

African American Heroism in the Educational Ethical Predicament in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

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Abstract: Education has a direct correlation with the advancement of racial equality, gender equality, class equality, and moral development among individuals of African descent. It consistently emerges as a prominent theme in the lives, thoughts, and protests of African Americans. Ernest Gaines, a contemporary African American writer, dedicated his efforts to depicting African American heroes. His notable work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, explores the ethical predicament surrounding education in the South, the ethical choices made by African American heroes, and the impact of heroism on African American education. Gaines' portrayal of heroism within the educational struggles faced by African Americans unveils its profound influence in liberating their minds and addressing the internal and external challenges of their education.

Keywords: Ernest Gaines; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*; heroism; African American education; ethical predicament

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标题: 论《简·皮特曼小姐的自传》中教育伦理困境中的美国非裔英雄主义

内容摘要: 教育直接关系到美国非裔的种族地位、阶级平等及伦理道德的发展，是美国非裔的日常生活和权利争取中始终如一的主题。当代美国非裔作家欧内斯特·盖恩斯致力于刻画美国非裔英雄，其代表作《简·皮特曼小姐的自传》诠释了美国非裔教育伦理困境中英雄主义的缺失、美国非裔英雄主义的表征以及英雄主义对美国非裔教育的影响。盖恩斯对美国非裔教育中的英雄主义的演绎，揭示了英雄主义在解放美国非裔的思想、解决美国非裔教育的内外困境。

关键词: 欧内斯特·盖恩斯；《简·皮特曼小姐的自传》；英雄主义；美国非裔教育；伦理困境

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Gaines' classic work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), is a masterpiece of heroism, winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award upon its publication. Previous studies of this work have explored its heroism to varying degrees, primarily focusing on the protagonist, Jane Pittman, with less attention given to the secondary character, the black teacher Ned. A closer examination of the text reveals that Ned is the most heroic character, permeating the entire novel and significantly shaping the values and moral qualities of the protagonist and other characters. He embodies the heroism inherent in African American heroes of “ris[ing] above humble origins to achieve personal success, but even more important was their public devotion to their racially defined communities” (Carroll 206). Gaines keenly felt the injustice within the ethical order of Southern education. He also deeply understood the profound impact of education on the spiritual liberation, moral development, and overall advancement of the African American community, so education is the most prominent theme in his works. This idea resonates in Gaines' works, where Southern black individuals, represented by Ned, pay the ultimate price in the face of intense racial threats, to address the marginalization of black education. They demonstrate the value of heroism in times of crisis and adversity.

According to the mythologist Joseph Campbell, heroism embodies the “monomyth” pattern, which consists of the stages of “separation-initiation-return” (24). Heroism researchers Allison and Goethals further elaborate on this pattern, emphasizing the core concept of transformation: changes in the environment, changes in the individual, and changes in society. They assert, “without a change in setting, the hero cannot change herself, and without a change in herself, the hero cannot change the world” (Allison and Goethals 381). These scholars advocate for the idea that the environment influences the construction of a hero's identity, aligning with the literary ethical criticism's notion that “an understanding of literature historical periods and is circumscribed with particular ethical contexts must return it to its ethical environment or ethical context” (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 256). Gaines, by portraying the ethical dilemma of

marginalized African American education in the American South, elucidates the impact of the environment on the construction of heroism and the significance of heroism in relation to education. In a backward racial environment of Southern education, African Americans awakened to their educational consciousness and fearlessly journeyed northward in search of education. After receiving an education in the North, these individuals, as heroes, made the ethical choice¹ to return to the South and courageously engage in reforming African American education. Their sacrifices ultimately awakened the ordinary African American populace, transforming them into community heroes and playing a vital role in the liberation of thought and the improvement of African American educational ideals. Gaines uses the education of African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the American South to shed light on the history of African American education, marked by obscurity, struggle, and progress. Through reflection on the ethical issues within African American education, he highlights the profound and far-reaching impact of African American heroism on the liberation of African American thought and the rectification of internal flaws in African American education.

