

ANALYSIS

Jazz (1992)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

“In *Jazz*, just as I did before with *The Bluest Eye*, I put the whole plot on the first page.... I thought of the plot in that novel, the threesome, as the melody of the piece, and it is fine to follow a melody—to feel the satisfaction of recognizing a melody whenever the narrator returns to it. That was the real art of the enterprise for me—bumping up against that melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth.... I wanted the story to be the vehicle that moved us from page one to the end, but I wanted the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it was a prism, constantly turning. This playful aspect of *Jazz* may well cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody, who want to know what happened, who did it and why....

With *Jazz*, I wanted to convey the sense that a musician conveys—that he has more but he’s not gonna give it to you. It’s an exercise in restraint, a holding back—not because it’s not there, or because one had exhausted it, but because of the riches, and because it can be done again. This sense of knowing when to stop is a learned thing and I didn’t always have it. It was probably not until after I wrote *Song of Solomon* that I got to feeling secure enough to experience what it meant to be thrifty with images and language and so on. I was very conscious in writing *Jazz* of trying to blend that which is contrived and artificial with improvisation. I thought of myself as like the jazz musician—someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful....

Jazz was considered—as all new music is—to be devil music; too sensual and provocative, and so on. But for some black people jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can imagine what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children, or who remembered their parents’ being slaves. Blues and jazz represented ownership of one’s own emotions. So of course it is excessive and overdone...

Jazz was very complicated because I wanted to re-represent two contradictory things—artifice and improvisation—where you have an artwork, planned, thought through, but at the same time appears invented, like jazz.... *Jazz* predicts its own story. Sometimes it is wrong because of faulty vision. It simply did not imagine those characters well enough, admits it was wrong, and the characters talk back the way jazz musicians do. It has to listen to the characters it has invented and then learn something from them. It was the most intricate thing I had done, though I wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age and so never use the word.”

Toni Morrison (1993)
The Paris Review Interviews II
(Picador 2007) 380-82, 383, 386

“While many black writers have used musicians and music as them and metaphor for their writing, none have attempted to draw upon jazz as the structuring principle for an entire novel [Ellison’s *Invisible Man*?] None, that is, until Toni Morrison’s new novel, *Jazz*, a novel set in Harlem in 1926, so near to—yet so far away from—the black literary movement known as the New Negro, or Harlem Renaissance.... The year 1926 is also that in which *Jazz* is set, the year in which Joe Trace a fifty-year-old door-to-door salesman of beauty products murdered his eighteen-year-old lover Dorcas, who refused to name her assassin as she lay dying. The year his wife, Violet, a hairdresser, attempted to disfigure the corpse at her funeral.

Just as Morrison’s novel *Beloved* was sparked by an actual historical event, so too is *Jazz*. Morrison first came across the story of the star-crossed lovers when she read Camille Billops’ manuscript, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, which contains photographs and commentary by the great African-American

photographer James Van Der Zee and poems by Owen Dodson.... As she lay dying, the young woman refused to identify the person who shot her. What manner of love was this? Morrison protected the seedling of this story line, nurturing it for over a decade, until it assumed the shape it has here, in *Jazz*. But what is compelling here is not only the novel's plot, but how the story is *told*. A disembodied narrator slips easily and guilelessly from third-person all-knowingness to first-person lyricism, without ever relaxing its grip upon our imagination. It is a sensitive, poetic narrator, in love with the language of fiction, enraptured with the finest and rarest of arts, the art of telling a good tale, reflecting, as it goes along, upon its responsibilities as a composer, and its obligation to the individual characters whose sole destiny is to make this composition come alive, to sing.

The lyrical composer of this strangest of tales, however, is at once generous with the voices of its characters and jealous of their right to speak, to be *heard*, in their own melodic voices. Like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, *Jazz* has several narrators, or points of view, whose arias or speaking consciousness bring both harmony and contrapuntal texture: Violet, the aggrieved wife of Joe, whose four-page-long first-person reflections burst out of the novel in a single paragraph; Joe and Felice, Dorcas's friend who had lent her an opal ring on the fateful night of her killing, only to lose it forever to the grave. Both Joe's and Felice's control of the narrative are marked by quotations, markers that the narrator has *allowed* them to speak, in their own voices; in the same way, Duke Ellington's jazz compositions were the first that were constructed, or scored, for his individual musicians and their peculiar timbres, their particular *sounds*.... It is this same effect that Toni Morrison has achieved in *Jazz*, a luminously literary rendering of an art of composition that Duke Ellington perfected sometime in the summer of 1926....

