

## Jazz Plot Summary

Morrison said in an interview that she "put the whole plot on the first page" of *Jazz*. Various characters then address events of the plot, turn them over and over, and explore them to make sense of them. This plot summary is arranged chronologically for reference.

The earliest events in *Jazz* happen in the 1850s, before the Civil War and emancipation. In Vienna, Virginia, Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of a wealthy white man, has an affair with Henry LesTroy, an African American man, and becomes pregnant. Her father, Colonel Wordsworth Gray, disowns her but gives her enough money to live in Baltimore. True Belle, Vera Louise's 27-year-old slave, goes with her to help raise the child, an adored son called Golden Gray because of his pretty blonde curls. When Golden Gray turns 18, True Belle tells him who his father is. Angry and confused, he travels to Virginia to meet him. On his way he encounters a naked, heavily pregnant woman in the woods by the road. The woman tries to flee but hits her head and collapses, so Golden Gray reluctantly takes her into his carriage, though he is put off by her dark skin and her bloody head. He arrives at a small house that he believes to be his father's and waits with the unconscious woman until Honor, a young teen, arrives.

Honor confirms that the house belongs to Henry LesTroy, who is away hunting but will return soon. Honor looks after Henry's livestock while he's gone. He tends to the pregnant woman, cleaning her wounded head. When Henry arrives and realizes that he has a son, he understands why Vera Louise left. Just as father and son are meeting, however, the injured woman goes into labor. Honor and Henry help her, but in her pain she bites Henry's cheek, which leads him to name her "Wild." Wild does not want her baby boy, but she is never far from him, hiding in the woods. The boy, Joe Trace, grows up with a foster brother, Victory, but they leave Vienna to find work when the African Americans in the area are stripped of their land. Henry implies that Wild is Joe's mother, so Joe seeks out Wild several times and attempts to speak to her. Unable to interpret her gestures because of her inability to speak, he remains unsure.

Violet, too, is growing up in the South at this time. Her mother, Rose Dear, is True Belle's daughter. Married to an irresponsible man who is absent for long periods and then shows up with gifts only to leave again, Rose Dear collapses under the strain. True Belle, no longer a slave, returns from Baltimore to care for Violet and her siblings, but Rose Dear kills herself by jumping into a well. When Violet is 17, True Belle sends her to work a cotton harvest; there Violet meets and falls in love with Joe Trace. They marry and live for several years in Virginia, but when Joe is evicted from the land he bought, they join the Great Migration north and arrive in Harlem in 1906. There Joe works as a door-to-door cosmetics salesman, and Violet cuts and styles hair. She has several miscarriages, and gradually they grow apart as Violet becomes largely silent.

Alice Manfred has also made her way to the City by this time. In 1917 her seven-year-old niece, Dorcas, is orphaned during riots in East St. Louis and comes to live with her aunt. A fearful widow, Alice tries to protect her niece from the City's temptations, but Dorcas and Joe meet when he comes to Alice's apartment to sell cosmetics, and they begin a short but intense affair. Dorcas soon tires of Joe, despite his attention and gifts; she loves to dance, listen to jazz, and be among people her own age. Dorcas begins to date a young man, Acton, and avoid Joe, despite her suspicion that Joe will react badly. When he hunts her down at a party and sees her

dancing with Acton, she is not surprised. Joe shoots Dorcas and flees. She refuses to send for help and bleeds to death during the night.

Rumors of their affair spread and reach the ears of Violet around the time of

## Jazz Plot Diagram



Dorcas's funeral. She pushes her way to the open coffin and slashes Dorcas's face with a knife before the men throw her out of the church. In the months that follow, Violet visits Alice repeatedly, and they become close as they grieve and try to understand their losses. Joe, too, grieves the loss of energy and happiness that Dorcas brought to his life. He and Violet rebuild their relationship with the help of Felice, Dorcas's young friend, who answers their questions about Dorcas's hopes and dreams.

### Introduction

1 True Belle helps raise Golden Gray, leaves daughters behind.

### Rising Action

2 Golden Gray seeks his father, encounters Wild.

3 Foster family raises Joe; True Belle helps raise Violet.

4 Joe and Violet meet under the walnut tree, court, and marry.

5 Joe and Violet leave Virginia, move to Harlem.

6 Violet acts oddly, accused of trying to steal a baby.

7 Joe and Dorcas begin their affair; he dotes on her.

8 Dorcas rejects Joe, begins to date Acton.

### Climax

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9 Joe kills Dorcas; Violet cuts Dorcas's face at the funeral.

### Falling Action

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10 Violet and Alice begin uneasy friendship, grieve together.

11 Felice helps Joe and Violet understand Dorcas better.

### Resolution

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12 Joe and Violet begin to renew their marriage.

