



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PROTAGONIST IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *JONAH'S GOURD VINE*

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ABSTRACT:

This analysis examines John Buddy Pearson, the protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, as a complex and multifaceted character who embodies the struggles of human imperfection. Set against the backdrop of rural Black life in the post-Reconstruction South, the novel explores themes of identity, spirituality, community, and personal flaws. John's dual nature—torn between his spiritual calling as a preacher and his earthly desires—serves as a central tension that drives the narrative. His relationships, particularly with the women in his life, highlight both his vulnerabilities and the strength of those around him. This study also delves into Hurston's use of Biblical allusions, particularly the metaphor of the gourd vine, to underscore the cyclical nature of John's rise and fall. Ultimately, this analysis presents John as a tragic yet relatable figure, through whom Hurston critiques societal pressures and celebrates the resilience of Black culture and humanity.

KEYWORDS:

IDENTITY, FOLKLORE, RELIGION, AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE, SELF-DISCOVERY.

INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) was an influential African American writer, folklorist, and anthropologist, best known for her contributions to literature during the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-Black incorporated town in the U.S., which inspired much of her work.

Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) is Zora Neale Hurston's debut novel, set in the American South during the early 20th century. The novel follows the life of John, a man of mixed race, who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and spiritual conflict. The story blends folklore, myth, and social commentary to explore themes of identity, religion, and the complexities of human relationships.

The title of the novel refers to a biblical story about Jonah, whose gourd vine withers, symbolizing both personal growth and destruction. In Hurston's narrative, the gourd vine becomes a metaphor for the central character's life — his struggles with love, faith, and the burdens of his choices.

The novel is also deeply rooted in African American culture, using vernacular language and capturing the oral traditions of the community. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* explores the tensions between individual desires and societal expectations, as well as the role of religion in shaping personal and communal identity.

John Pearson, the protagonist, is a mulatto born to a black mother, Amy Crittenden, and likely a white father, Alf Pearson, as John was born on Alf's plantation. Following the Slave Emancipation, John's family, including his mother, stepfather Ned Crittenden, and younger brother Hezekiah, move across the Creek. Facing rejection from his

stepfather, John eventually returns to Alf Pearson's plantation.

Lucy, the main female character, is portrayed as remarkable in several ways. She comes from a distinguished African-American family emerging in the post-slavery era. Her family members, including one who serves as John's teacher, are educated, financially stable, and enlightened. Unlike the unrefined women on plantations, Lucy maintains control over her sexuality. In contrast, John, coming from an unsophisticated and uneducated background, struggles with self-discipline, particularly regarding his sexual desires. Lucy plays a significant role in encouraging John to pursue education and instilling a sense of propriety by discouraging his lewd behavior.

Despite her mother's objections, Lucy marries John. Although John works as an assistant to Alf Pearson, he remains impoverished, to the extent of stealing a piglet to feed Lucy after the birth of their third child. This situation reflects the systemic racism and capitalism of the time. When John is caught and charged, Alf, suspecting John might be his son, advises him to flee. John escapes to Eatonville, an all-Black town where African Americans govern themselves. When Lucy and their children join him, she motivates him to build a home and achieve financial independence. Through her guidance, John becomes a carpenter, preacher, estate owner, postmaster, and church moderator. His eloquence and talent for storytelling help him establish a thriving church, gaining popularity akin to the biblical Jonah's gourd vine, which symbolizes rapid growth and eventual downfall.

Despite loving Lucy, John continues his infidelity after marriage, often abandoning her and their sick child for his

affairs. At one point, he strikes Lucy on her deathbed when she confronts him about his behavior. After Lucy's death, John marries Hattie, who proves to be hostile. When Hattie exposes his indiscretions at a church conference, John steps down as moderator of the Zion Hope Church, a congregation he founded. In his final sermon, John showcases his oratorical brilliance, reflecting the beauty of African-American verbal traditions, despite his moral failings.

Following his resignation, Hattie divorces John in a court of law. He refrains from using his eloquence to defend himself, explaining to his friend Deacon Hambo that he wanted to protect African-American secrets from white scrutiny. Praying for a wife like Lucy, John marries Sally, but his troubles persist. Ultimately, he dies in a tragic accident when his car collides with a train, distracted and burdened by his struggles.

African Americans faced immense challenges in the aftermath of slavery and the collapse of Reconstruction during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a pivotal period in American history. The rise of Jim Crow laws sought to dismantle the limited gains African Americans had achieved, intensifying racial segregation and institutionalizing inequality. Despite these oppressive conditions, African American communities demonstrated remarkable resilience, striving to maintain their cultural identity and independence.

Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance, provides a vivid portrayal of Black life during this era in her 1934 novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Through the story of John Pearson, the novel delves into the complexities of African American experiences in a society marked by both physical and psychological oppression. Hurston's work transcends a singular narrative of individual struggle to offer a broader commentary on the realities faced by African Americans in the South after Reconstruction.

John Buddy Pearson serves as the central figure in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, embodying a character in perpetual search of identity and self-understanding. Despite being the focal point of the narrative, John struggles with introspection and remains disconnected from his origins. As Josie P. Campbell notes, John's lack of self-awareness mirrors his uncertainty about his past. Hurston takes a bold step in creating a protagonist so fundamentally unaware of himself, which Campbell suggests may reflect a broader commentary on the struggles faced by African-American men. Similar themes are explored in Richard Wright's *Native Son* through Bigger Thomas, who only begins to comprehend his identity after a violent act. In contrast, John's awakening to his flaws and inner self occurs gradually and painfully (Campbell, 47).

John's failure to understand himself is most evident in his relationships with women. From a young age, his lustful tendencies surface, leading him into affairs with multiple women, including M'haley, Phrone, Big Oman, Exie,

Delphine, Hattie, and Ora, despite being married. His first wife, Lucy, plays a pivotal role in his success, providing strength and support that he simultaneously depends on and resents. John's masculinity feels undermined by Lucy's guidance, prompting him to retort, "You always tryin' tuh tell me whut tuh do. Ah wouldn't be where Ah is, if Ah didn't know more'n you think Ah do. You ain't mah guardzeen no how" (Hurston, 100).

John's inability to recognize his needs and desires leads to further missteps, such as his ill-fated marriage to Hattie Tyson, which ultimately fractures his family. Despite warnings from his best friend Hambo, John's impulsiveness prevails. Later, he admits his regret, saying, "But Ah don't. God knows Ah sho don't. Look lak Ah been sleep. Ah ain't never meant uh marry you. Ain't got no recollection" (Hurston, 120). Even after divorcing Hattie, John's search for purpose remains fruitless. His subsequent marriage to Sally offers a glimmer of redemption, but his habitual promiscuity leads to yet another affair with Ora. For the first time, John feels genuine guilt and attempts to reconcile with Sally, only to meet a tragic end en route. His journey, defined by a constant struggle for self-discovery, ultimately culminates in failure.

Hurston's portrayal of John as a deeply flawed but relatable figure reflects her intent to craft an authentic representation of a Black preacher, as Valerie Boyd highlights. Hurston sought to depict a man neither caricatured nor constrained by Puritanical ideals but one who embodied the poetic and vibrant spirit of the Black church (Boyd). Hurston's exploration of John's spiritual turmoil adds depth to his character. Despite his role as a preacher, John lacks spiritual balance—a critical component for personal growth. According to Lillie P. Howard, the novel addresses one man's quest for spiritual equilibrium while also presenting John as a universal symbol for those torn between conflicting desires. John's duality—his indulgence in earthly pleasures and his Sunday sermons—highlights the tension between the communal spirituality of his heritage and the rigid moral expectations of white Puritan society (Howard, 76).

As a mulatto, John's life is shaped by the inherent challenges of his mixed heritage. He is rejected by both his Black stepfather, Ned Crittenden, who calls him a "yaller nigger" and a "punkin-colored bastard," and his white biological father, Alf Pearson, who avoids any meaningful paternal responsibility. The mulatto's plight—being an outcast in both Black and white communities—is poignantly depicted through John's struggles. While Ned's resentment stems from his own powerlessness, Alf's inappropriate interest in John's sexual exploits reflects a lack of positive role models in John's life. This absence of guidance profoundly affects John's relationships with women, which becomes a central theme in the novel.

John's tendency to escape responsibility defines his character. From the beginning, he flees from challenges, a pattern established in childhood when he dreams of life "over de creek." His mother, Amy, warns him against this

behavior, saying, "Yuh always uh runnin' and uh rippin' and clambin' trees." Yet, John repeatedly chooses flight over confrontation, whether evading work on the plantation, avoiding conflicts with his stepfather, or escaping the consequences of his actions in relationships. Alf Pearson, recognizing this flaw, advises John to stop running and face his problems. However, John's habitual escapism persists, culminating in his final, fatal flight. As Hurston writes, "God, as if tired of his running, brings him to his Judgment Day" (Hurston, 166).

Despite his flaws, John's journey from a poor slave's son to a respected preacher and mayor demonstrates resilience and determination. Hurston's portrayal of John as a multifaceted character underscores his humanity, making his struggles relatable and his tragic fate poignant. Through John Buddy Pearson, Hurston explores themes of identity, spirituality, and the enduring impact of cultural and racial heritage, crafting a compelling narrative of a flawed but unforgettable man.

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