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Toni Morrison: Jazz

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The Literary Encyclopedia

Jazz

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Morrison, Toni
(1992)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1992, is the sixth of her ten novels to date and, some scholars believe, is the second in her series on love. Arguably, among her most experimental novels, Morrison's musically titled book is not focused primarily on music or musicians but rather on the places and the lived reality of the people that made jazz possible. Morrison combines a focus on the context out of which the music developed with her own inventive jazz style in writing. *Jazz* is structured as an ensemble of improvisational riffs, voiced by several

narrative speakers that Morrison imbues with innovative styles that are sometimes unmistakably distinct from each other and at other times are not so easily distinguished. Although *Jazz* is an ensemble production of Morrison's various narrative voices, she opens this novel with a distinctive, apperceptive insider narrative voice that persists throughout the ten untitled chapters in the novel. Also, Toni Morrison's uses of African American vernacular speech, idiom, and communicative gestures, including the teeth-sucking gesture —“Sth”— that opens the novel, situate this particular narrator within a modern, urban, New Negro cultural context. And, even though Morrison does not describe this speaker, she marks her narrator as female.

In *Jazz*, Morrison's focus is on the quotidian life of a black couple who live in Harlem during the New Negro literary renaissance, a setting that frequently presses most who write on this era to emphasize or at least mention notable persons from the arts and literary scene. Morrison does not do this. Events in *Jazz* take place primarily in New York City from October through March 1925-1926, although there are flashbacks and allusions to times as early as 1855 and to towns and cities throughout the

United States. Morrison's narrator persistently reminds readers of the flow of migrating African American people during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The City portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is Harlem, as three of her major characters live on Lenox Avenue. In many ways, Morrison's City operates similar to Ann Petry's Street—116th—in her novel *The Street*. Both writers employ a double metonymy to connect African American people in general to the similarly situated people and conditions which they portray in one well-known location, Harlem. Morrison further gives a nod to Petry not only in her similar use of metonymy but also in her scene in which a young boy is involved in stealing mail.

Toni Morrison in the novel *Jazz* also continues her literary project, which she had begun in *Beloved*, of re-imagining actual historical events. *Jazz* is based on a story associated with a picture that Morrison saw in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, a book of collected funeral photographs by the famed New Negro era photographer James Van Der Zee. Morrison also wrote the forward to this collection of photographs. Additionally, Morrison situates the events and sensibilities that she portrays

in *Jazz* firmly within the New Negro era in African American history by her reference to the silent protest organized by the NAACP in July 1917 following racially motivated attacks on black people in East St. Louis, Illinois; by her allusion to the parade in 1919 for the all-black 369th regiment's return from the war; and by her description of one of her major characters, Joe Trace, as a New Negro: "but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped."

Further, Morrison's adept reinscription in *Jazz* of African American literary and cultural concepts such as double-consciousness, call and response, and the trope of the talking book mark this novel as unique. Morrison indeed enacts, through her innovative use of narration in *Jazz*, the trope of the talking book, while simultaneously interrogating the notion that the book is an infallible means from which one gains knowledge. She also critiques the reliability of other books that have tried to describe black life in the City as well as the reliability of her own narrator, which Morrison describes in the novel as "curious, inventive, well-informed" as

well as “confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered.”

The lives of Joe Trace, his wife Violet, and of Joe’s teenaged lover Dorcas become the vehicle through which Toni Morrison addresses in *Jazz* several themes that recur in her writing: the construction of identity, particularly African American identity; the impact of beauty standards; and love. In *Jazz*, Morrison artfully returns to and endeavours to resolve the concerns with beauty standards that prevailed and ended tragically in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. In *Jazz*, youth and beauty are resonant, though not prevailing, themes throughout the novel, as Morrison constructs passages in which her characters buy, sell, or request beauty products and in which youth is contrasted with maturity. Joe Trace sells Cleopatra Beauty produces. Violet Trace is an unlicensed hairdresser, and the licensed hairdressers resent her competition. Joe is fifty-three and his wife is fifty, while Joe’s lover Dorcas is eighteen.

Violet Trace is beyond childbearing years and has finally decided that she regrets her many miscarriages, which she had not minded when

they occurred; now she wants a child. Her husband Joe has had an affair with Dorcas, a teenaged girl who was not especially beautiful, although she has all of the external qualities associated with beauty. After three months, Dorcas tires of Joe's devotion to her and begins a relationship with Acton, a young man whom all of the girls in the neighbourhood desire and whose passion for Dorcas is indeed slim when compared to Joe's. Acton, though, provides Dorcas with the dangerous emotional adventure that she desires. Joe finds Dorcas and Acton at a party where Joe shoots his young lover. Violet is devastated when she finds out what her husband has done, and in her grief goes to Dorcas's funeral and stabs the corpse in the face. Although Violet had demonstrated "cracks" in her personality before she attacked the corpse of her husband's lover, this event brought her notoriety and led her neighbours to refer to her as Violent instead of Violet. Through the intervention of Felice, Dorcas's best friend, the Traces gain a new perspective on Dorcas and on themselves. This new perspective allows Violet and Joe finally to mend their marriage and reconstitute their identities. Violet, in fact, asserts that she found her "me" after extirpating the various other identities that had been foisted on her.

Morrison's combined emphasis on beauty, identity, and love in this novel is resolved as Joe Trace and his wife eventually come into the fullness of their own identities and return to the love that they have built together.

By the time of *Jazz*'s publication in 1992 Toni Morrison was already an award winning novelist whose stature had been confirmed by five other books, all judged more than merely good by a significant number of readers and by her numerous literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize which she won for *Beloved*, the novel believed to be the first book in her much speculated series on love. *Jazz* appeared on the *New York Times* best sellers' list along with Morrison's first book of literary theory, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

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