### Summary:

Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* opens in Harlem, New York in 1926. While the city surrounding them surges with music and vitality, Joe and Violet Trace experience loneliness and despair as their marriage sinks under the weight of past injuries. When Joe takes a lover and kills her, the tragedy precipitates a collision between past and present, paradoxically resurrecting Joe and Violet's relationship.

With a nod to its title, numerous literary critics have described *Jazz's* nonlinear structure as improvisational. As a jazz piece begins with a complete melody that various solo instrumentalists then improvise upon, so *Jazz* sets down its quasi-complete story in the opening chapter. In subsequent chapters, the characters individually elaborate on this story.

Thus, the narrator reveals, upfront, that on January 1, 1926, fifty-two-year-old Joe Trace shot and killed his seventeen-year-old lover, Dorcas Manfred, in Harlem. At the funeral, Violet, Joe's fifty-year-old wife, attempted to mutilate the dead girl with a knife but was restrained. Joe was never charged with the murder. Violet's outrageous action at the funeral did not surprise local folks, as she had become notorious for strange, even alarming behavior. In one instance, she sat down in the street and remained there, inexplicably, until people carried her to safety. On another occasion, a woman left her baby in Violet's care for several minutes, and Violet began to walk away with the child. No one knows for certain that Violet intended to kidnap the baby before she was stopped.

After the funeral, Joe and Violet, already detached, emotionally retreat from each other even further. Having shot Dorcas in a fit of jealousy when she left him for another man, Joe grieves her death and is preoccupied with thoughts of her. Violet finds her own thoughts frequently turn to Dorcas, as well. The girl's apparent feistiness and determination remind Violet of herself when young.

Violet's increasing desire to know more about Joe's lover drives her to repeatedly contact Dorcas's unreceptive aunt, Alice. After finally admitting Violet into her home, Alice gives Violet a picture of Dorcas, hoping it will appease her. Violet takes the picture home, where it absorbs her and Joe's attention.

Having disclosed the foregoing details within the book's opening pages, the narrative then swings back and forth in time as it voices the thoughts and histories of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas.

Joe's story backtracks to 1855 when the owner of a prosperous Virginia plantation discovers his daughter, Vera Louise Gray, is pregnant with the child of her black lover. Mortified, the family packs her off to Baltimore, along with her servant, True Belle. Vera gives birth to a surprisingly fair-skinned baby boy and names him Golden Gray. Although True Belle has her own children in Virginia, she raises Golden Gray and adores him.

With his golden curls, Vera's son appears "white," and he grows up never suspecting otherwise. Vera tells Golden she adopted him, but when he is eighteen, True Belle divulges the truth: Vera is his mother, and his father is a black man. Assuming he is the product of rape, Golden goes to Virginia to avenge his mother by killing his father. His plans are sidetracked, however, when he sees a pregnant black woman in distress near the road. He takes the mud-splattered woman to the home of Henry Lestory, his estranged father.

Shortly after Henry delivers the woman's baby, she disappears again into the woods, and he names her "Wild." Golden Gray realizes he no longer has a place in "civilized" society, racially segregated as it is, so he follows Wild and lives with her in a cave. Wild's baby boy is raised by foster parents who name him Joe, and he later takes the surname "Trace." Joe develops a close, apprentice-like relationship with the county's best hunter, who, known as "Hunter's Hunter," is actually Henry Lestory.

At age twenty, Joe goes to work in the fields in a nearby town, and there meets seventeen-year-old Violet, whose mother has also forsaken her. Demoralized by poverty and a wandering husband, Rose Dear, Violet's mother, killed herself. True Belle, Rose Dear's mother, returned from Baltimore after a twenty-year absence when she learned of her daughter's struggles. Violet lived with True Belle after her mother's suicide, but her grandmother's frequent glowing references to Golden Gray sabotaged dark-skinned Violet's self-esteem.

Joe and Violet marry and move north to Harlem in 1906. Neither one wants children, but when she turns forty, Violet regrets being childless and begins sleeping with a doll. Unresolved feelings of anger and grief about her own mother overwhelm Violet, and she withdraws into herself, rarely speaking to Joe.

A salesman for beauty products, Joe meets Dorcas while peddling his wares at Alice's home. Dorcas's liveliness attracts him, and he discovers he can share secrets with her he has never disclosed. Dorcas, too, shares her traumatic past. After her parents were killed in the 1917 race riots in East St. Louis, she moved to Harlem to live with Alice. Her aunt's old-fashioned ideas of propriety are at odds with Dorcas's bold spirit.

While Joe provides Dorcas with an outlet for her passions, she tires of him after several months and takes up with a younger man. Joe then hunts her down, a pursuit that blends, narratively, with

his hunt for Wild, his mother, when he is fourteen, which ends at her empty cave. Joe finds Dorcas with another man and shoots her.

Appalled by Violet's aggression at Dorcas's funeral, Alice fears Violet's violence. The day after Alice gives her Dorcas's picture, Violet returns, and Alice finds herself mending Violet's cuff. The women develop a candid, if brusque, rapport that provides Violet with much-needed female advice.

