



## **THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN AND THE TRADITION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL NOVEL**

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### **RESUME**

*Cet article met en lumière trois aspects essentiels de The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman<sup>1</sup>, qui sont aussi ceux du roman historique traditionnel africain américain. Il s'agit de la mise en texte des conditions d'asservissement des esclaves par lesquelles débute le roman, de la guerre civile qui engendra la proclamation d'émancipation des esclaves noirs et de la période de reconstruction qui ouvrit la voie à la lutte pour les droits civiques des années 1950 et 1960.*

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**Mots-clés :**      *Africain                  Américain ;  
Asservissement ;      Guerre                  civile ;  
Emancipation ;      Reconstruction ;      Droits  
civiques.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article shows three main aspects of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman<sup>1</sup> which constitute the common ground of the traditional African American historical novel: the contextualization of the Blacks' conditions of enslavement, the Civil War which engendered the Emancipation Proclamation, The Reconstruction, and the struggle for the civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.*

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**Key words :** *African American ; Enslavement ;  
Civil War ; Emancipation ; Reconstruction ;  
Civil    Rights*

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1- Gaines J. Ernest. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. (New York: Dial, 1971). All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition and in parentheses in the text;

## INTRODUCTION

One characteristic of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is that it is written in the first person singular and that as such may be considered autobiographical. Though in its literal definition autobiography refers to "un récit de vie ou l'histoire d'une personnalité, écrit à la première personne du singulier qui met l'accent sur la genèse psychologique de cette personnalité ..." (Le Jeune 1975, 26), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, however, is not an autobiography in its literal sense. The inclusion of the term "autobiography" in the title is indicative of the historical elements the author takes from the Blacks' experience in the American culture. To be sure, the events, themes, and concerns in this novel are true not just for the central character Ticey, a young slave girl renamed Jane Brown after a Yankee soldier, but for a large segment of the black race in the United States. In fact, Gaines introduces his story not from his own perspective, but from an editorial persona, a black high school teacher who, in the "Introduction" to the novel points out that "*This is not only Miss Jane's autobiography... it is also the account of life experience intimately shared by many other Blacks*" (p.viii). Gaines' novel is thus what Lee Greene (1991, 284) terms "*a generic autobiography of the black race*".

By opening the novel with an editorial persona, Gaines establishes Jane as a speaking subject, and provides the reader with a subjective and participatory point of reference, so that he may understand the events which follow. He provides clues on how to read, or decode the real meaning of his ostensibly historical and racial message. The editorial persona is there to ensure the reader that the story he is about to read is reliable. In this sense the "introduction" is a device for authenticating and validating the realism of the story.

One of the most notable aspects of African American historical novels is the deprivation with which many of them begin. The initial stage is usually one of bondage and

humiliation, then the patterns of escape involve an attempt to break out this limitation. The third stage is seldom one that encompasses an ideal freedom, often related to an escape or to the emancipation of black slaves in 1865. The last stage is often the moment of protestation involving the struggle for the civil rights. This article purports to demonstrate that Gaines' novel is a case in point.

## I. - THE MEMORY OF BONDAGE AND HUMILIATION

One of the purposes of Gaines' novel is Miss Jane Pittman's desire to tell the reader that she has been a slave in the South. From the opening pages of the novel there is a strict autobiographical pattern at work. The author is concerned with showing how a black woman who has lived 110 years, has been both a slave and a witness to the American civil war of 1861 and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865, experiences the hard times of the Reconstruction (1865 – 1877) and the black militancy of the 1950s and 1960s, tells the story of her race in the United States.

