Chapter – 3  

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine: Roots Revisited*

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is Zora Neal Hurston’s first novel published in 1934. This novel aptly exhibits Hurston’s penchant for African American culture, dialects, folk-customs and oral traditions. This is a poignant tragic morality novel depicting a man’s rise and fall due to his own follies. Valerie Boyd writes in this context:

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*—a first novel that was, for its time, remarkable in its ambition and achievement. Even today, the novel holds up, in the words of Pulitzer Prize—winning poet Rita Dove, as “a glorious paean to the power of the word.” (255)

Hurston wrote the novel, in little more than two months and it was published in first week of May 1934. Early in 1933, Hurston had written a short story “The Gilded Six Bits” which was published in the magazine *Story*. This short story caught the attention of Lippincott Publishers who then asked Hurston if she was working on some novel. Hurston readily told them “yes” though she was working on none. In the next two months, Hurston completed her first novel, loosely based on her parent’s lives and named it *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Though the novel was completed in 1933, Hurston had been thinking about it since the year 1929 when she was conducting her anthropological research and field work. She wrote in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

While I was in the research field in 1929, the idea of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* came to me. I had written a few short stories, but the idea of attempting a book seemed so big, that I gazed at it in the quiet of the night, but hid it away from even myself in daylight. (171)
Hurston was sure of one thing, that she would write her stories or novels based on the rich African American culture, celebrating it rather than lamenting it. She wanted her works to encompass multi-colour panoramic view of black life replete with optimism. She wrote emphatically in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

For one thing, it seemed off key. What I wanted to tell was story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and condition having power to influence yes. Inherent difference, no. (171)

Hurston’s first novel also serves as model for her later works such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). This first novel deals with major themes such as race, class, gender, family, love, marriage, religion, nature, migration which can also be found in her later novels. The protagonist of the novel is John Pearson and Hurston’s narrative depicts his social, emotional, physical and psychological growth, and other characters related with him.

Permeated with folklore and folk customs, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is the story of John Pearson, rising from the life of an illiterate, poor worker to become a famous and successful minister in central Florida. John is a mulatto son of former slave Amy Crittenden. He was the result of the illegitimate union between slave Amy and owner of the plantation, Alf Pearson. John lives with his mother Amy, step father Ned and his other brothers. He is treated cruelly by his step father Ned and ultimately leaves
his house and goes over “the big Creek” to work in Alf Pearson’s house and farm. Seeing his potential, Pearson sends John to school where he falls in love with his classmate Lucy Potts. Later John and Lucy marry despite stiff resistance from Lucy’s parents. Even after marriage, John’s philandering continues. He has illegitimate relations with several women though he returns to Lucy each time. John leaves Alabama and settles in Eatonville. After they arrive, Lucy helps John to rise to prominence in Eatonville community and soon he becomes a minister in the Zion Hope church. He also becomes the mayor. Meanwhile John’s affairs with other women continue, as he is unable to resist them. Eventually, Lucy grows sick and dies.

After Lucy’s death, John remarries his mistress Hattie Tyson much to the chagrin of his children and parishioners. John realizes his mistake in marrying Hattie and starts beating her up for attempting to conjure him. Hattie and other people try to malign and remove John Pearson form his role in the community. John and Hattie are divorced. After his last sermon, John leaves the town and heads for Plant City where he meets a woman named Sally Lovelace. John with the help of Sally returns to preaching, but is killed in an accident when he is about to mend his ways and bring a change in himself.

In the novel, Hurston has tried to bring out the true experience of African Americans, their hopes and aspirations, drawbacks and follies and their pain and agonies. In a brilliant way, Hurston develops her themes and narration using imagery, metaphor, symbols and motifs to bring out the indepth. Most importantly she uses African American folklore, and folk tradition to bring out the culture and life of African Americans.
*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is replete with so many themes that are often intertwined and sometimes difficult to sort out. Hurston’s treatment of her themes varies from the comic to the tragic, from realistic to surrealistic, and from ironic to symbolic.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is set in the early years of the twentieth century. In the very opening pages of the novel, Hurston examines the life of African Americans in the post-slavery Southern part of America. She depicts the unfortunate legacy of slavery that continues to affect the lives of African Americans. Through the characters of Ned Crittenden, Amy Crittenden and Pheem, all former slaves, Hurston tries to explore the psychological and emotional trauma that affects the African American even after so many years. Ned Crittenden, step-father of John Pearson warns John to stay far away from the Whites. He tells John, “Come out dat do’ way and shet it tight, fool! Stand dare gazin ’dem white folks right in de face! Yo’ brazen ways wid dese white folks is gwinter git you lynched one uh dese days” (4). In fact, Ned is so scared of whites, that he warns his wife Amy also, “Amy, you better quit talkin’ bout de buckra. Some of ’em be outside and hear you and turn over tuh de patter roller, and dey’ll take you outa heah and put uh hun’ed lashes uh raw hide on yo’ back. Ah done tole yuh but yuh won’t hear” (9).

Amy Crittenden, mother of John Pearson was herself a former slave. Through the character of Amy, Hurston portrays African American women being treated as sexual chattel on slave plantations. Amy was abused by her slave owner Mr. Alf Pearson, a white. He rapes her and the result is the birth of John, a mulatto. Though born a slave, Amy after leading a slave’s life attains freedom. She poignantly tells Ned that blacks should treasure and value their children unlike in slavery times when they were most liable to be taken away. Amy says:
Course dey don’t, but we ain’t got tuh let de white folks love our chillun fuh us, is us? Dass jest de pint. We black folks don’t love our chillun. We couldn’t do it when wuz in slavery. We borned ’em but dat didn’t make ’em ourn. Dey b’longed tuh old, Massa. ’Twan’t no use in treasurin’ other folkses property. It wuz liable tuh be took uhway any day. But we’s free folks now. De big bell done rung! Us chillun is burn. Ah doan know, mebbe hit’ll take some of us generations, but us got tuh ’gin practice on treasurin’ our younguns. Ah loves dese heah already uh whole heap. Ah don’t wont ’em knocked and ’bucked. (6-7)

Slavery worked in a systematic way to break African Americans families and used each and every individual of the African American family as a commodity. It efficiently worked against any effort to bring cohesiveness in black family, disrupting relationship between man and woman, parent and children. Ned wants to send John to Cap’n Mimms a cruel white plantation owner, ―dat everybody knowed wuz de wust in southern Alabama. He done whipped niggers nigh tuh death‖ (8). This replicates the situation where slave owners used to sell their own children. The slave’s loyalty belonged only to their masters. Hurston shows that little has changed in the post war South. Hurston through the Crittenden family shows the ill – effects of slavery faced by African Americans, but she also shows putrid aspect of slavery through Alf Pearson, a white slave owner. Alf had abused Amy during slavery days and never acknowledges John as his son. He rules over not only his slaves but his town and community. When Alf meets John for the first time, he says, “What a fine stud! Why boy, you would have brought five thousand dollars on the block in slavery time! Your face looks familiar but I can’t place you. What’s your name?” (17). Alf Pearson’s treatment of his son is ironic yet reminds readers of the days of slavery. John Lowe
rightly asserts, “We laugh at the joke on Pearson, but wince as well at the equally ironic and immediate translation of a human being, his own son, into financial and breeding terms, which seems to be a post bellum hangover of slave owning” (104).

Concomitant with the theme of slavery, class is also an important thematic concern in the novel. The novel is set in small towns of Alabama and Florida centered on the lives of African Americans in rural setting. During this time period i.e. late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a large number of African Americans worked as labourers on plantations owned by rich whites in a system called share cropping. African Americans were allotted a plot of land by whites to cultivate in exchange of a big share of profit. Usually this transaction proved to be a loss for the blacks resulting in heavy debt as they had to pay rent for housing, farming supplies apart from surrendering huge share of profit. Though blacks became free but their economic slavery continued. In the novel, Hurston shows blacks and whites living in two worlds apart, one living in a state of poverty and other in affluence. Sharon L. Jones writes, “Hurston probes into the complex dynamics of race and class relationships by chronicling the lives of former slaves and slave owners” (77).

Alf Pearson symbolizes upper class white society. He is an influential person in his town as well as a judge. Other whites portrayed in the novel such as Mr. Shelby, Mr. Mimms too are shown rich.

Ned, Amy Crittenden and their sons live in poverty. They try to make a living by picking cotton but they fail miserably. They work for Mr. Beasley who is a rich but cruel white plantation owner who often exploits them. Amy says to Ned:

Ah tole you when dey hauled de cotton tuh de gin dat soon ez everything wuz counted up and Beasley give us share for yuh take and haul it straight tuh dis barn. But naw, yuh couldn’t lissen tuh me.
Beasley told yuh tuh leave hit in his barn and being he’s uh white man you done what he told yuh. Now he say ain’t got no cotton uh ourn. Me and you and all de chillun done worked uh whole year. Us done made sixteen bales uh cotton and ain’t even got uh cotton seed to show. Now he say he ain’t got no cotton uh ourn. Me and you and all de chillum done worked uh whole year. Us done made sixteen bales uh cotton and ain’t even got uh cotton seed to show. (7)

Hurston demonstrates the area “over de Big Creek” to manifest the difference between people from varied social and economic classes. When John arrives across the creek for the first time he is surprised to see people from different classes and African Americans living a more prosperous life than he had ever seen. Hurston writes:

Negro children going to learn how to read and write like white folks. See! All this going on over there…. and the younguns over the Creek chopping cotton! It must be very nice, but may be it wasn’t for over the creek niggers. (14)

There is a stark contrast in the economic conditions of John and Lucy Potts also. Potts family represents the rising black middle class. John throughout his life had been living in a shack in utter poverty. On the contrary, Lucy’s parents had enough money to buy their own land and house. When John goes to Lucy’s house for the first time, he is greatly influenced. Hurston writes:

John noted the prosperous look of the Potts place. It was different from every other Negro’s place that he had ever seen. Flowers in the yard among white washed rocks, tobacco hanging up to dry. Peanuts drying
on white cloth in the sun. A smoke house, spring house, a swing under a china-berry tree, bucket flowers on the porch. (60)

Emmeline Potts and Richard Potts, Lucy’s parents do not want their daughter to marry John as they consider John to be below their class. They deeply resent John and Lucy’s, relationship and want Lucy to marry another man named Artie Mimms. Emmeline warns Lucy against marrying John:

Here Artie Mimms is wid sixty acres under plow and two mules and done ast me fuh yuh ever since yuh wuz ten years ole and Ah done tole ’im he could have, yuh and here you is jumpin’ up, goin’ over mah head, and marryin’n is uh nigger dat ain’t hardly got changin’ clothes. (66)

The protagonist John, as he learns to read and write, slowly but steadily changes his economic status. Later when he settles in Eatonville, he becomes a successful moderator in the Church and ultimately becomes a mayor. He rises above his humble and modest beginnings and achieves fame and money which remains unparalleled in his immediate family. Alan Brown asserts, he “is a metaphor of all black men living in rural Florida in the early decades of the twentieth century” (79). Thus, Hurston shows that class differentiation exists not only between blacks and whites but also among blacks themselves. Fighting against financial instability throughout her life, perhaps Hurston herself knew very well about the importance of economic stability in a person’s life. She writes about poverty in Dust Tracks on a Road:

The wordless feeling went with me from the time I was ten years old until I achieved a sort of competence around twenty. Naturally, the
first five years were the worst. Things and circumstances gave life a most depressing odor. (87)

John Buddy Pearson is the protagonist of Jonah’s Gourd Vine. The whole story revolves around him. Through the character of John, Hurston deals with the theme of search for self-awareness and self-knowledge. Throughout the novel John is unable to understand himself and is in constant search for his identity. Josie P. Campbell writes in this regard:

John’s lack of self-understanding reflects his lack of knowledge concerning his origins. Hurston takes a great risk in creating a central character who appears to be so unaware of who he is. But this seems to be one of her main points concerning the character of John Buddy, and perhaps of the African-American male all too frequently. Richard Wright deals with this topic in his novel, Native Son, in the character of Bigger Thomas, who comes to have a glimmer of self-awareness only after committing violently horrendous murder. John Buddy’s awakening to the kind of man he is comes slowly and painfully. (47)

John’s failure to know himself is evident in his relationship with women also. As a teenager, John starts being lustful. He is eager to accept sexual advancement of other women such as M’haley, Phroney, Big Oman, Exie, Delphine, Hattie, Ora as well as others despite being married. His first wife Lucy, helps him to rise and flourish. John is in dire need of Lucy’s strength for his own support but he is also filled with guilt as it goes against his manhood. He says to Lucy, “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” (100).
John again fails to realize what he wants, when he marries Hattie Tyson. His family is broken and his children sent away. John’s best friend Hambo warns John of Hattie but it is of no use. Eventually, John realizes his mistake. He repents, “But Ah don’t. God knows Ah sho don’t. Look lac Ah been sleep. Ah ain’t never meant uh marry you. Aint got no recollection. (120). After his divorce with Hattie, John again tries soul searching but fails once again. He marries Sally, his third marriage, to no avail. He fails to see that Sally is an answer to his prayers, and God has sent her instead of Lucy. He spends a night with a young girl called Ora but the very next day realizes his mistake. For the first time in his life, he is guilty for his promiscuous behaviour. He wants to return to Sally, but on the way he is killed. Right from the beginning to the end he is in search of his truer self but fails miserably. In the end, when he finally comes to about himself, it is too late.

While creating the character of John Pearson, Hurston endowed him with certain qualities as well as vices. She knew that the character she is creating is unique yet admirable. She wanted to create a simple character who acts and thinks like any common man. Valerie Boyd writes about Hurston’s intention in creating this character:

I have tried to present a Negro preacher,” Hurston explained to James Weldon Johnson, “who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit.” She then added a clarifying note, which accounts for her emphasis throughout novel on the poetics of black language: “I do not speak of those among us who have been tampered with and consequently have gone Presbyterian or Episcopal. I mean the common
run of us who love magnificence, beauty, poetry and color so much that there can be never be too much of it. (256)

Through John, Hurston also explores the theme of spiritual equilibrium. Spiritual Equilibrium is necessary for any person. It fosters overall and balanced psychic growth of the individual. In the novel, through the character of John Pearson, Hurston delves deep into the repercussions of the lack of spiritual equilibrium in a person and its aftermath. Lillie P. Howard writes:

On a literary level, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* concerns one man’s search for spiritual equilibrium. On a broader level, however, John Pearson is a universal symbol for every man who seeks a balance between irreconcilable opposites. (76)

John is torn between the clarion call of his flesh and soul. His self is divided dichotomously between worldly and spiritual desires. On one hand he preaches on Sunday and comes close to God, but from Monday to Saturday he indulges in sensual pleasures. This seems unacceptable to the readers, yet they cannot help but pity John over his tragic fate as he symbolizes cultural difference between “formerly enslaved non-Christian communal society’ and “white Puritan Christian society” (Howard 76). Hurston shows this with dexterity. In the words of Larry Neal:

Two distinctly different cultural attitudes toward the concept of spirituality. The one springs from a formerly enslaved communal society, non-Christian in background where there is really no clean-cut dichotomy between the world of spirit and the world of flesh. The other attitude is clearly rigid, being a blend of Puritan concepts and the fire- and- brimstone imagery of the white evangelical tradition. (6-7)
The theme of the predicament of the mulatto is clearly evident in John’s tragic life. As Barbara Christian says, “The tragic mulatta theme reveals the conflict of values that blacks faced as conquered people” (3). Ned Crittenden, step-father of John hates him because John as a mulatto reminded him of his powerlessness. He often calls him “Yaller nigger” and “punkin-colored bastard” (10). The life of the mulatto was tragic indeed since they became outcasts in their own black community and were unaccepted in white society. In the words of Ned, “Yaller niggers ain’t no good nohow” and “dese half white niggers got de worst part uh bofe de white and de black folks” (10). Since mulattos were of light skinned color, they were employed in house hold works while black slaves were employed in rigorous plantation and agrarian works. Ned says, “John is de house house-nigger. Ole Marsa always kep’ de yaller niggers in de house and give ’em uh job totin’ silver dishes goblets tuh de table. Us black niggers is de ones ’posed tu ketch de wind and de weather” (6). Ironically John is hired by Alf Pearson as a coachman. John drives Alf’s “cream colored” buggy symbolizing his mulatto status.