Departure: Resistance Against the Ethical Predicament of Educational Marginalization

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman depicts the pursuit of knowledge by characters like Ned and unnamed African Americans in the context of an education system with inadequate resources and continuous interference by white supremacists. The educational dilemma faced by African Americans in the United States is an ethical dilemma that cannot be ignored in the novel. For Gaines, portraying this educational ethical dilemma is not only a significant entry point for him to reflect on African American education but also a necessary environment for shaping heroes. Gaines focuses his portrayal of the educational dilemma on a period of over two decades, from the end of the American South's Reconstruction period (1865-1877) to the late 19th century. During this time, slavery had been abolished, but the rampant influence of Jim Crow laws and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the American South resulted in severe racial segregation and persecution, seriously affecting the educational rights of African Americans in the South. As the ideas of Northern liberalism began to spread, the desires of Southern black people for education clashed with the outdated education system and inadequate educational facilities. Faced with these challenges and with limited resources, many

¹ See Nie Zhenzhao, "The Scientific Turn of Humanities Studies," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2022): 567.

black individuals had no choice but to leave the South and head to the relatively more liberal North in search of better educational opportunities. Their departure was a means to return better-prepared, and it ultimately paved the way for the educational reform efforts of Southern African Americans. Therefore, Gaines views their departure as a form of awakening to the importance of education and as a resistance against the marginalization of African American education.

Education is “a lamp unto their people’s feet and a light unto the path toward freedom” (Davis 105). Gaines metaphorically refers to education as light to emphasize the importance of African American education and the ethical dilemmas it faces. Specifically, Gaines titles the chapter where he begins to write about African American education as “A Flicker of Light; and again Darkness,” and the first sentence of this chapter highlights that the momentary glimmer of hope that African Americans in the South experienced after the abolition of slavery was represented by a small schoolhouse. After years of being denied the right to education, black individuals finally had hope for schooling, and their awareness of the importance of education surged. Young children went to school during the day, while older children and adults attended classes after returning from the fields in the evening. This scene in the novel also appears in the autobiography of Booker T. Washington: “Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. As I have stated, it was a whole race trying to go to school. It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn” (44-45). During this period, the African American community placed great importance on education, which led to the ritualization of education. In the novel, Southern black people celebrated Teachers’ Day on the first day of school, and black teachers visited each home. However, there was only one teacher, and there was only one book. Given this context, it may seem that education for African Americans in the American South was making significant progress, but this seemingly harmonious educational scene was actually an illusion carefully crafted by both the Republican and Democratic parties.

As described in the novel, after the Republicans freed the black slaves, they sent black intellectuals and military forces to the South to support the education and healthcare of Southern black people. However, the Republicans were not solely interested in improving the education and healthcare of Southern black people; rather, they aimed to leverage the black community to secure their voting rights. On the other hand, the Democratic Party intensified their efforts against black people, engaging in violence and targeting anyone who sought independence for black

people or anyone who tried to help black people gain independence.¹ The South's economy, the dire conditions of economic poverty, political powerlessness, and cultural backwardness among Southern black people not only failed to improve but worsened over time. After the Democrats came to power, the only black teachers, along with the black military forces stationed in the South by the Republican Party, were withdrawn to the North. The educational progress that Southern black people had just begun to experience quickly became a political tool in the power struggle between the Democratic and Republican parties, and it was ultimately sacrificed in the process.

From this, it can be seen that the emancipation of black slaves did not translate into tangible improvements in education. In fact, in the decades following the end of the Civil War, the educational situation for black people was extremely worrisome. After black people received education, it became challenging to exploit their labor, leading white people to be less inclined to support black education. The saying, "Educate a black man, and you waste a good field hand," was widely circulated in society at the time. Some white people even saw education as a significant marker distinguishing themselves from black people. They believed that "if blacks were granted access to the world of learning, it would be difficult to exploit them as a cheap labor source...education would expand blacks' horizons, allowing them to seek out a livelihood other than the menial one they were forced to accept under sharecropping and other exploitative systems."² In such circumstances, the quality of education for black people was inevitably very poor. Gaines integrates the ethical dilemma of black education into the novel's ethical environment, providing an opportunity for the nurturing of heroes.