Like William Faulkner, whose work was the subject of Toni Morrison's master's thesis at Cornell and whose finest work comes to mind again and again as we read through *Jazz*, Morrison's new novel serves to redefine the very possibilities of narrative point of view. Like Duke Ellington, Morrison has found a way, paradoxically, to create an ensemble of *improvised* sound out of a *composed* music. Riffing on these two great geniuses of American literature and music, Toni Morrison has established herself as one of the truly original novelists at work in the world today."

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present
eds. Gates and K. A. Appiah
(Amistad 1993) 52-55

"Grounded in the West African concept of 'iwa'—an approach to character that...insists on the unbreakable connection between the fate of the individual and of the community—call and response lies at the core of African American musical aesthetics.... Those grounded in African American literature may hear responses to Jean Toomer's *Cane* or Morrison's own *Song of Solomon* (when '[a] colored man floats down out of the sky'.... Morrison's text calls for readers to develop a new, more inclusive sense of community.... Instead of focusing on the individual artist as a genius whose claim to authority rests on originality, the model shifts attention to West African ideas of the artist as transmitter and shaper of a constantly shifting cultural tradition. In addition, the identification of both calls and responses highlights the active participation of the audience in African American aesthetic practices....

[Ralph] Ellison, the most insightful and influential theorist of the interconnection between African American music and literature, defines the jazz impulse as a way of defining and creating the self in relation to community and tradition (*Shadow*). As Ellison defines it, jazz—which may be music or another form of cultural expression—allows new ideas to enter the tradition.... The jazz impulse provides a way of exploring implications, of realizing the relational possibilities of the (blues) self, and of expanding the consciousness of self and of community through continual improvisation.... Recognized by numerous jazz and blues musicians as the foundation of African American music, the gospel impulse keeps alive the concept of difference from and within the white world....

The new music in *Jazz* sounds an urban blues of 'clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women.' Simultaneously, discontinuously, the new music holds out promises unthinkable in the South... Morrison portrays a modernist Harlem Renaissance that responds to Ezra Pound's modernist clarion call to 'make it new'... The new music 'made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was

like violating the law.' Yet Morrison emphasizes the costs associated with this dizzying energy: the loss of the past, of the village self, of the gospel church that Violet leaves in the first paragraph, never to return.... Morrison's novel can be discussed as a jazz-inflected response to two calls, one from Virginia Woolf, the other from *The Nag Hammadi*. These two examples can be used as touchstones for broader discussions of Morrison's relations to modernism and Afrocentrism. Both suggest the importance of women's voices to Morrison's response to, and construction of, her tradition.... Both Morrison's thesis and *Jazz* reject Woolf's claim to objectivity as a self-protective delusion; the narrator of *Jazz* admits to being 'confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered....

In the specific urban context that divides selves and communities in *Jazz*, this African voice provides renewed access to the gospel foundation, the vision of community and possible salvation, lost as the village became the city. Morrison's choice of a narrative voice echoing that of a visionary African woman seems particularly significant... Morrison grounds her jazz vision in the gospel impulse."

Craig Werner

"*Jazz: Morrison and the Music of Tradition*"
Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison
eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle
(MLA 1997) 86-92

"Toni Morrison said that she was trying to do in her novels 'what music used to do' for African Americans. She went on to say that music was the main expressive and stabilizing medium for African Americans over the years but that the complexities of modern technology mean African Americans need more than music for cultural survival and advancement: 'The music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore'.... *Jazz* is filled with references to bands, musical instruments, lines from songs, dancing, records, and nightclubs....

Morrison divides musical instruments into brass and clarinets. The golden brass instruments express the clean, bright, uplifting emotions of grief and uncontrollable passion.... Joy and sorrow, expressed by brass and clarinets, are further supported by images of high and low, light and shadow. This basic contrast in the novel includes images of the upper and lower parts of the human body and images of racial identity. These patterns show that Morrison integrates music carefully into the novel, they differentiate the various emotions, and they illustrate how the emotions can be expressed through images....

When Joe Trace comes to New York from the South in 1906 with his wife, Violet, he is nervous and scared, until he feels the rhythm of the train under him. This rhythm causes him to stand up in the aisle and tap back at the tracks, joining the train and Violet in a dance of hospitality and acceptance. The city is dancing with both of them, 'proving already how much it love[s] them.' Twenty years later, however, that same rhythm induces Joe to do something wild, to love a woman half his age and then to kill her. The city switches him onto a track that he cannot get off, a track that also involves music: 'Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're free'."