As John is a mulatto, the result of the unfortunate union between a slave and a slave master, his tragic fate is decided before he is born. He is never accepted by Ned his black step father, and never acknowledged by Alf Pearson, his biological white father. Both Alf Pearson and Ned Crittenden fail to take responsibility as a father. This leaves John without any role model for his manhood. While Ned beats his wife Amy and exploits his children, Alf takes a perverse interest in his son’s sexual engagements and is reminded of his own promiscuity. Alf says to John, “You’re a walking orgasm. A living exultation” (45). Alf knows every detail about his son’s affairs and takes great interest in his son’s sexual activities, such that he even suggests which woman he should sleep with or leave. Alf suggest John, “You damn rascal! that
girl you married is as smart as a whip and as pretty as a speckled pup. She’s making a man of you. Don’t let her git away” (72) and then again suggests, “Well John, you’d better keep Big Oman out of that Commissary after dark. Aha! You didn’t think I knew did you? Well, I know a lot of things that would surprise folks. You better clean yourself up” (72). He suggestively gifts John and Lucy a walnut bed as their wedding present. Devoid of any positive father image in his life, it colours John’s character and especially his relation with women, which forms the main crux of the novel.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is replete with many symbols and imagery. Imagery is one of the most common and frequently used terms in literature but it is also the most vague. It denotes variable meanings such as any vivid picture, imaginary scenes, “figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphor and similes” (Abrams 129). Symbol is a broad term which means that it signifies something else. For example the term “symbol” can be applied to a particular word or group of words that denotes a particular object or event which is significant to the writer. A writer may use conventional symbols like sun, cross, rose or may create his own personal symbols which often seem very elusive to the readers. Hurston has used some conventional symbols while creating her own personal symbols in *Jonah*. This fantastic blend of personal and conventional provides depth and meaning to her work. These symbols help the reader to understand the perspective from which Hurston was writing. She has used varied symbols and imagery as a means for her in her artistic endeavor.

Hurston has made abundant use of snake symbolism in *Jonah*. Whenever they appear they forebode persistent evils and lurking dangers. This symbolism is subtly suggested from the beginning as a raw hide whip used by Ned Crittenden, John’s stepfather to beat his wife Amy. “Ned looked about and seeing no plate fixed for him
uncoiled the whip and standing tiptoe to give himself more force, brought the whip
down across Amy’s back” (9). Snake images become more potent when John
decides to swim across the creek to venture into what he thinks is a land of
opportunities. Amy warns John, “Go ’wan, son, and be keerful uh dat foot log cross
de creek. De songahatchee is strong water and look out under foot so’s yuh don’t git
snake bit” (12). John again encounters snake when he is courting Lucy. Lucy is afraid
of the snake and she says, “Uh great big ole cotton-mouf moccasin. He skeers me,
John. Every time Ah go ’cross dat foot-log. Ah think maybe Ah might fall and den
he’ll bite me, or he might reah hisself up and bite me anyhow” (33). John kills this
snake and killing of this snake is symbolic because it makes John’s courtship of Lucy
heroic. Hurston writes, “Suddenly, he snatched the foot log from its place and leaning
far back to give it purchase, he rammed it home upon the big snake and held it here.
The snake bit at the log again and again in its agony, but finally the biting and the
thrashing ceased” (33). After John kills the snake, Lucy wonders “Reckon his mate
ain’t gonna follow us and try tuh bite us for killer dis one? (33). John answers, “he
can’t folle bofe us lessen us go de same way” (34). Eventually, John and Lucy marry
and go the same way, so snake’s mate cannot follow them. When Lucy dies, John is
left all alone and gravely exposed to dangers. Years later after Lucy’s death, John
poignantly recalls this scene in his dreams, “Lucy set beside a stream and cried
because she was afraid of a snake. He killed the snake and carried Lucy across in his
arms….happy because the dead snake was behind him but crying in his loneliness for
Lucy” (155). John should have remembered that though he might have killed the
snake but his mate still lived on portending danger. John mistakenly thought that the
danger had passed, but he was wrong as it had taken another shape and form. Thus,
the symbolism of snake represents sin and it is also a phallic symbol, representing
John’s adulterous nature. To quote Susan Edwards Meisenhelder:

The threat posed to their relationship by an oppressive notion of
masculinity is graphically symbolized in Hurston’s description of the
snake-killing scene early in their courtship. After ritualistically killing
the snake as a commitment that he will be a different man with Lucy,
John carries her over the bridge, crossing a threshold into a new kind
of relationship. Nevertheless, as the rest of the novel reveals…. The
symbolic snake in their relationship is not destroyed. (46)

Train is one of the most important symbols found in Jonah’s Gourd Vine.
Hurston’s use of train as a symbol is complex and she infuses in it many symbolic
meanings. Hurston uses train to symbolize John’s sexual powers. Anthony Wilson
writes in this regard:

The train provides the most explicit link between John’s sexuality and
an animalistic lack of control. Introduced as an aural presence, the train
produces music with dual significance, “Wolf coming! Wolf coming!
Wolf coming! Opelika-black and-dirty, Opelika-black-and-dirty!”
(41). As John’s apprehension of its music implies, the train plays a
double role in the novel’s symbology: it signifies both sexuality and
phallic power and the encroachment of technological modernity and its
attendant threats to community and self. (73-74)

When John sees the train for the first time, he is filled with awe and
admiration. Hurston describes the scene in great detail. Hurston writes:

John stared at the panting monster for a terrified moment, and then
prepared to bolt. But as he wheeled about he saw everybody’s eyes
upon him and there was laughter on every face. He stopped and faced
about. Tried to look unconcerned, but that great eye beneath the cloud-
breathing, smoke-stack glared and threatened. The engine’s very sides
seemed to expand and contract like a fiery-lunged monster. (16)

Instantly, John feels an attachment with the train and feels that he can
communicate with it. John tells a bystander, “Ah laked dat. It say something but Ah
ain’t heered it ’nough tuh tell whut it say yit.... Now, it say, some words too. Ahm
comin’ heah plenty mo’ times and den Ah tell yuh what it say” (17). John feels as if
the train can talk to him. “Unfortunately, John hears but cannot interpret the words of
the train, just as he does not understand what it represents” (Meisenhelder 48). Later
when John notices a crude drawing of a train on Lucy’s songbook, he decides that he
will not be returning over the creek with his mother. His obsession with the train, can
be noticed well in the following lines, “No, he couldn’t leave Notasulga where the
train came puffing into the depot twice a day. No, no! He dropped everything and tore
out across the fields and came out at last at the railroad cut just below the station He
sat down upon the embankment and waited” (38).

When John is forced to leave Notasulga because of impending imprisonment
due to assault charges, he gets his first ride on the train. He is completely mesmerized.
Hurston writes:

To him nothing in the world ever quite equaled that fist ride on a train.
The rhythmic stroke of the engine, the shiny-buttoned porter bowling
out the stations…. John forgot the misery of his parting from Lucy in
the aura of it all. That is, he only remembered his misery in short
snatches, while the glory lay all over him for hours at the time. He
marveled that just anybody could come along and be allowed to get on
such a glorified thing. It ought to be extra special. He got off the train at every stop so that he could stand off a piece and feast his eyes on the engine. The greatest accumulation of power that he had ever seen. (89)

The train becomes a symbol of John’s driving sexuality and “becomes a signifier of his hamartia, or tragic flaw and the train’s ominous music, “Wolf coming, wolf coming”, represents John’s bestial sexuality” (Wilson 74). While Lucy is alone tending to her sick child, John is on flight. John’s ride in the train denotes John succumbing to his sexual urges and philandering. Train is not only embodiment of invincible power but also adulterous temptation for John. Susan Meisenhelder comments:

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston uses the train as a broad symbol of power, wealth, and manhood as defined not in black but in white terms. A mechanistic symbol (like those so often used to describe a white world during the Harlem Renaissance) rather than the plant imagery Hurston associates with black identity, the train represents the kind of gaudy—and spiritually empty—splendor embodied in the gold watch in “The Gilded Six-Bits.” (47)

Train also symbolizes encroaching industrialization and destructive modernity. The train as a threat to the rural and agrarian community of the South where the story is set reverberates throughout the novel. Hurston being from the rural South knew the ill-effects of modernity to rural American culture and community. Anthony Wilson points out:

Hurston makes clear that in large part due to its troublesome connection with a “fallen” eroticism of industrialization, the train menaces both of John’s religious communities.... The train threatens all
tradition, threatens both communities’ autonomy and cohesion.

Ultimately, it signifies modernity’s disruption of any spiritual order, whether African, Christian, as anything between. (75)

However, Hurston also recognizes train as a means of progress, serving an important role in the Great Migration. Train brings out better opportunity and prospect for John and Lucy. So the paradox exists.

During John’s final sermon in Zion Hope Church, Hurston once again uses the symbol of train to depict his struggle and his divided physical and spiritual self. John preaches:

That’s where I got off de damnation train.

For in dat mor-ornin; ha!

When we shall be delegates, ha!

To dat Judgment Convention

When de two trains of Time shall meet on de trestle.

And wreck de burning axles of de unformed ether.

And de mountains shall skip like lambs.

When Jesus shall place one foot on de neck of de sea, ha!

One foot on dry land, ah.

When His chariot wheels shall be running hub-deep in fire.

He shall take His friends thru the open bosom unclouded sky. (151)

John speaks about the damnation train that pulls out of the Garden of Eden but also the redemption train, which is also the train of mercy. The damnation train or the “iron monster on de rail” symbolizes sin and lust, but another “Train of time” or Jesus’s chariot is the path to salvation. John’s ultimate salvation is confluence of the two trains, one the sacred, other the profane. This will lead to unison of his body and
soul. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* ends with John being killed, and symbolically he is killed by the train. The damnation train which he had been riding throughout his life leads to his salvation Lillie P. Howard points out, “Since John sees himself as a Christ figure throughout most of the novel it is fitting that he, too, should be rammed in the side by a train which proves to be his damnation” (87).

In contrast to John’s snake and train symbols, Hurston uses egg imagery in regard to Lucy. In the following lines the word “shell” refers to the egg imagery in context with Lucy. “Her family world that had been like a shell about her life was torn away and she felt cold and naked. The aisle seemed long, long! But it was like climbing” (68).

At the center of the novel is the escape motif. It recurs throughout the novel. Throughout his life John has been running away from his responsibilities as well as his problems. Escape becomes the solution to all his problems. “Escape is a key concept for John; the notion governs his life; running is in his blood (Howard 88). This motif can be seen from the very beginning of the novel when John decides to leave his home in search of a new life “over de creek”. He chooses a life at the other side of the creek because he knows that there he can lead a life in his own way. Before crossing the creek, his mother Amy warns him, “Dat’s how come, Ah worries ’bout yuh. Youse always uh runnig and uh rippin’ and clamin’ trees and rock and jumpin’ flingin’ rocks in creeks and sich like. John promise me yuh goin’ quit dat” (13). In the Pearson plantation, John plays “Hide the switch” with the girls. He soon overruns them as he has habit of running. At bed, John thinks, “He could have romped till morning. In bed he turned and twisted” (20). When Amy comes to fetch John to come to work on Mister Shelby’s plantation, John runs away to listen to the train’s whistle, “into the great away that gave John’s feet such a yearning for distance” (39).
After a quarrel with his step father Ned, John decides “Shucks! Ahm goin’ ’way from heah, it came to John like a revelation. Distance was escape” (43).

From now on this becomes John’s motto for life. He decides to escape whenever he feels that he is not able to cope with the impending situation. Over the creek, when John gets into a fight with Duke, over his wife, he decides to run away again from the town only to return when things settle down. Alf Pearson suggests to him, “I told you to leave Duke’s woman alone. I didn’t tell you to leave the place. Don’t gimme excuses nor back talk. G’wan to work. I will be glad when some good girls grab you and make something out of you. Stop running always face things out” (59). Even after marrying Lucy, John is not able to change himself. Succumbing to his old habit, he elopes with other women only to return to Lucy. When he gets into a fight with Bud, Lucy’s brother, he evades his imprisonment by fleeing away from Notasulga on the advice of Alf. Alf says to John:

    John, distance is the only cure for certain diseases. Here’s fifty dollars.

    There are lots of other towns in the world besides Notasulga, and there’s several hours before midnight. I know a man who could put lots of distance between him and this place before time, even wearing his two best suits—one over the other. (86)

John settles in Florida with his family, but his tendency to escape continues to persist. He becomes a preacher but not without any hesitation. He says to his congregation, “God called me long uhgo, but Ah wouldn’t heed tuh de voice, but brother and sisters, God done whipped me tuh it” (95). Even when John’s daughter Isis is very ill, instead of helping out Lucy, he flees to Tampa to be with his mistress Hattie Tyson. Hurston writes:
So John fled to Tampa away from God, and Lucy stayed by the bedside alone. He was gutted with grief, but when Hattie Tyson found out his whereabouts and joined him, he suffered it, and for some of his hours he forgot about the dying Isis, but when he returned a week later and found out his daughter feebly recovering, he was glad. (101)

Similarly in a fit of anger John slaps Lucy who is on her deathbed and then flees away as he is unable to face her. In his dreams he sees Alf Pearson saying “Distance is the only cure for certain diseases” (86) and flees Plant city, but John is unable to change himself. He keeps on running from one situation to the other. His last final escape proves to be fatal. Hurston writes:

He seized his coat and put it on as he hurried out to the car. Ora grabbed up her dress and dashed after him, but he was under the wheel before she left the room, and the motor was humming when she reached the running-board. John viciously thrust her away from the car door without uttering a word. He shoved her so hard that she stumbled into the irrigation ditch, as the car picked up speed and in a moment was red eye in the distance. The ground mist lifted on a Florida sunrise as John, fled homeward. (166)

This was the final flight for John. God, as if tired of his running brings him to his Judgment Day.

_Jonah’s Gourd Vine_ is permeated with African American folklores. Hurston has used folk tales, folk sayings, folk proverbs, folk songs, folk rituals and parables in the novel. Folklores are traditional stories, customs, and habits of a particular community or a group of people. Explaining folklores, Robert Hemenway writes:
Folklore consists of unwritten traditions which cause people to perform in familiar ways, the performance of each generation and each individual contributing to the tradition from within the security of its familiarity. It is behavior replicated through history, and it reflects the common life of the mind existing at a level other than that of high or formal culture. Formal culture grows primarily from the presumption of the written heritage, traditional culture arises primarily out of the communicative expectations of a given group. (86)

African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and few other writers have tried to imbue their culture in their works. Explaining the importance of folklore in literature, Keith E. Byerman writes:

Most precisely, folklore serves in the literature as the anti-thesis of closed, oppressive systems. Closed systems may be political, economic, cultural, religious racial, sexual, aesthetic, or philosophical, they may be black, or white male or female, psychological or physical. They seek to suppress individuality, community, imagination, voice, freedom, or even life itself by imposing a homogenous order on a heterogenic reality. The fiction usually establishes the reality of this order, frequently through its effects on the central character, and then offers an alternative through some aspect of the folk culture. Folk history and lore oppose stems of order by means that can be summarized in Jacques Derrida’s term difference. Difference implies both a “differing from” and a “deferral of.” In the case of recent black fiction, folk material is made to differ from oppressive orders by being historical, changing, disreputable, and performative. By definition, it
is a body of wisdom, wit, and story accumulated over time. As such it can be made to contradict the representations of the part and of reality offered by apologists for oppression. This folk material which contains among other things the human costs necessary for the powerful to attain their positions. (3-4)

Being an anthropologist, Hurston had a great interest in African American folklores. These folklores are a chief characteristic of all her works. Hurston wrote in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

I enjoyed collecting the folk-tales and I believe the people from whom I collected them enjoyed the telling of them, just as much as I did the hearing. Once that got started, the “lies” just rolled and story tellers fought for a chance to talk. It was the same with the songs …. The words do not count. The subject matter in Negro folk songs can be anything and go from love to work, to travel, to food, to weather to fight, to travel, to food, to weather to fight, to demanding the return of a wig by a woman who has turned unfaithful. The tune is the unity of the thing. And you have to know what you are doing when you begin to pass on that, because Negroes can fit in more words and leave out more and still keep the tune than anyone I can think of. (163-164)

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, throughout the novel Hurston has used traditional African American idioms and expression. The characters use idioms and phrases which straightaway come from rural black people, “talkin’ at de big gate” (15) meaning boasting behind the back of a powerful person; “smell his self” (41) meaning to reach puberty; “seben years ain’t to long fub uh coudar tuh wear uh ruffled basom shirt” (57); meaning it’s never too late to get even with a person; “he
ain’t goin’ tuh let his shirt-tail touch’ im (82) meaning he won’t sit down; “squat dat rabbit” (82) meaning let the matter cease; “Big moose done come down from de mountain” (97); meaning to make everything done in the past seem trivial; “big britches going’ tuh fit li’l’ willie (98) meaning a weak person in the past is now in a position to fight equally; “Gods dont eat okra” (109) meaning God does not like slickness or crooked ways, “black herald, black dispatch” (132) meaning African American gossip.

