JAZZ

Toni Morrison

Introduction to Toni Morrison

In the afterglow of a clean triumph—her widely celebrated, Pulitzer Prize—winning best-seller, *Beloved*— Toni Morrison moves to even higher ground. This, her eagerly awaited new novel, *Jazz,* is spellbinding for the haunting passion of its profound love story, and for the bittersweet lyricism and refined sensuality of its powerful and elegant style.

It is winter, barely three days into 1926, seven years after Armistice: we are in the scintillating City, around Lenox Avenue, "when all the wars are over and there will never be another one ... At last, at last, everything's ahead . . . Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff." But amid the euphoric decisiveness, a tragedy ensues among people who had train-danced into the City, from points south and west, in search of a promise.

Joe Trace—in his fifties, door-to-door salesman of Cleopatra beauty products, erstwhile devoted husband—shoots to death his lover of three months, impetuous, eighteen-year-old Dorcas ("Everything was like a picture show to her"). At the funeral, his determined, hard-working wife, Violet, herself a hairdresser—who is given to stumbling into dark mental cracks, and who talks mostly to birds—tries with a knife to disfigure the corpse.

In a dazzling act of jazz-like improvisation, moving seamlessly in and out of past, present and future, a mysterious voice—whose identity is a matter of each reader's imagination—weaves this brilliant fiction, at the same time showing how its *blues* are informed by the brutal exigencies of slavery. Richly combining history, legend and reminiscence, this voice captures as never before the ineffable mood, the complex humanity, of black urban life at a moment in our century we assumed we understood.

Jazz is an unprecedented and astonishing invention, a landmark on the American literary landscape—a novel unforgettable and for all time.

Toni Morrison is Robert F. Goheen Professor at Princeton University. She has written seven novels, and has received the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Jazz: Brief Summary

The novel opens in the black Manhattan neighborhood of Harlem, the year is 1926 and on an ice-cold winter morning, a woman named Violet Trace has thrown open her windows and emptied her birdcages of their flocks, including her favorite, lonely bird that always said “I love you.” Violet is a fifty-year-old black woman, she is skinny and emotionally unstable. We learn that she has

been living in Harlem for several years, but city life is difficult and the narrator hints that maybe the stresses of Harlem are finally wearing Violet down.

On one afternoon, Violet began carelessly wandering the sidewalks and then, for no apparent reason, she sat down in the middle of street, surrounded by a few concerned neighbors. Violet is married and she lives with her husband, Joe Trace, but she is not wealthy as she makes little money as an unlicensed hairdresser, arriving at her clients' residences. Violet is lonely and regrets that she does not have an extensive family to fill the quiet of her apartment‹a quiet that is exacerbated by her ejection of the birds. As Violet thinks about her loneliness and her grandmother down south, she has the sudden urge to build a family. She is convinced that this will breach the gap separates her from her husband.

Amidst the chaos of individual relationships, the City emerges as omnipotent and glamorous, a force that inspires and controls the courses of the human characters. Below the gaze of the city's skyscrapers, the ghost of Dorcas is haunting the Traces and while the Salem Women's Club was going to help Violet, she has been ostracized because of her inappropriate behavior at the funeral. Wholly detached from the moral commentary and judgment of her peers, Violet embarks upon a search to know everything about Dorcas: she visitsMalvonne, whose apartment was used as a "love nest" for Joe Trace and Dorcas. After this, Violet learns the dances and music that Dorcas liked, and she talks to teachers at Ps-89 and JH-139. Dorcas' dignified aunt eventually warms up to Violet and eventually offers her a photograph of the young woman. This photograph is placed in a silver frame and kept on the mantle where Violet and Joe visit nightly, still separated by their silence.

Even though he has shot Dorcas, Joe is a well-mannered older man who does not feel guilt for his actions. Instead, his nightly vigils are his mourning for the love affair that has ended. Violet cannot sleep and she visits the picture at night because it is quiet. In contrast, Joe Trace's visits are the pure result of his melancholic and slightly exaggerated memory of Dorcas. Both of the Traces were "field workers" in Vesper County, Virginia and soon after meeting Violet under a walnut tree (in 1906), Joe proposed marriage‹and a move to Harlem. Joe's memories of this time, roughly twenty years before the present, include his intense passion for his new wife, Violet, as well as an encounter with a mysterious woman who is half-clothed and hiding in a bush. For some reason that is not revealed to the reader, Joe Trace, having grown up an orphan, has reason to believe that this mentally-incapacitated woman may be his mother. His last memory of Vesper County is the scene of his conversation with this woman, who is hiding in a hibiscus bush.