The initial condition is one of bondage, deprivation, and injustice. Like other slaves Jane Pittman has never known her parents : "*My mama was killed when I was young, and I never knowed my daddy. He belong to another plantation, I never did know his name*" (p.14). In fact, many slaves never had the chance to see their parents ; Frederick Douglass, a former slave reports : "*My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant before I knew her as mother.*" (Douglass : 1982,48). Jane Pittman has been told how her mother was savagely and unjustly "*whipped and killed*" by an overseer (p.28). As can be seen, she is confronted early on with the cruelty of the white man who does not spare her hard labour : "*They put me in the field when I was ten or eleven. A year after the Freedom come*" (p.10). She thus comes so abruptly in contact with the white man's conception of the black man, for she understands the overseer's urge to bully her. Because of the brutality both the overseer and his master are likened to animals. Her experience with the Bryants is representative

of the white man's bestiality : *"They used to beat me all the time for nothing"* (p.28). The tragic dimension of these whippings is heightened later by Jane's realization that they have caused her barrenness : *"He [the doctor] told me it had happened when I was nothing but a tot. Said I had got hit or whipped in a way that had hurt me inside"* (p.77). Repeatedly, one sees the agony and uncertainty the initial condition produces on Jane : The young girl is broken in body, soul, and spirit by those whippings. She recalls the storm of whippings on her at the Bryants' : *"Old Master used to beat us with the first thing her hands fell on"* (p.28).

Jane Pittman is also concerned with showing how black slaves who live in what was commonly known during the nineteenth century as *"the prison house of slavery"* (Houston, 1974,10) try their way to freedom by running away from the plantation. Commenting on the Blacks' urge of freedom, Jane says that the one thing that saved black slaves was escape. She argues that it was only by setting themselves psychologically apart from the white world that they were able to achieve their freedom. In spite of the existence of patrollers, they used to place themselves in a kind of extralegal position in order to leave the South : *"All through slavery people was trying to get away from the South"* (p.71). Jane's experience allows her discovers that the masters' *"bloodhounds"* or dogs were able to end a fugitive's life by tearing his body to pieces. The word *"bloodhound"* suggests that white masters have trained their dogs to shed blood. The image of masters or overseers killing their slaves who try to escape comes again and again to Jane's mind. She points out, for example, that the slave world had defined different categories of slaves and found specific punishments for trouble-makers :

*The old master and the patrollers used to go after the people with dogs. If you was a good slave, a good worker, they would bring you back home and beat you. Some of the masters would brand their slaves. If you was one of the trouble-makers always trying to run away, then they would bring you back and sell you to a trader going to New Orleans* (p.71).

These lines contain a just assessment of the patrollers' and overseers' task. But the slave subjected to the rigours of the plantation life, and broken by hard work, sometimes prefers death to his life as a slave. The patrollers' brutality finds its most elucidating phase in this passage where Jane recalls how a runaway who refuses to go back to the plantation is killed :

*I knowed a man who wouldn't come back and they had to shoot him. He told them he rather they shoot him down like a dog than go back, and he tore his shirt open to let them shoot at his heart. They shot him right where he was and left him back there for the buzzards* (p.71).

Jane Pittman is greatly shocked by what she sees, and no wonder that the burst of the Civil War acts for her both as a destructive force upon the South and a projection of the Blacks' freedom.

## II. - FROM THE CIVIL WAR TO FREEDOM AND RECONSTRUCTION

The overall tragic dimensions of the civil war are heightened by Jane Pittman's description of the violent destruction of the South: *"Lord, I ain't seen nothing but ravishing and more ravishing"* (p.27). In her role as an individual who has seen, who remembers and records the situations and the attitudes that have destroyed the South, Jane recalls the moment when the Confederate soldiers entered their plantation: *"It was a day, something like right now, dry, hot and dusty. It might a' been July, I'm not too sure, but it was July or August. Burning up, I won't ever forget. The Secesh Army, they came by first"* (p.3). The Civil War started on April 12, 1861 in Virginia, but reaches Louisiana, where Jane experiences bondage, four months later.

Jane has a good opinion of the Union Troops, because she sees *"the victory of the North as her victory over a way of life in which her humanity had been denied"* (p.114), but she feels compelled to satisfy her masters' dream of winning the war by helping the Confederate Troops: *"My mistress told me stop standing there gaping, go out there in the road and give the Troops some water"* (p.4). Jane is, thus, a girl caught between two worlds.