Signifying is another folkloric device that Hurston has used abundantly in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Signifying is an important part in African American culture. Signifying may be a verbal duel or encoded message which contains an element of indirection. According to Geneva Smitherman, signifying is when:

A speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on the listener. Sometimes signifying (also siggin) is done to make a point, sometimes it’s just for fun. This type of folk expression in the oral tradition has the status of a customary ritual that’s accepted at face value. That is to say, nobody who’s signified on is supposed to take it to heart. It is culturally approved method of talking about somebody—usually through verbal indirection. Since the signifier employs humor, it makes the put-down easier to swallow and gives the recipient a socially acceptable way out. That is, if they can’t come back with no bad singification of their own, can just laugh along with the group. (118-19)

Hurston has infused many instances of signification in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* which are integral to the text. In the very first chapter, Hurston provides an example of signification when Amy and Ned Crittenden indulge in domestic argument. Amy
says to Ned, “Dats uh big ole resurrection lie, Ned. Uh slew-foot, drag-leg lie at dat, and Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. You know Ahm uh fightin’ dawg and mah hide is worth money” (4). Amy here not only signifies but also challenges her husband Ned to a physical and linguistic duel to which Ned is unable to respond aptly and says, “Don’t you change so many words wid me, ‘oman! Ah’ ll knock yuh dead ez Hector. Shet yo’ mouf” (4).

Perhaps the best example of signification in the *Jonah* is when John signifies on his stepfather Ned abusing burnt-off trunk of a tree:

And you, you ole battle-hammed, slew foot, box-ankled nubbin, you! You aint nothing’ and ain’t got nothin’ but whut God give uh billy-goat, and then round tryin’, tuh hell-hack folks. Tryin tuh kill somebody wid talk, but if you wants tuh fight,—dat’s de very corn Ah want tuh grind. You come grab me now and Ah be yuh Ah’ll stot you from suckin’ eggs. Hit me now! G’wan hit me! Bet Ah’ll break uh egg in yuh! Youse all parts of ub pig! You done got me jus’ ez hot ez July jam, and Ah ain’t got no mo’ use fuh yuh than Ah is for mah baby shirt. Youse mah race but you sho ain’t mah taste. Jus’ you break uh breath wid me, and Ahm goin tuh be jus’ too chastisin’. Ah’m jus’ lak uh old shoe—soft when yuh rain on me and cool me off, and hard when yuh shine on me and git me hot. Tuh keep from uh sorry somethin’ like yuh, Ahm goin’ way from heah. Ahm goin’ tuh Zar, and dat’s on de other side of far, and when you see me agin Ahm gointer be somebody. Mah li’l finger will be bigger than yo’ waist. Dont you part yo’ lips tuh me no mo’ jes ez long ez heben is happy-do Ah’l put
somethin on yuh dat lye soap won’t take off. You aint nothin’ but uh big ole pan of fell bread. Now dat’s de word wid de bark on it. (43-44)

Here is an excellent example of signification whereby John not only signifies on his abusive step father but also symbolically castrates his step father. John’s final signification on Ned is “Youes mah race but you sho ain’t mah taste” (43). Thus, here John signifies not only on Ned’s blackness but also his oppressive behaviour. This passage is also memorable for its use of rich folk epithets.

An example of signifying can also be seen when John’s friend Hambo signifies on John’s newlywed wife Hattie for her bad behavior. Hambo says:

Dat strumpet ain’t never done nothi’n but run up and down de road from one sawmill camp tuh de other and from de looks of her, times as hard. She ain’t never had nothin’--not eben doodly-squat, and when she git uh chance tuh git uh git holt hu sumpin de ole buzzard is gone on uh rampage….Ah aint gonna bite mah tongue uh damn bit….Ahm three times seben and uh button….Ah ain’t gonna wait nothin’ uh de kind. Wait broke de wagon down. Ah jes’ feel lak takin’ uh green club and waitin’ on dat wench’s head until she acknowledge Ahm God and besides ne there’s no other….Ah ain’t come tuh make yuh no play party. Stoopin’ down from where you stand, fuh what…. jus ’cause you never seen no talcum powder and silk kimonos back dere in Alabama. (116-117)

Besides signification in this passage Hurston once again uses folk epithets like “strumpet”, “buzzard”, “wench.” Hambo says that John a simpleton had been lured by talcum powder and “silk kimonos”, a false and pretentious image.
In yet another scene, when John charges Hattie for not being like Lucy, Hattie signifies on John:

Naw, Ah ain’t no Miss Lucy’, cause Ah ain’t goin’ tuh cloak yo’ dirt fuh yuh. Ah ain’t goin’ tuh take offa yuh what she took so you kin set up and be uh big nigger over mah bones .... And dat ain’t all. You fool wid me and Ah’ll jerk de cover offa you and dat Berry woman. Ah’ll throw uh brick in yo’ coffin and don’t keer how sad de funeral will be and Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. Ah ain’t gonna be no ole man’s fool. (122)

Thus, Hurston has used significance in Jonah which has become exemplary in its own way. Deborah G. Plant writes in this regard, “Hurston uses the act of signifying as a stylistic technique and as a rhetorical device in her work. She also treats Signifying as a major thematic element of African American folklore. Whether as style, theme, or strategy, characteristics of Signifying permeate Hurston’s oeuvre” (81).

Indirection is an intrinsic part of Signifying in African American oral traditions. Indirection originated in slavery times, when black slaves could not express their opinions freely without the fear of getting reprimanded. As a solution to these adverse situations, they devised the technique of indirection whereby they could articulate their ideas by cloaking them. Hurston uses indirection in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, for instance when John offers a veiled proposal of marriage to Lucy:

Lucy, you pay much ’tention tuh birds?
Unhunh. De Jay bird say ‘Laz’ness will kill you,’ and he go to hell ev’ry Friday and totes uh grain uh sand in his mouf huh put out de fire, and den de doves say, ‘Where you been so long?’
John cut her short. “Ah don’t mean dat way Lucy. Whut Ah wants tuh know is, which would you ruther be, if you had yo’ ruthers—uh lark uh flyin’ uh dove uh settin? (65)

In this critical speech John first asks Lucy if she pay attention to birds. She is not able to understand him and asks if he is referring to a folk belief about the bird blue jay. Actually what John wants to know is that whether Lucy will marry him or not, “He proposes in ritual handed down from slavery, some where he was taught the words and ways of courtship, the poetic ceremonies that adorned life, under on oppressive system” (Hemenway 193).

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, one also see the use of Trickster traditions. Trickster traditions are an integral part of African American folklore. Hurston was well aware of trickster tradition and has induced it in her works. “Hurston was also well aware of the trickster’s position in world folklore from her studies at Columbia and used all versions of these stories in her work” (Lowe 5). Hurston wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

No doubt these tales of God, the Devil, animals and natural elements seemed ordinary enough to most people in the village. But many of them stirred up fancies in me. It did not surprise me at all along. Or let us say, that I wanted to suspect it. Life took on a bigger perimeter expanding on these things. I picked up glints and gleams out of what I heard and stored it away to turn it to my own uses. (52)

Hurston shows resemblance between John Pearson and heroic human trickster Jack or High John de Conqueror who can trick and surpass anyone, even God. High John de Conqueror, is the story of a slave in Alabama who outwitted his white slave master and attained his freedom. Here John Pearson tricks his wife, people of his
community, other women and tries to trick his God. But in the end, he himself gets tricked and has to pay for his sins. Hurston uses another trickster, Anancy the spider which appears in *Jonah*. Lucy while on her deathbed observes spider’s progress down the wall. Lucy says:

> Now, Isie, been watchin’ det great big ole spider.... The spider was lower on the wall and Lucy entertained herself by watching to see if she could detect it move. She sent Isis to bed early that Thursday night but she herself lay awake regarding the spider. She thought that she had not slept a moment, but when in the morning Isis brought the wash basin and tooth brush, Lucy noted that the spider was lower and she had not seen it move….Despite Lucy’s all-night vigil she never saw the spider when he moved, but of first light she noted that he was at least a foot from the ceiling but as motionless as a painted spider in a picture..... Lucy watched the spider each day as it stood lower.

(110-12)

Here spider is a harbinger of death. As the spider progresses down the wall, so is Lucy’s impending death. “Once again the trickster deity appears as a joker, this time asleep at the wheel—for Lucy in her suffering finally calls out to the evening sun to tell the Lord she’s waiting” (Lowe 131). Hurston depicts some characteristics of animal trickster in Ora, the prostitute with whom John spends his last night before his death. Ora speaks like an animal trickster when John spurns her, “He done lef’ me right where Ah wants tuh be, wid pay-day at de pakin’ house tuh morrer. Jes lak de rabbit in de briair patch.” (166)
Hurston also uses another element of African American folklore in telling ‘lies’ or tales. In African American tradition, storytelling has always played an important part. Its origin goes back to Africa but when blacks were brought here as slaves in America, they altered their traditional African stories with North American animals. In the stories of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Raw-Head-and-Bloody Bones, one sees importance of wit to save anyone from impending dangers. These stories in a way provided strength and confidence to African Americans to survive the horrendous experience of slavery. Hurston depicts John telling tales, “That night John, deaf to Mehaley’s blandishments, sat in the doorway and told tales. And Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox and Raw-Head-and Bloody-Bones walked the earth like natural men” (25). Commenting on these tales, John Lowe writes:

They also focused more on the animals’ “mother wit” than any presumed link with gods; as many skeptical slave tales indicated, “de Lawd” was not that helpful when “de Massa” elected to play god. Trickery of all sorts seemed not only permissible, but advisable, in the face of the horrors of slavery. Accordingly, many of the animal fables, even those of the child-pleasing Uncle Remus, concluded with the wily Rabbit causing the violent and painful death of larger animals, who represent the slaveowners. (8-9)

Even, after the end of the slavery, story-telling had its own importance. It was an important part of African American oral tradition and also a means for community bonding. Everyone in the tie-camp at Opelica liked John because of his friendly nature and his admirable quality of storytelling. Hurston writes:
John loved to tell stories. Sometimes the men sat about the fire and talked and John loved that. One night Do-dirty began, “Y’all wanta heah some lies?”

“Yeah”, said Too-Seet, “Ah evermore loves lies but you can’t tell none. Leave John tell ’em ’cause he kin act ’em out. He take de part uh Brer Rabbit and Brer B’ar and Brer Fox jes’ ez natche’l.” (54-55)

Hurston has also used other type of folkloric traditions in her novel, such as Dozens, African American games and Joking Relationships which is evident between John and his best friend Hambo.

Use of proverbs is an important element of Hurston’s narrative. Proverbs are replete with folk wisdom and play an important part in any community’s culture and tradition. According to Lowe, “Hurston dramatizes the use of proverbs in everyday life, throughout her fiction, and the issues of advice and judgment, in all their forms, never move very far from the surface of the narrative” (15). Hurston has induced some very memorable proverbs ever used in African American literature, which she borrows from her own personal experience of her community. At one instance Lucy advices John, about the choice of his friends. She says, “Everybody grin yo’ face don’t love yuh” and “Anybody kin look and see and tell uh snake trail when dey come cross it but nobody kin till which way he wuz goin’ lessen he seen de snake” (97). She urges John to dream big and think and make something out of his life, “Jump at de sun and eben if yuh miss it, yuh can’t help grabbin’ holt uh de moon” (82). This particular proverb that Hurston uses in Jonah, comes out of personal experience. She wrote in her autobiography Dust Tracks on the Road, “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to “jump at de sun. We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground” (13). Before dying Lucy sermons her daughter Isis , “You
always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin” (110). In her last moments she poignantly tells Sister Clarke, “Ah done been in sorrow’s kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots” (112). Similarly a character named Aleck, warns John of his enemies, “Uh dog dat’ll bring uh bone will keep one” (103). There is also Hurston’s favorite, “Some folks kin hit uh straight lick with uh crooked stick” (124).

John Lowe writes:

As proverbs provide a center for the discourse, along with signs, markers and precedents from the past culture. Virtually all of them are memorable to the oral culture because of their clever construction, which frequently turn on witticism ... Proverbs, because of their ambiguity and multivalent constitution, function as “crooked stick” that are used to “lick” home a point of comic correction. (15)

African American culture has its roots and origins Africa. Hurston knew her rich cultural heritage and as a literary artist she was determined to represent it in her works. John Lowe writes in this context:

We should remember that not many Americans of this era, black or white, really understood the true greatness of black folk culture, which had never been included in American history and literature courses, themselves relatively new fields at this time, when the folk expression “If it’s white, it’s right” held great sway with the black bourgeoisie. Hurston was one of the first writers or scientists to assess the riches of black folk culture and map its contours. Even Alain Locke at one time scorned the spirituals, although he changed his mind with a vengeance when they became the vogue. It was presumed that dealing with rural people was demeaning to the race; the representation issue was
vehemently argued again and again, with figures like du Bois
demanding that the “talented tenth” lead their people artistically with
properly genteel (which in many case meant “white derived”) models.
Jesse Fauset and Nella Larsen were much more to this school’s taste
than the bodacious Hurston. (56)

The theme of Africanism reverberates throughout the novel. Hurston has tried
to depict pre-colonial African rituals and culture in _Jonah_ with which she felt so well
connected. She wrote in her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”:

For instance when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World
Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about
any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz
waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one lunges
into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down
to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo
and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious rears on its
hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it,
clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those
heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself I yell
within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the
mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My
face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse
is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give
pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. (154)

It is this feeling of primitivism that Hurston tries to depict in _Jonah’s Gourd
Vine_. The protagonist John Pearson has primitive Africanism inherent in him. Other
workers of cotton plantation also feel their long lost connection to their mother land Africa. Though now, leading life in America, they still have vivid memories about their ancestral land. Hurston describes a scene where African American workers are celebrating the end of the cotton-picking scene and perform an old African ritual of dance and ceremony. Hurston writes:

So they danced. They called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins- the-drum -and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin. With their feet they stomped it, and the voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it….furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa but whose soul sung around a fire in Alabama .....Hollow hand clapping for the bass notes. Heel and toe stamping for the little one. Ibo tune corrupted with Nango, Congo gods talking in Alabama ... The fire died. The moon died. The shores of Africa receded. (29-31)

In this scene, Hurston provides her readers a spectacular glimpse into African American culture embedded in traditional African heritage. Hurston reminds the readers of a connection between African Americans and African tribes. Commenting on the importance of dance and music in African communities, Samuel Floyd writes:

Dance, drum, and song was inseparable from the traditional communities in which it existed—communities in which social and cultural conformity and egalitarianism prevailed, in which….the failure to live up to one’s social obligation [was] interpreted as hostility toward the community. (33)
Other cotton plantation workers are able to control their primitive impulses but John is not. Later, when he becomes a preacher, Africanism is evident in his sermons. On the pulpit he not only evokes his Christian God but also his Congo Gods. His unrestricted rhythm and fervor brings a new dimension to his sermon coupled with his pagan poetry. After his tragic death, he is given a fitting funeral replete with Africanism. Hurston writes:

They beat upon the O-go-doe, the ancient drum. O-go-doe, O-go-doe, the ancient drum. Not Kata-Kumba, the drum of triumph, that speaks of great ancestors and glorious wars. Not the little drum of kid-skin, for that is to dance with joy and to call to mind birth and creation, but O-go-doe, the voice of Death—that promises nothing, that speaks with tears only, and of the past. (168)

Thus, the theme of Africanism plays an important role in the plot and most importantly in the character development of John Pearson; in fact he owes his inherent behavior to his primitivism. Commenting on Afro-American religion, Erika E. Bourguignon writes:

Afro-American religions, in their many forms, represent a mixing and merging of African and European traditions and often the formation of a new growth of belief and ritual, quite different from the sources from which they started….It is a well-known fact that in some parts of the Afro-American area there exists religious beliefs and practices that appear to be strikingly African, involving as they do spirits that have recognizably African names, spirits of whom it is believed that they take possession of the faithful during ritual. (191-192)
Religion is an important theme in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. The very title of the novel has a biblical allusion. The title of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* refers to a biblical text (Jonah 4.6-8). Story of a biblical character Jonah comes from the book of Old Testament, in which God sends Jonah to prophecy the destruction of residents of Nineveh. According to the story, God becomes angry at Jonah’s behavior, and God decides to teach a lesson to Jonah and creates a gourd vine to shade him, but the next day, the vine withers away, bitten by a worm and Jonah is left in scorching heat. Hurston replicates this story in her novel creating the character of John as Jonah. The gourd vine is represented by Lucy, who provides loving care and empowerment through her own mental strength. John’s vice of philandering becomes his worm, which eats away his wife and his career. Like Jonah, John is left in the desert of his community to repent alone. Deacon Harris, an enemy of John twice refers to, “cut down dat Jonah’s gourd vine in uh minute” (123), with Hurston clearly mentioning its implications. Thus, the “gourd vine” is an important religious symbol representing John’s rise and his nadir. Till the end, John Pearson fails to realize the gravity of his actions and the after effects that they may have on his family and community. Genevieve West points out, “Lucy serves as John’s gourd vine by crafting his prosperity, protecting him, and guiding him. Just as Jonah sacrifices nothing for the vine’s protection, John sacrifices nothing to make his wife happy or his marriage successful, but he still receives the benefit.” (510)

The Church also plays an important role in cementing John and Lucy’s relationship. Both exchange love notes in a hymn book while meeting in the church. Later in life, John under the able guidance of Lucy rises to prominence as a minister and has a powerful influence on the community. In spite of John’s follies, religion continues to play an important role in his life. In his last moments, before his fatal
accident he thinks of God. Hurston writes, “False pretender! Outside show to the world! soon he would be is the shelter of Sally’s presence. Faith and no question asked. He had prayed for Lucy’s return and God had answered with Sally.” (167)

Concomitant with the theme of Christian religion is African tradition of Conjuring or Voodoo in *Jonah*. Conjuring or Voodoo is a folk spiritual custom of magic which can be utilized for an evil or a good purpose. Conjurers use herbs, spices and other materials to cast spells on people. According to Valerie Boyd:

The term “hoodoo,” “voodoo,” “obeah,” and “conjure” are all used to describe a set of beliefs and practices centering on an abiding conviction that human beings—trained in certain rites—can reliably call upon spiritual forces to alter situations that seem rationally hopeless.