According to Joseph Campbell, "the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (48). Clearly, African Americans in the American South, who experienced self-realization catalyzed by education, could no longer adapt to the backward education system and racial segregation imposed on black education in the South. They were forced to transfer "spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown," that is, the "freer" (Campbell 53) North. To Southern black people, this unknown zone was like the "Promised Land" in the hearts of the Jews, an aspirational place.

1 See Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, New York: Bantam Dell, 2009, 70.

2 See Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, *Race in America*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016, 248.

Gaines likens Ned and many Southern black people leaving the South to the biblical “Exodus.” The Bible’s “Exodus” recounts the birth of the Israelite hero Moses and his leading of the Israelite people out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. In one of the chapters of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* titled “Exodus,” Gaines describes the response of Southern black people to the call, clearly indicating his affirmation of this event.

Before their departure, black individuals often changed their names to emphasize their agency. Ned, originally bearing the last name “Brown”, changed it to “Douglass” after encountering the heroic deeds of Frederick Douglass. Other young men of Ned’s age also adopted the last names of other famous black leaders, such as Nat Turner and Booker T. Washington. An individual is “acting in his own name or in the name of a group that is more or less important in terms of its size and social significance, indicates to someone that he possesses such and such property, and indicates to him at the time that he must conduct himself in accordance with the social essence which is thereby assigned to him” (Bourdieu 105-106). Ned naming himself after Douglas symbolized his break from the past and indicated that, like Frederick Douglass, he would also struggle against the constraints of racial prejudice for the future welfare of black people.

Education “would remove the vestiges of slavery, illiteracy, joblessness, and caste-like segregated economic and political powerlessness” (Anderson 51). There is no doubt that the progress of black people in education and their pursuit of education would threaten white dominance. Ned’s collaboration with a committee to guide impoverished black people to escape the lingering slavery in Louisiana caught the attention of the Ku Klux Klan. Ned reluctantly fled to Kansas. In fact, Ned’s departure was not an escape but rather a quest for more education, with the intention of returning to the South to advance the education of Southern black people. Driven by a sense of mission, courage, and responsibility, Ned left in the dead of night, not only to escape the pursuit of white people under the cover of darkness but also symbolically to embark on a journey toward dawn and enlightenment. In this sense, Ned’s departure and return posed “an even greater threat to an entrenched social system dependent upon ignorance” (Carmean 67).

The novel focuses on the life of Miss Jane Pittman, so Gaines does not provide a detailed account of Ned’s experiences in the North. However, through Jane’s narration, he conveys the transformation of Ned’s body, mind, and material circumstances brought about by the change in environment. In the North, Ned received some support from white people who promised to provide him with more support once he completed building schools in the South. He did not give up on

education; he worked during the day and attended night school in the evenings. He even participated in the Cuban War, demonstrating physical strength and resilience. Undoubtedly, without the forging he underwent in this new environment, it would have been challenging for Ned to stand out among other black people. However, in an era when black people were often regarded as cowards and rogues, the key to becoming a true hero lay in his ethical choices.

The Realization of Sacrifice: Ethical Choices of the African American Teacher

The identification of heroes and heroism are varied. The definition of a hero ultimately converges as a moral agent who acts beyond the call of duty despite the interferences of fear, apprehension, and self-preservation.¹ Combined with the perspective from literary ethics criticism that “ethical choices refer to a person’s moral choices” (Nie, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* 250), whether a person can become a hero depends on their ethical choices. Ned became a hero not only because of his unwavering loyalty to the black community but also because, when others in his community became bystanders and white racism repeatedly tempted him to abandon his educational reform efforts in the South, he made the selfless choice to continue, ultimately giving his life for the cause. Gaines’ portrayal of Ned’s heroism is based on the educational conditions of Southern black people at the end of the 19th century, the racism they faced, and the heroism inherent in black individuals within the African American community before the 1970s.