Dorcas's friend Felice appears at the Trace's residence, hoping to recover a ring Dorcas had. As they talk, they quickly feel comfortable with one another. Felice visits often, and through the trio's frank conversations about Dorcas, Violet and Joe rediscover their love.

Self-reflective, judgmental, and intrusive, the narrator of *Jazz* is noteworthy. Although unnamed and without gender identification, it is widely assumed the narrator is female. "She" opens the novel with the words "Sth, I know that woman," referring to Violet and seeming to establish a first-person narrative perspective. The voice occasionally assumes a third-person perspective, however, revealing the characters' inner thoughts. That the narrator is not all-knowing becomes undeniable when the novel's ending elicits her surprise, and she admits she envies the Trace's unexpected return to happiness.

*Jazz* is the second novel in a trilogy that begins with *Beloved* (1987) and ends with *Paradise* (1997).

## **SOME IMPORTANT THEMES AND SYMBOLS IN JAZZ**

### **Nighttime and the Hunt**

Morrison uses night in *Jazz* as a marker of routine and ritual, as a time for passion and love, and as a space for questing to fulfill deeply held needs and desires. The music, Jazz, has always had an association with night as an illicit and sensual time, and thus, nighttime figures prominently throughout the narrative.

Sleeplessness marks the lives of Violet and Joe at the beginning of the novel. The specter of Dorcas haunts the couple. Her picture is the focus of their nighttime prowling. By the end of the novel, as Violet and Joe gradually resolve the troubles of their marriage, the two become more routine in their actions and, as a result, begin to treat the night as a time of companionship. Joe takes a job that starts at midnight and so he and Violet spend the evenings comfortably in each other's company. The two overcome the restlessness and disorder that the night originally represents for them.

The night is also a site for love and passion. This is particularly true during the early period of Joe and Violet's relationship, which begins in the South. Violet and Joe meet one night when he falls out of a tree in front of her. Their love develops during night meetings, and nighttime becomes a special time for them. Later, because Joe also has his affair with Dorcas at night, Violet feels that the love she and Joe shared during long ago nights is tainted. While he is having the affair with Dorcas, Joe begins to live for their nightly encounters.

Unfulfilled desire motivates each of the characters in *Jazz*. Often the quest for fulfillment of these needs occurs at night. These nocturnal quests often result in unpredicted outcomes. Golden Gray sets out on a journey to find his black father and, as the sun begins to set, he crosses paths with the naked

woman, Wild, who is pregnant with Joe. Golden Gray cares for Wild at night in his father's cabin. As a hunter, Joe habitually spends much of his nighttime stalking prey. This activity is appropriate for the country hunter but becomes a problem when, as a city-dweller, he reclaims his identity and authority as a hunter and shoots Dorcas at an after-hours rent party after she tells him that she no longer wants to be in their relationship.

## **Birds and Flight**

Violet and Joe own several birds. The birds serve as a symbolic connection between the couple's rural past and urban present. Although the couple find in Harlem the economic security and relative safety they lacked in the South, they are both haunted by loss and yearning—loss of home and longing for their absent mothers. The birds seem to function temporarily as a substitute for the couples' losses. Violet talks to her birds more than to anyone else. Violet's parrot even tells her that he loves her and, as such, may temporarily replace the love she does not receive from Joe. Joe continues to take care of the birds, even when he is with Dorcas, so as not to disturb the routine of his stale marriage to Violet. The birds seem to represent a solid ritual that replaces the hunting to which he is accustomed.

Joe also believes that Violet cares more about her birds than her own husband. Joe feels threatened by Violet's relationship with her parrot because she gives more love to the bird than to him. This realization partially motivates Joe's search for love and affection elsewhere.

When Violet discovers that Joe has killed Dorcas, she runs back to the apartment and lets the birds fly out into the cold. This action may be symbolic of throwing love out of the window, letting go of and not appreciating the love she has. After Violet releases the birds, she and Joe are left alone in the silent apartment. The couple is lonely without the birds.

## **Love, Lust, and Longing**

In *Jazz*, the apple becomes the symbol of unrequited desire. When Joe and Dorcas make love, the two cast Dorcas as the apple, the forbidden fruit. Joe is attracted to the girl, and yet, even when their relationship is thriving, Dorcas and the feelings she evokes make Joe wish that he was never born. Dorcas dangles just out of Joe's reach. Although the two have a fully sexual relationship, Dorcas never completely is satisfied with it. Even when they make love, Dorcas wants Joe to take her out places and to do things with her, while Joe is entirely satisfied just being in her presence. All Joe desires is Dorcas's company, while Dorcas longs for affirmation that she is an adult, something her relationship with Joe cannot provide.

