

“JAZZ” ANALYSIS OF FIRST FIVE CHAPTER



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1. Introduction:

Jazz is a 1922 historical novel by Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning American author Toni Morrison. The majority of the narrative takes place in Harlem during the 1920's. The novel forms the second part of Morrison's Dantesque trilogy on African American history, beginning with *Beloved* and ending with *Paradise*. The novel deliberately mirrors the music of its title, with various characters "improvising" solo compositions that fit together to create a whole work. The tone of the novel also shifts with these compositions, from blusey laments to up beat, sensual ragtime. The novel also utilizes the call and response style of Jazz music, allowing the characters to explore the same events from different perspective.

2. Significance of the Title "Jazz":

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is a simply titled novel, but this simplicity belies the complexity of the narrative structure to which the word "Jazz" alludes. "Jazz" is experimental in that it challenges the conventions of the American canonical literary narrative, Toni Morrison incorporates elements of the genre of Jazz music as a way of both honouring African American modes of expression and creative and cultural production, as well as creating new, hybrid form of expression. The result is a novel that can be frustrating and difficult, at times, for the reader to follow. Morrison's narrative is a, by turns, tangential, digressive, and improvisational. Nevertheless, understanding the underlying structural and thematic significance of this narrative approach by analysing the novel's structure through the lens of Jazz music helps the reader to not only develop a tolerance for the novel, but to adapt himself or herself to its expressive power. As a result, new possibilities open not only for Toni Morrison as an author, but for the reader as well.

3. Summary:

Jazz is the story of a husband and wife living in Harlem, New York in the 1920's. Joe and Violet Trace's marriage has experienced the usual ups and downs, but in the winter of 1926, their lives are nearly destroyed by Joe's infidelity with 18 year old Dorcas whom he shoots to death. Because there are no witnesses, Joe is not arrested or made to pay for his crime in the traditional sense. Instead, he punishes himself.

His wife Violet is humiliated and outraged by Joe's betrayal of their love. Her reaction is to blame the dead girl and to strike out against her. Violet attends Dorcas' funeral to see what makes this girl so beautiful and why her husband loves her so fiercely. At the funeral, Violet tries to attack the corpse with a knife.

Violet is physically thrown from the funeral service. Now both Joe and Violet are the subjects of ridicule in their community.

However, neither of them is concerned. Joe is too busy crying. Violet spends her days trying to find out more about her husband's dead lover. Violet still considers Dorcas her rival for Joe's affections. Violet becomes more and more mentally unglued. She is willing to do anything to hold on to her husband and to keep herself from going crazy. Violet becomes friends with the dead girl's aunt Alice Manfred and with Dorcas' best friend Felice.

As the story unfolds, we find out what causes the anguish suffered by Joe and Violet. Joe wanted recognition from a mother who was unable to give it to him. Violet is haunted by her mother's suicide. Her mother threw herself down a well when the burden of having no money to care for her five children became too much.

These private agonies eventually cause the couple to pull away from each other. Joe's involvement with Dorcas broadens the barrier between them. By the time spring comes, the couple have forgiven each other. Around this time Dorcas' best friend, Felice, becomes their friend and helps them return their lives to normal. From the beginning of the novel, the reader is led to believe that Joe shot Dorcas dead.

But in the final pages Felice reveals some missing details, details that help the couple figure out what Dorcas was really like and how much responsibility Joe should take for his part in ending her life.

4- Characters:

a) Narrator: unnamed. Moves in and out of the story.

b) Violet Trace: The main character, a hairdresser. She has been married to Joe Trace for 20 years. She has trouble holding on to her husband and her sanity. When her husband shoots his lover, Violet is thrown out of the funeral for trying to disfigure the corpse's face.

c) Joe Trace: A main character, the husband of Violet, a cosmetics salesman. He has named himself Trace because he can find no trace of his mother.

d) Dorcas Manfred: The 18 year old girl that Joe falls in love with. She is being raised by her aunt Alice Manfred because her parents were killed in racial incidents. Her only interest is to explore her sexuality.

e) Wild: Joe Trace's mother. She could not speak and lived almost like an animal in the cane fields. Joe was hurt that she could never care for him or acknowledge him as a child.

f) Golden Gray: A white-skinned man whose blood is half black. He is named for the colour of his eyes. As a child, he was cared for by Violet's

grandmother, True Belle. His mother is Vera Louise Gray and his father is Henry Lestory. When he finds out his father is black, he vows to kill him.

