Miss Jane and Personal Experience Narrative: Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

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Ernest Gaines' novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is framed as an edited, tape-recorded life story which tells of a hundred years of life that included a childhood in slavery and old age in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. In a brief introduction signed "The Editor," a black history teacher introduces Miss Jane and tells the circumstances under which her story was recorded. Miss Jane, a fictional character, then takes over as narrator and seems to take on a presence and life of her own. Sustaining this illusion and the interest of the reader depends on creating a narrator with whom the reader can feel some sense of intimacy and trust. The narrator must be believable, and an authentic voice must be maintained. Gaines does this by the extended literary use of the personal experience narrative.

The novel tells much more than the story of Miss Janie, but it is her own personal experience stories and reflections that make the novel work by establishing a believable narrator with an authentic voice.

As Sandra Stahl and others have noted, there is a fascination with writers who create the illusion of oral narrative style in their written works (Stahl 1979, Scholes and Kellogg, Rubin). In *Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines creates the illusion of the oral style and the immediacy of the
narrator to the extent that he, the author, seems to disappear, and the narrator takes over and "interacts" with the reader. The novel has been called a "chat with the reader" and part of "that rare category of American novels which talk to the reader" (Beckham 1978). While the creative or fictional dimension is widely accepted as part of personal narrative and life story, in the novel, of course, Miss Jane herself is part of the fictional creation and not based on any one real person.

Gaines created a fictional character, Miss Jane, and had her tell the story of his people. He succeeded so well that many people will not believe that Miss Jane was not a real person. Former New York Governor Hugh Carey included her on a list of historical black women, several national news magazines asked Gaines for a picture of Jane Pittman to publish along with reviews of the book, and *Folklore and Literature in the United States* lists Jane Pittman in the author index.

Though Gaines' Miss Jane is fictional, her style and voice are based directly on listening to people like Miss Jane tell their own personal narratives. The reader's perception of Miss Jane and the subsequent attachment to her give this fictional character a true to life reality that becomes a kind of anchor or point of reference from which the reality (i.e. the illusion of reality) of the whole novel emanates. By focusing on Gaines' use of personal narrative and his process of creating Miss Jane as a narrator, we can learn something about the author's use of this oral folk tradition in his literary work and also something about personal narrative and life story in a basically illiterate folk community.

While none of Gaines' fiction is strictly autobiographical, there is always the strong influence of culture and family in his works. The setting is based on rural Point Coupee parish in South Louisiana where he grew up. He served his first apprenticeship as a writer writing letters for the "old people" because they could not read or write. In *Miss Jane Pittman*, Miss Jane tells about the young boy Jimmy reading the sportspage and the funnies to her and about how he wrote their letters for them. She says, "All you had to do was get him started and he could write the best two-page letter you ever read. . . . And he would get it down just like you felt it inside." (204–205). This episode with Jimmy is based on Gaines' own experience as a child.

In talking about early influences on his life and his work, Gaines has said that the old people would come to his house to visit his aunt who was crippled and could not walk. He says, "In summer, they would sit out on the porch, the gallery—they called it the 'garry'—and
they would talk for hours . . . I did not know then that 20 or 25 years later I would try to put some of their talk in a book which I would title *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Gaines 1978).

Gaines has often said that he sees himself as a storyteller and that he came from a place that was oral, where people sat on the porches and along the ditch banks and talked. He says:

I come from a long line of storytellers . . . I think in my immediate family there were tremendous storytellers or liars or whatever you want to call them . . . My aunt was not a storyteller, she was more of a recorder; she could tell about what happened in the past. She remembered quite well. Since Auntie could not go to their place, the old people used to come to ours. They would talk and talk and talk, and I listened to them.

*Miss Jane Pittman*, before it became an autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, was a short biography of Miss Jane Pittman—that is, a group of people telling about her (Laney 3).

While it is true that life stories may not be recorded unless solicited by an ethnographer, Gaines' background in a folk culture suggests that life stories were (and probably are) told in an oral culture as a normal, routine thing. In fact, Gaines suggests, others present would already know the life story of someone like Miss Jane so well that they could pick up things and move the story along when she did not feel like talking.

In discussing the process of writing the book and his own reaction to Miss Jane, Gaines says, "I started writing on *Miss Jane Pittman* with the idea of narration in mind, that different characters would tell the story of her life in their own way" (1978:36). He then says:

I decided to change the way of telling the story because I had fallen in love with my little character, and I thought she could tell the story of her life better than anyone else. The others were making her life too complicated in that they had too many opinions, bringing in too many anecdotes. I thought a single voice, Miss Jane's, would keep the story in a straight line. (Though even here, I had trouble with her when she got wound up. Once the story really got moving, Miss Jane did and said pretty much whatever she wanted, and all I could do was act as her editor. Never her advisor) (1978:37).