Despite her desire for something and some place else, Dorcas's relationship with Joe does provide her with one aspect of what she longs for, an adult drama. At the rent party before she is shot, Dorcas is aware of Joe's intentions to come and do her harm, yet she does nothing about it. She also does not reveal Joe's identity after he shoots her at the party. Before she dies, Dorcas whispers to Felice to tell Joe that there is only one apple. This cryptic remark may refer to Dorcas's acknowledgment that the longing that she had for adult experiences and for public recognition were in fact fulfilled by the relationship she had with Joe. When Dorcas dies, ironically, she receives the attention and celebrity she longs for in life.

When Joe learns from Felice of Dorcas's last words, he smiles sadly. But the next words that Joe utters, after learning of Dorcas's pronouncement, are the repetitions of Felice's name, possibly indicating that he will have some happiness and satisfaction knowing that the relationship with Dorcas meant something to his former lover in spite of all of the destructiveness that resulted from it.

## Sexuality

The word “jazz” has, since its origins, been associated with sexuality, temptation, and taboo. As such, it follows that Morrison’s novel should be rooted in passion. Sexuality is at the center of the novel as are other forms of desire and longing.

Sexuality manifests itself as a central current throughout the narrative. Joe Trace is moved, literally and metaphorically, by what he imagines is Dorcas’s innocence, freedom, youth, and sweetness. This attraction culminates in a sexual union that has its roots in both characters’ motherlessness. As a refrain or echo to the activities of Joe and Dorcas, the city sky reminds the novel’s narrator of the illegal love of sweethearts before they are caught. Tantalizingly, while Dorcas paints Joe’s fingernails, the two experience a metaphoric orgasm.

Malvonne reads from love letters she has never sent—letters that have been stolen and have not reached their intended destinations. Malvonne’s voracious consumption of the letters may represent an unrequited love and/or her unfulfilled desires. Contradictorily, she thinks of sex as “a low down sticky thing” (44).

Forbidden or taboo love manifests in the text in the sexual relationship that reaches fruition in the birth of the mythical Golden Gray. Vera Louise Gray, the white plantation mistress, seduces a black man, Henry LesTroy, and becomes pregnant. As a result of her pregnancy, she is disowned by her family and relocates to Baltimore with the family slave, True Belle.

The end of the text suggests the possibility of a quieter and more sober sexuality with the reconciliation of Joe and Violet and the quiet simmer of their twilight passion. The intimacy of their sexuality at the end of the novel is notable and contrasts sharply with the spectacle of Joe and Dorcas’s affair. Joe and Violet’s undercover whispers and public love are mysterious to the narrator.

## 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.

## **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.

## **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.

## **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. Both the City and the woods of Virginia are described as having their own music and rhythm and the pace of the narrator's storytelling ranges from upbeat and fast to slow and "bluesy." Music also speaks to the individual characters on a deep level, as when Alice Manfred worries about the sinful powers of the music. However, music can also be restorative, as Felice facilitates the healing process between Joe and Violet by bringing over her records and watching them dance.

## **Red-wing birds**

According to the local Virginia lore, Wild's proximity is always indicated by the flight of red-winged birds from nearby trees. The workers in the sugar cane fields establish their own set of symbols in the natural world based on shared stories and experiences. The collective recognition of a red-wing bird as a herald of Wild's presence illustrates the richness of a community's bonds. Unlike Violet's caged birds, the birds in Virginia have not lost their instinct of flight and like the woman that they shadow, they represent freedom from society's bonds.

## **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 human 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.

## **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, Violet and Alice in particular.

## 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 husband's 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

## CHARACTERS

### Acton

Acton is the boy Dorcas dates after she breaks up with Joe. Dorcas tries so hard to win Acton's affection, but nothing she does pleases him. The boy is superficial and does not really care about Dorcas. His relative disinterest excites Dorcas who is looking for someone whose interest in her more closely matches her own relatively low self-esteem. Dorcas also is deeply invested in the approval of her peers. Although Joe treats her with adulation and respect, Dorcas prefers Acton who is not solicitous of her needs.

Dorcas is with Acton at the party where Joe hunts her in order to commit murder. Acton and Dorcas are dancing when Joe appears and shoots her with a silencer. After discovering Dorcas's injuries, Acton remains self-absorbed. He seems much more upset with the fact that Dorcas's blood stains his clothing than he is with the girl's injuries. He disappears from the narrative after the night of the party during which Joe shoots Dorcas.

### Alice Manfred

Alice Manfred is the aunt who raises Dorcas after the girl's parents are killed in a race riot. Alice Manfred emphasizes modesty and decorum in her home. Her housekeeping represents her take on life. She seems to want, more than anything, to have some control over what happens and so maintains rigid control over her home and tries to extend that control to her niece.

Alice Manfred was left by her husband and never fully recovers from his abandonment. After he leaves, she dreams of revenge and fantasizes about killing her husband's mistress. Alice's inability to forgive either her husband or the woman paralyzes her and prevents her from progressing or making changes in her life. After Violet tries to attack dead Dorcas at the girl's funeral for having an affair with Joe, Alice Manfred calls Violet Violent.

