Jazz in *Jazz*

Freedom is often something taken for granted by many of us who have had the luxury of possessing it for the entirety of our lives. It is hard for one who has experienced the privilege of freedom to comprehend its true value, and what it means to be utterly free. Free to make one’s own choices, and to experience life in whichever way one would like. Yet those who have not had the same luxuries, the same privileges; they are the ones who can appreciate the value of the term and all of its meanings. It is this group of people who compose the majority of Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz*, a fictional narrative of a tragic event that took place in Harlem during the time of the great migration and urbanization in North America, and the characters that experienced this tragedy. These characters experience true freedom throughout their lives, and learn to deal with the sometimes-unexpected consequences of that freedom. Thus, *Jazz* serves as a quintessential example of the freedom experienced by African Americans during the 1920s, expressed through a novel structure that in and of itself challenges the ideas of freedom and its association with the artform for which it is named.

But what is freedom in the context of jazz, and how does it apply to Morrison’s novel? To understand this, one must first understand the artform itself, its conception, its checkered history in the U.S., and how it has affected the African American community as a whole.

Jazz has its roots in its ancestral music genres of the blues and ragtime, both of which came into fruition in the late 19th and early 20th century. The blues, a musical genre characterized according to ethnomusicologists Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby in their book *African American Music: An Introduction* as containing four key elements: “blues texts, the role of instruments, ‘blue notes’, and blues form” (Burnim 2015: 124), first came about in the southern areas of the U.S., particularly on and near plantations. The genre came to serve as an emotional outlet for the African American community of the late 19th and 20th century who struggled through the prejudices inflicted upon them by the Jim Crow Laws which enforced segregation between blacks and whites in nearly all forms of society. Thus, the blues often contains themes stemming from this injustice such as love, sex, travel, work, poverty, unemployment, alcohol, drugs, gambling, and trouble with the law, all of which were sang in a way that emphasized the sad (or blue) manifestations of said theme.

Ragtime came about at roughly the same time as the blues, yet in a much different environment. Rather than stemming from the rural areas of the U.S., ragtime claims its roots as the more urban areas of the country, including St. Louis and Kansas City. Ragtime was less of an emotional outlet for the injustices served to blacks at the time, and more of a musical style of playing characterized by ragging (or syncopating) a piece of music, as well as inserting embellishments and ornaments when playing a piece, thus giving the genre a more individualistic character due to the ability of performers to make a piece their own rather than play exactly what was written on the page.

The combination of the two genres listed above merged to create the beginnings of jazz, a genre that took the thematic elements of the blues and the playing style of ragtime and established a music that was inherent to the black community. Not only that, but it represented a state of mind that was burgeoning at the time: that African Americans were free, that they were new to being free, and that they were experience the offerings of freedom for the first time while simultaneously trying to overcome prejudices by the white community.

All of this comes across in Morrison’s novel, in both the story that she tells, as well as in the literary structure of the novel itself. As stated previously, *Jazz* follows the story of a murder that occurs in Harlem in the 1920’s. However, it is not the context of the specific tale that is being told that makes this book so interesting, but rather how Morrison has structured the telling of said tale, and the complex lives and interactions of the characters found within. In particular, the characters of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas experience firsthand, though at differing levels of intensity, the freedom that the city of Harlem allowed them.

Joe Trace and his wife Violet, both African Americans who grew up working several odd jobs throughout the southern U.S., came to Harlem soon after they married. Like many other African Americans like them in the early 20th century, the Traces traveled to the city seeking a better life than that which they had living in the South. A life of opportunity and freedom, where the average African American could earn wages in one day that were equivalent to a weeks’ worth of pay working on plantations. Indeed, the two were so elated at the seemingly endless opportunities that the city offered that “They weren’t even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for the first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them” (Morrison 1992: 32).

Upon arriving to Harlem, they found the freedom they were looking for. In fact, they found an abundance of freedom that they most likely did not expect, as is clear by the actions of Joe. After living in the city for several years, Joe engaged in a romantic relationship with a young girl whom he met on one of his daily cosmetic sales runs. The young women, Dorcas, infatuated Joe, eventually leading him to cheat on his wife with her. This seemingly radical diversion of character for Joe stems from the very thing that he came to the city for: freedom. Or rather, an excess of freedom. For Joe, when provided with the boundless choices that the city proffered him, coupled with the fact that his relationship with Violet was beginning to stagnate, the overwhelming nature of Harlem caused him to revert to feelings of loss and loneliness that he experienced as a child due to his mother abandoning him at a very young age. Dorcas served as a means to cope with these feelings and fill the void in his relationship. In a way, she was Joe’s relief from the blues that he was undergoing.

