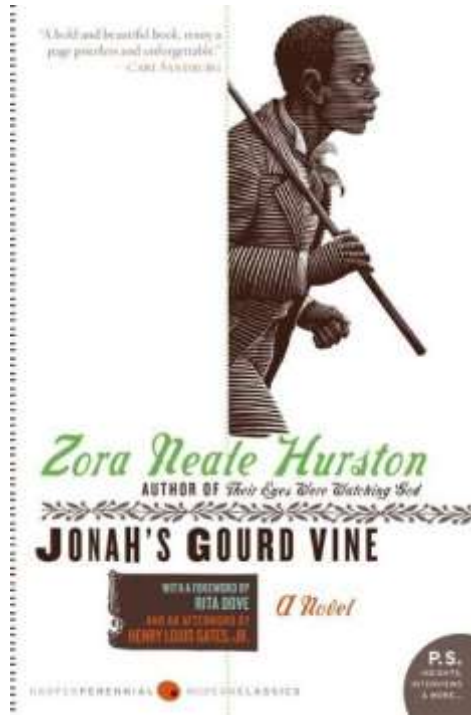


## Familial Relationships: Healing the Impact of Separation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

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Courtesy: <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780061350191/jonahs-gourd-vine/>

### Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston in her novel depicts human life, placing the characters within the positive and the negative stance of the family circle. She emphasises family relationships, emotional nuances of family members, their interactions and the role of family in an individual's life. The family patterns and the relationships seem to reflect the hiatus in the familial circle. Hurston's novels present family in all its complicated brilliance and pain, forgiveness and perseverance, heart break and loss leading to better discovery.

### *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

The novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) deals with family relations in a black family living in an all-black town. The setting of the town is a collage of different towns near Eatonville. The protagonist John Pearson is modeled after Hurston's philandering, preacher-father John Hurston and Lucy Pearson after her mother Lucy Ann Potts. The novel describes socio-economic

difficulties feared by black mothers who “socialize their children to survive in the world fraught with racism, patriarchy and the uneven distribution of wealth” (Collins 126). The image of black mothers is of guidance, love and astuteness. The mother in African American community is considered the influential and dynamic force behind their children. This is reflected in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as Hurston depicts Lucy as a special tie between love and strength.

### **Pragmatic Amy Crittenden**

John’s mother, Amy Crittenden, is the wife of a share cropper Ned Crittenden. Amy and Ned’s household is emblematic of the grinding poverty in which many sharecropper’s lived after the Civil War. Amy is portrayed as the strong black woman who resists oppression, caused by racism and sexism. She constructs the most prominent family dynamic and the most basic family unit, the mother-child relationship.

Potent and resilient, Amy Crittenden is a pragmatic woman, who cares for her family as best as she could. She defends them against Ned’s inconsiderate treatment and at the same time she tries to instill in her husband the need to love their children. She is successful within the relative safety of her house in the humanization of her children and teaching them resistance to oppressing hegemonic forces.

Amy is the mother of six sons, the oldest being John Buddy, born to white plantation owner during slavery. She struggles to create a safe place where her children can live at peace. She protests Ned’s ill treatment of John when Ned calls him “de house – nigger” and threatens to hit him. Amy protests:

Ned Crittenden, you raise dat wood at mah boy, and you gointer make uh bad nigger outa me.... Naw you ain’t tried tuh chesstize ‘im nothin’ uh de kind. Youse tryin’ tuh fight ‘im on de sly. He is jes’ ez obedient tuh you and jes’ ez humble under yuh, ez he kin be. Yet and still you always washin’ his face wid his color and tellin’ ‘im he’s uh bastard. He works harder’n anybody on dis place. You ain’t givin’ ‘im nothin’. He more’n makes whut he gets. I don’t mind when he needs chesstizin’ and you give it tuh ‘im, but any time you tries to knock any des chillun ‘bout dey head wid sticks and rocks, Ah’ll be right dere tuh back dey fallin’. Ah’m dey mama. (JGV 4-5)

### **Ned Crittenden - John’s Stepfather**

The harsh and emasculated Ned Crittenden is John’s stepfather. He lacks the ability to move his family beyond its impoverished conditions. Amy’s role as a wife and a mother, managing to avoid political and economic destructive forces, exhibits her autonomy through resistance. Amy’s household echoes Patricia Collins view:

[By assuming] that male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life and that understanding the struggle for individual autonomy in the face of such a domination is central to understanding motherhood. (57)

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To Amy, her home becomes a source of great power that affords her the strength to instill in her children the device that will prepare them to deal with the intimidating legacy of the remnants of slavery. She believes that the power and the willingness to resist must be implemented to face patriarchal domination prevailing in her household. The shame associated with powerlessness on the white man's land plagues Ned; this precarious humiliation turns to anger and is expressed through domestic violence. He continuously abuses John, his stepson, who is a physical reminder of the white man's dominance of him. To get rid of John he plans to bond John to a white landowner, Captain Mimms. Amy decrees, "you ain't gwine put no child uh mine under no Mimms" (JGV 8).