Conjure’s roots are distinctly African. A fusion of beliefs from various parts of the continent, vodou—commonly called voodoo—is the name generally applied to an intricate, syncretic religion with several offshoots….The word “vodou” derives from *vodu*, which means “spirit” or “deity” in the Fon language of Dahomey….When Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves, they were forced to adopt Christianity. Purloined largely from the Yoruba peoples of West Africa, slaves in the United States—like those in Haiti, Brazil, and elsewhere—surreptitiously melded their traditional spiritual beliefs and practices with the white man’s religion. In this way, on slave plantations throughout the South, vodoun’s American cousin—hoodoo was born.
At its most simplistic level, hoodoo is sympathetic magic. At its most complex, it is a sophisticated spirituality, as Hurston saw it, with “thousands of secret adherents.”….Hoodoo practitioners are called hoodoo doctors, voodoo doctors, priests or priestesses, two-headed doctors, voodoo doctors (because they are said to have twice as much sense as regular people), conjure doctors, or, simply, conjurers. Many conjure doctors also are root workers, employing various medicinal herbs and roots doctors, however, have nothing to do with hoodoo; they are strictly healers. (175-176)

Hurston had an anthropological approach towards Voodoo and did not consider it as a deviant practice. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, just as Lucy represents Christianity, Hattie Tyson represents Conjuring and Voodoo. Hattie uses voodoo to lure John and create trouble in his married life with Lucy. “Women often used hoodoo to gain power over men, Hurston observed,” (Boyd 177). She also takes help of another conjurer woman named Dangie Dewoe. Hurston gives a detailed description of Voodoo practice of which she had knowledge when working as an anthropologist. She writes:

The door slammed and An’ Dangi crept to her altar in the back room and began to dress candles with war water. When the altar had been set, she dressed the coffin in red, lit the inverted candles on the altar saying as she did so, “Now fight! Fight and fuss’ til you part.” When all was done at the altar she rubbed her hands and forehead with war powder put the cat-bone in her mouth, and laid herself down in the red coffin facing the altar and went into the spirit. (107)
Hurston had conducted an extensive research on hoodoo in New Orleans and African countries like Haiti. Hurston herself took part in hoodoo practices. She writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

In New Orleans, I delved into Hoodoo, or sympathetic magic. I studied with the Frizzly rooster, and all of the other noted “doctors.” I learned the routines for making and breaking marriages; driving off and punishing enemies; influencing the minds of judges and juries in favor of clients; killing by remote control and other things. In order to work with these “two-headed” doctors, I had to go through an initiation with each. The routine varied with each doctor….the most terrifying was going to a lonely glade in the swamp to get the black cat bone. The magic circle was made and all of the participants were inside. I was told that anything outside that circle was in deadly peril. The fire was built inside, the pot prepared and the black cat was thrown in with the proper ceremony and boiled until his bones fell apart. Strange and terrible monsters seemed to thunder up to that ring while this was going on. It took months for me to doubt it afterwards. (156-157)

Hattie also keeps a piece of John-de-conqueror root in her hair which is very ironic as her husband’s name is also John. Thought she is able to marry John after Lucy’s death but she cannot keep in check his rampant promiscuous nature. Later John comes to know about Hattie’s plan to put a spell upon him through Hambo. Hambo says, “Less take it tuh uh hoodoo doctor and turn it back on her, but what you got tuh do is tuh beat de blood out her. When you draw her wine dat breaks de spell…dont keer What it is” (135). At last Hattie’s spell is broken and John realizes his mistake of marrying Hattie. Later Deacon Harris calls “De Bible is de best conjure
book in de world” (124) and “Moses as de greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made” (124).

Central to the plot is the theme of sin and salvation. Throughout the novel, John never realizes the consequences of his action and blatantly commits mistakes again and again. Though he becomes a preacher, he still commits sins. Right from his first sexual escapade with Phrony to his last with Ora and numerous in between, he never owes up to his deeds. Instead of owing up to his actions he continuously tells lies and even slaps Lucy on her death bed and this becomes his greatest sin which ultimately consumes him. Anthony Wilson aptly points out:

> At this stage then, John’s theology carries with it no conception of adulterous sin. His sexuality is central not antithetical, to his identity and membership in the community. John’s youthful lack of any idea of sexuality as sinful becomes clearest late in the novel as a shamed fallen John ruefully says to Hambone, “Don’t it look funny, dat all mah ole pleasures done got tuh be new sins? .... Havin’ women didn’t useter be no sin Jus’ got sinful since Ah got ole.” Sin becomes a function of Johns distance from the community of his youth.” (68)

John’s sin of promiscuousness and lust ultimately catches up with him. His wife Lucy dies, he has a troubled married life with Hattie and ultimately gets divorced; he loses his minister ship in Zion Hope Church and is forced to leave his community and town. Only in the end just before his death, John realizes his mistakes and decides to mend his ways “he was mad—mad at his weakness—mad at Ora” (166). In this act lies John Pearson’s salvation. In this final moment of introspection, John is killed by an approaching train, the very train which earlier represented his
sexuality. Ironically the engineer of that train says, “Damned if I kin see how it happened” (167). John Pearson gets salvation only in his death.

Just as the theme of sin and salvation is associated with John Pearson, so is the theme of forgiveness with Lucy. Lucy is embodiment of Womanism. She forgives John at each and every step despite the fact that he constantly betrays her. Right from the beginning, she is aware of John’s promiscuity but marries him in the hope that he will mend his ways. Even after the marriage, John continues his philandering, much to the chagrin of Lucy. When Lucy is informed by her brother Bud about John’s affair with a woman called Delphine, Lucy replies, “You can’t pay no ’tention tuh talk. Dey’s talkin’ everywhere. De folks is talkin’ in Italy, Ah don’t pay dese talkers no mind” (77). Yet, Lucy once again saves John from going to jail when he had assaulted Bud. Just three days after her childbirth she goes to Judge Alf Pearson to get John released. She is successful to bail out John but she “collapsed on the steps of Pearson’s office, and he sent her home in his buggy.” (85). In Eatonville, Lucy helps John to become a preacher. Despite being a preacher, John’s lustful behavior does not stop. Lucy is aware of it and “even so, a little cold feeling impinged upon her antennae. There was another woman” (98). John betrays Lucy as well as he shirks away from his responsibilities. Instead of taking care of his gravely sick daughter Isis he runs away to Tampa and leaves Lucy alone to tend to her. Lucy once again forgives him when he returns. John Lowe claims that Lucy “becomes a mother figure for John, gives him detailed instructions on how to handle his ministry, and in her loving forgiveness of his sins simultaneously creates a never ending source of guilt” (87-88).

Time and time again, Lucy not only forgives John but also warns him of impending dangers. “You either got tuh stop lovin’ Hattie Tyson uh you got tuh stop
preachin’. Dat’s what de people say” (102). Further she says, “If you keep ole Hattie Tyson’s letters out dis house mah chillun kin git bolt of ’em and you kin stop folkses mouf by comin’ on home instead uh layin round wid her in Oviedo” (109).

All the forgiveness and care goes in vain, when John slaps a sick Lucy. Lucy finally realizes that whatever she has sacrificed for John means nothing to him. She poignantly tells John before her death, “De hidden wedge will come tuh light someday, John. Mark mah words. Youse in de majority now, but God sho don’t love ugly” (109).

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* Lucy is the strongest character. Though of small stature, she has greatest mental strength, confidence and sincerity. She becomes an epitome of goodness. It seems Hurston’s real interest in the novel is Lucy and not John. It is because of Lucy that he starts going to school, “Then the black eyes of little girl in the school yard burns at him from out of the darkness and he added “Wisht Ah coudl go tuh school too” (20) and “studies hard because he caught Lucy watching him every time he recited” (26). Right from beginning. Lucy is a bright, intelligent girl, “she’s almost uh ’fessor now. No body can’t spell her down’” (26). It is also because of Lucy that John starts going to church, “He saw in her church and she was always in his consciousness” (31). After marriage, she advides John not only in domestic life but also in public life. She continuously goads him to his success. she suggests to John, “You knows how tuh carpenter. Go ast who want uh house built and den you take and do it. You kin prop up shacks jus as good as some uh dem dat’s doin it”(94). Thus, Lucy helps John to establish his carpentry business. She helps John to establish himself as a successful minister, even suggesting which sermon he should give in the church. She advices John to, “preach uh sermon on yo’self, and you call tuh they remembrance some uh de good things you don’t” (104). Everyone in the community

(94)

John Pearson is a “wife-made man”(98) and “had to be pushed and shaved and there was no one to do it but Lucy”(100). Lucy helps John to get elected as mayor of his town and also advise him on his friends and foes. She advises John:

Don’t pomp up deacons so much. Dey’ll swell and be de ruinatin of uyh.... you lissen tuh me.... Don’t syndicate wid none of’em do dey’ll put yo’ business in de street” Lucy went on “Friend wid few. Everybody grin in yo’ face don’t love Yuh. any body kin look and see and tell uh snake trail when dey come cross it but nobody kin tel which way he wuz goin’ lesson be seen de snake. You keep outa sight, and in dat way, you won’t give nobody uh stick tuh crack yo head wid. (96-97)

Lucy in a way becomes a mother figure for John. She mothers not only his seven children but also provides motherly care and advice to John at every step of his life. Anthony Wilson writes in this context:

Lucy empowers John in both spheres commenting and safeguarding his identity and masculinity while simultaneously compromising his agency.... Throughout the novel, John is characterized either with praise or sneers as a “wife-made man” thus reinforcing the idea that John owes his very identity to Lucy’s intervention. Though John may have been a “yaller god” through his own essential merits in his old world, he requires Lucy’s help to become a man in his new one. (71)
Even after her death Lucy seems to be omnipresent such that John Lowe has called the “entire book as a pastoral elegy” (132) Even living with his second wife Hattie, John remembers Lucy “Suddenly a seven-year-old picture came before him. Lucy’s bright eyes in the sunken face. Helpless and defensive. The look. Above all the look! John stared at it in fascinated horror for a moment” (122).

There are no two opinions about Lucy being the most likable and powerful characters in the novel, but still she cannot be called the protagonist or central to the plot. Most importantly there is no internal struggle ongoing in her. It is John who is consumed with his inner conflict and dilemma. It is the character of John which develops and finds his internal voice.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* complies with the European Bildungsroman genre. The term Bildungsroman denotes a novel of complete self-development. Following are the chief features of a Bildungsroman genre novel:

1. Bildungsroman, most of the times, is the story of an individual and his process of growth within the prescribed and definite social order. The development process of an individual can be explained as on apprenticeship to existence in a world.

2. The protagonist of the novel embarks on a journey and in the earliest stages of their growth they face some sort of a loss.

3. The process through which the protagonist matures is a long and difficult one, often resulting in conflict between the hero or heroine’s thoughts, views and needs and the social context.

4. Eventually, the values and qualities of the society are shown in the protagonist, who is then blended into the society. The novel finishes by an evaluation of the hero or heroine about himself and his new found place in the social structure.
Jonah’s Gourd Vine seems to be a Wilhelm Meister, prototypical Bildungsroman novel set in African American context. John Pearson leaves his home and embarks on a journey away from home to seek a new life. Leading a life of a mature man he is often in conflict with his wife, family and community because of his inherent weakness for lust. Later John repents and introspects his weakness and tries to get rid of it. He starts his life in a new place with a new sobriety. He again gains new social respect as a preacher. First time in his life he tries to think about others rather than living a selfish life.

Hurston has placed the story of Jonah in rural Florida. Hurston loved her state of Florida very much and she has used the setting of the state of Florida in all of novels except, Moses, Man of the Mountain. To quote Larry Neal:

Her South was, however, very different from the South depicted in the works of Richard Wright. Wright’s fictional landscape was essentially concerned with the psychological ramifications of racial oppression, and black people’s response to it. Zora, on the other hand held a different point of view. For in spite of its hardships, the South was Home. It was not a place from which one escaped, but rather, the place to which one returned for spiritual revitalization. It was a place where remembered with fondness and nostalgia the taste of soulfully prepared cuisine. Here one recalled the poetic eloquence of the local preacher (Zora’s father had been one himself). For her also, the South represented a place with a distinct cultural tradition. Here one heard the best church choirs in the world, and experienced the great expanse of green fields. When it came to the South, Zora could often be an inveterate romantic. In her work, there are no bell boys shaking in fear
before brutal tobacco-chewing crackers. Neither are there any black men being pursued by lynch mobs. She was not concerned with these aspects of the Southern reality. We could accuse her of escapism, but the historical oppression that we now associate with Southern black life, was not a central aspect of her experience. (13-14)

In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, there are three major settings. First is the Crittenden side of the creek, second is the Alf Pearson side of the creek and both of them are situated in Notasulga, Alabama. Third is the Sanford Zion Hope Church in Eatonville, Florida.

The first setting is Ned and Amy Crittenden’s house hold and the plantation of Mr. Beasley in which they work. They represent acute poverty. Crittenden family lives a ‘hand to mouth’ existence, as very little is left for them after the majority of the produce is taken away by their white master Mr. Beasley through share-cropping system. The whites here are cruel who “done whipped niggers tuh death” (8) and white folks over the creek “make their living by swindling the nigger” (21). Ned Crittenden often abuses his wife and children and intimidates and bullies them just as he has been treated throughout his life. He beats Amy and threatens John to “stomp his guts out” (4). In this side of the creek, there is not only economic but also psychological slavery.

The second setting is on the other side of the creek on Alf Pearson’s plantation. Alf Pearson is a former white slave master. He also has his land share cropped, but has a benign attitude towards his black workers. He has provided servant quarters to his workers. On his plantation black rituals are observed and black children play folk games. Alf Pearson is sympathetic towards his workers and, “When the cotton was all picked and the last two load hauled to the gin, Alf Pearson gave the
hands two hogs to barbecue” (28). Black workers here freely observe their festivities. Thus, Hurston sharply contrasts both the settings on either side of the creek. Hurston writes, “Negro Children going to learn how to read and write like white folks, See! All this going on over there and the younguns over the Creek chopping cotton” (94).

Set against both the plantation settings is the self-reliant and self-supporting black farm of Richard and Emmaline Potts. Richard Potts, not only owns a mule but also a horse and buggy. The Potts also own their own land and farms. They also have a house with all material comforts.