In listening to a story told orally, one listens to the *voice* of the person telling the story. In a written text based on oral tradition, the
author creates the illusion of the spoken voice and must maintain it with consistency and authenticity. As John Callahan points out, “Speech is Gaines’ gift, and he reorlizes the written word with the old immediacy of oral storytelling” (190). In the literary tradition of Twain, Faulkner, and Welty, Gaines is able to capture the illusion of the spoken voice on the printed page. Eudora Welty says, “It takes art to make something read as though it were spoken—of a very high kind, I think” (Ferris 24). In addition to good literary reproduction of dialect, Gaines adapts the oral tradition of telling personal experience narratives and life stories to the literary medium. Callahan further notes, “In writing as well as speech, voice articulates the self and the self’s capacity for form and eloquence” (191). Like Gaines’ aunt, Miss Jane is a recorder of her own life and the events surrounding it (though Miss Jane’s experiences are not those of Gaines’ aunt). The black history teacher comes to record Miss Jane’s life story because she has not only lived a long life, but she is recognized by her own people as someone capable of narrating her own life. Though she is illiterate, her intelligence, verbal acuity, and folk wisdom are evident to her folk community. Keith Byerman says, “Gaines has used the folk form to present the black folk experience. Jane Pittman embodies the history of those who had no one to record their stories” (94).

While Miss Jane Pittman as a whole uses the frame of the extended personal experience narrative of autobiography, many narratives are about others or about historical events. Throughout the novel, there are stories of the folk history, freeing of slaves, the major floods, the death of Huey Long, etc. But it is the personal anecdotes that Miss Jane tells about herself that create the illusion of Miss Jane as an oral narrator on an intimate basis with the reader, and this holds the entire narrative together. Miss Jane tells of life in slavery, love and marriage to a strong man and the effects of his death, and the hardship of finding a place for herself in the world. Callahan says, “She’s mastered the representative anecdote and in her eloquence persuades us that what she leaves out is really there in her (and potentially our) imagination” (203).

Miss Jane begins her narrative with a personal anecdote by saying, “It was a day something like today.” She then tells how the Yankee soldier, Corporal Brown, re-named her Jane Brown, instead of Ticey, her slave name. As an adult over 100 years old, she calls back into memory her vulnerability as a child and shares this with the reader. She says, “I stood there grinning like a little fool. I rubbed my foot
with my big toe and just stood there grinning. The other troops was grinning to me... It was the prettiest name I had ever heard” (8).

In other personal anecdotes she tells about her attraction to a young school teacher, the pain of finding out she was “barren,” her visit to a hoodoo lady to protect her husband, and the death of Joe Pittman—the most important person in her life—and her need to come to terms with the feeling that in trying to protect him, she had caused his death. Speaking of Joe Pittman's death, she says:

When Joe Pittman was killed a part of me went with him to his grave.
No man would ever take his place, and that's why I carry his name to this day. I have knowed two or three other men, but none took the place of Joe Pittman. I let them know that from the start (98).

In the anecdote about Black Harriet and the competition and conflict among women workers in the fields, Miss Jane acknowledges her own part in a situation that ends in tragedy. She says:

I got to say it now, we was all for it. That's how it was in the field. You want that race. That made the day do. Work, work, you had to do something to make the day go. We all wanted it. We all knowed Katie couldn't beat Harriet, but we thought the race would be fun (131).

Later in the book, Miss Jane talks about the “high water” of 1927, and says the “old people, the Indians, used to worship the rivers.” She says that they respected the rivers and found strength in them and explains that she has also experienced that with certain things:

There's an old oak tree up the quarters where Aunt Lou Bolin and them used to stay. That tree has been here, I'm sure, since this place been here, and it has seen much much, and it knows much much. And I'm not ashamed to say I have talked to it, and I'm not crazy either. It's not necessary craziness when you talk to trees and rivers. But a different thing when you talk to ditches and bayous. A ditch ain't nothing, and a bayou ain't too much either. But rivers and trees—less, of course, it's a chinaball tree. Anybody caught talking to a chinaball tree or a thorn tree got to be crazy. 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 (147–148).

Sandra Stahl has illustrated how the personal narrative serves to create a feeling of intimacy between the teller and the listener. She says, “Without apology, the personal narrative makes a gesture to-
ward intimacy” (1985), and “The personal narrative recounts an event, but it also displays a personality” (1988). In addition, she says, “The personal narrative, through its typical abundance of esoteric allusions maintains the illusion, if not the reality, of intimacy between teller and listeners” (1989).

Stahl’s analysis of the personal narrative as creator of intimacy between teller and listener applies also to the fictional narrator seeking to create a sense of intimacy with the reader. Gaines’ novel tells much more than the story of Miss Jane, but it is Miss Jane’s own personal experience stories that engage the reader with a sense of intimacy with her and tie the narrative together by establishing a believable and acceptable character with a clear narrative voice. Barry Beckham points out that Miss Jane takes the reader/listener into her confidence and addresses the listener directly. For example, she says, “I want to tell you a little story just to show you how these people look at things, and this story is true” (108).

Jeff Titon says, “Personality is the main ingredient in the life story,” even though “It is a fiction, just like the story” (290). We come to know the fictional narrator of a life story also through the self-revelation and through the personality displayed. In addition, we come to know the subject in life histories, as Elliott Oring contends, through the creation of an authentic voice (259–260). In order to maintain the illusion of the oral form, the author must in some way create the voice and the sense of intimacy that an oral personal experience narrator has with his audience.