Of course, too much of a good thing is bad for you as they say. Joe fell once more into a deep, lonely depression after Dorcas decided to leave him for a younger and more strapping man. So far, he fell, that he was driven to murder Dorcas, shooting her in the chest while she was dancing with her new boyfriend. He did not kill her out of jealousy, however, but more so out of a deep sense of love for her. He loved her so much that the thought of losing her drove him to a momentary lapse of sanity, and the ultimate crime of passion.

All of this obviously infuriated Violet, who herself was driven into a temporary insanity during which she sliced the dead Dorcas’ face with a knife at her funeral. When reflecting on her actions and what had led her to that dreadful deed, she contemplated how she could have let Joe’s and Dorcas’ relationship happen. While most of her fury was directed at Dorcas, she turned some of that fury onto herself, thinking “...while I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody’s kitchen to do their hair? Huddled in a doorway out of the wind waiting for the trolley? Wherever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears because it got that cold sometimes it did and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the earlobe. That’s why” (Morrison 1992: 94-95). She clearly felt anger towards the woman who stole her husband from her. But she also felt some anger at her inability, helplessness, and negligence in regard to the entire situation. This is again characteristic of the blues, in particular the common theme of relationship troubles found throughout the genre.

The city also portrays these jazz themes, specifically through the personification of Harlem and the rich descriptions put forth by Morrison. She describes one seen of a man on a street corner who sang the blues, describing him as “Blue man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man. Everybody knows your name” (Morrison 1992: 119). While the analogy of blues music is evident, the idea that blues music being inherent to the African American community is also introduced. Morrison is stating that by being black, you inhabit the themes of the blues. It is an inevitability. The black communities “human condition”, if you will. She goes on to personify the city more by relating it to a record being spun, saying “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” (Morrison 1992: 120). Thus, the City is given character. However, though nearly everyone in the novel thinks of the City as containing the freedoms that they so desperately want, the City does not allow for complete freedom. It takes you in and pushes you along the path in how the City sees fit, while only offering the illusion of complete freedom. Putting these two lines together, it is evident that Morrison is saying that the blacks that migrated to the City in the 1920s are moving towards an idea of freedom in their heads that will not completely match that which they find on the streets; and that even though there is the illusion of complete freedom of choice, it may be easier and better to allow the City to push you along like the needle on a record player moving through groves of an old jazz vinyl.

Not only do the characters of the novel portray themes of freedom and the chaos that freedom can bring through the outlet of jazz ideas such as the blues, but also the novel’s structure itself. Rather than being told chronologically, the story is broken into sections that are each told from the perspective of an ever-changing narrator in an ever-changing time surrounding the murder of Dorcas. This constant shift of voice parallels the idea of improvisation in jazz music. That is, when a new character is introduced in the novel as the narrator, they get a chance to tell the story (or the main idea of a jazz chart) in a way that expresses their personal voice (much like an improvised solo). Not only that, but Morrison writes each separate narrator in such a way as to give them a distinct “sound”, allowing the reader to know who is speaking when. This idea of writing for the character ties closely with Billy Strayhorn’s description of the so called “Ellington Effect”, wherein famed jazz composer and orchestra leader Duke Ellington was more concerned with making sure that each individual in his band’s unique voice was heard by matching the part to the player and their sound, rather than to a specific instrument (Burnim 2015: 169).

In addition to allowing each character’s voice to be heard individually, the elements of call and response between the characters and herself (Morrison), is reminiscent of jazz music, and African music as a whole. Several times throughout the novel, it is implied that Morrison’s own voice is being used when describing the characters action. This idea of narrator-author call and response comes across in the last section of the story, where the narrator states that “I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew … that when I invented stories about them - and doing it seemed to me so fine - I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy” (Morrison 1992: 220). When reading this paragraph, it can be concluded that the whole time that Morrison was writing this novel, she thought that she was creating the stories for these characters, while in reality the characters were taking on a voice of their own. They developed a sound, and used that sound to tell their version of the story in a soloistic manner, thus creating a call and response between themselves and their creator.

Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* clearly exhibits the themes of freedom expressed through the many different facets of the musical genre that is the novel’s namesake. Whether it be the abundance of the blues experienced by the characters within, the freedom that they feel that is so often attributed to the free-flowing and experimental nature of jazz music, or the structuring of the novel itself mimicking the soloistic improvisation of a classic jazz tune, *Jazz* is a perfect example the freedom that jazz represents, and the freedom experienced by the African American community of the early 20th century.

Bibliography

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