On Pearson’s side of the creek things are much better off. African American families can either work with reasonable earnings on a plantation farm or have their own land and house with their hard work just like the Potts.

The third and the last major setting is Eatonville. It is a town which has only black folks living and most importantly this town is run entirely by the blacks themselves. The town of Eatonville and Hurston share a special connection with each other. Hurston deeply loved her town where she spent her childhood days with her mother. She loved this town so much that she throughout her life mentioned Eatonville as her birth place. She recalls about her town in her autobiography Dust Tracks:

I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of negroes in America. Eatonville is what you might call hitting a
straight lick with a crooked stick. The town was not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else. (1)

The most significant place apart from John and Lucy’s house is Zion Hope Church where John becomes a preacher. After settling here John and Lucy acquire property in the form of a house just like Potts family. Lucy takes care of her seven children and her philandering husband in this house. She also dies in this house. The peace of this house is ravaged by Hattie Tyson, second wife of John Pearson.

Zion Hope Church is one of the most important settings of Jonah. Hurston connects Zion Hope Church to the novel’s plot, various characters, and themes. It is from the church that John Pearson rises to his zenith and it is again the church that brings his doom. Though, Hurston has not described Zion Hope church’s physical exterior or architecture, but in her inimitable style she lets the readers feel the church’s impulse. The name Zion is symbolic as it has been taken from the name of Mt. Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem. John gives many of his memorable sermons in Zion Hope church such as the “natchel man” Sermon (104), the Dry Bones Sermon (132), the “Wounds of Jesus” (145-151) and finally, there is the requiem service at John’s funeral in the church. During John’s funeral, the church is decorated with “tight little sweaty bouquets from the woods and yards were beside ornate floral pieces” (168) and “high-backed, throne like chair” was also decorated that symbolized the body of John. In memorial service, the preacher recites a, “barbaric requiem poem” and “the hearers wailed with a feeling of terrible loss. They “beat upon the O-go-doe, the ancient drum” (168). The imagery of Zion Hope Church enlarges from Christian imagery to one covering African expanse.

Black folk preacher and black folk sermon is another theme that Hurston deals with in Jonah’s Gourd Vine. In the novel, John wields an important position in his
community only after he becomes a preacher in Zion Hope Church. In African American life, a black preacher has a very important function. He not only acts as a mediator between people and God but also acts as a vehicle of African American oral tradition. Right through the times of slavery, black people found their strength to resist oppression in the form of folk preacher and black folk sermon which became their voice. The powerful sermon of the black preacher, full of vision and hope, helped them to survive in adverse and menacing conditions. Deborah G. Plant rightly asserts:

In her reclamation and celebration of African American folklore, Hurston often expressed her idea in sermonic form and through the voice of the folk preacher—the very embodiment of African American oral tradition. That Hurston appropriated the folk preacher’s voice as a vehicle to inspire spiritual rebirth as well as to incite resistance to European cultural hegemony in telling. The sermon of the African American folk preacher has historically expressed the collective liberatory voice of African Americans since enslavement. Through the antiphonal dynamics of the folk sermon, preacher and congregation merged, in a ritual of spiritual renewal and empowerment. (93)

In *Jonah*, Hurston tells her readers a story of a poor illiterate ordinary person becoming a successful preacher. When a teenager, John starts going to church, learns traditional prayers and rituals. Torn between love for Lucy and his lust for other girls, he prays:

O Lawd, heah ’tis once mo’ and again yo’ weak and humble servant is knee-bent and body bowed— Mah heart beneath mah knees and mah knees in some lonesome valley cryin’ fuh mercy whilst meray kinst be
found. O Lawd! you know mah heart, and all de ranges uh mah deceitful mind—and if you find any sin lurkin’ in and about mah heart please pluck it out and cast it intuh de sea uh fuhgitfullness what it’ ll never rise tuh condemn me in de judgement. (25)

John then becomes a member of Macedon Baptist Church to befriend Lucy Potts. John decides, “If mah voice sound dat good de first time Ah ever prayed in de church house, it sho won’t be de last”(48). Hurston endows John with the power of words and John knows this fact, “Lucy, look lak Ah jus’ found out what Ah kin do. De words dat sets de church on fire comes tuh me jus’ so. Ah reckon de angels must tell ’em tuh me.” (96) With his impressive sermons like on “natchel man”, “dry-bone” and “wounds of Jesus”, John is able to stir up the emotion of the people at the congregation and manages to “hewin” down sinners tuh repentence”(96). A preacher guides his followers not only to spiritual communion with God but also guides him in various spheres of his daily life. With his folk sermon permeated with jokes, anecdotes, stories he infuses a new spirit in his listeners. As Deborah G. Plant says, “Narrative and dramatic example of the folk sermon are derived from both the story telling dynamics of African American oral culture and from biblical rhetoric” (105). One of the most oft repeated themes in African American sermons are Old Testament. African Americans find affinity with the story of Hebrews, their oppression, enslavement and freedom which somehow parallels theirs.

This theme of empowerment and resilience is also echoed in John’s sermons. In fact, John’s most memorable sermon the “Wounds of Jesus “ is borrowed by Hurston straight from Eau Gallie in Florida which she heard on May 3, 1929. Hurston is able to portray a true picture of a black folk preacher and his sermon. She herself reasons out in Dust Track on a Road, “I tumbled right into the Missionary
Baptist church when I was born. I saw the preachers and the pulpits, I heard my father, known to thousands as “Reverend John” explain all about God’s habits, His heaven, His ways and Means. Everything was known and settled” (215). John Pearson is a great preacher and orator. By weaving a web of golden words, he is also able to save himself from impending disgrace in the community. John preaches in beautiful and inspiring words but he himself is not able to understand those words. Robert Hemenway points out:

The preacher as poet is the dominant theme in the novel, and it is the quality of imagination—his image making faculty—that always redeems John’s human failings. When in the pulpit, John is an inspired artist who consecrates language…. John’s poetic powers operate in both spiritual and physical worlds; he is a poet who attempts to reconcile the secular and the religious, the spirit and the flesh…. John’s poetic faculties are part of the esthetic matrix of black fold as culture.

(193-195)

One of the most memorable moments of the novel and yet also one of the most ironic and contradictory is the “Wounds of Jesus” sermon by John which will also become his last one. Hurston aims to portray this sermon as the climax of Jonah. The sermon starts with the rendering of the text of Zechariah 13:6. Hurston writes:

Jesus has always loved us from the foundation of the world

When God

Stood out on the apex of His power

Before the hammers of creation

Fell upon the anvils of Time and hammered out the ribs of the earth

Before He made any ropes
By the breath of fire

And set the boundaries of the ocean by the gravity of His power. (145-146)

John uses rich metaphorical ornate language and striking imageries while delivering the sermon. “Hurston surrounds her character with a world of metaphor and image” (Hemenway 195). The readers are so riveted by John’s performance that his personal dilemma is foreshadowed by his sermon. It seems “it is a linguistic tour de force’ traditional metaphors and similes well known in the black community are skill improvised” (Hemenway 196). The imageries and metaphors employed in the sermon are quite common to the African American folk Sermon. In a letter to James Weldon Johnson, Hurston wrote:

I suppose that you have seen the criticism of my book in the New York Times. He means well, I guess, but I never saw such a lack of information about us. It just seems that he is unwilling to believe that a Negro preacher could have so much poetry in him. When you and I (who seem to be the only ones even among Negroes who recognize the barbaric poetry in their sermons) know that there are hundreds of preachers who are calling that sermon weekly. He does not know that merely being a good man is not enough to hold a Negro preacher in an important charge. He must also be an artist. He must be both a poet and actor of a high order and then he must have the voice and figure. He does not realize or is unwilling to admit that the light that shone from GOD’S TROMBONES was handed to you, as was the sermon to me in Jonah’s Gourd Vine. (qtd in Hemenway 193-194).
The treatment of themes in *Jonah*, is direct and realistic. Through her inimitable style, Hurston represents the themes in the novel as part of the African American experience which is an integral part of their life. The treatment of the main theme, sin and salvation and other secondary themes are treated in a direct and realistic manner. With accurate representation of traditions, rites, rituals and folklore which were a part of African American life, Hurston approaches her themes in a realistic mode.

Hurston also deals with the theme of migration in *Jonah*. Hurston depicts the impact of migration in the rural south and the lives of African Americans before and after World War I. The Great Migration occurring from 1900s to 1940s was a massive and gradual trajectory of African Americans to the Northern and Midwest part of America from the Southern States of America. Hurston writes:

Some had railroad fare and quickly answered the call of the North and sent back for others, but this was too slow. The wheels and marts were hungry. So the great industries set out recruiting agents throughout the south to provide transportation to the willing but poor. “Lawd, Sanford getting’ dis Nawth bound fever lak eve’y where else” Hambo complained one Sunday in church” (126).

The whole of the South was engulfed in the Great Migration. African Americans from the South migrated to the North in search of better opportunities in social and economic spheres. African American people escaped to the north to avoid the racist south where brutal killings of black, the share cropping system and all sorts of exploitation and discrimination was rampant. World War I created jobs in the Northern part of America and consequently “an estimated 700,000 to 1 million blacks
left the South for northern and western cities” (Trotter 378). Hurston vividly describes the scene:

But a week later Hambo was back. “Looka heah, John, dis thing is gittin’ serious sho’ ’nuff. De white folks is gittin’ worried too. Houses empty eve’where. Not half ’nough people tuh work de farms—crops rotting in de ground. Folks plantin’ and aint even takin’ time tuh reap. Mules lef’ standing’ in de furrers. Some de folks gone’ thout lettin’ de families know, and dey say iss de same way, only wurser, all over de South. Dey talkin’ abot passin’ Law tuh keep black folks from buying railroad tickets. Dey tell me dey stopped uh train in Georgy and made all de colored folks git off. Up dere is awful de pullman porters tell me.

Ride half uh day and see nothin’ but farms wid nobody on ’em. (127)

Many southern African Americans like Hurston herself were against the migration as they thought that it would disrupt southern community’s culture and economics, which were unique in their own sense. Interestingly Hurston was a migrant throughout her life. She was born in Notasulga, Alabama but spent her childhood and youth in Eatonville, Florida. After her mother’s death, she moved north, to Baltimore, Washington D.C. and then Harlem. She later relocated to Florida and spent her last days there. In fact Hurston alludes to the theme of African American migration in the majority of her works. In a way, she portrays her own innate tendency to migrate in her works. Significantly, Hurston not only deals with interstate migration theme but also depicts intrastate migratory trajectory that was taking place at that time period. The home state of Hurston, Florida was an important Southern state. Most of the rural South was facing economic disruption due to the Great Migration but the state of Florida was booming. Right from the beginning of the
story, John Pearson migrates from one place to other in search of better economic opportunities. He arrives on the Alf Pearson’s plantation in Notasulga by crossing Songahatchee Creek which also marks his shift from share cropping to plantation labor. It is in Notasulga that John sees the train, a vehicle for migration for the first time. He then goes on to work in a tie-camp near Opelika and then to another railroad camp in Wildwood, west of Sanford. After being exiled from Sanford because of his scandalous lifestyle, he arrives in Plant City. Martyn Bone aptly points out:

Recent Historical work on African American migration sheds new light on Hurston’s writing, elucidating her profound understanding of rural migration within and between the Southern states. It helps us to see how John Pearson’s “highly mobile” search for “greater opportunities” encompasses not only the interstate train journey from plantation life in Alabama to “de new country” of Florida but also his interstate movements even before leaving Alabama. (761)

Significantly John Pearson the protagonist never transplants himself to North “the land of promise” (128) but settles in “The South-land of muscled hands” (126). John moves further south from Notasulga to southeast direction in Sanford and Eatonville to again further southwest to Plant City. What Hurston wanted to emphasis was that the Great Migration to the North was not the complete picture but she wanted to portray the real picture of the South where African Americans were still living and supporting themselves.

Parallel to the theme of migration runs the theme of travelling in Jonah’s Gourd Vine. This theme is recurrent in all of Hurston’s fictional works. The protagonist John Pearson travels to different places such as Notasulga, Sanford, Plant City and thus his character develops from being “over-de-creek nigger” (38) to a
“natchel man” (104). John travels some time in search of better economic opportunity, and some time to save himself from impending dangers or to start his life afresh. Hurston replicates her father John Hurston’s travel trajectories in John Pearson.

Gordon E. Thompson writes in this context:

For Hurston, telling tall tales about personified figures, travel, and sexual infidelities are not only related to one another but are also linked with men. Travel, for instance, appears to be closely linked with sexual promiscuity, as when Hurston identifies her father by his “meandering” from Alabama to Florida and also with his possible infidelities. Whatever Hurston’s problems with her father, she certainly sought to emulate him, particularly where storytelling and travel were concerned. The repetition of his name throughout her works is no accident. It is also no wonder that, like the “meanderings” of John Hurston, who was some-thing of folk minister, John Crittenden of Jonah’s Gourd Vine is also a folk minister who loves to travel. (751-754)

Through the character of John Pearson it seems that Hurston not only replicates her father but also projects herself. Since childhood Hurston had a penchant for travel. Hurston writes in Dust Track on a Road, “I just took to walking and kept the thing a’ going. The strangest thing about it was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods all alone, following some inside urge to go places” (22). Hurston led a rootless migrant life. She travelled to a lot of places for her research work in anthropology and literary endeavors. She mapped the whole South, but also went to Jamaica, Haiti, and Honduras. She wrote in Dust Tracks “My search for knowledge of things took me into
many strange places and adventures” (146). By portraying the protagonist John Pearson as a travelling hero, Hurston has written about herself. In her wonderful style she projects herself in the novel. To quote Gary Ciuba:

In writing *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* Hurston pursued her own version of the hermeneutical quest that engaged John Pearson. Although the novelist modeled the preacher after her own father, she also wrote much of herself into him—her wanderlust, childhood defiance, fascination with trains, imaginative response to nature, but, above all, her efforts to serve as interpreter of and for her culture. (130)

Hurston has used color symbolism in *Jonah*. The most prominent colour symbol is that of white. White colour is associated with Lucy. Significantly Lucy’s name also means white light. Lucy represents purity of feeling and emotion and thus Hurston associates white colour with her. Hurston writes, “Lacy whiteness…. Lucy calm and self-assured” (35); “He studied the back of Lucy’s head and shoulders and the way the white rice buttons ran down” (49); John noted the prosperous look of the Potts place … Peanuts drying on white cloth in the sun” (60); “Little Lucy somewhat smaller in death than she had been even in life lay washed and dressed in white” (113); After her death Lucy becomes “rider of the pale white horse of death” (115). Even in his dreams, John dreams of Lucy and relates white colour with her, “Lucy went racing down the dusty white road together” (155) and “carried Lucy across in arms to where Alf Pearson stood at the cross roads and pointed down a white shell road” (155).

Another colour used by Hurston as a symbol is that of red colour. Red colour symbolizes ominous and impending dangers. When John is returning to his home after meeting another woman named Big ’Oman he sees “Red water toting” and “the
river was full of water and red as judgment” (73). John tries to cross the river and in the process is about to die. Hurston also associates the interiors of the ominous train with red colour, “red plush splendor” (88). One also comes across another reference of red colour as ominous when Aw’ Dangie is practicing voodoo for Hattie Tyson, “When the altar had been set, she dressed the coffin in red….and laid herself down in the red coffin” (107). The “red coffin” ominously hints at approaching death of Lucy Pearson.

Hurston’s choice of names is also very symbolic. Though John and Lucy were Hurston’s real parents’ names but in the context of the story their names have immense symbolic meanings. John’s name symbolizes Jonah. Both their stories are the same, both being doomed by their own pride and follies. Lucy’s name means white light. Lucy guides John to his success through her ‘scintillating’ strength and is like a beacon of light for John in times of danger. As Lucy dies, John’s life is filled with darkness. John and Lucy’s daughter’s name Isis, is equally symbolic. Isis is Hurston’s symbolic alter ego as described by Hurston herself. To quote Valerie Boyd:

The name Hurston chose for her fictional doppelganger is even more intriguing, symbolically speaking. In Egyptian mythology, Isis was a woman who possessed words of healing power. She used her magic to trick Ra, the Creator, into revealing his secret name and she was then elevated to become the most revered goddess of Egypt. Associated with the color red, Isis was considered the most powerful magician in the universe, and she was intelligent and inventive—both attributes Hurston assigned to the fictional Isis of Eatonville. (92)

Other minor characters too have symbolic names. Hattie Tyson symbolizes hate and malignity which makes John’s life miserable. A black character named Coon
Tyler, whom John meets in tie-camp, also has a symbolic name. Coon symbolizes the black comic stereotypes image. Another black character Ezeriah Hill is also called uncle Dump. His name, Uncle Dump is symbolic because he has been dumped by women. Another character is named Do-dirty because of his nasty and dirty ways with women whom he often double crosses. The name General Pershing also has symbolic connotations whereby he used to ‘push’ African American for taking part in war and ‘punish’ them for asking their rights.

