

JAZZ

Toni Morrison

Critical Paper by Peter J. Haas

The basic story is fairly simple. It takes place in Harlem in 1926. Joe Trace, married to Violet, starts an affair with a 17- year-old girl named Dorcas. Joe in fact goes so far as to rent a room from his upstairs neighbor, Malvonne, for his weekly trysts with Dorcas. This relationship/affair goes on for several months without Malvonne or Dorcas's guardian Aunt, Alice Manfred, finding out. Eventually, as might be expected, Dorcas is ready to move on and finds herself attracted to a younger man, Acton. At a party Dorcas is attending with her friend Felice, Joe shows up and shoots Dorcas in the shoulder. In all the noise and confusion of the party, nobody seems to have witnessed the actual event. Dorcas asks to be left alone and refuses to name the assailant. Felice, her friend, nonetheless calls an ambulance, which fails to show up that night. By morning, Dorcas has bled to death. Later, at Dorcas' funeral, Violet tries to slash Dorcas's face. Violet, who has been acting a bit strangely of late anyway, is restrained and nothing more comes of this event. Eventually she and Joe reconcile in a sort of happy ending.

So much for the simple plot. But the book is not just about a love triangle gone bad. It is about how several lives of African-American migrants to NYC intersect in Harlem in the 1920's and fuel one complex event, an event that was apparently based on an actual news item Morrison read. On one level the story pivots around the shooting, but on another level, the novel is really more about the various stories the actors bring to the unfolding drama. It is by picking apart

this one event, as told from numerous perspectives by different people even of past generations, that we begin to get a glimpse of the complexities of African-American lives in Harlem in the 1920's in the age of jazz.

I want to take just a moment to think about the City as Morrison describes it because it provides a context for the story, or stories, that unfold. The City is never described in one place, but hints and bits and pieces pop up here and there. Let me just give two examples which I think throw light on how this works and why the City is an important part of the action.

The first example is when Morrison is writing about the neighborhood. She says,

Everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the post box (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barber shops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club. ... (1)

As a second example, I want to look at when Dorcas is shot and lying in the bed bleeding. We recall that nobody bothers to call the police because "they won't show up in our neighborhood anyway." In the end, Felice does eventually call an ambulance, and it does shows up... but only the next morning.

It is worth noting at this point that these descriptions of life in the Negro ghetto of Harlem take place in 1926. But they were just as true in 1992, when

Toni Morrison was writing this story, and they remain true in large part even today, when we are reading this story. That of course is part of the message of the book.

But the story is not just about this one event, one shooting, in 1926; it is about the memories and histories and identities that all of the story's characters have brought with them into the City and the events of their lives. Like so many African-Americans of the time, they left their lives and homes and memories and scars of the South (in this case, Virginia) in anxious anticipation of finding a new life in the City. What they find is a bewildering mixture of anticipation and memory, of love and loss, of freedom and captivity. What does the picture of Dorcas on the mantel in the Trace apartment mean? For Joe Trace it is of love found and then love lost, maybe a reflection of his love for Violet that was found, and lost, and finally found again. And for Violet? The picture was of the love she once knew Joe had for her and which now is lost. Her anger at this loss may be what drove her to free her parrot and disfigure the girl's corpse, which was of course beyond feeling.

Surely a theme that haunts all the characters is that of identity. The most striking relationship, I thought, was between Wild and Golden Gray. Here is the untamed African savage woman, on the one hand, and the rich white (or not so white) privileged youth on the other. The relationship between the two is perplexing maybe much like racial relations in the South were in the end a confounding mess in their own way. Golden Gray discovers Wild as a pregnant naked woman. He eventually feels he has to help her and brings her to the cabin of the very (Black) father Golden is searching for. He then does try to take care of

her, but -- take note -- only after taking care of the other life in his care, namely his horse. This episode struck me because the child that is ultimately born is none other than Joe Trace. Joe spends his life trying to find his roots in the tangled web of Southern black family disruptions. He eventually literally falls into the lap of Violet. For both, escaping to the City of course does not help. In fact, loss of family happens there too. It was during the 1917 march for racial justice, for example, that the young Dorcas sees her house burn down, and her parents with it. So in some sense, Joe and Dorcas are two orphans who find each other. The intermediate person is Malvonne Edwards, who rents to Joe the room for Joe's trysts with Dorcas. Malvonne herself is orphaned another way. Her son, Sweetness, note the hopeful name, runs away and turns out to be a thief. There is that touching scene where she discovers the bags of mail he has stolen to retrieve checks and money and how she tries to make amends by addressing what is already past.