In Nie Zhenzhao’s ethical literary criticism, identity is a person’s emblem of existence in society, and individuals must bear the responsibilities and obligations assigned by their identity. Ethical choices need to confirm a person’s identity from the perspective of values such as responsibility, obligation, and morality.² Ned’s ethical choices are related to his social identity as a teacher, and it is precisely because he adheres to the responsibilities and obligations demanded by his teacher’s ethical identity that he remains steadfast in his choices despite the misunderstanding and questioning of bystanders. “Describing a group struggle for freedom and social advancement, uplift also suggests that African. Americans have, with an almost religious fervor, regarded education as the key to liberation. This sense of uplift as a liberation theology flourished after emancipation and during the democratic reforms of Reconstruction” (Kevin Gaines 1). In other words, at the end of the

1 See Andrew Flescher, *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2003, 109.

2 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014, 263.

19th century, educational practice and reform were the necessary means by which African Americans sought their rights, and they were integrated into the mission and responsibility of black educators. After returning from Kansas, Ned's every action revolved around this goal of struggle, hoping to liberate the minds of black people through education, calling on them to unite and empower themselves. However, Ned's actions did not receive understanding and support from the black community; he was fighting a lonely battle. On the second day of his return, Ned went to various places to solicit support from black people, but the local black community had seen "too much bloodshed" (106)¹ and feared provoking white people, so they dared not participate in Ned's educational enlightenment movement. Even the church, which preached love and goodness, and had provided classrooms for Republican teachers during the Reconstruction era, was unwilling to give Ned a piece of land to teach. Faced with fellow African Americans as bystanders, isolation, and constant surveillance by white racism, Ned had to make a crucial decision: should he give up teaching and return to the North where he could live in peace, or should he persist in educational reform? Ned purchased a piece of land with his own efforts, taught at home in the evenings, and built a school on the vacant land during the day, hoping that those who had previously rejected him would join him after seeing his efforts.

Ned's isolation and lack of support set him apart from ordinary people, highlighting the risks of the endeavor he was undertaking. But his risks had only just begun. Ned's unwavering determination urged him to make another critical ethical choice in his life, a life-and-death choice. However, he didn't hesitate for a moment and said, "I will build my school. I will teach till they kill me" (111). So, Ned delivered an impassioned speech by the riverbank to elevate the thinking of Southern black people and called for unity to fight for their rights. This speech awakened the thoughts of many black people and also ignited the murderous intent of white supremacists. On a rainy night when Ned was returning after buying lumber to build the school, a hitman named Albert Cluveau, blocked their path. The two students were determined to protect Ned with their lives, but he stopped them. He ordered them to take the lumber back home and build the school, then he confronted Cluveau unarmed. Despite being shot in the leg, Ned stood up and fought back against Cluveau, ultimately being shot through the left chest. The novel is primarily narrated by Jane Pittman, and before and after Ned's assassination, it conveys a rich range of emotions and complex feelings through her perspective. However, in the event of Ned's assassination, the text is presented objectively and

1 See Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, New York: Bantam Dell, 2009. All references are to this edition will be cited hereafter in parentheses.

succinctly, devoid of any emotion. In fact, the absence of emotion highlights the tragic heroism of Ned's sacrifice.

The ethical identity of a teacher endows Ned with the highest responsibility and mission of moral education. However, teaching in the vortex of extreme racism while sacrificing himself to defend his vision of education that he deemed suitable and uplifting for black people goes beyond his duty. He had the opportunity to carefully consider his actions, weigh the consequences they might bring, and then decide whether to persevere, but he did not do so. It is precisely because of his fearless ethical choices that he became a hero of the community. Renowned contemporary heroism scholar Philip Zimbardo highly praises the actions of everyday heroes, believing that they show "a contempt of danger, not from ignorance or inconsiderate levity but from a noble devotion to some great cause and a just confidence of being able to meet danger in the spirit of such a cause" (518). Therefore, Ned's resolute determination to face death is not a tragedy but an interpretation of the true meaning of educational equity and freedom, challenging the injustice of black education produced by institutionalized racism. Harriet argues that in the course of history, the prototype of the everyday hero is none other than the ancient Greek educator Socrates. Like Socrates, as an educator, Ned died for truth and belief. Despite engaging in ordinary professions, they possessed the "great spirit" described by Aristotle, enabling them to achieve great deeds—the defeat of an enemy, the salvation of a race, the preservation of a political system, the completion of a voyage—which no one else could have accomplished.¹ In this regard, Ned has become a monument to heroism in the field of African American education and even in the history of education worldwide.

