding to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*? Losing your sons, your name, and your estate seems to be the quintessence of tragedy for a white Southern plantation owner.

We may, however, guess things are just as painful for a poor black woman.

the essence of man's way

The book speaks often about what the conjure woman calls "man's way." That phrase obviously concerns only the main characters. The church elders, for example, have clearly no identity of their own. They are terrified of the whites and avoid controversy at all costs. Manhood is something they are not concerned about. On the other hand, Ned, Jimmy, Timmy, Joe, and Tee Bob are idealists. They are divided personalities: they know what sort of limitations reality entails, but at the same time they yearn for another level. In a process of transgression, their dreams and their desires take them outside the world into some sort of utopia that eventually destroys them. They actually desire what is impossible, what doesn't exist. Very often, it is an image of themselves as free and happy, something that the racist society in which they live won't allow them to achieve.

Joe is a good example. He constantly needs to go beyond his condition. As the conjure woman puts it: "But man is foolish. And he's always proving how foolish he is. Some go after lions, some run after every woman he sees, some ride wild horses" (93). Joe will not be a sharecropper like the others. He needs to be different, to show that he is "the best." That is of course only an image in his mind. He is always being used by his boss, Mr. Clyde. Yet he wants to prove that he is a man. He can only do so by dying. What is manhood? Maybe, as the conjure woman says, Joe breaks horses because he can't have children with Jane. As a consequence of his narcissism, he becomes the prisoner of an illusion. There is a strange hesitation in his speech when he mentions his job. He alternately says that he likes to "break" and "ride" horses (89), which are extremely different activities. That detail reveals Joe's ambivalence. His freedom can occasionally be synonymous with a balanced relationship with nature when he rides a horse. When he breaks a horse, however, he symbolically plays the role of the slave owner or of the overseer. "Breaking" implies a relationship based upon violence which ends only with the wild horse's losing its freedom forever.

Ned also produces impossible images of himself. He thinks he is still a soldier. He has kept his US army uniform and he wants to believe that

it represents equality even outside the army. He then tries to convince his people to become “soldiers,” as he says. More generally, he claims that he is an American, just like the “whites” and even the “reds,” with all the rights that that involves. Again, that was an unrealistic utopia at the beginning of the twentieth century. It becomes clear that for Ned being a man implies a vertical dimension, probably because he lives in a fundamentally hierarchical society. The aristocracy ride horses, whereas poor sharecroppers only have mules, on which they are symbolically closer to the earth. When Ned is shot down by Cluveau, he is made to crawl on the ground. He has to do so because Cluveau shot him in the knees, but also because he is someone who doesn’t “crawl.” Ned does not want Jane “To eat the crumbs they throw on the floor” (76) and exhorts the crowd listening to his “sermon” not to “take the scrap” (108) of the white man. His problem is that he lives in a society in which black people must crawl.

Curiously enough, Tee Bob shares the same ideas. He also imagines that he is not part of his society, although everybody expects him to play the role of the white master’s son. But it is more revealing to talk of the other important white person, Albert Cluveau. That Cajun good-for-nothing is a parody of idealism, the typical white trash. He knows what his life has been like, and yet at the same time he has a strange yearning for purity. He wants his two daughters to go to church on Sunday mornings. At night, they share the same bed, with Adeline and Christine on both sides of him. Are the daughters’s initials symbolic? A and C? The virtuous Adeline and the promiscuous Christine? The two sides of Albert Cluveau, a man divided between purity and dirt? In his case, we are not far from paranoia.

Apart from Jane, who doesn’t do much except to live on and remember for more than a hundred years, the book seems to be about men. They virtually all commit suicide. At least that is a very plausible way of looking at their deaths as they refuse to run away and avoid the fate awaiting them. It would appear that they need that sort of death as a means of expressing their idealism. Only in death can they achieve manhood. All their deaths share a number of similarities. At the last moment, each man sees a sort of double, or shadow. The shadow is of course himself, his true self, or rather that part of himself that he has rejected and that he is now forced to confront.