On the other hand, Alice eventually seems to forgive Violet after the women bond. Ultimately, Alice sees that both she and Violet are wounded by life in very similar ways and that they both suffer from terrible losses that have warped their characters. There is some evidence that the relationship with Violet may even help Alice to recover from her past.

Alice's apprehensions are not only personal. She sees evil doing and danger in the world, and the music, jazz and the blues comes to represent all that is wrong. Alice keeps newspapers as a kind of proof of what she calls Imminent Demise. After Dorcas's death, Alice begins to obsess about defenseless women. She is a perfectionist. She sews to make money. Eventually, Alice leaves Harlem and returns to her home in Springfield.

## **Bud**

Bud and C.T. are acquaintances of Joe's. The two play checkers and exchange friendly insults with each other. Joe enjoys their company. The day that Joe meets Dorcas for the first time, he is delayed in the delivery he is making to her aunt's house because the conversation between Bud and C.T. is so compelling. On that day, the two argue over the S.S. *Ethiopia*, Marcus Gravey's ship, a discussion from which Joe has a hard time tearing himself away.

## **Clayton Bede**

Clayton Bede is a landowner in Virginia who takes over Harlon Rick's place. He exploits Joe and Violet to the point that they decide to move to Harlem.

## **Colonel Wordsworth Gray**

Colonel Wordsworth Gray is the novel's representative of the southern master class. Colonel Wordsworth Gray is Vera Louise Gray's father. The man disowns his daughter after he learns that she is pregnant by an African-American man. Even though Colonel Wordsworth Gray has children himself with some of the slave women on his plantation, he is unforgiving in his treatment of his daughter after the discovery of her pregnancy. Both he and his wife send Vera Louise away. They provide her with money and tell her never to return to her home.

## **C.T.**

C.T. and Bud are acquaintances of Joe's. The two play checkers and exchange friendly insults with each other. Joe enjoys their company. The day that Joe meets Dorcas for the first time, he is delayed in the delivery he is making to her aunt's house because the conversation between C.T. and Bud is so compelling. On that day, the two argue over the S.S. *Ethiopia*, Marcus Garvey's ship, a discussion from which Joe has a hard time tearing himself away.

Dorcas Manfred Dorcas Manfred is 18 years old at the beginning of *Jazz*. Dorcas is the other woman in the novel's central love triangle. The three members of the triangle are Dorcas Manfred and Joe and Violet Trace. Although the triangle forms the center of the novel, Dorcas is dead at the novel's inception. Dorcas dies when Joe shoots her with a silencer at a rent party.

Dorcas has simple and superficial interests and tastes. Her favorite band is Slim Bates' Ebony Keys. She goes frequently to have her hair done by legally licensed beauticians. Dorcas is, in part, interested in Joe because he sells cosmetics. During the course of their brief relationship, Dorcas enjoys giving Joe manicures. Dorcas asks Joe to take her to Mexico, a night club, but he does not want to be seen in public with her and have Violet learn of their tryst.

Dorcas's father is killed in riots in East St. Louis, Illinois. Her mother is killed later that day when the family's house burns down while the woman is inside. During the riot, Dorcas stays across the street at a friend's house when her house incinerates. While the house is burning down, Dorcas wants to go back to her room to get her paper dolls. After the fire, she is sent to New York City, to Harlem, to live with Alice Manfred, her aunt.

Partially because of the experiences of Alice's parents and also because of her own negative life experiences, Alice Manfred fears the world and all that might happen. As a result the woman tries to

control everything that she can, including her environment and her niece. Dorcas does not understand her aunt's fears and rebels against the woman's misguided attempts at protection. One evening when Dorcas is 16 and her aunt is out of town, she sneaks out to go to a party for the first time. She has a difficult time finding something to wear since her aunt forces her to wear very modest clothes. When Dorcas is out of her aunt's sight, she frequently makes a habit of dressing in ways that her aunt would find inappropriate.

At the party, Dorcas dances with a boy named Martin. She discovers that she is a good dancer. Sometime later, Dorcas meets Joe at her aunt's house while Alice hosts a Civic Daughters meeting. Joe comes to Alice's in his capacity as a door to door cosmetics salesman. Dorcas answers the door when Joe arrives. This meeting signals the beginning of the courtship between Dorcas and Joe.

There is no particular or obvious reason for Joe to be attracted to Dorcas. She has long hair and bad skin. The girl wears glasses, but not around Joe. She also changes her voice when she is around Joe. Dorcas is young enough to be one of Joe and Violet's miscarried children. She feels that the body she inhabits is unworthy of the love and attention Joe lavishes.