Dreams also have a great symbolic meaning in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. “Many of Hurston’s characters dream grand dreams, and this forms a subject in many other classic works in the African American canon” (Lowe 26). In the novel, dreams have their own significant meaning. John, the protagonist dreams when his life is about to take a new turn and will affect him profoundly. When he comes to Alf Pearson plantation for the first time by crossing the creek, “That night he dreamed new dreams” (20). Entering into a new world by crossing the creek, John prepares himself for the things to come and this finds place in his dreams. After Lucy’s death and John’s divorce with his second wife Hattie Tyson, John’s life takes a new turn for the worse. He lives a life of lone, wretched person. He poignantly says to sister White, “Seem lak de dreams is true sho’nuff sometime—iss so plain befo’ me, but after while dey fades. But even while they be fadin’ Ah have others. So it goes from day tuh day” (154). One night John had a dream. Lucy sat beside a steam and cried because she was afraid of a snake. He killed the snake and carried Lucy across in his arms….Somehow Lucy got lost from him, but there he was on the road happy because the dead snake was behind him, but crying in his loneliness for Lucy” (155). John decides to move out of Sanford and search of a new place, “May be it’s meant for me tuh leave Sanford. What Ahm hangies’ ’ round heah for, anyhow?” (155). Most
importantly, it manifests that John is subconsciously attached to Lucy even now and even death she permeates his life. When he meets Sally Lovelace, “The world and all seemed so different it seemed changed in a dream way” (156). Once again John’s life is going to take a new turn albeit a better one.

John Pearson’s crossing of the creek symbolizes initiation. The term initiation means the rites of passage from the stage of childhood to adolescence to maturity which is practiced in primitive cultures. Literally speaking, the term initiation has different implications in the works of fiction. The protagonist goes through the rites of initiation through his personal existential experiences in his life and learns about himself and the world. It is necessary that initiation should have a permanent effect on the character and thinking.

John Pearson’s crossing over is his first initiation. His crossing of the “De Songahatchee” (12) creek initiates him into a new world leaving behind an old world. Right from the beginning, he manifests his desire to cross the creek. He says, “Over Big Creek, mama. Ah ever wanted tuh cross over” (12). Hurston presents the scene of crossing the Creek in an allegorical form and with minute details:

John plunged on down to the Creek, singing a new song and stomping the beats. The Big Creek thundered among its rocks and whirled on down. So John sat on the foot-log and made some words to go with the drums of the Creek. Things walked in the birch woods, creep, creep, creep, The hound dog’s lyric crescendo lifted over and above the tree tops. He was on the foot-log, half way across the Big Creek where may be people laughed and maybe people had lots of daughters. The moon came up. The hunted coon panted down to the Creek, swam across and proceeded leisurely up the other side. The
tenor-singing hound dog went home. Night passed. No more Ned, no
hurry. No telling how many girls might be living on the new and shiny
side of the Big Creek. John almost trumpeted exultantly at the new sun.
He breathed lustily. He stripped and carried his clothes across, then
recrossed and plunged into the swift water and breasted strongly over.

(13)

John enters new world stripped and without clothes like a new born child
plunging into the water, which also represents baptism and a symbolic rebuilding for
John. The ugly and scornful laughter of Ned is replaced by laughter of people across
the creek. “The hound dog’s lyric crescendo,” “The moon,” “the new sun” (13) all
signal freedom of John. John first swims with his clothes and then swims again in
nude as he “have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indication rank or role,
position in a kinship system” (Twiner 95). This marks his first initiation.

John enters a new world represented by Alf Pearson’s side of the creek.
Everything is different from the previous world he has been living in till now. “There
was a strange noise that John had never heard. He was sauntering along a road with
his shoes in his hand. He could see houses here and there among the fields—not miles
apart like where he had come from. Suddenly thirty or forty children erupted from a
log building near the road side, shouting and laughing” (14). This new world that
Hurston portrays is in stark contrast to the old world of John. John is completely
mesmerized by it. The scene is filled with shouts and laughter of children. For the first
time in his life, he sees black children going to school, while children on the other
side of the creek are engaged in manual labour such as chopping cottons and are
illiterate. John also becomes self-aware of his identity which is a crucial phase in a
passage of initiation.
Lucy sees him for the first time and says, “Well folks where your reckon dis big yaller bee-sting nigger come from? Everybody laughed. He felt ashamed of his base feet for the first time in his life” (14). After this the train scene marks his second initiation. When John sees train for the first time in his life, he is extremely terrified, “John started violently in spite of himself” (16). This scene is followed by John’s meeting with Alf Pearson, his real father. Alf says, “Your face looks sort of familiar but I can’t place you. What’s your name?” (17). John’s initiation into the new world becomes more easy for him because of his friendly and benign temperament, his zeal for knowledge and most important, with ever abiding help from Lucy Ann Potts, the sharp intelligent girl whom he marries.

Empowerment through knowledge is another important theme of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. John Pearson’s rise from a poor “over-de-creek nigger” (38) to a successful pastor at Zion Hope Church and ultimately mayor of Sanford is due to his education. It is only because of his eagerness to learn that John becomes successful in his life. After John arrives at the Pearson plantation in Notasulga, he for the first time sees a school and decides, “Wisht Ah could go tuh school too” (20). Alf Pearson is quick to recognize his illegitimate son’s potential and decides to send him to school, “I’ll make something out of you” (21). Having a penchant for learning, John is quickly able to grasp new knowledge, “He studied hard…. He wrote on the ground in the quarters and in a week he knew his alphabet and could count to a hundred” (26). Hurston further writes, “He had learned to spell his way thru several pages in his reader. He could add, subtract, divide and multiply” (31). Due to his gaining of knowledge, Alf Pearson soon promotes him from the menial job of looking after hogs to an accountant.
Despite having affairs with many other girls, John is attracted to Lucy only because for him “she combines the power of sexuality and the power of language and knowledge” (Lowe 117). He is irresistibly attracted to her because she is not like other girls, “she kin speak de longest pieces and never miss uh word and say ’em faster dan anybody ah ever seed. It was agreed Lucy was perfect” (35). John by his new empowerment through knowledge communicates with Lucy more confidently and often in amusing ways through love notes, folk adages. When John becomes pastor, he combines his sharp intellect and acquired knowledge to his sermons, making him one of the most successful pastors at Zion Hope Church. To quote Gary Ciuba:

John succeeds at becoming a masterly reinterpreter because his preaching relies upon rhetorical originality to express the continuing vitality of the primal sacred word. He always, according to Hurston’s narrator, found “some new figure, some new praise giving name for God, every time he knelt in Church.

(126)

Not only through the protagonist John, has Hurston conveyed the theme of empowerment through knowledge through the character of Lucy too. In the death scene, Lucy tells her nine year old daughter Isis, “‘Member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat’s de onliest way you kin keep out from under peoples feet” (110). Here Hurston once again emphatically suggests the importance of education and knowledge for African Americans. In a way she is exhorting them to get involved in the pursuit of knowledge and make their life better.

One important imagery used by Hurston in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is the washing or cleansing imagery which reverberates throughout the novel. Hurston introduces
this imagery in the opening pages of the novel itself. The abusive step-father of John Pearson scorns his son because of his mulatto status. “Yaller-god eep’n wash ’im up” (4) To this, Amy Crittenden warns her husband in defense of her son, “Ah’ll wash yo’ tub uh gator guts and dat quick” (4). She threatens Ned to stay away from her son or he should be ready to face the consequences. She tells Ned that he is always abusing John for being an illegitimate child, “Yet and still you always washin’ his face wid his color and tell in ’im he’ uh bastard” (4-5). Notably, at this moment “washin” actually means a stain as John is an illegitimate child of Amy, a former slave and her former white master, Alf Pearson. Amy also reminds Ned that before marrying her, Ned did not mind John’s presence with her, “Dat ain’t whut you said. You washed ’im up jes lak he wuz gold den” (5).

After arriving “over-de-creek” John cannot resist the temptation of girls and he starts having illicit relations with them. He is aware of his sins. “John fell to his knees and prayed for cleansing” (47). Hurston once again induces washing imagery when John wins the election of mayor. Walter Thomas, another character provides explanation for Sam’s loss to John, “Yo’ morals is clean ez uh fish—and he been in bathin’ all his life, but youse too dry fuh de mayor business” (98). Later John is washed away by the flood in the river when he is coming from Big Oman’s house. “Hurston here extends the “washing” references to a near-fatals baptism into repentance that merges quite obviously with the catastrophic and almost final, purgation of flood” (Lowe 124). There is another important cleaning reference when Lucy on her death-bed confronts John about his infidelities and irresponsible attitude towards his family. She warns him, “You can’t clean yo’ self wid yo’ tongue lak uh cat” (109).
After Lucy’s death and John’s marriage to Hattie, John’s miseries start. Deacon Harris and Hattie decide to malign John in public. Through washing imagery Hurston tries to suggest that ominous things are going to occur, “Hattie was rubbing in the first water and dropping the white things into the wash-pot when Deacon Harris hurried up to her back gate” (129). Hattie and Harris both meet clandestinely. Harris suggests that Hattie ask for a divorce from John, Hattie replies, “He don’t try tuh keep it out mah sight. He washes mah face wid her night and day” (130). Finally, Hattie ‘washing dirty linens’ in public, accuses John for adulterous behavior and files for divorce in the court.

Hurston associates John with nature imagery in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. In the beginning John is as agricultural worker and does sharecropping on his land, later he also does carpentry work. Gourd vines is another natural imagery. Like the gourd vine in the Bible John is also cut down. After exile from Sanford, John moves to Plant City. The name ‘Plant City’ is quite suggestive as John will once again flourish and grow in this new city. The snake is another nature allusion used by Hurston. The Songahatchee creek, a precursor to John’s initiation is another allusion to nature.

Parallels to slave narratives abound in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Several slave paradigms can be traced out in the novel. John a “yaller bastard” (58) is a living embodiment and a product of slavery. He is an illegitimate child of former slave Amy Crittenden and white slave master Alf Pearson. John, before crossing the creek, promises his mother Amy that he will return after making some money. This reminds of slave narrative. After arriving at Alf’s plantation, John is given the job of driving Alf Pearson’s cream coloured carriage to which Alf’s wife objects. This is because she had seen a resemblance between her husband and John. This clearly reminds of a slave narrative, where wives of white slave masters wanted to keep their husband’s
illegitimate mulatto child away from them. Hurston again uses slave narrative when John is given new the name of John Pearson from being “Two-Eye-John”, by the school teacher, who is Lucy’s uncle. Renaming was one of most of the important themes which occurred in slave narratives. The slaves who escaped to the Northern part of America started their new life with a new name. A new name was symbolic of their freedom.

John’s life takes a new turn, when he goes to school. He learns to read and write and has “new power to communicate his thought” (31). He found new freedom through literacy. This was a long tradition in slave narratives where a slave used to change his life for better through acquiring education. Slave narratives have a substantial influence on African American women literature and Hurston is no exception. To quote Joycelyn Moody:

While slavery and the genre of the slave narrative influenced virtually every aspect of the earliest literary traditions developed by and about black women.... Perhaps most importantly, a series of novels produced by African American women writers ... revisit and revise the major conventions, tropes and themes of the earliest slave women’s narratives. (124-125).

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is full of irony. In Hurston’s fiction, irony is present not only as a verbal irony or irony of the situation but also as a total output of experience. Hurston induces ample irony in *Jonah*, sometimes subtle and sometimes grave. Hurston introduces irony when John crosses over the creek and meets Lucy for the first time. He has an instant liking for Lucy but when he sees other girls he forgets about her. This situation is ironic because this scene will recur throughout the novel,
and each time John is with any new girl or woman, he will forget Lucy. Hurston writes:

One girl behind her had breasts, must be around fourteen. He looked at her again. Some others were growing up too. In fact all were looking a little bit like women—all but the little black-eyed one. When he looked back into her face he felt ashamed. Seemed as if she had caught him doing something nasty. He shifted his feet in embarrassment. (14)

The situation is ironic and gives a subtle hint for thing that will happen in future. The girl who stepped behind Lucy and caught John’s attention is Phrony, who also becomes the first girl with whom, John has sex. She may be the first but not the last. The only difference in the future would be that John would not feel embarrassed anymore.

When John meets his biological white father Alf Pearson for the first time, Alf is not able to recognize John. He says “Your face looks sort of familiar but I can’t place you .... Boy you’re almost as big as I am” (17-18). The scene is full of irony. In John’s face, Alf is able to see features of his own face, yet he is not able to recognize him till John tells Alf about his mother Amy. In a comic yet ironic mode, Hurston depicts post bellum conditions of slavery. Later in school, John is named as John Pearson as he is born there which is again ironic because this is his real name. Earlier name of John, as “Two-Eye John” is also ironic because it subtly suggests John’s split of body and soul which becomes evident in his internal struggle. Hurston once again induces subtle irony in the duet scene in Church. Ironically John is given the part of ‘a philandering soldier’ (36) and Lucy is given the role of ‘overeager maid’ (36). John and Lucy both play their parts so well that they have to perform once again for the audience. Not only here but later in their married lives also they have to act out their
roles again and again, John being a philanderer and Lucy as an overeager maid for John.

Hurston also manifests John’s ironic double standards concerning infidelity. John is extremely possessive of Lucy. He does not want any man in Eatonville to talk about Lucy. He even warns Lucy, “Lemme tell you somethin’ right now, and it ain’t two, don’t you never tell me no mo’ whut you jus’ tole me, ’cause if you do, Ahm goin’ tuh kill yuh jes’ ez sho ez gun is iron. Ahm de first wid your, and Ah means tuh be de last. Ain’t never no man tuh breathe in yo’ face but me. You hear me?” (95). This seems extremely ironic that an adulterous person like John is preaching about fidelity and to a person like Lucy who epitomizes faithfulness.

Hurston presents another ironic instance when Hattie secretly carries in her hair a “piece of John-de-conquer root” (117). This is a grave ironic coincidence as it is also the name of her husband John. Not only she keeps a voodoo herb named “John-de-conqueror” to put a spell on John Pearson but also to conquer him.

Finally the greatest irony of the novel lies in the fact that John is killed by the train. Right from the beginning the symbol of the train has been representative of John’s sexuality and the “brute-beast” (75) in him. His love for the train becomes his obsession, so much so that he even forgets Lucy when he is riding on it. Throughout his life John continues to ride on “de damnation train” committing sin, but in the end when he decides to change for good, he is ironically killed by that same train and the driver ironically says, “Damned, if I kin see how it happened” (167). Hurston perhaps want to learn it to her readers to understand how and why it happened and the grave ironic meaning of it.

Hurston has delved deeply into the theme of marriage. Hurston explores four marriages in _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_. There are three marriages of John and also the
marital relationship of John’s mother Amy Crittenden and her husband Ned Crittenden. In doing so, firstly, Hurston has manifested the drawbacks and negative aspects of patriarchal marriage; secondly, she also demonstrates that to some extent women are also responsible for their own inferior status in the marriage, and thirdly she has broken negative stereo type image of African American women as promiscuous. Hurston aptly proves that “holy wedlock is no longer a site of utopian partnership” (Du Cille 154).

John contests election for mayor and becomes mayor of Sanford. Everyone in the town and community know that John owes his success to Lucy, a fact John constantly denies. He says:

Don’t you rection. Ah know how to talk, Lucy? You ain’t out dere wid Brown and Battle and Ford and all dern big mens, lak Ah is, You always tryin tuh tell me what tuh do, Ah wouldn’t be where Ah is, if Ah didn’t know now more’n you think. Ah do. You ain’t mah guardzeen nohow. (100)

Throughout the marriage, John never realizes the worth of his wife. She is a mere object which “belongs to him” (115). In her married life, not for a moment does Lucy try to live an independent life. Socially, morally and financially she is dependent on her promiscuous husband. Lucy continues to ignore John’s philandering, irresponsible attitude towards his family, until he slaps her on her deathbed. It is then she realizes her worth in the eyes of John. As if cursing John she says, “De hidden wedge wil come tuh light someday, John. Mark mah words. Youse in de majority now, but God sho don’t love ugly” (109). Throughout her married life, she loves John more than herself, she realizes her ultimate mistake. In her last moments she gives an
important lesson to her daughter Isis, “Don’t you love nobody better’ you do yo’self” (110). In this marriage, once again Hurston portrays subjugated status of a wife.