### **Resisting Ned to Protect Her Children**

Amy attempts to resist but at the same time tries to include Ned into her home place, but he thwarts Amy's efforts by maintaining his racial and patriarchal ideals. She tries to have a voice within her marriage. She longs for a better and safe place for her children. She tells Ned, "what us needs tuh get offa dis place. Us been heah too long. Ah b'longs on de other side de big creek anyhow, never did lak it over heah. When us gather de crops dis yeah less move" (JGV 7). But Ned's measures to enslave Amy through beatings "killed the cry within her" (JGV 9).

Realizing her exploited condition, she tries to protect her children from the prevailing austerity in her home.

In her exertion to protect John from Ned, Amy sends him to the plantation of her former slave master, Alf Pearson. She walks with John to the creek and gives him a dollar that she had saved amidst racial and patriarchal domination. She tells him:

Go in Notasulga and ast fuh 'im [Pearson]. Tell him whose boy you is and maybe he mought put yuh tuh work and if he do, son, you scuffle hard so's he will work yuh reg'lar. Ah hates tuh see yuh nucklin' under 'round heah all de time. G'wan, son and be keerful uh dat foot-log; cross de creek. (JGV 12)

### **Amy as the Source for Survival**

Amy's acceptance of John's getaway from family leads to his maturity as the leader of the black church. Creation of a home space by Amy provides her children, especially John the basic device to help him resist and survive in a racialized world after the Civil War. Amy's significance as the source for survival is emphasised as she erects a home place for healing and affirmation. Amy contradicts Ned's insults of John. She defends him by saying "he ain't de onliest yeller chile in de world. Wese uh mingled people", and "Yes'day is – Jes ez good ez anybody else" (JGV 10). Amy's words have a soothing effect on her son John who otherwise was ill treated by his stepfather.

As Bell Hooks avers, Amy through her care and support provides her children a safe place where they can "affirm one another, and by so doing, heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination" (42). John inheriting the strength to resist oppression from Amy begins his

journey of self-identification and succeeds in becoming the leader of the southern congregation, when the community was still struggling against the remnants of slavery.

### **Inherited Interpretive Symptoms**

Hurston's portrayal of John and Lucy Pearson's family follows the "inherited interpretive" symptoms stated by Kanthak. John inherits Amy's strength to resist and survive the demeaning socioeconomic oppression. Crossing over the creek he raises his social status to become the pastor of Zion Hope. On the contrary, he inherits the most precarious model from his stepfather Ned and his white father Alf Pearson. He becomes the inheritor of "a kind of masculinity that is fundamentally childlike in its emotional dependency and irresponsibility" (Meisenhelder 43).

In the relationship between Ned and Amy though Ned exhibits his dominating nature, at many instances he sulks like a child. He becomes child-like when he is defeated in an argument. As Kanthak elucidates:

When one half of an adult couple chooses the role of a child, the other half is nominated for the role of a parent. Amy Crittenden accepts this role and enables

Ned's childish behavior by acting like a mother to him. (115)

### **Ned Behaves Like a Child**

Ned behaves like a child, sometimes lashing out his feelings when hurt or sometimes sulking to do his daily chores. Ned's childish behavior is reflected in John. The relationship of Lucy and John projects Lucy as the mother figure. She becomes John's backbone. As Kanthak states, John "had the dumb luck to marry a master puppeteer" (121). Lucy like Amy constructs a home place to nurture and care for John and their children. John as Alf Pearson tells Lucy is "ain't nothin' but uh stinkin' coward or he wouldn't always be dodgin' back uh yuh" (JGV 77). Lucy's creates a home place showering love and gently chastising John and her children. When he gets into trouble for his philandering acts he runs to Lucy like a lost child, asking, "whut mus' Ah do?" Lucy provides him the necessary help like a mother to handle situations.

### **Lucy as a Mother**

Lucy's motherhood provides her the necessary emotional fulfillment. She is "the preserver and builder of the new generation" (Jain 145). She becomes mammy, mamma, matriarch, and the superwoman through the strength and power over her family. Lucy's relationship with her children is strong and portrays her as the embodiment of the numerous overlapping characteristics of black motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins in *The Black Feminist Thought* states:

motherhood can serve as a sight where black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, under belief in black women's empowerment. (176)

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Motherhood is a central theme and plays a crucial role in the reconstruction of black womanhood.

Lucy's longing for liberation is accentuated through her relationship with her daughter Isis. Lucy in her death-bed shares a special bonding with Isis. Lucy attempts to protect Isis from oppressions of all kind. Speaking of education, she enlightens her daughter saying, member tuh git all de education you kin" as she believes only education can liberate women from the clutches of racism and sexism. Lucy provides her daughter the necessary confidence to attain self-identity. She professes that

you got de spunk, but mah po' li'l' sandy-haired chile goin' suffer  
uh lot 'fo' she git tuh de place she kin 'fend tuh herself. And Isie,  
honey, stop cryin' and lissen tuh me. Don't you love anybody  
better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll be dyin' befo' yo' time is out.  
(JGV 110)