She is part of the “broken” people who want to break out the chains of slavery, and at the same time participates in the war for the self-satisfaction of her masters. So while she is in presence of her masters, there is no sign of any expression of anger against the Confederate soldiers. But the anguish left by their presence is deep in her. During that moment of confusion, Jane’s actions in the civil war are accompanied by visions of her people’s freedom. The final light comes when Caporal Brown of the Union Army explains to her the aim of the fratricidal conflict : “*I’m just a ‘old ordinary Yankee soldier come down here to beat them Rebs and set y ‘all free. You want to be free, don’t you?’*” (p.8). The war has, in effect, created moral, social, and economic chaos for the Bryants and their southern world. Much as he wants to struggle to perpetuate slavery, Mr Bryant is obliged to accept the evidence : to free black slaves. The key to Gaines’ novel is perhaps most explicitly expressed in Mr Bryant’s words about the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865: “*All right, I got news for y’all (...) Y’all free. Proclamation papers just come to me and they say y’all free as I am*” (p.10). The author does not pass on quickly from this idea of the Blacks’ freedom, however, but proceeds to develop it as thoroughly as possible. Remembering the plight that had been theirs for hundreds of years, and seeing the freedom which comes up suddenly because circumstances are favorable, Blacks see that freedom as a gift of God, as evidenced by this song :

*We free, we free, we free  
We free, we free, we free  
We free, we free, we free  
Oh, Lordy, we free* (p.11).

It is interesting to see how the word ‘free’ is repeated in this context. But the light of freedom has its dark side for the very first sorrows emerge among the slaves and their masters:

*Old Mistress and Young Mistress was standing in the door crying, and right behind them the house niggers crying, too. For a while after the master got through reading the Proclamation the people didn’t make a sound.*

*Just standing there looking up at him like they was listening to his words* (p.10).

This passage reflects the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation. The author’s main concern is to outline the facts, and to convey the state of mind of both masters and slaves. Slaves are crying because they are not prepared to their new situation; the driver’s question comes as a very good illustration of their embarrassment: “*Master, if we free to go, where is we to go?*” (p.11). The reason of that perplexity is in the text: “*We have never thought about nothing like that, because we have never thought we was go’n ever be free. That’s why we hadn’t got ourselves ready*” (p.16). Here the author conveys the Blacks’ desperate and inarticulate feeling. Their freedom has been so unexpected that they are still wondering about their fate. The white master obviously thinks with some disdain of the change which is taking place in the South. Mr Bryant for instance gives no indication of taking sides, or showing political partisanship, even though, as one suspects, he is against the abolition of slavery, and presumably ready to enslave his former slaves. His answer to Isom’s question about what to do after his freedom, tells evidence : “*No, they just say y’all free (...). They don’t care what y’all do, where y’all go. I’m the one who saying y’all can stay on if y’all want...*” (p.12). The Blacks’ perplexity invites to this dramatic interrogation: what does the emancipation proclamation lead to, in practical terms?

In a further passage, one notices that the freedom under discussion is clearly restricted ; it is as the author describes it, a very short moment of freedom, a “*Flicker of Light ; and again Darkness*” (p.65). In fact, if the Blacks are for a moment puzzled by the word ‘freedom’, they grasp its essence a few months later when they realize that it is something that brings a different kind of social and economic difficulties, as Jane recalls it:

*We didn’t know a thing. We didn’t know where we was going, we didn’t know what we was go’n eat when the apples and potatoes ran out, we didn’t know where we was go’n sleep*

*that night. If we reach the North, we didn't know if we was go'n stay together or separated (p.16).*

Going through the text the reader discovers in fact that things are not easy for the newly freed Blacks. Jane reports how the signs of *bygone days* are present in their daily life through Big Laura's attempt to make a fire during their wandering, not with matches, as done in modern societies but by scrapping a piece of flint and iron together as it used to be done during the prehistoric epoch :

*Big Laura dropped her bundle on the ground and sat the children side it (...). Then she dug a hole in the ground and filled it with leaves and dry moss. She stuck a little piece of lint cotton under the moss and leaves and started scrapping a piece of flint and iron together near the cotton. Soon she had made fire (p.20).*