Joe makes her feel valuable because of his immense hunger for her. His hunger stems from the absences and hollows that formed in him as the result of his status as an orphan like Dorcas. After Dorcas grows tired of Joe and of his unfailing adulation, she chooses a second lover who is closer to her age named Acton.

Acton does not treat Dorcas well or genuinely care for the girl, but she still likes Acton better than she does Joe because he is in demand. Dorcas is immature and asks the boys she dates to do foolhardy things to impress her, like slapping white sales ladies. Frequently, she gives Acton presents and acts toward him with the deference and care she learned from Joe's treatment.

Dorcas is with Acton at a party the night that she is killed. Joe comes to the party and shoots the girl with a silencer. Joe does not shoot Dorcas out of anger, but because he cannot stand the idea of her living without him and no longer returning his love and affection. When Dorcas's friend, Felice, asks her who shot her, she refuses to tell her or anyone else of Joe's guilt. Dorcas's refusal suggests that her feelings for Joe may have been more profound than was apparent in her breakup with and subsequent cruelty to the man.

Dorcas dies as a result of the injuries she receives at Joe's hands. Alice Manfred is beside herself at the news of the death of her niece. Alice Manfred cannot forgive herself when she learns that Dorcas met Joe at her house. Violet is so angry when she learns of Joe's affair with Dorcas that she goes to Dorcas's funeral and impotently attempts to stab the girl while she lies in her coffin.

Violet becomes obsessed with Dorcas and borrows a photograph of her from Alice Manfred, who loans Violet the photograph to get Violet to leave her apartment. Joe and Violet take turns looking at the girl's photograph and projecting on to her their imaginings and desires. Eventually, Dorcas's friend Felice helps to free Joe and Violet from the spell of Dorcas when she gives them more information about what the girl was really like in life.

## **Duggie**

Duggie is the owner of the malt shop that Violet frequents. Violet goes there to drink the malts she thinks will help her to have hips. She believes that having hips like she used to have when she first met Joe will help save her marriage and will affirm her womanhood. Before the couple actually meet at Alice Manfred's, Joe first sees Dorcas in Duggie's where she goes to buy the peppermint candy that she loves and that makes her skin break out.

## **The Dumfrey Women**

The Dumfrey women are Harlem residents. The women are a mother and daughter who imagine themselves to be the epitome of what it means to be urbane. The two women are Violet's customers and have relocated to Harlem from Cottown, which is near Memphis. Their origins in the country may help to explain the airs that the women adopt when they arrive in the city. They appear to be what Harlem residents refer to as citified.

Their father and husband owns a store on 136th Street and the money that he brings in contributes to the sense of status the women feel. Both women have the good fortune of having desk jobs, jobs that also confer a type of status. Violet comes to their home every other Tuesday to do their hair. They are the customers Violet is waiting for when she is accused of stealing the baby, Phil, from the girl with the records.

## **Faye**

Faye is Stuck's new wife. Stuck is Joe's best friend.

## **Felice**

Felice is Dorcas's best friend and goes with Dorcas to the rent party where Joe kills her. Trying to save her friend, Felice calls the ambulance twice. She does not go to Dorcas's funeral because she is mad at Dorcas. She believes that Dorcas wanted to die. Before the party, Felice loans Dorcas a ring Felice's mother stole for her daughter from Tiffany's. Felice's mother steals the ring for her daughter as the result of a racial slur that she experiences while in the store. Much to Felice's chagrin and distress, Dorcas wears the ring to her grave. Felice lives with her grandmother, although her parents come home when they can from their employment in a town called Tuxedo Junction.

Before she learns that the ring her mother gave her has been buried with Dorcas, Felice visits Violet and Joe to inquire about the ring. Felice thinks that they might have some information about where Dorcas might have left it. After her first visit to Violet and Joe, Felice feels that the experience with the elderly couple helps her to understand Dorcas better. She even almost understands why Dorcas had a relationship with Joe. Felice and the couple become friends and, unintentionally, Felice helps them to recover their marriage and get over what happened between Joe and Dorcas. After Felice's embrace of them, the couple no longer haunt Dorcas's picture at night looking for answers. They find comfort in each other's arms and in a newfound appreciation of their long-term love.

## **Felice's Mother**

Felice's mother is away from Felice working most of the time when Felice is young. She, along with Felice's father, Walter, works in a town called Tuxedo Junction. Felice's mother, who remains unnamed in the novel, misses going to church when she and Walter are working in Tuxedo Junction. As a result the woman is filled with regrets whenever Felice sees her mother. The woman loves to dance.

Apparently, Felice's mother is bitter about the racism she experiences as a part of her work and is sensitive to racially based insults and slights. When injured by a racial slur, she steals a ring from Tiffany's and gives it to Felice. This is the ring that Felice loans to Dorcas and it is, inadvertently, buried with the girl.

Felice's mother grows too ill to work in Tuxedo. Felice empathizes and helps both her mother and grandmother with the things they need that require her assistance.