Joe recalls feeling a special bond with Dorcas because she is similarly motherless and Dorcas' history is not as extensive as his, though equally mysterious. The teenage girl hails from the black community of East St. Louis, Illinois and is described as an anonymous migrant among "a steady stream" who came to Harlem "after raving whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home." She remembers visiting a friend and being startled by screams coming from her street. Her house was deliberately set on fire and she remembers the realization that her mother and her doll collection were trapped inside and burnt alive.

Alice Manfred lived in Harlem for several years before she called for her niece, Dorcas, to live with her. One of earliest memories of Dorcas is a Fifth Avenue parade in July, 1917, where silent men and women marched to condemn the lynch riots that had just occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois. Alice's reason for continuing in Harlem, despite her overwhelming fear of the music and fast pace of the city, is never revealed, but Dorcas' arrival does allow Alice to make her fears and concerns vicarious. Dorcas lives in an apartment of oppression‹her clothes are unflattering; Alice instructs her niece to be "deaf and blind;" she teaches her how to avoid anything that is living and unknown. Her "elaborate specifications" are a well-intentioned effort to protect Dorcas from the "Day of Judgment," "The Beast" and "Imminent Demise." Both the aunt and the niece, privately

admire the songs and dances of the street, and Dorcas eventually acts upon her desires. Alice Manfred had "overnight business in Springfield" and Dorcas seized the opportunity to accompany her friend, Felice, to a dance party, where she (Dorcas) is awkward though enthralled and ultimately rejected. Having "tasted" the music, Dorcas finds her life "unbearable" until Joe Trace enters the scene.

To give the details of Violet's family history, the story shifts to the original third-person narrator. One morning back in Violet's childhood, some time after her father had deserted the family, debt collectors repossessed their house and belongings. Violet's mother, Rose Dear, was presented with a "piece of paper" (presumably, an IOU) that her debtor husband had signed, authorizing the repossession. Stupefied, Rose Dear sat the dining table, sipping from an empty cup as the debt collectors emptied the house, took the dining table and slid Rose Dear out of her chair. Rose Dear's mother, True Belle, left her job in Baltimore and arrived to "take charge and over." Four years later, presuming that her children were in good hands, Rose Dear killed herself by jumping into a well. Two weeks after her burial, her husband arrived on the scene with "[chocolate] ingots of goldŠtwo-dollar piecesŠand snake oil."

True Belle sends her granddaughters to Palestine, Virginia where an exceptionally large cotton harvest has sparked a labor migration. One night, Violet is sleeping under a tree and she startled by a man who has fallen out of the tree under which she had been sleeping. This is Joe Trace, and his hammock has broken. After the cotton work is over, Violet sends her money home with her sisters and she finds other work in the area, so that she can stay close to Joe. After marrying Joe, Violet had plans to go to Baltimore, having heard years of her grandmother's Baltimore stories. In the end, of course, Joe and Violet decide to take the train to New York, joining a steady migration of black Southerners. Excited though challenged by the rigors of "citylife," the couple decided that they did not want children and Violet's three miscarriages "were more inconvenience than loss." By the time she was forty, however, Violet's "mother-hunger" had become "a panting, unmanageable craving," and her "citylife" began to unravel in chaos.

Joe Trace dates his birth in 1873, and he gives an extensive description of his childhood in Vienna, Virginia, beginning with his life in the home of Rhoda and Frank Williams. The Williams' raised Joe along with six of their own children. While the Williams couple cares for Joe as well as they care for their natural children, they are honest with Joe, informing him that he is not their natural child. When a younger Joe asks Rhoda about his parents she replies, "O honey, they disappeared without a trace." Joe misinterprets the comment and changes his last name after he identifies himself as "the Œtrace'" without which his parents disappeared. Joe identifies "the best man inVesper County," a man he calls "hunters hunter" as another parental figure in his life as a young orphan.