The reader cannot fail to see that this passage deals with what is commonly called "*the Blacks' Wandering*" after the Emancipation Proclamation. The author's reference to the black experience is also perceived through the problem of land. Mr Bryant's statement "*I got to work with you on shares*" (p.12) is a direct allusion to the well-known system of the sharecroppers which prevailed during the Reconstruction. The word 'shares' suggests that Blacks have no right, are treated rather like slaves, or are made to undertake hard labour. Certainly they do not profit from their work nor do they find pleasure in it. Here the author indicates the collapse of post-slavery land reform. Robinson (2005, 115) underlines that during that period every effort was made to "*prevent negroes from acquiring lands*". Gerald Jaynes (2005:126) explains that the system of paying black laborers one-half the crop frequently resulted in severe labour incentive problems and inefficient work. Another terrible and realistic aspect of the Blacks' experience during the Reconstruction is their poverty as shown by Jane's description of her cabin :

*All we found in that cabin was two little beds and a fire half. Beds were two wide boards nailed against the wall like a shelf.*

*Mattress was dry grass sewed in ticking. We had no table, no chairs, no benches – You sat down on your bed or you sat down on the bare ground (p.60).*

This passage echoes Booker T. Washington's description of his cabin during the Reconstruction : "*The cabin was without glass window : it had only openings in the side which let in the light.... There was a door to the cabin that is, something that was called a door but the uncertain hinges by which it was hung, and the large cracks in it... made the room a very uncomfortable one*" (Washington :1901,16). One may also notice a number of elements which contribute to Blacks' plight. There are for example, elements of hardship and violence when Blacks are killed by members of the Ku-Klux-Klan :

*Names like Ku Klux Klan, the white Brotherhood, the Camellias O'Luzana – groups like that rode all over the state beating and killing. Would kill any black man who tried to stand up and would kill any white man who tried to help him (p.68).*

Another interesting point is made about the emergence the of the Ku Klux Klan in 1866, immediately after the civil war : "*Patrollers was poor white trash that used to find the runaway slaves for the masters. Them and the soldiers from the Secesh Army was the ones who made up the Ku Klux Klan later on*" (p.21). Concerning the task of the Klan's members, Janes recalls that : "*they took of the trouble – maker to jail and brought the rest of us back home*" (p.67). Thus, for example, Ned who is considered a trouble – maker because of his political activities is the Klan men's target. So one night while he was out working for the Committee for Civil Rights, they came to Jane's cabin and started threat and bullying:

*Some eight or nine of them... they had kicked the door in. Then they turned over everything in the house. Turned over my table, kicked my bench in the fire. The end of it got scorched.... There he slapped me back down. "We'll get him some other time (74-75).*

It is that negative image of the South, which epitomizes the white man's violence and inhumanity that makes Jane advise Ned to leave, telling him that, the Klan men will not allow him continue his political activities : "They'll do worse when they come back (...). Then you have to go, or they'll kill you" (p.75). But the necessity for Ned to use his courage to survive is prominent. It is his instinctive knowledge of the white man's psychology that enables him to challenge his pursuers and to ignore Jane's advice to give up his militancy : "I can't give it up. I ought to stay here and just let them kill me" (p.76). But the Klan's pression is so great that finally Ned decides to leave for Kansas. Obviously, the Klan men's behaviour reinforces Ned's political convictions and precipitates the Civil Rights struggle.

### III. - THE YEARS OF PROTESTATION

In a Kansas' school Ned completes his studies and is exposed to Booker T. Washington's and Frederick Douglass' ideas that he decides to teach to other Blacks down the South (p.100). Effectively, no one better exemplifies the positive impact of access to education on black upward mobility than Booker T. Washington who would gain fame as the Founder of Tuskegee Institute, an agricultural and technical school created for Blacks in central Alabama, for Washington was conscious for a "College" to educate local black Youth.