Anthony J. Berret

"*Jazz: From Music to Literature*"
Approaches (1997) 113-14

"*Jazz*, more than any of Morrison's previous works, demands conscious participation from its readers. The novel's ostensible failure to provide answers to the many questions it raises must, therefore, be reconsidered as an opportunity for the reader to enter the text and formulate her or his own interpretation from the many layers of knowing densely configured in this novel. For as Morrison observes, the novel should have 'something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve these problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe....

Jazz is her most sophisticated literary work, her magnum opus.... Morrison creates a polyvocal text that successfully tells and sounds the lives of Violet, Joe, Dorcas, Felice, Sweetness, and other orphans in Harlem. The novel is set in a period variously dubbed the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, and the Harlem

Renaissance era.... The period between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance—roughly coterminous with the interval between the events of *Beloved*, set in 1873, and those of *Jazz*—witnessed a rapid escalation of racial violence toward African Americans in the South (which precipitated the great migration to northern cities).... [Note the] call-and-response dialectics—between *Jazz* and Harlem Renaissance works including Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, Nella Larson's *Quicksand*, Hughes's *Not without Laughter*, and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, as well as other contemporary representations of the period in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time*."

Judylyn S. Ryan
"Morrison's *Jazz*: 'A Knowing So Deep'"
Approaches (1997) 154-55, 157

"In *Jazz* Morrison transposes into another medium the music that sprang out of her people and expressed their joys, their sorrows, their beliefs, they psyche. This music—spirituals, blues, ragtime, jazz—has spread throughout the world in our time, and is no longer uniquely or exclusively African American/ There's need now, suggests Morrison, to make fiction do what the music used to do, tell the whole wide world the ongoing story of her people. In *Beloved* she used the blues mode of fiction to conjure up and exorcise, to expiate and to pass on, the 'disremembered' dark world of slaves and of slavery. *Jazz* dramatizes what happened to those born after Emancipation who migrated from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North to seek both refuge and a new way of life....

The basic voice used in *Jazz* is warm and human, reassuring, a voice of quiet authority in command of itself. Very like the voice of Ma Rainey or of Bessie Smith singing the blues on early records. The words that pour out sound rich and mellow, with a lilt all their own and a steady speed. Toni Morrison's voice has a low but dynamic register. No dramatic changes of tempo occur, but there are subtle modulations and variations especially when it presents dialogue.... Towards the end, when Felice and Violet and Joe Trace talk and offer dramatic revelations, the black vernacular with its flicks of irony, its touches of humor, its use of understatement...comes alive and resonant.... The punctuation in *Jazz* is rhythmical. It transforms the text into a musical score, it compels the use of both eye and ear; what it generates is a cadence that makes meanings vibrate.... The shifts in rhythm parallel the shifts in narration....

Jazz is made up of a number of such rhythmic paragraphs, subsections and sections that together compose a musical score. The novel has a loose fluid non-Aristotelian experimental form. Not the tight, climactic, Freytag-pyramid structure of conventional fiction, but the form of a jazz piece. Toni Morrison oralizes print. She also uses her language instrument to try out some daring modes and techniques of play and to create the informal, improvisatory patterning of jazz.... Like Louis Armstrong's classic 'West End Blues' (1928), the novel ends with a closing ensemble of interludes and breaks and brief solos. Played in a low register at a slow blues tempo, the seven subsections use stretched blue notes to restate and to purify earlier experiences of joy and pain."

Eusebio L. Rodrigues
"Experiencing *Jazz*"
Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches
ed. Nancy J. Peterson
(Johns Hopkins 1997) 248-51, 263

"*Jazz*, which Morrison published in 1992, is her sixth novel and the second volume in her trilogy. Its characters are the children and grandchildren of Sethe's and Paul D's generation who left the rural areas and life on the land with dreams of success in the urban centers. In 1906, Joe Trace and his wife Violet, like many others of their group from across the South, rode the train north to Harlem and elsewhere. Seeking escape from poverty and white violence, they danced into the City (capitalized C), with high expectations. The action in the novel begins in 1926, in the jazz age. Ironically, by then, the dreams of the ordinary migrants no longer sparkled with hope, and Joe, now a fifty-year-old door-to-door beauty products salesman, traces his eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Dorcas, to a party in Brooklyn and shoots her. She dies without revealing the identity of her assailant. Then Violet, who already acts strangely and is angered by Joe's infidelity, disrupts the girl's funeral by attempting to mutilate the face of the corpse.