The narrator begins the chapter intending to understand True Belle's "state of mind when she moved from Baltimore back to Vesper County," to take care of her evicted daughter, Rose Dear, who was purportedly living in an abandoned shack. True Belle was a slave when she left Vesper County for Baltimore, but she was a free woman when she returned in 1888. True Belle convinced her employer (and former master), Vera Louise Gray, that she was dying and wanted to return to Vesper County to live her final days with her family. True Belle lived with Vera Louise Gray in a large house in a sophisticated Baltimore neighborhood. The third occupant, Golden Gray, was Vera's son, named at birth for his radiant golden color. Vera had lived in Vesper County, on the plantation owned by her father, Colonel Wordsworth Gray. In a small community where "nobody could hide much," Vera Louise enjoyed a romantic affair with one of her slaves and after she revealed herself to be pregnant, her parents disowned her. The narrative continues with Golden Gray's journey to Vienna, Virginia to find his father, Henry LesTroy(or Lestory).

Towards the end of his journey by horse and carriage, Golden Gray's concerns that he has lost his way are interrupted by a rustling in the bushes and the startling sight of "a naked berry-black woman." Startled by the presence of Golden Gray's carriage, the woman turns to run away but moves too quickly and without rhythm, banging her head against a tree trunk and falling into unconsciousness. The young man tries to convince himself that the woman was "a vision," but he overcomes his feelings of nausea and approaches the side of the road. The woman is naked, bloody and dirty; she is also extremely pregnant. Wrestling with himself, Golden Gray eventually decides to bring the woman along with him, because the heroic act will be an anecdote. After his sixth hour of travel, Golden Gray arrives at an empty cabin where he decides to rest, suspecting that this is the cabin where his father lives. He sets his trunk on the dirt floor, finds water for his horse and then tends to the woman in carriage, setting her on the bed in the cabin's second bedroom. After surveying the cabin, Golden Gray struggles to set a fire and later gets drunk from the contents of a jug of liquor. A young black boy arrives at the cabin and indicates that Mr. Henry has asked him to tend the animals while he was away.

Henry Lestory (Hunters Hunter, Mr. Henry) is "instantly alarmed" by the presence of Golden Gray and his carriage. Henry views Golden Gray as "a whiteman" and equates his presence with trouble. The father and son do not immediately speak to one another as Henry interrogates the boy,Honor, who explains that the white man has brought the bleeding and pregnant black woman into the cabin. Henry leaves the room and after surveying the cabin and discovering the empty jug of consumed liquor, he curtly asks Golden Gray "Do we know one another?" The impact of the young man's reply, "No. Daddy. We don't." is mitigated by Wild's screams. Honor and Henry assist in the delivery of the child and Honor is sent to inform his mother and the other women of the village, as it is clear that Wild has no intention of nursing her child. The conversation between the father and son is tense and emotionally unrewarding. Henry explains that Vera Louise never informed him of the pregnancy and that "A son ain't what a woman say. A son is what a man do." Golden Gray's sober thoughts are mostly of anger and he considers shooting Henry. Of course, he neither vocalizes nor acts upon the idea.

The narrator then confirms Joe's exodus out of Vienna, after racist's burned the town down. Soon after the fires' onset (they burned for months), Joe returned to the cane field to search for Wild, hoping to communicate with her and confirm that she is his mother. Additionally, Joe is worried that fires may have confused Wild and she could have easily wandered herself into a doomed situation. During one of the childhood trips with Hunters Hunter, Joe joked about hunting the wild woman and interprets Hunter's stoic response: "Šthat woman is somebody's mother and somebody ought to take care," as an intimation that Wild was his mother. Joe takes three journeys to find his mother, traveling into her favorite cane fields and much of the nearby forest.

At the end of the novel, Felice has decided to visit the Traces. She too, has heard Joe Trace sobbing in the windows and she decides to make an effort to cheer him up. Perhaps Joe is crying because Violet has returned the photograph of Dorcas to her aunt, Alice Manfred. Felice makes her visit to the Traces in the middle of her errands. When she enters their apartment, she is carrying the Okeh record and butcher's parcel of meat that her mother requested she bring when returning home.

As Violet is in the kitchen, preparing a catfish dinner for the three of them, Joe speaks expresses his gratitude to Felice and tells her that her visits and kind words are helping them get their lives back together. Felice confesses to Joe that there is more information that she has not given him, a message that Dorcas asked her to relay as she was dying. The message is: "There's only one apple. Just one. Tell Joe." Felice intends to cheer Joe up, telling him that he was the last thing on Dorcas' mind. Still, Joe is more sad than pleased. After the dinner, they hear music "floated inŠthrough the open window." The Traces start dancing, "funny, like old people do" and

they invite Felice to join in, though she declines. Joe sits down when the music ends and says that the apartment needs some birds. Felice adds that a Victrola (record player) would be suitable as well and that she'll being some records to play for them.