Ned's perspective is that of a militant, a hero who assumes a racist universe, speaking the unspoken. He reveals a will to challenge the racist white society by struggling for black children's education. All he says, Jane reports, is "I will build my school. I will teach till they kill me" (p.106). This militant who campaigns against the Ku Klux Klan's ideology, is really an echoe of Booker T. Washington. Like in the case of the Tuskegee Institute, Ned's school appears as the symbol of his rebellion against illiteracy imposed on Blacks by their former masters. Building that school becomes the site where the Whites' hatred emerges for they cannot stand Ned's outrageous attitude : "They don't want him to build that school there, no.

*they say he just good to stir trouble among niggers. They want him to go back. Back where he comes from"* (104-105). What Ned teaches is the right for the black children to be educated like other American children ; in so doing he claims their americaness :

*This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you (...). It's yours because your people's bones lay in it; it's yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth. The white man will use every trick in the trade to take it from you* (p.107).

Ned raises the problem of the Blacks' citizenship and tells them that "America is for all of us" (p.109). At the same time he seems to show that America is flawed because it is built on a lie of human freedom, justice, and equality, defined by a white man who cannot accept Blacks as his brothers and sisters. That is why Ned's sense of liberation is in his school as an open signifier he takes on his life to assert the Blacks' presence in a white America: "*Be Americans (...). I'm building that school so you'll have a chance to get from out that corner"*, (p.110) a statement which, again, echoes Booker T. Washington because, according to Wilson J. Moses (2005;149) his goal was to "*develop a stratified society in which the masses would be prosperous farmers and handworkers, led by a managerial elite of college trained technocrats*". Ned's return to his southern homeland reminds also *The Souls of Black Folks* in which WEB DuBOIS relates his experiences as a school teacher in rural Tennessee. That idea of educating young Blacks is especially clear in chapter thirteen entitled "*Of the coming of John*" in which the author tells the story of a young black named Jones who is educated and goes back home to southern black community in order to open a school for Blacks. Ned is, however, conscious of the tragedy pursuing his life, but he does not care as he tells Janes : "*I'm go'n-die, Mama*" (p.112). Obviously, the Klan men are already establishing their gruesome plan to stop him. Albert Cluveau, one of the white gangs who "*used to get contracts to kill people just like you get contract to cut wood*" (p.98) informs Jane of the Whites' conspiracy. Ned is perhaps

an icon bearing the spirit of the Black forthcoming revolt. Addressing his black kin he says :

*I agree many of them (Blacks) have been killed because they stood up on their two feet. 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 ? (p.111).*

But that black cause he defends has its darker side, for a few days after, Ned is shot by Albert Cluveau. In this struggle for the black cause, Ned stood almost alone unable to convince old black people, but when he dies, he becomes a hero, a powerful voice among those old black people :

*They didn't want to go near him when he was living, but when they heard he was dead, they cried like children (...). They wanted to touch his body, they wanted to help take it inside of when they couldn't touch his body they took lumber from the wagon. They wanted a piece of lumber with his blood on it (p.116).*

In Gaines's pen, Ned becomes a Jesus-like figure who has "*shed his precious blood for Blacks*" (p.113). Blacks go from time to time to his grave to pay a tribute to his soul. The only thing he has left to his people is his speeches that no one can forget. Gaines expresses that eternity of the black militant through the metaphor of the indelibility of his blood :

*A trail of blood all the way from where Ned was shot clear up to his house. Even the rain couldn't wash the blood away. For years and years, even after they had graveled the road, you could still see little black spots where the blood had dripped (p.116).*

Like Ned, Jimmy Aaron is motivated by the civil rights struggle. He thinks that white men have been oppressing Blacks for hundreds of years and that "*they wasn't about to give up without a fight*" (218). He is an organizer who urges Blacks to struggle against whites' racism and oppression. But if his

political commitment allows him to appear before the black community as a leader, if there is in him a desire for social demonstration, it seems difficult to be transformed in action. He needs therefore an incident, and Whites give it: "*They had picked out a girl to drunk from white people's fountain.... This was their Rosa Parks*" (p.232), and quite naturally the emblematic figure of Rosa Parks comes to the fore :