## **Frances Miller**

Frances Miller and her sister tend small children during the day. They belong to a group called the Doomsdayers. The women keep a list of nightclubs that sell liquor. Even though the nightclubs often are owned and/or frequented by other African Americans, the women are willing to report the lawbreakers to the authorities. When Dorcas is young and has moved to New York to live with Alice after the death of her parents, the sisters watch the child while Alice works. Frances Miller gives the kids in her care, including Dorcas, apple butter sandwiches and tells them stories about love. Dorcas's romantic notions about love that she acts out later may have roots in the stories that she hears from the Miller sisters while she is a young, impressionable girl.

## **Frank Williams**

Frank Williams is the father of Victory Williams and the husband of Rhoda Williams. He and his wife adopt Joe after the child is abandoned as a baby by his mother, Wild. Frank Williams is good to Joe and treats him like one of his own children.

## **Gistan**

Gistan is a friend of Joe. When Joe has problems with Violet, and later with Dorcas, he cannot talk with his friend about it. When Joe kills Dorcas at the rent party, Gistan comes by Joe and Violet's house with Stuck, Joe's other friend, to tell Joe that they cannot play cards with him anymore. The two friends shun him because of his murder of Dorcas. The girl's death, however, does not end the men's relationship forever. The friendship between the three is renewed by the end of the novel. Once their friendship is reestablished, Gistan helps Joe get a better job at a hotel. The hotel's clientele are so wealthy that they are able to tip the workers with paper money—a fact that helps Violet and Joe financially.

## **Golden Gray**

Golden Gray is Vera Louise's mixed-race son. Vera Louise Gray conceives the boy while, during her youth, she has an affair with African-American Henry LeTroy. Following her parents' discovery of her pregnancy, Vera Louise Gray is disowned by her family. Although they cast her off, they supply the woman with enough money for her to live comfortably for the remainder of her life away from them and from her home. Vera Louise takes their money and the woman who has functioned as her MAMMY, True Belle, and relocates to Baltimore where she gives birth to her son whom she names Golden Gray because of his appearance.

Ignorant of his parentage until he is 18, Golden believes he is Vera Louise's protégé rather than her son. He is raised by Vera Louise and True Belle.

The women dote on him and make him feel as if he is the most important person in the world. The two women name him for his hair, which is golden and curls in tendrils around the boy's neck. True Belle tells him that pretty hair can never be too long. True Belle, Vera Louise's slave, is Golden Gray's first love. Golden Gray is proficient at two things: reining in his horse and playing the piano.

Golden Gray learns the truth about his parentage when Vera Louise finally tells him the story of his life. Capable of conceiving of life only in chivalric terms, he decides that his sole course of action is to go and confront the man who is his father in order to defend his mother's honor. Golden Gray leaves Baltimore, his home, Vera Louise, and True Belle, and goes out into the world on a confused and misguided quest for revenge and justice. Golden Gray cannot reconcile with his selfimage—the reality that he is black. He has always looked down on people that he considered to be black and as a result is in the only turmoil he has ever had to face as he tries to understand who he is as the illegitimate son of a black man.

Golden Gray sets off on an ill-conceived journey designed to assuage his discomfort and to revenge his mother. He sets off with all of the trappings of the chivalric hero—velvet jacket, carriage, and horse. While on his quest, Golden Gray happens upon a young, naked, and pregnant black woman who, when she sees him, knocks herself out by running into a tree. The chivalric hero, ironically, is not pleased by his discovery of a damsel in distress. Golden Gray puts the woman, ultimately known as Wild, in his carriage only with the greatest of reluctance. Although Golden Gray has cast himself in the role of chivalric hero, the youth is more concerned about his clothes than Wild's well-being.

When Golden Gray finally arrives at his destination, the home of Henry LesTroy, he is uncertain how to proceed. Again, his concerns and priorities demonstrate a marked disregard for the life of Wild and her unborn child. Eventually, he settles the woman, without ceremony or concern, on Henry LesTroy's bed.

When LesTroy finally returns from his hunting trip he confronts Golden Gray, who he thinks is white, about his intrusive presence in his house. Golden Gray tells LesTroy that he is his son and the two proceed to have an encounter, the outcome of which the reader does not have access to and does not fully experience.

The only other account of Golden Gray in *Jazz* occurs through both Joe and Violet's recollections of the enigmatic man. Violet learns about Golden through the stories told to her by her grandmother, Vera Louise Gray's slave, True Belle. When True Belle leaves Vera Louise after news of the downfall of her daughter Rose Dear, she returns to her family after her long exile to care for her grandchildren, one of whom is Violet. True Belle is enamored of the young Golden Gray who has been under her primary care since his birth. She transfers her adoration of the boy to her granddaughter, Violet. The stories of Golden Gray make Violet feel inadequate and unattractive. The stories of Golden Gray's hair may be the source of Violet's adult occupation as a hair dresser. True Belle's stories are at the nexus of Violet's feelings of loss and inadequacy, feelings that are particularly acute following the death of Violet's mother by suicide. Rose Dear, Violet's mother, kills herself by drowning herself in the family well and that loss, interspersed with True Belle's stories of Golden Gray, sets Violet on a path of low self-esteem that eventually contributes to the decay of her marriage to Joe.