Characters in the Novel

Acton:

Acton is Dorcas' boyfriend, after she has ended her relationship with a much older suitor, Joe Trace. Acton accompanies Dorcas to the party where she is shot and killed by Joe Trace.

Dorcas:

One of the central characters of the novel, Dorcas enjoys a romantic relationship with Joe Trace, an older man who shoots Dorcas after she rejects him. An orphan, Dorcas has come to live in Harlem with her aunt, Alice Manfred, after both of her parents were killed in riots in East St. Louis, Illinois. Throughout the novel, Dorcas' interests in jazz, the "fast life," and "vampy clothing" bring about her eventual independence from her aunt's puritanical ideas. Dorcas' independence is marked by her relationship with Joe Trace, whose age and casual demeanor bear a marked contrast to Dorcas' speed and excitement. Her relationship with Trace, who is married, brings consequences from his wife, Violet Trace, who slashes Dorcas' face at her funeral. Dorcas' relationship with Joe Trace is her first, and even as she represents the "wages of sin," her ruptured innocence and orphaned childhood suggest that she is more of a victim, than a predator.

Duggie:

The owner of the drugstore, depicted in Chapter 4, where Violet Trace thinks about her mother and buys malt drinks in the hopes of gaining weight.

Felice:

Felice is Dorcas' best friend and co-conspirator, sharing in her efforts to evade Alice Manfred's rules. After Dorcas is shot, Felice kneels beside Dorcas' deathbed. At the novel's close, Felice consoles Joe Trace, who is suffering from grief and remorse, informing him that Dorcas chose to die and rejected all efforts to seek medical care. In her exploits with Dorcas, as well as her conversations with the Traces, Felice (a name that means "happy") serves the role of a comforter.

Golden Gray:

Golden Gray is a Phaeton-like character who appears in the mythologies recounted to Violet by her grandmother, True Belle. Golden Gray is the son of Vera Louise Gray and one of her slaves, Henry Lestory. After Vera Louise is disowned, she moves from Wordsworth, Virginia (accompanied by True Belle) to Baltimore, Maryland. Vera is enamored with her newborn son , naming him for his radiant golden color. Despite his auspicious birth, Golden Gray eventually leaves his home in search of his father.

Vera Louise Gray:

The owner of True Belle, and mother of Golden Gray. She moves to Baltimore after her parents discover that she has been impregnated by one of their slaves. An evasive and sentimental character, Vera avoids telling her son the secret of his paternity for eighteen years. After her son leaves for Vienna, Virginia‹presumably, to find his father‹Vera never sees him again.

Colonel Wordsworth Gray:

The father of Vera Louise Gray, who owns a plantation with "seven mulattos" of indeterminate parentage. When he discovers that his daughter has been impregnated by a slave, he slaps her into a serving table and eventually disowns her.

"Henry"/Henry Lestory(LesTroy)/Hunter's Hunter:

This man of several names serves several roles in the novel. As "Henry," he is the slave who has a romantic involvement with Vera Louise Gray, though he is unaware that she later becomes pregnant. Henry Lestory (or LesTory) is the name that True Belle gives to Golden Gray, when he asks for information about his father. Henry Lestory takes care of the pregnant and deranged woman, named Wild, and as Hunter's Hunter, he offers valuable lessons in life to her son, Joe Trace. A convoluted character, he serves as a connection between the folklore of Violet Trace's grandmother and the disappearance of Joe Trace's mother.

Honor:

A young black boy who lives in Vienna, Virginia, Honor is the first of the town's residents to notice Golden Gray when he arrives at the cabin of Henry Lestory, his father.

Malvonne:

One of the upstairs neighbors of the Traces. Malvonne is an eavesdropper who enjoys meddling in the affairs of her neighbors, going as far as to rent her apartment to Joe Trace‹for the afternoons and early evenings‹so that he might use it as a "love nest."

Alice Manfred:

An older woman, Alice Manfred is the strict, rather Puritanical, aunt of Dorcas. Alice is disconsolate as she considers Joe Trace's crime to be evidence of her failure to guard her home from the sins and violence of the world. After Dorcas dies, Alice finds herself lonely and she later befriends Violet Trace, before leaving for Springfield, Illinois.