- g) Rose Dear:** Violet Trace's mother. The pressure of trying to provide for her children lead her to commit suicide by throwing herself down a well.
- h) True Belle:** Violet's grandmother, Rose Dear's mother. She comes to the rescue of the family when they are penniless. She also raised Joe's father, Golden Gray.
- i) Alice Manfred:** Dorcas' aunt who is eager to care for her sister's child. She is considered well-to-do in Harlem society. She wants Dorcas to be above the average street people, so she raises her with an iron hand.
- j) Malvonne:** Joe and Violet's upstairs neighbour. She has allowed Joe and Dorcas to meet secretly in her apartment and feels guilty about it.
- k) Sweetness:** Malvonne's no good nephew. She has raised him as her own son. He is a very minor character who steals the neighborhood mail looking for money.
- l) The Miller Sisters:** Francis and Neola. They care for Dorcas as a child and preach about the sins of sex.
- m) Violet's father (unnamed):** Husband of Rose Dear. He is always away from home when the family needs him. When he returns he brings money and trinkets for everyone.
- n) Stuck and Gistad:** Joe's two buddies. They don't always tell him about Violet's crazy behaviour.
- o) Hunter's Hunter:** A man who teaches Joe and Victory about the woods. Also the name used for Henry Lestory, Golden Gray's black father.
- p) Henry Lestory:** An ex-slave who was Golden Gray's father. He was also called Hunter's Hunter.
- q) Vera Louis Gray:** Golden Gray's mother. Her child was fathered by a black slave and as a result, she was banished from her home. Her father owned the plantation where True Belle was born. She took True Bell with her when she was sent away to Baltimore.
- r) Colonel Wordsworth Gray:** Vera Louise's father, Golden Gray's grandfather. He owned a plantation in the area. He disowned his daughter when he discovered a slave was the father of her child.
- s) Honor:** A local teen who helps Henry Lestory around the farm.
- t) Victory Williams:** Joe's childhood friend. He always has the answers Joe needs.
- u) Rhoda and Frank Williams:** Victory's parents. They raised Joe as if he were one of their own children.
- v) Acton:** Dorcas' new, younger boyfriend.
- w) Felice:** Dorcas' best friend, raised by her grandmother because her parents are live-in servants in upstate New York. She becomes friends with Joe and Violet.

5- Important quotes:

“I’m crazy about this city, A city like this one make me dream tall and feel in on things”

The city is not only the setting for many events in Jazz but almost another character, urging and aiding people as they make up new lives for themselves.

The narrator loves the city and looks to it for wisdom and guidance.

“He did not yearn or pine for the girl..... He thought about her, and decided”.

One reason Joe loves Dorcas so excessively is that he chose her. He fell, metaphorically and literally, into his relationship with violet, but he experiences the pleasure of asserting his choice with Docas. The ability to decide for oneself, to make one’s life deliberately, matters to him and to the narrator.

“It was the..... dirty, get-on-down music..... danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild.”

Alice Manfred, trying to understand the riots that orphaned her niece, blames not racism or disgruntled veterans” but Jazz and the sexual drives it represents to her. Jazz makes people “do unwise disorderly things”, Alice thinks.

“No! that Violet is not somebody..... wearing my skin.....shit no that Violet is me!”

Violet must reintegrate the angry, strong aspects of her nature with the betrayed and fearful aspects to move toward wholeness after Joe’s affair. Her musings are an example of the stream-of -consciousness style that of Morrison sometimes uses in Jazz.

“you were the reason Adam ate the apple.....He left (Eden) a rich man.”

Joe explains his love for Dorcas using biblical references. She is like “the taste of the first apple in the world”, and their love is like paradise to him, worth the cost, worth the “red peeling” that breaks the heart.

6- Motifs:

a) Migration: Almost all of Morrison’s characters migrate to New York City from other parts of the country in an attempt to escape economic and social prejudice and in search of a new start in Harlem. The motif of migration goes hand in hand with the numerous allusions to birds and recurs frequently in the narration of the characters’ histories. Malvonne’s nephew, William the Younger, exemplifies a constantly shifting and itinerant black population with his sudden departure from New York for “Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O.” His young restlessness indicates an inability to establish roots or a connection in one place and echoes the “homelessness” of Morrison’s principal characters.

b) Orphans: The absence of a strong parental presence in *jazz* ties together many of Morrison’s characters and connects their shared sadness to one cause. Raised by aunts, grandparents and adoptive parents, Violet, Joe and Dorcas all experience a feeling of displacement, and feel that they are

handed over with no control. Unable to control the fact that they are orphans and placed in homes without any choice in the matter, characters are relocated in a way that resonates with the paternalistic adoption of slaves. Their *true* parents would be the tie to a history and would provide an identity for the characters. Thus, the lack of parents creates the characters' sense of displacement and their obsessive desire to find a stable and complete identity.