Though physically ill, Lucy exhibits her mental strength as she reminds Isis that resistance and education are the tools to overcome oppression. Her words, "Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self. Do, you'll be dying befo' you' time is out' (JGV 110). Her words reveal fear of oppression which she feels would affect her daughter. As a mentor she advises Isis to free herself from the shackles of any oppression. The novel ensures that Hurston pays special attention to mother-daughter relationship as she makes Isis the spokesperson of Lucy. Lucy in her death bed asks Isis to speak for her to others. The trust between the mother and daughter strengthens their relationship. Lucy also gives her bed, the only property to Isis providing a stronger link to their relationship. Alice Walker in her *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* praises her mother as, "Whatever rocky soil she landed on she turned into a garden", and she believes that daughters, should draw power and spirit from their mother's legacy following their bravery to identify their needs (Alice 241). Mothers in this novel are the pillars of strength and inspiration to their families.

### **A Semi-autobiographical Novel**

The novel is semi-autobiographical and the characters John and Lucy are replicas of Hurston's parents John Hurston and Lucy Ann Potts. Hurston's discussion of the mother-daughter relationship is based on the relationship with her mother. Lucy Ann Potts like Lucy in the novel shared a special bonding with her daughter Zora Neale Hurston. Hemenway in his biography states:

It was her mother who made Zora her special child and had the most influence on her early life. She did not want to "squinch" Zora's sprit and turn her child into a "meaty mouthed rag doll". Small in stature, large in spirit, Lucy Hurston possessed the steely toughness", which "caused her youngest daughter to blossom. (15)

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## Lucy Protecting Children from Enslavement

Victimized by familial oppression by her husband's philandering attitude, Lucy Ann Potts wishes to protect her children from such enslavement. She is the backbone of the Hurston family. She believes that education alone can save the African Americans from the social and political oppressions of the time. Hurston avows, "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" (DTOR 13). Hurston in both her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* and her autobiographical novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* discovers the need for a smooth functioning of familial relationships and her characters underscore the idea of self-awareness. Family serves not only as the inspiration for her characters but also as a means for Hurston to work out her own thoughts and feelings about her parents in this first novel.

The death of Lucy Hurston, the only force which was holding the family together brought total calamity and disintegration. After which they never got to be living together under the same roof. Disrupted family takes Zora Neale Hurston far away from home to wander in search of education and identification of self. Both Lucy Pearson and Lucy Ann Potts provide solace to their children's suffering caused by their irresponsible fathers. Their "Motherhood opens the pathway to greater self-awareness and becomes the vehicle for the retrieval of the lost self-support" (Braxton 33). Though both of them die early they leave a long-lasting impact on their families. They remain in their children's memories acting as the source of self-confidence and mending their broken hearts to progress in their respective journeys of self-discovery.

## Motherly Functions and Roles

Fivush and Nelson in their psychological research point out the role of the mother in providing linguistic scaffolding for her children's development of language: [the] "linguistic 'scaffold' that helps to form the child's attention and organize the event into a coherent whole" (574). Likewise, Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* helps her daughter's initial association with language. However, the death of Lucy becomes a turning point in Isis and Hurston's life as "these ties are cut" and [their] link with place and tradition is broken (Braxton 147).

In both *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston projects the hazards of domestic violence in African American families. While speaking of the Crittenden household, Hurston exposes domestic violence. His lack of ability to support his family causes a sense of inferiority in Ned. As a result, he is always in a foul mood, forever chiding or even beating his children. John being the stepson is most of the time at the receiving end of Ned's anger.

Domestic violence is portrayed as a pattern of abuses through coercion, humiliation and persecution to execute the ruling power within the family. Ned Crittenden feels that he has less power than his woman; hence he is more physically abusive towards her. Poverty plays a major role by aggravating the effects of domestic violence. Ned quarrels with Amy, telling of his decision to send John away from home, so that he has less number of children to feed. When Amy stresses that she would not support such a thing he "brought the whip down across Amy's back" (JGV 9).

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As Dr. Oliver Williams affirms:

African American men who better must consider that if societal oppression influences their life, then African American women are also affected by the same oppression of sexual abuse [caused by them]. (91-103)

### Seeking an Authentic Place for Expression of Autonomy

Hurston too believes that if a change in the mindset of African American men towards a better living is achieved then the familial setting of their homes can be turned into a place of harmony.

Hurston's characters amidst their bonding with the members of their family seek an authentic place for an expression of their autonomy. Their desire is similar to that of the ethos and telos of black religion. They battled against dominant culture while trying to assert their own aesthetic and spiritual privilege. They show how this confronts issues of identity to claim a distinct sense of self through spiritual perspectives. Hurston's characters as stated by Connor:

[become] aware of the forces of oppression that operate within and without to deny people full humanity and recovers a sense of the sacrality of each life, one begins to realize that the movement of the human agenda is inclusive and that all spiritual searches are the same in the eye of God. (viii)

In many ways these relationships directly affect an individual's well-beings. Strong, positive relationships help an individual to cope with stress and change. Familial relationships always render support and makes man feel worthwhile. Thus, it is obvious that emotional nuances of family members, their interactions and family patterns closely affect the individual's role with the external world.

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