John Pearson’s second marriage is to Hattie Tyson. Hurston depicts her different approach to the theme of marriage. John marries Hattie within a couple of months after Lucy’s death thinking that she will take her place in his life. If Lucy was an embodiment of a betrayed wife, Hattie becomes a model for resistance against male hegemony, though Hattie’s married life also remain unsuccessful as Lucy’s John betrays, abuses and beats Hattie too. Hattie refuses to be cowed down by John, or support and guide him on the contrary she tries to control John through voodoo. In this marriage also, John refuses to accept his responsibilities. When the members of the congregation are trying to remove John from his moderatorship because of his drinking and promiscuity John blames it on Hattie. Hattie challenges John, “Now, Ah ain’t no Miss Lucy, cause ahg ain’t goin’ tuh clock yo’ dirt fuh yuh” (122).

Caught off guard by the insolent behaviour of Hattie, John starts beating Hattie, “No woman ain’t never cussed me yet and you ain’t gonna do it neither—not and tote uh whole back” he gritted out between his teeth and beat her severely, and felt better” (123). Instead of living a life of an abused and betrayed wife like Lucy, Hattie applies for divorce in the court and ends the marriage for her own good. Though Hattie is the least liked character in the novel, as she is always scheming and conniving, but there is something about her resilience that is admirable. She refuses to be a passive and timid wife, neither supports John nor mothers his seven children and proves to be a stiff opponent for John. Neither is John excused for physical violence against Hattie.

Next John marries Sally Lovelace. By now, an exiled and deeply repentant John seems a changed person. Sally is a widow who successfully manages thirty
pieces of property as well as her public life. She helps John resurrect his career as preacher as well as his carpentry business. Hurston depicts a role reversal. It is Sally who proposes to John, “Ahm gointer marry you, ’cause Ah love yuh and Ah belive you love me, and ’cause you needs marryin” (159). On their first night after marriage, “John was as shy as a girl—as Lucy had been. His bride wondered at that” (160). As if answering John’s prayers, God sends Sally in place of Lucy, a woman to support him once again, and this time not only morally but also financially. Yet John falls to the temptation of flesh, he has a one night stand with Ora, a prostitute. In his moment of introspection and repentance, he is killed by an approaching train.

All the four marriages depicted in the novel by Hurston, provide different approach to each of them. In her inimitable style, Hurston shows that ideal marriage does not exist in Jonah. Genevieve West aptly points out:

The combined tenor of the four marriages in the novel suggests the likelihood of oppression and inevitability of betrayal in marriage.

Likewise, patriarchal culture dooms wives to mother or, as in Hattie’s case, patriarchal norms that the women are complicit in their oppression. In Amy’s case, marriage is hardly a refuge. Rather it is the lesser of two oppressive alternatives. Lucy, on her death bed, understands her complicity. but Sally never does. She clings to the illusion that John was faithful. Only Hattie presents an alternative for resistance, and an unattractive one at that. (509)

Hurston also tried to shatter negative stereotype of African American women as grossly sexualized creatures. Before and at the time Hurston started writing, black women were shown as having overtly uncontrolled sexual desires. Through the character of Amy, Lucy and Sally, Hurston has tried to break this myth. In Amy and
Lucy we find the epitome of forgiveness, while once again in Lucy and Sally, one finds epitome of motherly love. Lucy and Sally both exert their importance in public spheres and manage their husband’s private and public life, but never take advantage of their privileged positions. Here it could be apt to quote Barbara Christian who wrote in *Black Feminist Criticism*:

> Until the 1940s, black women in both Anglo and Afro-American literature have been usually assigned stereotyped roles—their images being a context for some other major dilemma or problem the society cannot resolve. Throughout the novels of the slavery and reconstruction periods, Anglo American literature, particularly southern white literature fashioned an image of the black woman intends to further create submission, conflict between the black man and woman, and importantly, a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront. (2)

The theme of envy resonates throughout the novel. In the beginning of the novel, one sees Ned envy John’s light skin and his mulatto status. He keeps on referring to John by using derogatory adjectives such as “punkin - colored bastard” (10), “half -white youngun”(10) “powerful biggity”(40) and “trashy yaller rascal” (42). Ned treats John differently from his biological sons and constantly resents his mulatto status which according to him provides John a privileged status. Ned envies and complains, “John is house nigger. Ole Marsa always kep’ de yaller niggers in de house and give ‘em uh job to tin’ silver dishes and goblets tuh de table, us black niggers is de ones s’posed tuh ketchde wind and de weather” (6). Though John, works hard in the field, more than Ned or anyone else but still Ned dubs him as a slacker. He even maliciously complains to the white plantation owner Mister Shelby about John
not working in the field, which is a sheer lie. John says to Amy, “Mama, better tell Ned tuh leave me be. Tell 'im tuh stop his bulldozia. Ah done heered 'im lyin’ tuh Mist Shelby makin’ out Ah don’t do nothin’—hard ez Ah works” (41). John is stepson of Ned but instead of treating John as his child, Ned acts like a jealous sibling. When John returns from Alf Pearson’s plantation to work for the family, Ned is jealous of John and his new empowerment through literacy. He has sinister plans against John:

Damn biggity rascal! Wisht Ah had 'im tied down so he couldn’t move! I’d put uh hund’ed lashes on his bare back. He know he got de advantage uh me. He don’t even know his pappy and he ought tuh be proud Ah took and married his ma and mable somethin’ out ’im. He ought to be humble, but he ain’t, and plenty folks right now on account uh his yaller skin will put ’im abo ve me. Wisht Ah knowed somthin’ that would crumple his feathers! (41).

Another instance of envy can be seen between John and Coon Tyler. Though John has only a short stay in the tie camp in Opelika, but this stay is dominated by Coon’s envious and pernicious attitude towards John. Due to his easy going, friendly nature, John is liked by everyone except Coon. Right from the beginning Coon hates John and views him as his competitor. Hurston writes, “He looked up at John out of red, angry eyes and growled, “you oughter quit goin’ ’round skeering folks. You better hail fo’ you tuh walk upon me again”(53). Coon is envious of John as he is more brave and powerful than him, and is also the most likable person in the tie-camp.

Female rivalry and envy is once again depicted through the character of Hattie Tyson as she is envious of Lucy. Hattie not only seduces John, but intends to marry
John. She envies Lucy and tries to disrupt marital life of Lucy and John through voodoo. Not only this, she also tries to kill Lucy through voodoo, a fleeting suggestion made by Hurston in the novel. After Lucy’s death John marries Hattie but is unable to forget Lucy. Hattie criticizes Lucy even though she is dead, “Naw Ah ain’t no Miss Lucy, ‘cause Ah ain’t goin’ tuh cloak yo’ dirt fuh yuh. Ah ain’t goin’ tuh take off a yuh whut she took so you kin set up and be uh big nigger over mah bones” (122), and “Miss Lucy agin! Miss Lucy dis, Miss Lucy dat!” (123).

Theme of envy is again manifested when John’s enemies are constantly trying to “pull him down” or “cut down dat Jonah’s gourd vine” (123). John’s friends and members of congregation all turn against him as they are jealous of him. They want to size down him as he has become “uh big nigger” (110).

Underlying all the themes in the novel is the theme of second chances. Despite continuous sinning by John due to his uncontrollable lustful behavior, John is given a second chance for redemption. Just as the story of the biblical character Jonah is a story of “predilection toward forgiveness, restoration, and rehabilitation” (Brueggemann 525), so is the story of John who sins again and again, but every time he is saved by compassion. God gives second chance to John to redeem himself of his sinful behavior to reestablish himself in a new town “Plant City” to restart a new life with Sally, a wealthy widow. Sally Lovelace is a wealthy and independent woman, but is an equally devoted and caring wife. She seems like as answer to John’s prayers. John has been given a second chance to reform himself, but he wastes it.

The novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was originally called “Big Nigger.” Before publishing the novel, Hurston changed the title of the novel to *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Perhaps, she did not want her white audience to get a negative message from the title “Big Nigger” or perhaps she would have thought that the character of John Pearson
does not go well with the title of “Big Nigger.” Though, John refers to himself as “big nigger” twice in the novel, he cannot stand up on his own without the help of a woman. Hurston breaks the patriarchal image of African American man and demonstrates that even women can manage their private and public lives better than “uh big nigger” (100) like John Pearson.

Employing viable modes of narration is very important for an author in order to connect to his readers, so that a pleasant exchange of views and ideas occurs between author and his reader. Through his characters an author can reveal their emotions and feelings and make readers themselves a part of the story. Thus, a good fiction writer should have mastered the art of narration. Zora Neal Hurston brilliantly uses narration to bring out her story and thus spontaneously connects with her readers.

_Jonah’s Gourd Vine_ is remarkable for its use of African American narrative voice. How to represent black voice in literature has always been a bone of contention among African American writers. After the end of slavery, the stance was in favor of adopting white culture and literature by the black in order to diminish differences between black and whites. But since the beginning of Harlem Renaissance a new generation of black writers sprung up who acknowledged their roots and appreciated their rich black folk culture and language. Writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown and Zora Neal Hurston who was forerunner among them, wanted to reassert their black culture and heritage and break black stereotypes. “She was preserving a language that linguists saw as an attempt at English, broken or truncated, or otherwise disabled from full reflective and cognitive power….She had a powerful myth to supersede. But Hurston never abandoned the poetry of her folk” (Holloway 23).
When Hurston started her work as a literary artist in the early 1920s, African American dialect was still not accepted as a written literary language and discarded by African American writers themselves for it showed them in a bad light. It was mainly used for comic and derogatory effects. Still, some black and even white writers in the nineteenth century did yeoman’s service by rendering black dialect in their literature. Earlier African American writers like Charles W. Chesnutt and Paul L. Dunbar used Afro American folklore and dialect to accentuate their work. Nevertheless, black vernacular remained subjugated to standard voice. James Weldon Johnson writes in this regard:

That this is not a shortcoming inherent in the dialect as dialect is demonstrated by the wide compass it displays in its use in the folk creations. The limitation is due to conventions that have been fixed upon the dialect and the conformity to them by individual writers. Negro dialect poetry had its origin in the minstrel traditions and a persisting pattern was set. When the individual writer attempted to get away from that pattern, the fixed conventions allowed him only to slip over into a slough of sentimentality. (Jones 58)

Thus, African American dialect was used only in the Afro-American oral traditions and avoided in printed texts. Writers like Zora Neal Hurston, who were aware of their roots, were determined to experiment with African American narrative voice. To quote Sharon L. Jones:

Zora Neale Hurston’s novels, short stories, folk lore, and drama reflect some of the best examples of dialect in the American literary tradition. The dialect Hurston presents is a form of non-standard English, a black vernacular specific to a particular region or community. While it
differs from the English taught in grammar books, black vernacular English is a complex language in its own right, adhering to syntactical rules just as any other language. By presenting black dialects, Hurston realistically depicted black cultural expression and life in the early 20th-century South. By using this language, she implicitly validates it, showing it as a valuable and relevant part of the culture, and not inferior to white versions of English. (212)

Hurston’s first literary efforts were in the form of short stories which later culminated in her first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. In *Jonah* she brings out the essence of African American speech which is an integral part of black oral tradition. Right from the beginning of her career Hurston was determined to make oral quality of folklore texts. To quote Deborah G. Plant:

Hurston’s use of African American linguistic patterns in her fiction and, particularly, in her nonfiction indicates her belief in African American folklore as source of individual and collective power. Hurston valued and embraced the African American cultural traditions from which she derived her self-love and self-respect….It is from within that circumference that the author drew the stuff of her writing, her personal strength, courage, and power. And it is there, in the reclamation of cultural traditions, that the author believed African Americans would find the strength and courage to file off the iron collar. (92)

Hurston stressed the fact that a black writer should be aware of his folkloric origins and in order to prove her point, she modified her character’s narrative voices. Hurston wrote in her influential essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, “If we
are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and burnt cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of “ams” and “ises”. Fortunately we don’t have to believe them.. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself” (236).

All the characters, except the whites in Jonah speak in African American narrative voices, asserting their folkloric oral tradition. In a first glance, Jonah’s Gourd Vine seems to be a tragic story of a mulatto and his struggle for existence in impending conditions, but with the use of southern black dialect which is so integral to the text, Hurston shows Jonah in a specific cultural background representing black life. In the novel, language used by the black characters is authentic southern black dialect. The characters are steeped in black culture and the protagonist John’s search for self-awareness is actually his search for blackness. Hurston represents this blackness in the novel by employing various forms of black folklore and cultural heritage.

Dialogues between characters are in black southern speech which is heavily emphasized while there is also a third person omniscient narrator, narrating the story. This third person omniscient narrator uses the Standard English which merely serves as an introduction. But the real meaning and content are transcribed in black dialect. For example, Amy says to John:

Ned, he too hard-headed tuh do dat. Ah done tried and tried but his back don’t bend. De only difference ’tween him and uh mule is, mule got four good foots, and he ain’t got nairn. De minute anybody mention crossin’ dat creek, he’s good tuh make disturbiment and tear up peace. He been over dat creek all his life jes’ ez barefooted ez uh yard dwag and know he ain’t even got uh rooster tuh crow fuh day, yet and still you can’t git ’im ’way from dere. (37)
The figurative and metaphorical qualities of Southern black dialect is depicted in this paragraph. In *Jonah*, Hurston has emphasized the importance of oral communication and black folklores in the African American culture. More than her contemporary Langston Hughes, who used black vernacular in his works, Hurston used black dialect, oral tradition and black folklores. Matthew Heard writes in this context:

Hurston should be appreciated for anticipating and transforming negative stereotypes and generalizations that stifled other authors during her time. Engaged with white audiences, Hurston certainly attempted to help her white contemporaries understand black culture and folk life, even if this goal demanded that she use the dialect and oral traditions that black leaders wanted to abandon her. Meanwhile, engaged with black audience, Hurston researched, investigated, and tried to faithfully represent the linguistic richness of her own black community revaluing the stores and the language that were so central to the lives of many black Americans. Hurston consistently proves in her works that writer from the non-main-stream minority can successfully use her own traditions in order to understand, evaluate and even change the value system of the dominant culture. (149)

One important and unique aspect of African American dialect that Hurston has tried to manifest in *Jonah*, is hieroglyphics. In her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” Hurston explains:

The primitive man exchanges descriptive words. His terms are all close fitting. Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by
contact—must add action to it to make it do. So we have “chop-axe”, “sitting-chairs”, “cook-pot” and the like because the speaker has in mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. (225)

Hurston provides a beautiful example of hieroglyphics when a character named Charlie comment on Lucy, “She trables right’ long wid dem grown women and kin sing all de notes….. de square ones, de round ones, de triangle’s” (27). Hurston once again proves her race’s unique culture and orality tradition.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, one sees an example of an autobiographical narrative. The main characters in the novel are based on Hurston’s parents and it also contains many autobiographical elements. The character of John Pearson and the life of John Hurston, father of Hurston parallel each other in many ways; both are born in Alabama and are mulatto. Their families work share cropping on southern Alabama cotton plantation. Both decide to go “over the creek” to change their lives where they meet Lucy Potts, the real name of Hurston’s mother and eventually marry her. Hurston in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* writes:

Into his burly, boiling, hard-hitting, rugged individualistic setting, walked one day a tall, heavy-muscled mulatto who resolved to put down roots. John Hurston in his late twenties, had left Macon County, Alabama, because the ordeal of Share cropping on a southern Alabama cotton plantation was crushing to his ambition…. He had been born near, Notasulga, Alabama…. It was over the creek. He went one time, and met up with dark-brown Lucy Potts, of the land-owning Richard Potts, which might have given him the going habit. (7)
Not only the character’s names are the same as Hurston’s parents such as John, Lucy Potts and her elder brother John and her grandparents Richard Potts and Emmaline Potts, but are also other details which bear resemblance to Hurston’s real life. She presents a faithful and realistic description of places like Notasulga, Alabama where blacks and whites both were struggling hard for a living. Eatonville, was an all-black town governed by blacks themselves. Even Joe Clarke’s porch which actually existed in Eatonville is mentioned many times in the novel. Hurston writes, “But the five acre plot was bought nevertheless, and John often sat on Joe Clarke’s store porch and bragged about his determination to be a property owner” (94).