*What Miss Rosa Parks did, everybody wanted to do. They just needed one person to do it first.... Then they needed King to show them what to do next. But King couldn't do a thing before Miss Rosa Parks refused to give that white man a seat. (p.228).*

This passage is a direct reference to the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955. Then, Miss Jane Pittman points out the biblical origin of Jimmy's political commitment: "*People always looking for somebody to come to lead them. Go to the Old Testament; go to the New Testament. They did it in slavery; after the war they did; they did it in the times...*" (p.199). Here the novel refers to what Adeboye (2008,30) defines as the biblical motif of the messenger / messiah which, he says, "*underscores the impact of the Bible in the tradition of the African American novel*". In fact, the incident of the girl's capture is a mere pretext for Jimmy to mobilize people for the Monday's parade to show the whole world how Blacks are handed roughly by Whites. Jane agrees to participate in the demonstration planned by Jimmy Aaron in Bayonne in spite of her old age-she is 110. Later on she becomes "*an inspiration to her community*" (Adeboye, 35) and continues to lead the Blacks on the plantation to Bayonne for the demonstration. During the march Jane Pittman who has witnessed everything is asked if she could afford the march; she answers: "*My feet is tired, but my soul-is rested*". This sentence shows that Gaines' novel conforms to historical cycles in Southern black militancy of the 1950s. Actually, Miss Jane's feeling of having "*tired feet*" and "*rested soul*" refers to the historical march of the Montgomery bus boycott with Martin Luther King. It recalls that old woman who captured the very spirit of the

Montgomery march, as reported by historian Levine:

*One day one of the minister said to an elderly black woman that she would better take the bus, for she was too old for all this walking. She said absolutely not "my feet is tired, but my soul is rested (Levine : 1977,30).*

Jimmy's sentence,

*Some of us might be killed, some of us going definitely to fail, and some of us might be killed, and some of us might be crippled the rest of our life. But death and jail don't care us (p.22).*

is another direct reference to Martin Luther King's speech at Memphis a few hours before his assassination in April 1968: *"I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord"* (King quoted by Harding, 127). Jimmy has strong similarity with Martin L. King. This similarity is established when Gaines refers to the bombing of Martin Luther King's home: *"And look how they treated Reverend King – how they bombed his house and jailed him"* (p.218). In fact, King's home was bombed on January 30, 1956. At the end of the novel Jimmy is shot the day he would lead the march of Bayonne. Once again, King is fictionalized, for we know that the black preacher was murdered on Thursday, April 4, 1968 in Memphis where he had planned to organize a great march. Here Gaines' novel follows closely the social and political events in the American society that have affected the lives of Blacks.

After Jimmy's assassination, Miss Jane Pittman emerges as a civil rights activist; she leads the Blacks on the plantation to Bayonne despite her hundred and ten years old, becoming a mythical figure for her people. Miss Jane Pittman political commitment indicates that the black woman has been central in the black community from slavery to the present where resistance is concerned. Gaines provides a link between historical events, and her episodes of life.

## CONCLUSION

Gaines follows African Americans' experience in constructing his novel; he takes his subject from American historical events. It is worth noticing that the novel is based upon an account told to a black high school teacher who recorded a very old black woman life in the community of slaves in the south of the United States. It is also instructive to note in what ways the author is influenced by contemporary historians of the American civil war and its aftermath. One may argue, too, that he read Ned's experiences ultimately through Booker T. Washington's autobiographical *Up from Slavery* and Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, books in which both authors stress their respective urge for Blacks' education during the Reconstruction. Finally, Gaines interprets the dynamics of the black civil rights struggle and Martin Luther King's political achievement through the character of Jimmy Aaron, as a type of African American activists of the 1950s and 1980s. The flood of events which constitute the "inner world" of *The Autobiography of Miss Pittman* is relentlessly animated by the history and experiences of the ante-bellum, the Civil war, the post-civil war, and the struggle for the civil rights of the 1950s and the 1960s which may be considered as the main characteristics of the African American historical novels. In some ways Gaines was influenced by the historiography of his time, and his novel, too, is very much of its time.

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