Frances and Neola Miller:

Frances and Neola Miller, (the "Miller sisters") live on Clifton Place, and they are babysitters for Dorcas, when she first arrives in Harlem, at a young age. While Alice Manfred works late evening shifts, the Miller sisters feed Dorcas enticing stories of heartbreak and "hellfire," their lurid details negating the intended moral lessons.

Philly:

The baby that Violet Trace allegedly kidnapped from his carriage, while his sister went inside the apartment building to find a "Trombone Blues" record.

Rose Dear:

The mother of Violet Trace. Rose Dear is dispossessed and loses all of her belongings on account of the debts of her itinerant husband. Four years after her mother, True Belle, comes to rescue the family from poverty, Rose Dear kills herself by jumping into a well.

Stuck and Gistan:

An inseparable pair, Stuck and Gistan, are Joe's best friends in Harlem. They mention his wife's alleged kidnapping and later seek to console him after they hear that he has murdered Dorcas.

Sweetness:

The nephew of Malvonne, who makes money by stealing mail and rifling the envelopes for cash. He eventually leaves Harlem, either for Chicago "or some other city that ended in O."

Joe Trace:

Joe Trace grew up in Vesper County, Virginia in the Williams' household. After Hunter's Hunter intimates that his mother is Wild, a "wild-woman" who roams the margins of society, Joe makes three failing attempts to track her down. In an effort to sever his memories of an incomplete, "trace" of a mother, Joe marries Violet and later moves to New York and makes a decent living as a salesman for Cleopatra cosmetics. After living in "the City" for two decades, his idealism is tempered by the emerging silence that he shares with his wife. He views Dorcas, a teenager, as a final opportunity to regain his youth and excitement, but the relationship ends in rejection and helpless violence. After Joe Trace shoots and kills Dorcas, he is not prosecuted because as she was dying, Dorcas refused to reveal his name to the authorities. With Felice's indirect assistance, Joe is able to come to terms with his past and renew his relationship with his wife.

Violet Trace:

The wife of Joe Trace, Violet is an unlicensed hairdresser, who is nicknamed "Violent" after she invades Dorcas' funeral to dishonor the girl's face with a knife. Violet married Joe Trace in Virginia, and she was similarly eager to disavow her memories of an itinerant father and a mother who killed herself by jumping into a well. In Harlem, Violet struggles to preserve her sanity, amidst the tumult of three miscarriages, her husband's affair, and her ebbing youth. After Dorcas' funeral, Violet relies upon Alice Manfred's advice to stay with her husband. The conclusion of the novel indicates that even if Violet is unable to fully restore the physical body of her youth, she is able to resuscitate her marriage.

True Belle:

As a slave in Baltimore, True Belle cared for Vera Louise Gray and her son, Golden Gray. The mother of Rose Dear (and grandmother of Violet Trace), True Belle shares the stories of Golden Gray as she puts her daughter's life back together. As she survives slavery, the initial separation of her family and the suicide of her daughter, True Belle functions as a symbol of strength and fortitude, even as her Golden Gray stories have an unhealthy effect on Violet's perceptions of beauty and reality.

Wild:

A semi-conscious and pregnant black woman, who Golden Gray discovers on his trip to his father's cabin. She eventually gives birth to Joe Trace but as a "wild-woman," she is unable to function as a mother or in any other social capacity. As she lives in the forest at the community's edge, Wild's phantom-like presence tortures her son Joe Trace, as he makes repeated and unsuccessful attempts to communicate with her.

Rhoda and Frank Williams:

Foster parents who give Joe Trace his original name: Joseph Williams. While they do not mention (and may not even know of) Wild, they openly tell Joseph that they are not his natural parents. After Rhoda, tells Joe that his parents "left without a trace," Joe renames himself, concluding that he is the "trace" that his parents left without. Several decades later, Joe Trace holds the Williams family in very high regard and is grateful for their kindness and honesty.

Victory Williams:

Joe Trace's boyhood friend and foster brother. Victory has a enormous capacity for memory. In his old age, invokes Victory's memory as he begins the difficult task of coming to terms with his past.