c) Music: As the name of the novel implies, music operates both thematically and formally to provide structure to the book. The jazz music of the 1920s situates the narrative in a specific cultural and historical moment, when a black aesthetic style was gaining ground in New Orleans and New York. Music can also be restorative, as Felice facilitates the healing process between Joe and Violet by bringing over her records and watching them dance.

d) Violence and Race: cultural violence and race are woven into *jazz's* historical setting. Race riots erupt as African American workers crowd into Northern industrial cities to work in factories; veterans who fought in the war come home to endure racist treatment; and systematic racism by whites threatens African American men with violence and women with sexual violence. The novel is packed with examples: Alice's brother is "stomped to death". Joe survives a beating only because a white man decides he should. young men are lynched or beaten. The narrator maintains, usually, a strangely neutral tone when she reports violence, perhaps to let readers make of this madness what they may. Friends, families, enemies_ all are susceptible to interpersonal violence or the urge toward it in *jazz*.

Violence seeps from generation to generation, as Vera Louise's pregnancy is revealed. Colonel Gray's "rage seeped into the room, clouding the crystal, "white Mrs. Gray provided the "final cut" _ a look of disgust. Vera Louise, though not physically harmed, is sent away to "die.....elsewhere." Even the language of the novel resonates with violence. The narrator describes light that "slants like a razor cutting the building in half, "and the drugstore illuminates customers in a "thin sharp light," for example.

Violent music rings with "complicated anger" and hostility. And yet set against this permeating violence, like balm spread over burned skin, are many acts of gentleness, compassion, and restraint. Post-slavery, racism still destroys families. When Felice complains that her parents' job keep her from seeing them often, Dorcas reminds her that she has no parents_ only a picture. Fearful, racist beliefs_ that whites were losing their jobs to new

workers from the South, being crowded out of “their” homes, “their” city_shatter Docras’s Family.

- e) **Identity and Motherhood:** Individuals such as Joe and Golden seek to create and maintain identity in *Jazz*. Joe’s “inside nothing” stems not from a lack of love his foster family embraces him. He does not know who he is because he does not know to whom he belongs. His misunderstanding of “without a trace” makes the point. The name Joe chooses is a case of mistaken identity.

The “proud-making” decision Henry made in training Joe provides him with identity as a hunter and woodsman, but these skills are of little use to a salesman. Joe has identity, too, as Violet’s husband, but this falls away when she becomes silent; his affair with Dorcas is an attempt to become another “new” man.

Golden suffers, too, unaware of his father until he has imbibed the cultural hate of the South. The loss feels like a missing arm; he’ll never know what life would have been with the arm, though he gets along well enough without it. No father “helped me over the stile” or “fed me food”. Golden’s father-longing is a hunger. He both despises his African American heritage and wants to tell his father about the “missing part of him” so that they are “free, arm- tangled and whole”. But reconciliation is difficult.

Motherhood occupies an important place in *Jazz*. Joe wants his mother to acknowledge him, but there is no substitute for Wild’s touch. If Joe can’t convince himself that he felt it, in the twilight of the woods, he can’t complete his identity. Violet’s identity, on the other hand, is mostly wrapped up in her marriage to Joe. She felt complete with him at the beginning of their marriage.

Her unfulfilled longing to become a mother, however, created a rift between them. When Joe has an affair with Dorcas, Violet almost believes she could have loved Dorcas the way she would have loved her own daughter, but this was not meant to be. Violet’s desire to be a mother is perhaps related to the absence of her own mother.

- f) **City versus Country:** The City is Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. The City is a place for reinvention; the people who move there are free to be “their stronger, riskier selves” in a place relatively sheltered from racist behaviors. The City acts almost as a conspiratorial character; it “makes people think they can do what they want” and lays out paths before their feet. But the city also tempts, “looking raunchy” and “sending secret messages” that lead to opportunities for sex. “Seeping music,” it calls, “come and do wrong”.

When Joe tracks Dorcas down, the city doesn't "object". Not even the narrator is safe from the city's influence; it "distracted" her when she tried to "speak its loud voice," causing her to miss clues to Joe and Violet's future. In stark contrast to the city, the country represents a kind of purity, untainted by humans civilization.

The woods become a refuge for Wild, a place where she can escape and live a life of solitude "where wild women grow". To Henry and Joe, the woods are home. As hunters and trackers, they are attuned to its sights and sounds and have learned to "read" the woods. They can also appreciate its beauty and serenity. Despite the bustling activity of the City, Joe feels lonely and longs for the woods. He uses the skills he acquired in the woods to track down Dorcas in the City.

g) Marriage: Marriage is an important theme of Morrison's novel. Joe and Violet's marriage is riddled with problems, mainly stemming from the fact that they are unable to produce children. The ensuing emotional separation causes Joe to seek companionship elsewhere. Violet's view of marriage is affected by her mother's failed marriage, and thus she clings to Joe, a man very different from her own absent father.