Cluveau is slightly different from the other four men in so far as he dies of natural causes. He doesn't have to run away. Yet, like them, he sees himself in the form of a double. He has always believed that he was superior because his skin is white. However, when he is about to die, he jumps from his bed and starts crying "I'll kill him," waving an imaginary gun. Is he reliving the scene when he shot Ned to death? He also brings about his own death and identifies with Ned. He screams for Adeline to "stop the horses" (125), referring to an imaginary "Chariot of Hell" which he believes is trying to destroy him. Some pages before, Cluveau knows very well that the said Chariot of Hell comes from his sons' bedroom and that it embodies the "dirt" (121) he has created. He is thus the cause of his own destruction.

To some extent, Ned's assassination reads like Cluveau's death, as if the two men were mirror images of each other. It is true that the two of them are at the bottom of society. As a matter of fact, both the Cajun poor white and the Negro would-be teacher ride a mule. They confront each other. Cluveau forces Ned to crawl on the ground. But Cluveau has symbolically been crawling all his life in front of whites on their horses.

Joe Pittman knows that he is going to die. In that respect he has no illusions whatsoever. The horse will kill him, because it is just like him. It is different from the others horses, it is the "Number One" horse, the "Chief." The interesting point is that the horse is black.⁷ It is obviously his double, looking at him when he passes by the corral with Jane. In this passage, a mirror effect is produced. For Joe, trying to break the horse means going beyond his own nature and his own limitations. The animal is deeply ambiguous. It is described as "slick" (91). Is that adjective a compliment concerning his beauty or does it suggest that there is something more or less superficial about him? In the end, Joe dies for nothing. Readers will never know if he finally caught the black horse before it brought about his death. We could perhaps offer that Joe dies in order to express a desire that was impossible to fulfil. In this respect, modern readers may be tempted to recall the whiteness of Moby Dick. In a mirror effect, Captain Ahab had to die trying to annihilate the White Whale. They too were made for each other.

⁷In the celebrated TV film made from the novel in 1973, the horse is curiously white, as if Joe was fighting white society. We know that in fact he is fighting himself, his own nature.

Tee Bob's death appears to follow a similar pattern. The process begins the moment he discovers an image of himself in Marie-Agnes's eyes as she is lying on the floor. In a mirror effect, he sees himself as "God," that is to say as the creole white gentleman who seduced her grandmother in New Orleans, and he also sees himself as his own father on his horse going to visit his black mistress in the quarters. He understands that he will never escape the role he has to play in Southern society: he has no personal identity, he can only belong to the class of the masters. Tee Bob then goes back to the big white house. He realizes that he is unable to write to his mother and, when his father knocks on the door, he kills himself using his grandfather's historic paper-knife. He takes his life in the library whose walls are covered with the culture of the South from which a man cannot run away.

Desire is the main question Gaines raises in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. So far, we have analyzed the men around Jane. If we now consider her own life, we will find a reverse theory of desire. She doesn't desire the way they desire. That is probably the reason she lives to be more than one hundred years old. We can distinguish three separate stages in her life. At first, in 1863, immediately after she gains her freedom, she entertains an unrealistic desire: she wants to go to Ohio and she doesn't understand that Ohio is only a word. For her, Ohio is synonymous with freedom and happiness, it is almost like the promise of a mystical revelation. She desires what literally she cannot reach and, in doing so, puts her life and Ned's life at risk. She then understands the way desire actually works in the South. Unlike the four men around her, she chooses to avoid transgression. The second stage covers most of her life in rural Louisiana. She then desires only what she can have. It follows that her desires are extremely limited, but she has established some sort of balance which enables her to survive without too many conflicts. She knows that she has to be content with small things, such as her favorite brand of ice-cream. It is only in the third stage at the end of her life that Jane begins to experience another type of desire. This time, it is desire for what is not present in her life. There is however a difference from the first stage. She is now conscious that her desire can be fulfilled. It is no longer the childish whim of a child. The difference is that she is now part of a community and it is that community which is about to achieve its legitimate social and political rights. On the other hand, men's desires in the novel always seemed to be radically idealistic.