Themes

Youth vs. Age

One of the novel's central relationships is the sustained romantic affair 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 calamity. The motif of the garden of Eden presents the image of Dorcas as a young Eve who is enticed and enticing. Violet Trace's reaction to Dorcas is similar. Her jealousy stems from her husbands affair and she can't help but notice the contrast between her aging, sagging body and Dorcas' youthful, fuller figure. 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. Dorcas' friend Felice comes to serve this role for Violet and she also provides consolation for Joe, demonstrating a healthier way in which "youth" can sustain "age" without bloodshed.

Subthemes: Sexuality, the "Fall" in Eden, Seduction

Music

The novel borrows its title from Jazz music and the idea of music is discussed throughout the novel. Alice Manfred and the Miller sisters interpret jazz music as the anthem of hell. The passion and pleasure that Dorcas and Violet find in the music is contrasted with the musical treatment of Joe's crime. When he stalks and shoots Dorcas, it is at a party where loud music is being played to incite passion, "boil" the blood and "encourage" misbehavior. For the entire novel, music is the weapon that the City wields to control its citizens. The seasons and weather are determined by the presence of clarinet players in the street. Music also bears a sadness that can be juxtaposed to Violet's ribaldry and Joe's flared passion. Wild's disappearance takes place as her body is replaced with a trace of music and this sound haunts Joe's memory for the rest of his life. Similarly, the "blues man" who walks the streets becomes the "black-and-blues man" and finally, the "black-therefore-I'm-blues man," providing a critique of racism. The "blues" songs that the characters evoke are largely the consequence of suffering brought about by America's racist traditions.

Subthemes:: Piety, Social Pretension

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 a child in East St. Louis IL, is built around a solitary photograph and is fading fast in Harlem.. In the same way that Joe and Golden Gray and Dorcas have lost their parents, Morrison makes the argument that the African-American community as a whole experienced a sort of "orphanhood" during this turbulent period. After slavery separated families, the "Great Migration" displaced millions of bodies□further separating them from their collective and cultural memories. Memory is definitely the most important team in the novel. All of the major characters, Violet, Joe, Dorcas -- even Alice Manfred, all of them suffer the consequences of living a life that is dissociated from the memories of the past.

Subthemes: Pain, History, Orphanhood

Violence

Jazz begins with a recap of Dorcas's murder and Violet's attack on her corpse. The couple that kills and then defaces the young girl seem immediately to be evil and immoral characters but surprisingly Morrison goes on to flesh them out and to explain, in part, that their violent acts stem from suppressed anguish and disrupted childhoods. Morrison traces the violence of the City characters back to Virginia, where generations of enslavement and poverty tore families apart. Subtly, Morrison suggests that the black on black violence of the City carries over from the physical and psychic violence committed against the race as a whole. She interweaves allusions to racial violence into her story with a neutral tone that lets the historical facts speak for themselves. Further, her descriptions of scenes are often filled with violence, as she discusses buildings which are cut but a razorlike line of sunlight. Even her narrative is violently constructed with stories wrenched apart, fragmented, and retold in a way that mirrors the splintered identities of the novel's principal characters.

Motherhood

Mothers are almost always absent from the lives of Morrison's characters, having abandoned their children, died, or simply disappeared. The absence of mothers also reflects the absence of a "motherland," as the African-American community searches for a way to make America its home, despite the horrors of dislocation and slavery. The mother also signifies a common cultural and racial heritage that that eludes the characters as they struggle to define themselves. The word "mama" rests on the tip of the characters' tongue and is an unconscious lament for a lost home or feeling of security. During one of Violet's visits, Alice Manfred blurts out "Oh, Mama," and then covers her mouth, shocked at her own vulnerability. Dorcas also refers to her mother out of nowhere as she lies on her death bed, thinking, "I know his name but Mama won't tell." Morrison's narrator, ever-present in the lives and histories of her characters, doubles as a kind of mother for the text, tending to the community of black Harlem.

Race

With its shape-shifting, omnipresent narrator, *Jazz* immerses its reader in the psyche and history of its African-American characters. The book attempts to mirror, from an anthropological and fictional standpoint, the concerns of this community and the roots of their collective search for identity. The narrator does not travel far from the self-contained universe of black Harlem and does not focus on the lives of any white characters, save for Vera Louise Gray. The legacy of slavery reverberates throughout the story and the influx of blacks to the City reflects a distancing from this past.

Q- Discuss the context and significance of the women characters in Toni Morrison's novel Jazz?