Violet takes her revenge on Dorcas for threatening her marriage by cutting the dead woman's face. Alice's failed marriage has distorted her view of men. Her late husband's affair devastated her, and she convinces Dorcas that men are dangerous and not to be trusted. Learning about Dorcas's affair with Joe brings back painful memories of her own marriage. Marital problems and infidelity are recurring issues in *Jazz*, and they mostly affect women.

h) Youth and Age: One of the novel's central relationships is the sustained romantic affairs between Joe Trace, a fifty year old man, and Dorcas, who is in her late teens. Throughout the novel, the murdered girl becomes a symbol of youth. Her aunt Alice Manfred, identifies Dorcas' youth with a budding sexuality that has brought clarity.

Violet tries to drink malts and eat multiple meals to regain the pounds of her youth and her "competition" with the dead girl is ironic because Violet does not want to compete with the young, dead child; rather, she wishes that Dorcas could be the young daughter that she never had.

i) Memory: Memory is mostly developed through the presence of several orphans in the novel and while Dorcas is the only young orphan in the story, most of the development of this theme actually comes through Joe Trace. Golden Gray and Violet have each lost a parent, while Joe and Dorcas have lost both parents in fires and riots.

In Joe's case, he never knew his parents and his "orphanhood" is defined by his "trace" of a memory. Joe is an orphan who never knew his true parents and continues to struggle with his memory after he leaves Virginia and comes to Harlem similarly, Dorcas' memory as child in East St. Louis IL, is built around a solitary photograph and is fading fast in Harlem. Morrison makes the argument that Africa-American community as a whole experienced a sort of "orphanhood" during this turbulent period.

7- Symbols:

7.1) Birds: Birds appear repeatedly and symbolically in *Jazz*. **The redwings** appear when Wild is nearby, according to local lore, and Joe finds this to be correct when he tries to speak to Wild. The redwings are no one's pets or possessions and represent Wild's freedom. Few would choose to live as Wild does, but Henry asserts that, though she may be "crazy", she has her "reasons". Yet she is not completely detached from the community; friends put out food for her, and she thieves small items from people's homes. The image of the redwings comes to Joe's mind, too, when he shoots Dorcas. He expects the crowd of dancers to "scatter" like the flock does. **The pet birds** represent domestic contentment. Violet and Joe get pet birds when they move to Lenox Avenue, and, as their marriage slowly recovers from the affair, Joe decides that the house needs birds again. The birds are caged and unused to flight; the poor parrot especially seems content in its cage before Violet throws it out. "I love you", the parrot says day in and day out. When Violet gets rid of her birds, she is perhaps saying that love is too painful or love has abandoned her home, and yet she misses their role in daily domestic routines. Alternatively, the freeing of the birds from their cage could symbolize Joe and Violet's wish to be freed from their marriage. The author refers to the young men in the City as "young roosters who stood without waiting for the chicks who were waiting_ for them." The image of a young rooster in the book represents a man's pride in his appearance. It could also symbolize the virility, frivolity, and vanity of youth.

7.2) Clothing:

Clothing has several symbolic uses in *Jazz*. Clothing expresses desire and desirability. Joe's hat provides an example. He wears it with "a definite slant," jauntily, and it sells him with his female clients. The unattractive clothes Dorcas wears are Alice's attempt to hide Dorcas's desirable body, and Felice and Dorcas do their best to

eliminate “the hard hand of warning” in Dorcas’s clothing before going to the dance party.

Clothing signals connections. Vera Louise’s green-as-grass dress is an example. First it belongs to a wealthy young woman; her lover then keeps it for years in his small home, where it is put to use by their son, on the day they first meet, to cover Wild, Joe’s mother.

Later, when Joe seeks out Wild, he sees the dress in her hovel.

Green often represents life, and the dress ties these characters together as family.

Clothing represents social rank. The clearest example is Golden Gray’s elegant wardrobe, which he carts to Virginia just to show off to his father. Golden worries about getting his clothes muddy when he carries Wild; he changes into utterly inappropriate clothing, including “boots that had never walked country roads,” before Henry arrives.

Wild, who is naked each time she appears in the novel, holds the lowest social rank of any character. Ironically, Golden chooses to shed his finery and live in the woods with Wild. He must wriggle out of his fancy clothing to achieve the metamorphosis that allows him to stay with her.