After being labeled as a hero, Ned has become a culturally rich symbol in Gaines' writing, with prototypes drawn from African American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and the martyr Jesus Christ. Gaines has mentioned his deep admiration for Martin Luther King Jr. Although he has said that he did not intentionally insert King into his work, there are many similarities between Ned's speech, where he calls on black people to uplift themselves, strive for freedom and equality, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 1963 speech "I Have a Dream." Furthermore, Ned's sermon by the river and Jesus Christ's sermon "The Sermon on the Mount" share a similar theme. They became heroes in the eyes of the community because they made ethical choices that set them apart from ordinary people. Jesus centered his teachings around people and preached the morals and virtues that

¹ See Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Heroes: A History of Hero Worship*, London: Harper Collins, 2004, 5-6.

Christians should uphold. Similarly, Ned emphasized the importance of being human first, admonishing black people to “be Americans, but first be human” (115-116). At the same time, Ned developed the idea of equality for all, emphasizing that “America is for all of us, and all of America is for all of us” (115). Ned, therefore, rightfully stands as a national hero for black people. Despite his solitary struggle in returning to the South to teach, his practice and sacrifice symbolize the sublime and bring hope, shedding light on the apathy and ignorance of the black community.

“The Spark of Thought”: The Welfare African American Hero Brought to the Community

Campbell pointed out in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (28). Ned’s ethical choice to sacrifice himself for justice and belief made him a hero, and his heroism served a cognitive function of “imparting knowledge and wisdom” and an inspirational function of “inspiring us and promoting personal growth” (Allison 190). within the black community. As a result, the thinking of the black community underwent a profound transformation, and Ned’s sacrifice brought a “spark of thought” to the black community. Moreover, Ned’s heroism is not transient; it demonstrates enduring cognitive and inspirational functions that have implications for the current ethical order in education.

The imagery of the “fire of thought” was subtly introduced when Ned first appeared. After his mother and sister were killed by a patrol, Ned carried the flint and iron left by his mother and continued to flee with Jane. The literal meaning of the flint as a source of fire is evident, but it also carries a metaphorical meaning. In human mythology, when humans were first created, they lived in darkness because they did not possess the fire. It was Prometheus who gave fire to humanity, allowing them to escape from the darkness. Therefore, the metaphorical meaning of the “fire of thought” represents intellectual liberation, the “beneficial power” that a hero brings to others. “No people can progress, without the vivifying touch of ideas and ideals” (Anderson 59). Ned’s educational enlightenment for black people is similar to the Enlightenment movement that began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, which was based on reason and marked by human subjectivity. He traced the history of immigration to the United States, informing black people of the contributions made by African Americans to the formation and development of the United States, making them aware of their pivotal role in American history. At the same time, he called on black people to stand up against white supremacy and racism but not to instill racial hatred or reject all white people blindly. Instead,

he criticized ignorance and foolishness: “I won’t blame all white men. I’ll blame ignorance” (114). He further pointed out that black people should approach racial relations rationally, understand the injustices they face, and seek solutions.

Previous African American literature that featured positive images of black teachers mostly depicted them motivating black students to fight for freedom, without delving into the educational philosophies of black teachers. Gaines received his education in the South during his childhood and later experienced the economic hardships of the 1930s. He witnessed the closed, one-sided teaching methods and educational injustices in black education, leading to deep contemplation of the ethical dilemmas in black education and the need for reform. Undoubtedly, in Ned’s speeches, there is an implicit unity between the author and the narrator regarding the issue of black education: what black people need is education that is centered on humanity, rather than mere training. This is a theme repeatedly emphasized by Gaines in his works. Considering the centuries-long struggle of African Americans in the United States, issues of human dignity and identity have always been the focal points of their struggle. Only through education can black people truly attain freedom, establish their dignity, and clarify their identity. Therefore, bell hooks viewed black education as a fundamentally political endeavor, rooted in the struggle against racism, stating that “for black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in anti-racist struggle. Indeed, my all-black grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution” (2). Ned’s educational philosophy prompted African Americans to see the state of African American education in the early 20th century and urged them to bravely reform the existing problems in black education, update outdated educational beliefs, and support black political struggles for equality.