Surely one of the more symbolic scenes is when Violet/Violent releases her birds. The context is her loss of Joe Trace. They were once in love and that helped both of them to work through their past. But then Joe falls for Dorcas and Violet loses her lover, and to some extent her mind. She releases the parrot, the one living thing that still says, "I love you." At the end, Joe and she reconcile, their love returns, she starts training another parrot, and sings jazz.

The book for all its mind-twisting complexity has a simple title: Jazz. This title brings me to the larger aspect of the book. The word "jazz" hardly appears in the story, but it is always there in a way, a silent elephant in the room, so to speak. How so? To explain, let me start off with one critic's view, taking off I

think from classical music. “And since it is no longer important to these artists to convey their meanings, technical proficiency, narrative structure and clarity have given way to idiosyncrasy and abstraction.” (2)

With this in mind, let me quote, with a bit of editing, the definition of “jazz” from the Encyclopedia Britannica, “musical form, often improvisational, developed by African Americans and influenced by both European harmonic structure and African rhythms. It ... is often characterized by syncopated rhythms, polyphonic ensemble playing, varying degrees of improvisation, often deliberate deviations of pitch, and the use of original timbres.” (3)

Morrison herself has Alice say, “She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn’t real music – just colored folk’s stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious (4)

So in many ways jazz reflects the background of the book. Jazz was seen as an edgy, maybe even dangerous, music that broke Western (read White) norms and could lead to all sorts of immorality. It is individualistic, lacks classical structure, reflects African-American roots. It became strongly associated with the Black Renaissance in Harlem in the 1920’s and beyond that in the sense that the Black community itself was edgy, dangerous, and in its non-whiteness maybe even immoral and violent. Again, this was true in 1926 when the story takes place, and was still true in 1992 when Morrison wrote, and rings true even today. So that is one level.

To be more explicit. Jazz is not a linear and logical development of a theme as is classical Western music. It is emotional (given its roots in the Blues), exciting (given its roots in ragtime) and particularly improvisational. In that sense, the story before us is sort jazz in print – it is emotional full of energy and danger, and narrated in an improvisational non-linear, multiple-voiced sort of way. It is, so to speak, Jazzed. In its rhythms, colloquialisms and its choppiness of language, when read out loud (or hummed without articulating words) it sounds like Jazz. (5)

So the story tells us about the situation or condition of the Black community in Harlem in the 1920's centered around a murder. Yet it is told in a language infused with, or reminiscent of, jazz, so an African-American story told in a specifically African-American way. Insofar as Momaday was trying to find a Native American way of telling his people's story, so we can see here Morrison is trying to find an African-American way of telling her people's story. The question is does it work, for an African-American audience, and for us.

ENDNOTES

- 1). Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (NY: Vintage Books, 2004), pg. 10
- 2). http://www.brothersjudd.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/reviews.detail/book_id/1059/Jazz.htm
- 3). <https://www.britannica.com/art/jazz>
- 4). *Ibid.* Morrison, p. 59.
- 5). [http:// Jazz by Toni Morrison : The Symbolic Significance of the Title; Posted by Nicole Smith, Dec 7, 2011; <https://www.articlemyriad.com/jazz-toni-morrison-symbolic-significance>](http://Jazz%20by%20Toni%20Morrison%20-%20The%20Symbolic%20Significance%20of%20the%20Title%20-%20Posted%20by%20Nicole%20Smith)

QUESTIONS

1. Does the relationship drawn between the literary style of this book and the musical genre of Jazz work for you, or is it a forced comparison?
2. There are many characters, by one count almost two dozen. Many of their stories, including the main characters, are told in episodic bits by different narrators at different times. This makes it impossible for the reader to put it altogether in a coherent form. Is this a fault in the book, or part of its narrative strategy?
3. Morrison contrasts the hardships of picking cotton in the agrarian South to the glorification of life in the City. To what extent is the City itself a character in the narrative? Did the City live up to expectations or is it just the same oppressiveness in another form?
4. A constant theme in contemporary social criticism has to do with the “failure of the African-American family”. *Jazz* addresses a whole range of family and kin relationships. To what extent is the book a critique or examination of the development of the African-American family?
5. Although there are a number of characters who are given voice, there is also an anonymous narrator. How would you characterize this narrator, and what role does this narrator have in shaping the story?