They always demand what they would never get and in so doing endanger the precarious equilibrium established by women like Miss Jane. They clearly didn't understand that one cannot alter the subtle relationships that at the same time separate and unite the white and the black communities.

the fatherhood gap

Is there an explanation behind the differences between "man's way" and "woman's way" in the rural areas of Louisiana in the first half of the twentieth century? A final hypothesis is that it has to do with fatherhood, or rather its absence.⁸ Virtually all the characters symbolically either don't have a father or can't be one. There is a sort of "be/have" structure at work. It follows that some male characters try to compensate for that absence, and what these men do is judged extremely dangerous by Jane, and that would account for her scapegoating attitude towards them. Ned is an orphan. His mother was killed when he was four and, like many slaves, he never knew his father. Admittedly when he became an adult, he married and had children of his own, but obviously something is missing. He would like to be a "soldier," an "American," and of course he symbolically invents his own father when he adopts Frederick Douglass's name, and to some extent when he identifies with Christ, knowing perfectly well that he will be sacrificed just as He was. He is the son that America will never recognize. Jimmy is very much an alter ego of Ned. When he was a teenager, Jimmy was prevented from going out with girls. His community had decided that he would be "the One" that would take them out of Egypt and that therefore he must remain morally pure. He eventually dies like Ned, having carried his cross without help from his real father, as one neighbor remarks ("but the daddy, if he had been there, would 'a' been able to give him some help" [199]). Joe's case is perhaps easier to understand. His first wife did not give him a son, only daughters, and he knows that Jane is barren. He suffers from a widespread variety of narcissism: he would like a son bearing his name. As that is impossible with Jane, for him "man's way" means finding a compensation. He needs to assert his manhood and accordingly does so

⁸It certainly extremely difficult to be a father—and to have a father—if you are an African American in the South. Gaines tackled the problem as early as his first novel, *Catherine Carmier*, and of course he poignantly returned to it later in *In My Father's House*.

on an imaginary level when he creates himself as “Chief” horse breaker in the ranch near the Texas border.

As far as Tee Bob is concerned, his case is certainly different. To begin with, he is white. That doesn’t mean, however, that he doesn’t suffer from an absence of fatherhood. His father is unable to help him in any way in his attempts to become an adult. Tee Bob has no one to turn to, least of all his mother who has identified with the subservient role women have to play in an extremely traditional patriarchal society. Tee Bob finally falls in love with a girl who represents a radically impossible partner for him—that is, a girl he will never be able to marry and as a consequence who cannot give him a legitimate son. To some extent, Gaines rewrites *Absalom Absalom!* and the story of Thomas Sutpen who lost his two sons. He also rewrites *The Sound and the Fury* and creates his personal vision of Quentin Compson who fell in love with the only girl he could not fall in love with. It is very tempting to suggest that it is death that both the white and the black characters around Miss Jane are fundamentally in love with. Like Quentin.⁹ With Gaines, we are never very far from Faulkner.

Maybe, if we pay close attention to Gaines’s hints, we will find a tentative theory of fatherhood near the beginning of the novel. One night, as they are trying to escape the South, Jane and Ned meet a black hunter going south, which astonishes Jane who wants to reach the North and Ohio at all costs. The hunter says that he is in search of his father. We know of course that a former slave like him is almost certain never to discover his true father, especially in an area unfamiliar to him. Yet he knows that he needs roots, or, to put it more theoretically, a frame of reference. That is exactly what Jane will endeavor to create throughout her life. She will remain in the South. She doesn’t know who her father was. She can’t have children, probably on account of the savage beatings she received as a child. She accordingly adopts Ned. In her case, motherhood can only be a personal matter, surrogate, invented. And, of course, when she is a very old woman, she dictates the *Autobiography*

⁹Cf. Faulkner’s “Appendix/Compson 1699-1945” to *The Sound and the Fury*:

But who loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death as a lover loves and deliberately refrains from the waiting willing friendly tender incredible body of his beloved, until he can no longer bear not the refraining but the restraint and so flings, hurls himself, relinquishing, drowning. (1132)

to the teacher who visits her. It takes her nine months to tell him how the blacks needed a hundred years to get their freedom. Nine months? A symbolic figure? Filiation seems to be the most important problem in *The Autobiography*. Gaines's diagnosis is that it is something that doesn't work in the South, and that is precisely what accounts for the peculiar structure of desire and the processes of scapegoating we discover in the book. That situation is undeniably due to the legacy of slavery as a black family was something inconceivable for a slave owner. That is also due to the fact that for one entire century the white majority tried to negate time and prevent changes. We will not, however, forget that filiation is synonymous with time. You cannot kill time. The situation of the African American community eventually changed. That of the whites too: the great aristocratic "houses" slowly died and former poor whites acquired their lands. The end of a world. What is Gaines's lesson? He wants us to believe that fatherhood should no longer be a dream. The South needs fathers and children, both black and white.

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