Ned’s educational philosophy of uplifting humanity and enlightenment had both immediate and far-reaching effects on the black community. Initially, black students were passive recipients of education in the classroom, but after receiving Ned’s education, some students began to ask questions actively, and these questions delved into core issues of black revolution. When Ned faced threats from the killer, the students also displayed the courage to face death, embodying the “warrior view” that Ned promoted, showing courage “But there’s a big difference between a nigger and a black American” (118). After Ned’s death, people mourned and wept at his coffin. Those who had once feared provoking white anger cried like children and collected pieces of wood stained with his blood as a memorial. Subsequently, people fulfilled his wish and built the school, which was in use for over a decade until it was eventually flooded. Ned’s wife, Vivian, inherited Ned’s aspirations

and intended to continue the work he had started during his lifetime. The scattered sparks of Ned's ideas quickly spread through oral traditions among black people, igniting a widespread movement. Years later, Jimmy inherited Ned's advocacy of love, dignity, and racial unity, saying, "we need you to stand by us, because we have no other roots [...] I know we can't do a thing in this world without you" (239). Therefore, Ned's promotion of ideas of freedom and his new educational philosophy had a subtle yet profound influence on black people.

Gaines portrays Ned in his role as a teacher, providing guidance to the black community on issues related to racial identity, racial relations, personal qualities, and more. This portrayal aims not only to reveal the courageous struggle of black teachers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries against intense racism but also touches on the debate among black educators of the early 20th century regarding vocational education versus humanistic education. Black educators, represented by Booker T. Washington, believed that education should "teach some trade, or give training for some special work" (Jackson 89). Classical education opposed this view, insisting that education should be based on a broader foundation of humanities and sciences and should not be solely for practical purposes or reduced to vocational training. Ned unequivocally emphasizes the importance of humanistic education for the comprehensive development of black individuals: "But trade is not all. I want to see some of my children become lawyers. I want to see some of my children become ministers of the Bible; some write books; some to represent their people in the law. So trade is not all. Working with your hands while the white man write all the rules and laws will not better your lot" (117). Clearly, Ned supports humanistic education and advocates that education "has been well defined as the building up of a man, the whole man" (Cooper 249). This educational philosophy directly relates to the essence of black education, as it concerns the shaping of black personalities and social values, making its impact on the community irreplaceable.

The hero may have passed away, but his spirit endures for eternity. The function of literature is to teach moral values by praising virtue and punishing vice.¹ Gaines portrays Ned's courageous self-sacrifice not only to expose the suppression of black education by whites in the early 20th century but also to celebrate the heroism he represents. Therefore, Ned's blessings for the black community hold strong historical significance. Gaines hopes to inspire readers with such scenes, invoking emotional resonance: "what I wanted to do with that scene is to write it so well, and make you to see and hear and feel, that you will try to never let something

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

like that ever happen again. That you will stand up and speak” (Lepschy 201). According to ethical literary criticism, “moral enlightenment is the fundamental function of literature, which is achieved through the reader’s esthetic experience in the process of reading” (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory” 190-191). It is evident that Gaines integrated heroism into the esthetic shaping of individual compassion and responsibility when creating his work. Ned’s heroic achievements not only had a positive impact on the African American community at that time but also hold a constructive meaning for the development of heroism in today’s African American community and every reader.

Conclusion

From the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring racial segregation in American public schools illegal to the “No Child Left Behind” Act proposed in 2002, the educational conditions for black Americans have been a long-standing and unresolved issue that has garnered widespread attention. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* addresses the struggles of black Americans at the end of the 19th century in the marginalized landscape of education. It highlights the dedication, sacrifices, and spiritual legacy left behind by black heroes in the advancement of black education. Gaines’ exploration and portrayal of heroism in black education not only condemn the negative impact of racism on black education but also deepen the significance of heroism in black education through the ethical choices of black teachers.

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