In his article on personal narratives and the novel, David Stanley discusses “the close relationship between the hearing of personal narratives and the reading of personal novels.” Stanley points out that the personal novel “may be autobiography masked as fiction” (108). This is not the case with Gaines’ novel; in fact, it has been called “fiction masquerading as autobiography” (Hicks 16). The fictional dimension of “real” personal narrative and life stories is widely recognized. Jeff Titon says, “What appears to be a person telling a life story is usually an informant answering a series of questions. Then by a common ruse the interview comes to masquerade as a life story” (277). Thus, Miss Jane’s story would seem not unlike authentic life stories, except that the narrator is part of the fiction.

Stanley also discusses the role of the narrator in personal narrative and in the novel. He says:
The personal narrative, in other words, is a selective construct which masquerades as truthful reenactment. The personal novel, on the other hand is fiction in which the narrator is not present with the same immediacy as the performer of the personal narrative, and in which the narrator and the author are seemingly not closely related.

The personal novel thus adopts many of the conventions of the personal narrative but reverses that of the immediacy of the author, so that the reader is simultaneously tempted to conceive the work as personal narrative and to reject the same idea. The disappearance of the author, I think, leaves the reader with contradictory clues to the work ... (117).

Contradictory clues, I think, are there only if the author does not succeed in maintaining the illusion of disappearing. The author must disappear in order to create the illusion—the narrative voice must take over and the reader must interact with and respond to the voice of the narrator. In Miss Jane, Gaines created the illusion of the immediacy of the narrator to the extent that he, the author, is forgotten. According to Gaines, this is as it should be if the author has created his character effectively and found an authentic voice. Gaines says:

That thing is supposed to take over and you're not supposed to sense that writer ever again ... I'm disappearing if I am writing from that first-person point of view. I'm totally disappearing because I must put everything into that character.

I must in some way—and that's how we come back to the voice thing—give her all this information and let her tell this the way she would tell it, as an illiterate black woman a 100 years old talking about these things. I must let her do it. ... I have to give her that information as if she were just holding a regular conversation with her friends on the porch (Gaudet and Wooton 1988:238–239).

Gaines also says, “It's knowing the place, knowing the people, and then letting your imagination take over to a certain extent” (Gaudet and Wooton 1990). He says that he was trying to produce a “folk autobiography,” and the book has been often called that. He establishes Miss Jane on an intimate basis with the reader through her personal narratives and then keeps her in character by maintaining the narrative voice of a 100 year old illiterate black woman that he bases on the voices he heard in the folk community. Gaines' ideas about the importance of the single voice “speaking” to the reader in fiction seem similar to the concern of anthropologists with the person
speaking. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett says that American anthropologists realized the advantages of an autobiographical account in achieving coherence and vividness and saw that it was not only an ethnographic device but also "a literary genre for capturing the vividness of the living speaker" (129). She also says, "If the anthropologists could not experience a culture that had, in his view, all but disappeared, he could experience the person who remembered how things were. And the life history made it possible to convey a sense of that experience" (129).

In addition, Gaines has said that while writing Miss Jane Pittman, his bible was Lay My Burden Down (Rowell 46). He used this collection of WPA interviews with ex-slaves, he says, "to get an idea of how the ex-slaves would talk about themselves" (Rowell 47). It seems that Gaines was also influenced by Botkin's ideas about personal narrative and oral history (Botkin 1945). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that "Botkin made the case for a coalescence of voices, and in Lay My Burden Down, for the disappearance of the folklorist altogether . . ." (135). She quotes Botkin as saying, "all stories must be narrated as told by an informant or as they might be told orally, with all the flavor of talk and all the native art of casual narration belonging to the natural story-teller" (Botkin 1946, quoted by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 135).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls Botkin's goals "noble, but naive" and rightly so for folklorists and oral historians. What Botkin proposes, however, is certainly appropriate to the writer of fiction trying to create the illusion of oral narrative. Gaines, the author, is further removed because he also has the fictional editor, the young black history teacher, who also seems to disappear. Gaines seems to be purposefully de-emphasizing the role of author and editor in order to make Miss Jane appear more real. Gaines, after all, is not a folklorist or scholar concerned with the integrity or authenticity of a specific text to be studied (by professional folklorists), but a writer of fiction who is trying to create a character and a text that will seem like a real folk narrative. His main concern is with the authenticity of the message he is conveying to the reader about people like Miss Jane. Gaines has said, "Truth to Miss Jane is what she remembers. Truth to me is what people like Miss Jane remember" (1978:37).

Though Gaines frames the fictional Miss Jane's life story as obtained from tape-recorded interviews, this kind of thing (i.e. structuring and telling one's life story in narrative form) was a part of the folk culture he grew up in. Miss Jane Pittman is based on the oral
tradition of personal experience narrative, the culture, and the people in the community. Though Gaines is using literary conventions to create the illusion of orality, he has successfully submerged them to effectively create in art literature the closest thing we have to a “folk autobiography.”

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