

Zora neale hurston's portrait of a preacher in jonah's gourd vine



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In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Zora Neale Hurston portrays her protagonist, Reverend John Buddy Pearson, as a flawed Christian leader whose congregation in Sanford, Florida considers him to be both a stimulating new addition and a moral threat to their larger community.

Set in Alabama and Florida, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston's first novel, chronicles John's attempts to reconcile his spiritual commitments and fleshly desires. The prideful minister is so obsessed with women and power that he cannot focus on people who lack religious faith.

This paper argues that Hurston uses this novel to critique those who stereotype black preachers as hypersexual and power-hungry, and also do not accept that their preachers may have simultaneous interests. Ironically, she reveals that the members of her southern congregation are dually committed themselves; they demonstrate both love and hate toward John because he is a human symbol of the fact that their societal norms are rapidly changing.

Portrait of a Preacher

Hurston pictures John as a tall, physically strong, light-skinned mulatto. This description, perhaps, suggests the value his townspeople place on men's prowess, though they should concentrate on understanding men's inner qualities. John's birth father is suspected to be the former white master of his mother, an ex-slave.

As Walter C. Daniel notes, Hurston also fashions John as "the touchstone of the upheaval" occurring in the south after the World War I period (85).

Pearson comes of age in Notasulga, as the oral, folk culture there is rapidly influenced and overridden by the mechanization and faster pace of the north. His presence, like the influence of the north, overwhelms the community.

Early on, for instance, John learns that he has the gift of persuasive public speaking; this mastery of words proves detrimental later. He is too physically attractive and clever-tongued for his own or his community's good, and he accumulates power and women much more quickly than he can handle them.

John's and his congregants' inability to grow spiritually and socially can be analyzed in direct relation to the Biblical story of Jonah and the gourd vine. John could have helped himself and his congregation by being a pastor with a better foundation in the secular, everyday world, or, specifically, more conscious of his duties and place in the larger scheme of daily living in Florida.

Like Jonah, however, John was more interested in getting glory for himself. The Biblical account indicates Jonah did not want God to spare Nineveh, a powerful city in Assyria at around 721 B. C. Nineveh was guilty of disobeying God's mandates, but God was willing to show the people there mercy, if they would repent. Though God told Jonah to minister to the Ninevites, Jonah was not happy with his assignment.

When Jonah expresses his anger at God for showing compassion to Nineveh, the Lord asks him, "Doest thou well to be angry?" (Jonah 4: 4, KJV). Jonah retreats to a place east of the city to sulk, "and the Lord God prepared a <https://assignbuster.com/zora-neale-hurstons-portrait-of-a-preacher-in-jonahs-gourd-vine/>

gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief.

So Jonah was exceedingly glad of the gourd" (Jonah 4: 6, KJV). To teach him a lesson later, however, God snatches this shade-providing vine away. He allows a worm—which can be seen as snake-like and a symbol of sexuality—to eat the vine and a “vehement east wind” to blow, its scorching adding to the sun rays already blazing on Jonah’s head (Jonah 4: 8, KJV). Jonah wants to die.

God reprimands Jonah for being angry that the gourd vine has been removed: “Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not labored, neither madest,” says God (Jonah 4: 10, KJV). Like John, Jonah was more sensitive to his own interests than to the blessings he had been granted or the spiritual needs of the people around him.

Physical gratification drives both men—John wants to engage in worldly pleasures involving women and the power of leadership, despite the harm this may cause others, and Jonah wants his bare head soothed even though he does not assist other people in their times of need.

As he grows more popular, John does not understand how to balance the morality he preaches with his interests and activities outside of the church.

As Rita Dove states in her foreword to *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, however, Hurston's novel suggests that “sudden growth—fame achieved without thought or labor—must maintain a precarious balance” (xii). Those who gain

favor or prestige quickly must carefully consider how to best handle their growing influence and popularity while upholding their morality.

John's early days at school, as depicted in the first chapters of the novel, are a perfect point of entry into this discussion of John's too rapid development.

He leaves his mother and stepfather, Ned Crittenden, with great anticipation of the young girls he will encounter across the creek. As a young person, he has not learned to reflect upon the implications and consequences of his choices.

When he arrives on the other side, he does become excited about the formal education now available to him, but his first thoughts are still ones of " how many girls might be living on the new and shiny side of the Big Creek" and he still " breathed lustily," overwhelmed by matters of the flesh and not too concerned about his faith or scholarship (12).

Already, John quickly begins to lose his balance. He cares more about satisfying the desires of his body than he does about his schooling or anything else.