Toni Morrison being herself a woman portrayed her female characters in full length. Nowhere in her description, we feel suspicious of her personality. Whatever she gives us as an information about the background and psychological growth of female characters is in no sense their advocacy.

In whatever tone she has described the female characters we have no argument to call it a propaganda against menfolk.

In the description of the characters, she has not only kept in her mind the influence of society or City on them but also their own innate deprivations to cope up with men. The characters in her novel speak about themselves in their dialogues. They come with all their inner and outer qualities. Whatever they speak they speak about themselves. The description of character through dialogues in this way becomes independent of the omniscient interference of the writer. This is how we can say Toni Morrison can escape the charge of partiality towards female characters.

The chief female character in the novel, however, is that of Violet Trace. She has given us not only the picture of her physique but also the mind developed in the consciousness of racial complex. In the text of the novel, Toni Morrison has avoided giving any mental picture. Whatever she has given to convey the mind of the characters is through dialogues or their behavior with the other people. She has given the out appearance of Violet in these words:

She is awfully skinny, Violet; fifty but still good looking when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out the Church would be the end of it- the shame and all- but it wasn't. Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house.

Violet wore the same dress each time and Alice was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve, as well as the coat lining ripped in at least three places she could see.

To support her opinion about the psychology or mind of Violet Trace she has given two very powerful points or touches in her description of the novel. The first is Violet talking to her parrot and parrot's saying her 'I love you' and second in her decision to beget no children. They leave so powerful an impression of Violet Trace on our minds that we feel no further anxiety to know anything about her. The people living around her had started calling Violet not Violet but Violet.

Though Violet's character is portrayed as a central character or heroine of the novel. The other character equal to her stature both is presentation and significance is that of Dora's Manfred.

Toni Morrison, in fact, has tried to provide us with a full picture of Black life in America. She has given us the picture of nearly all types of people from layman to reasonable middle class. Whatever they do and feel is partly natural and human and partly a mimicry of White people. Her characters range from childhood to adult and old age. In the same way, they belong to nearly all types of minds. They are passionate; they are emotional; they are ferocious and they are cheaters. They are kind as well as the patient.

The character of Dorcas Manfred in this way remains struck to our mind and we do not dare forget it. Her desires to live life fully and her passion for enjoyment leave no doubt in the mind of readers about the forthcoming fate she meets in the progress of narration. Writing about the physical description of Dorcas, Toni Morrison has matchlessly given details we do not feel thirsty of any afterward.

"Dorcas should have been prettier than she was. She just missed. She had all the ingredients of pretty too. Long hair, wavy, half good, half bad. Light skinned. Never used skin bleach. Nice shape. But it missed somehow. If you looked at each thing you would admire that thing- the hair, the color, the shape. All together it didn't fit. Guys looked at her, whistle and called out fresh stuff when we walked down the street."

The description of her mental condition is so perfectly given that we feel bound to accept her as a tragic character. There is no other Black character in the novel we feel so much pity for as we feel for Dorcas. Whatever she receives from Joe Trace she gives to her boyfriend Acton.

What a pity! What a tragedy in the life of Blacks in America. This single point as enough to make Dorcas character an evergreen character in the history of character description. Dorcas meets a tragic death but leaves in our minds an indelible impression for coming years.

Toni Morrison s style of depicting a character is very unique. She gives us the sides or angles of a female character that is not only different from the sides or angles of other characters but also matchless and queer in their own importance. The character of Malvorne, for example, leaves no room for further description. Toni Morrison not only gives her mental picture through her habits but also through her response to Joe Trace's offer.

The character of Alice Manfred is also in the same vein portrayed to its perfection. His reaction on the death of her niece. Dorcas is particular to the psychology of Blacks living under great suppression of Whites. Further, she treats Violet in a very femininity logical way.

Minor characters like Rose Dear and True Belle are not given as ample space in a novel as they leave an equally indelible impression on our minds.True Belle comes to rescue the family when they are penniless and she is one who raises Joe's father Golden Grey. Similarly Rose Dear bears the pressures of trying to provide for her children. She gets so much depressed that she commits suicide by throwing herself down a well.

So we can say that the context of the female character in the novel is that of suppressed Black society. Nearly all the female Black characters are morally strong. They are the representatives of virtue and good in the human soul. Neither the novel nor the society is complete without the Black female characters.