Just as *Beloved* interested Morrison as a result of her reading of the Margaret Garner story, so the plot of *Jazz*, as an extension of *Beloved*, suggested itself to her from the photograph of a dead girl in her coffin in James Van Der Zee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. The story behind the picture reveals that Dorcas did exactly as this girl, who also refused to name her killer. Like Sethe, who considered her children her 'best parts,' Dorcas loved someone else so much more than herself that she was willing to bleed to death rather than reveal her lover's name. This willingness to replace the self with a love object outside of the self is, Morrison says, a way in which women sabotage themselves. The idea intrigued her. How Joe and Violet came to the place in which they find themselves at the time of Dorcas's death and where they will go from there is the burden of the narrative, which takes readers on a journey into black history and returns to many of the themes Morrison used in her previous novels. As always, the struggles with alienation, fragmentation, self and identity are all present. This time Morrison explores them in light of the unfulfilled promises of the black migrant urban experience."

Nellie Y. McKay, Introduction
Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook
eds. McKay and William L. Andrews
(Oxford 1999) 11-12

"*Jazz* (1992) in several ways is an extension of *Beloved*, although less complete and less compelling technically. The theme of the displaced person continues, here transposed to the north, where dysfunction is the order of the day, despite lip service to racial and social equality. The story is the dispossessed, twisted quality of black lives, the result of a situation in which blacks must settle and resettle, a kind of nomadic, gypsy existence which has defined their lives in post-civil war days and torpedoed their efforts at community.

Only the moment gives them some sense of respite, and often the moment is just that, without continuity, self-definition, or any of the ordering devices we associate with a measured life. Morrison here continues the Faulknerian verbal stream, with long convoluted sentences, disregard for conventional syntax, the omission of essential punctuation, the use of misdirected or deliberately confusing pronouns, all of it contributing to waves of consciousness rather than a clearly delineated narrative. Such deliberate tactics work toward maximizing the patterns Morrison wishes to impress on black life in the north.

The narrator, while *there*, is gender neutral and hidden; with the main focus on the shooting of a black woman, Dorcas, and her disfigurement at the funeral by Violet, the wife of the man who killed her. But while this is the ostensible story, the seeming text, the subtext becomes more significant: the twisted web of black lives, the dispossessed quality of their existence. And here the convoluted nature of much of the language works well to define the mosaic of dysfunction and of pathological urges which create 'the moment' while subverting continuity or measure in individual lives.

The one area Morrison neglects—which could be a source of enrichment—is that pertaining to blacks who succeed, those who go on to college, make their way as professionals, and establish themselves in some version of the mainstream. By the 1980s, a large black middleclass was visible, with blacks having entered executive and professional posts—more than token, fewer than acceptable—but Morrison bypasses this for the losers, or those who merely hang on to the edges. As a novelist of 'black life,' she is highly selective; she seems to fly in the face of considerable black stability in the home, as well as in careers and professions.

It is true that her losers are sometimes winners, in that they fight on in lives which are perforce stunted, aborted, meaningless except to themselves. Often, they must, like Joe Trace here, remake themselves repeatedly—Joe does it seven times. But remaking oneself, while it means taking on a second skin, also forgoes continuity and, ultimately, self-definition. The black male in Morrison, but also the female, wanders an American landscape, a refugee in his own country. Yet one looks in vain for balance; the wanderer is never juxtaposed to the one with roots, the one who makes a life for himself or herself, whatever the tremendous odds and psychological dislocations.

In one sense, even as Morrison has defined new ground for the novel of the uprooted and the unsettled, even as she has fought to find common interests and community for these very people, she has caught a

quite different aspect of the last decades—the need to redefine oneself, to remake the self, to move on. This the black has in common with many whites, since literature by nonblacks also focuses on this: counterfeiting, disguising, faking, all, serve as a continuum with this need to remake oneself. Using the black who struggles to stay afloat, she underscores the instability of the culture from the point of view of those who have the most to lose. With the self in a constant process of adapting and readapting, the individual is caught in forces he and she cannot foretell; and while this is, as she shows, more precarious for the black, it is—if we listen to our writers—an all-purpose situation.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 149-51

Michael Hollister (2015)