Joe Clarke’s porch is a regular feature in Hurston’s works which actually existed in Eatonville. Joe Clarke was a kind of community center where people would come and discuss about their day to day life. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, too Hurston uses Joe Clarke’s porch in the story. Hurston writes about it in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

There were no discreet nuances of life on Joe Clarke’s porch. There was open kindness, anger, hate, love, envy and its kinfolks, but all emotions were naked, and nakedly arrived at. It was a case of “make it and take it.” You got what your strengths would bring you. This was not just true of Eatonville. This was the spirit of that whole new part of the state at the time, as it always is where men settle new lands. (46)

Hurston’s father was a large man with great physical strength but he was a habitual philanderer while her mother was “tiny” and small statured, but a woman of great mental strength and courage. Hurston blends these characteristics in her character of John Pearson and Lucy Potts. In reality, Hurston’s grandparents were against the marriage of John Hurston and Lucy Potts and this is mentioned in the
novel. John Pearson’s empowerment through education is just like John Hurston’s growth in reality. John Hurston had also become a minister in Zion Hope Church, and his second marriage hastened his downfall and caused the disintegration in his family. All this is aptly mentioned in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Even the manner in which Hurston’s parents died is repeated in the novel. For example, Hurston’s father was killed in an accident after his car collided with the oncoming train. As if recreating the death scene in her mind, Hurston writes in *Jonah*, “The engine struck the car squarely and hurled it about like a toy. John was thrown out and lay perfectly still. Only his foot twitched a little” (167).

Hurston also depicts the death bed scene of which she had memories from her childhood when her dying mother had asked Hurston to stop the neighbors from performing last communal rites such as removing her pillow at the moment of demise. Similarly Lucy tells her daughter Isis in *Jonah*, “And Isis, when Ahm dyin’ don’t you let ’em take de pillow from under mah head, and be covering up de clock and de lookin’ glass and all sich ez dat” (110-111). Hurston also depicts her family conflicts in *Jonah*. John F. Kanthak writes in this regard:

Hurston infused her fiction with her own, hard-earned insights into marital dysfunction. She was nine years old when her father re-married a few months after her mother’s death. In Hurston’s published version of the events, her step mother (upon whom she modeled the selfish, gold-digging Hattie Tyson) saw her step children as competition for her husband’s affection (Hurston, Dust 73). She ordered Hurston’s older sister out of the house and sent her husband to beat his first-born daughter with a buggy whip “for commenting on the marriage happening so soon after Mama’s death.” A later encounter between
Hurston and her stepmother ended in a bloody fistfight as Hurston’s father stood by helplessly watching and weeping. In *Jonah*, a widowed and remarried father similarly draws a knife against his eldest child at his second wife’s instigation. (113-114)

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is one of the best examples in literature in which one sees a beautiful blend of fact and fiction, real and imaginary. In reality, Hurston as a daughter had irreconcilable differences with her father. She always had resentment in her heart about her father’s adulterous nature, his careless attitude towards her mother whom she loved so much and his second marriage which broke up the Hurston family. For these reasons she could never forgive her father. However, while writing *Jonah*, she finally came at peace with her father who was already dead many years before. Lowe writers in this context, “Finally, telling her father’s story means not only appropriating his voice, but becoming that voice. Doing so meant working through her personal problems.... *Jonah* thus constituted a personal odyssey into her patriarchal origins and legacy and a coming to terms with both” (93). Most importantly, Hurston comes at peace with her father whom she had never forgiven.

Lillie P. Howard Points out:

With so many autobiographical references, then, perhaps the story of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* did not merely “tell itself” to its author. Perhaps it was, in addition to being good material for fiction, a real though subconscious, therapeutic effort to rid herself of her ambivalent feelings toward her father.... It is in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, then, that the conflict between father and daughter is finally resolved. (90-91)

While creating *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston wrote so much of herself. Her penchant for travel and adventure her defiant nature, fascination for trains and love for
nature. Hurston was a great traveller. She loved travelling right from her childhood days. She writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

But no matter whether my probings made me happier or sadder, I kept on probing to know. For, instance, I had stifled longings. I used to climb to the top of one of the huge chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate, and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon. Every way I turned, it was there, and the same distance away. Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like. (27)

Hurston was a trail blazer in her own times. She lived in an era where all the other black writers were busy in producing protest and social novels depicting ongoing butchery of black people. Only Hurston had the courage to be experimental in her works. She constantly recreated her modes of narration and her style. Being dissatisfied with the present literary scenario, she looked rut for new modes and style to bring out the real worth of her community and culture without undervaluing them. In pursuance of her motives she opted for humorous narration in her fictions. And *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is an apt example where she has used humor narration.

The importance of humor in an African American’s life can hardly be exaggerated. In an ongoing onslaught of exploitation, discrimination, violence that African Americans continue to suffer may crush their resilience and spirit. But these adverse effects are neutralized by bringing humor in their lives. Folk tales storytelling, jokes, humorous anecdotes brings a new vitality to a troubled life of a black person. According to Deborah G. Plant:
They help to transform pain, frustration, and despair into relief, perseverance, and hope. The vital, life giving, and life-sustaining forces of wit and humor quicken the spirit and restore life. Hurston saw humor as the balm of on oppressed people. It revitalized the soul while it calmed tension and anxiety. (89)

Hurston gives us a glimpse of humorous narration in the very first page of *Jonah.* The very first lines of the novel at once seem ominous and foreboding, yet humorous: “God was grumbling his thunder and playing the zig zag lightening thru his fingers” (3). Amy Crittenden says, “Ole Messa gwinter scrub floors tuhday” (3). This is really humorous because it brings out an image of “Ole Massa or God on his knees scrubbing the floor. In yet another instance, Hurston characteristically induces folks humorous narration though full of grim meaning in the scene where Ned and Amy are quarrelling. Ned says, “De brother in black don’t fret tuh death. White man frets and worries and kill hiself. Colored folks fret uh lil’ while and gawn tuh sleep. Nother thing, Amy, Hagar’s chillun don’t faint neither when dey fall out, dey jes have uh hard old fit” (11). To this absurd statement, Amy answers equally absurdly, “Dass awright. Niggers gwine faint too. May not come in yo’ time and it may not come in mine, but way after white us people is gwine faint jes lak white folks” (11). Here Hurston brings out humorous aspect to a serious problem of racism. John’s courtship of Lucy also provides ample humour. John and Lucy send each other humourous love notes, such as:

Sweet Notasulga, chocklit Alabama

Date of kisses, month of love

Dere John, you is my honey. I won’t never love nobody else but you.
I love choir practice now. Sugar is sweet, and lard is greasy, you Love me, don’t be uneasy. (42)

In another instance, when John comes to meet Lucy in her house and they are sitting on two separate but close chairs, Lucy’s mother Emmeline barge in, “Lucy! ?Whut you doin’ settin’ on top uh dat boy…. How come you ain’t movin? Mah orders are five feet apart…. Heifer! Move dat chear ’way from dat boy!” (62). Hurston infuses humor in this scene through exaggeration (“settin” on top one ’nother, and epithets (“Heifer!”) . Similarly, Hurston induces another humorous scene of marriage ceremony of Mehalley and Pomp. Pomp, another character, fails to appear in his own marriage. To this another character Duke comments, “He jus’ keepin’ colored folks time. When white folks say eight o’clock dey mean eight o’clock. When uh colored person say eight o’clock, dat jes’ mean uh hour ago. He’ll be heah in plenty time” (70). Later Pomp appears in borrowed dress and shoes while Mehalley’s father and the preacher quarrel with one another over trivial issues. This scene not only contains humorous narration but also gives a glimpse into rural black life and culture.

After Lucy’s death, the humour becomes much more surreal and haunting. In the courtroom scene, where Hattie and John are present for divorce, the narrator presents a surreal humour : “His Honor took his seat as a walrus would among a bed of clams …. John saw the smirking anticipation on the faces of the lawyers, the court attendants, the white spectators and felt as if he had fallen down a foul latrine” (139). White Judge’s dark humour applies to John and Hattie both. He asks Hattie, “Why didn’t your g’wan leave him and get youself somebody else? You got divorce in yo’ heels aint you? You must have the next one already picked out. Ha!Ha! Bet he ain’t worth the sixty dollars” (139).
After his divorce, John leaves his job as a preacher. Simultaneously, his flourishing carpentry business also starts to fail; his friends and community men refuse to give him work. Hurston describes this situation in a humorous narration, “it would be lacking in virtue to pay carpenter-preachers who got into trouble with congregations ... He was the father of dozens of children by women he had never seen” (152). Significantly, John is still able to maintain his sense of humour in this grave situation. John says, “All de lies folks strowin’ ’round ’bout me done got some folks in de notion. Ah can’t drive uh clean nail in they lumber. Looks lak dey spectin’ uh house Ah build tuh git tuh fornication befo’ dey could get de paint on it” (153).

Hurston has used complex biblical narratives to develop the story of Jonah. Beautiful and powerful sermons by John such as “The Battle Axe”, “The Dry Bone”, and “The Wounds of Jesus all create transcendent biblical narration. The lines such as, “He died until the great belt in the wheel of time, And de geological strata fell a loose” (150) is a beautiful confluence of historical and biblical narrative. Similarly in earlier pages, narrative equates the Great Migration of African American as the Exodus and Northern America as a land of promise. Hurston writes:

Where as in Egypt the coming of the locust made desolation, in the farming South, the departure of The Negro laid waste the agricultural industry—crops rotted, houses careened crazily in their after desertion, and grass grew up in streets. On to the North! The land of promise.

(128)

At one point John compares himself to Saint Peter and Paul who preached the gospel of Christ, “Ah means tuh preach Christ and Him crucified” (95). After preaching his first sermon, John compares himself with Samson “when his hair begin tuh grow out agin’ (159). Just as Samson is betrayed by Delila, John also feels he is
betrayed by Hattie Tyson. In one of the most important as well as moving scene of
*Jonah*, John hits his dying wife Lucy and feels like “Nebuchadnezer in his exile”
(109). Hurston here alludes to the story of Nebuchadnezer II who was king of
Babylon and enslaved Hebrews. By doing so he also dethroned kings belonging to the
lineage of King David. This becomes a complex irony here as earlier John was also
compared to David “Jes lak it ’twuz wid Saul and David” (98). Similarly Lucy on her
death bed says “Ah done put on de whole armor uh faith. Ah aint afraid thu die , Ah
done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus” (112). After Lucy’s death funeral is
prepared for her, but even before the funeral ends, John deliberately tries to distance
himself from the memories of Lucy. Hurston writes, “On the other side of Jordan in
the sweet fields of Eden—where the tree of life is blooming—and the hot blood in
John’s veins made him deny kinship with any rider of the pale white horse of death”
(115). This alludes to book of revelation where a biblical figure Faithful and True
rides a white “stud” (Rev 19,11).

Hurston also uses *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as a socio-political commentary,
significantly diverting from central narration. Hurston comments on war and the role
African American were playing in it. Hurston writes:

black man ain’t got no voice but soon ez war come who de first man
dey shove in front? De nigger! Ain’t it de truth? Bet if Ole Teddy wuz
in de chear he’d straighten out eve’yth ing. Wilson! stop det ole lie....
Ain’t never beeen two sho’ ’nuff smart mens in dese United States—
Teddy Rooseveltt and Booger T. Washington. Nigger so smart he et at
the White House. Built uh great big ole school wath uh thousand
dollars mape mo’. Teddy wuz allus sendin’ fuh ’im tuh git ’im tuh he’p
’im run de Guv’ment . Yeah man, dat’s de way it ’tis—niggers think up everything good and de white folks steal it from us. Das right. Nigger invented de train. White man seen it and run right off and made him one jes’ lak it and told eve’body he thought it up. Same way wid ’lectwicity. Nigger thought dat up too. DuBois? Who is dat? ’Nother smart nigger? Man, he can’t be smart ez Booger T! Whut did dis DuBois ever do? He writes up books and papers, hunh? Shucks! dat ain’t nothin’ anybody kin put down words on uh piece of paper. Gimme da paper sack and lemme see dat pencil uh minute. Shucks!

Writing! Man Ah thought maybe he wuz man dat could make sidemeat taste like ham. (125-126)

In the passage, Hurston intends to show war is affecting African American people’s life. Though they are exploited and discriminated in every sphere, they are the first to be shoved into the war. According to Hurston, the whole war for democracy is an exercise in futility and also an epitome of hypocrisy by the government because the ideals of democracy do not exist for the blacks in America.

Similarly, Hurston also takes a dig at black elites such as DuBois and mocks them. Hurston was greatly influenced by Booker T Washington and this is clearly evident in the passage. Interestingly, Hurston’s narrative is in black dialect rather than Standard English. Writing in dialect enabled Hurston to bring out her thoughts and ideas without offending anyone. Thus, by the use of a “dialect mask” and “anonymous voices” (Lowe 142) Hurston brings out her point.

*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is not without flaws. Most important among them is the disjointed parts of the novel. Viewing all parts of *Jonah*, it does not seem unified, for example, snake and train symbols, the spiritual and physical conflict, African
spiritualism and Puritanism, the Jonah’s Gourd Vine imagery. There is also intertwining of so many themes that sometimes it becomes difficult to separate them all. They not blend in harmoniously leaving Jonah as a ununified work. Secondly, Hurston has made profuse use of African American folklore such that “the novel is less a narrative than a series of linguistic moments representing the folk-life of the black South” (Hemenway 192). Jonah is so laden with cultural metaphors and black folklore that it seems the central plot gets disintegrated and character development is overshadowed by it. Andrew Barris writes in this context:

One must judge Miss Hurston’s success by the tasks she has set herself—to write a novel about a backward Negro people, using their peculiar speech and manners to express their lives. What she has done is just the opposite. She has used her characters and the various situation created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and their folkways. She has become so absorbed with these phases of her craft that she has almost completely lost sight of the equally essential elements of plot and construction, characterization and motivation. John Buddy emerges from the story through his mere presence on every page, and not from an integrated life with the numerous others who wander in and out and do things often without rhyme or reason....In John Buddy she had the possibility of developing a character that might have stamped himself upon American life more indelibly than either John Henry or Black Ulyses. (166-167)

African American counterparts of Hurston not only resented her use of African American folklores but also her ignoring race issues in Jonah. They alleged that Hurston’s novel weakened their effort to integrate in main-stream American
literature. For Hurston race was never an issue and later, in all her works we see this trend. She had already vowed never to write about race problems and rather depict positive black life. She mentions emphatically in *Dust Tracks*:

“This Race Problem business, now. I have asked many well educated people of both races to tell me what the race problem is. They look startled at first. Then I can see them scratching around inside themselves hunting for the meaning of the words which they have used with so much glibness and function. I have never had an answer that was an answer, so I have had to make up my own. Since there is no fundamental conflict, since there is no solid reason why the blacks and the whites cannot live in one nation in perfect harmony the only thing in the way of it is Race Pride and Race Consciousness on both sides….. So Race Pride and Race Consciousness seem to me to be not only fallacious, but a thing to be abhorred. It is the root of misunderstanding and hence misery and injustice. I cannot, with logic cry against it in others and wallow in it myself. The only satisfaction to be gained from it anyway is, “I ain’t nothing, my folks ain’t nothing, but that makes no difference at all. I belong to such-and-such a race.” Poor nourishment according to my nation. Mighty little to chew on you have to season it awfully high with egotism to make it testy.” (250)

Apart from such scathing criticism, it must be remembered that *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was Hurston’s first novel. The novel was distinct in her own times because of its rich folklore, vitality and earthiness. One should also remember that Hurston was not only a novelist but also an anthropologist. While writing a novel she was also chronicling African American culture. One of the aims of Hurston in writing *Jonah
was to show the world the rich and unique legacy of African American culture in the form of its folkloric traditions and its language which played a key role in a community and also sustains and preserves it. To quote Lowe, “By basing her narrative in folk humor and legend, and through her loving decision to face her father’s faults with an open heart and a multivocal text Hurston found a code for communal explication and, correlative a key to the human soul.” (148)

*Johan’s Gourd Vine* beautifully encompasses African American culture, the people living in it, their dream and their lives, their love and hate, their follies and their glory. It is a simple story about a simple man.
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