Likewise, Joe is also plagued by the legacy of Golden Gray. Joe is adopted as a child by the Williams family, which raises him as their own. He ultimately recognizes, however, that he is an orphan. This recognition makes him long and search for his mother, who, he learns from rumor, might be Wild. As he searches for Wild, he finds traces of Golden Gray.

## **Harlon Ricks**

Harlon Ricks is the owner of the farm where Violet and Joe work when they first meet in Virginia. Joe and Violet live at Harlon Ricks's place when they first marry. Ricks sells the land to Clayton Bede who proves even more exploitative.

## **Helen Moore**

One of the letters Malvonne's miscreant nephew Sweetness (William Younger) steals and Malvonne finds is addressed to Helen Moore.

## **Henry LesTroy (Lestory, Hunter's Hunter)**

Henry LesTroy is the black man Vera Louise Gray has an affair with. Until Golden Gray arrives at his house, he never knows he has a son. He is out hunting when Golden comes to seek revenge against the man he learns is his father. LesTroy is a legendary hunter and is sometimes called Hunter's Hunter. He helps the pregnant woman, Wild, give birth and, when Joe comes of age, teaches her son how to

hunt. After Joe moves to the city, he recalls this first teacher as a man who could remember things clearly and who would express the truth.

## **Honor**

Honor is Patty's boy. He is the first to see Golden Gray at Henry LesTroy's house. Honor tends animals for Henry LesTroy when he is hunting. Although he is a child, he knows better than Golden Gray how to care for the injured and laboring Wild. He is compassionate and exhibits a large degree of common sense. Honor is startled when he first discovers Golden Gray in Henry LesTroy's home and believes that Golden Gray is a white man.

## **Hot Steam**

Hot Steam is the female writer of a letter to Mr. M. Sage. The letter is one of those stolen by Malvonne's delinquent nephew Sweetness. The letter is so spicy that Malvonne is conflicted about sending it on and fostering what she sees as the couple's sinfulness.

## **Joe Trace**

Joe Trace is Violet's husband. Shortly after his birth he is abandoned by his mother, a woman called Wild. Following his abandonment at birth by Wild, Joe is raised by Rhoda and Frank Williams. Rhoda tells him that his mother disappeared without a trace, so, with the misapprehension of a child, he assumes he is the trace in the sentence. So when he is asked at school what his name is, he tells the teacher that his name is Joseph and then he adds the last name Trace, thinking that trace is his last name. Joe is given the name Joseph by the Williamses.

As a boy, Joe's first job is cleaning fish. Before leaving Virginia to relocate to New York, Joe is a hunter. One night while sleeping in a tree, he falls out of a tree landing onto the ground beside Violet. This nocturnal fall is how the two first meet.

After marrying Violet, the two begin working a part of the property Harlon Ricks owned that is later turned over to Clayton Bede. Bede establishes a SHARECROPPING relationship that keeps all of his workers in his debt and ensures that they remain that way. As a consequence, Joe leaves to work in the sawmills for five years. He also works for a while laying rail. Then, he decides to buy some land of his own, but loses the land to whites who steal it from him. Eventually Joe gives up on the idea of remaining in the land that he knows so well and that he loves to hunt. Joe decides to leave Virginia with Violet after a fire decimates his hometown. Joe loves the woods, so it shocks everyone that he knows when he takes Violet to the city.

Joe has eyes that are two different colors—one that is said to look inside the hearts and minds of other people and another that lets people look inside of him. He does not want to become a father when he marries Violet, but he has a way with children. While in the city some of the jobs he has include cleaning fish, waiting tables, and working hotels. Once, he is almost killed in a riot.

He moves north from Vesper County, Virginia, with Violet in 1906. While living in the city, Joe and Violet grow estranged and stop communicating with each other. Violet begins to act peculiarly and stops connecting with her husband. After their marriage disintegrates, he begins having an affair with Dorcas whom he later kills. The loss of Joe's mother early in his life is profoundly connected to his attraction to Dorcas and his hunt for satisfaction and understanding.

Joe Trace is a diligent boyfriend and suitor and always brings Dorcas gifts. He is a door-to-door salesman for Cleopatra cosmetic products and he sells soaps and perfumes for the company. He talks a neighborhood busybody, Malvonne, into letting him rent a room from her in exchange for money, products, and fixing up the place. Joe is the kind of man whom everyone trusts.



Although Joe's attraction to Dorcas is inexplicable to those outside of their relationship, Joe Trace is moved, literally and metaphorically, by Dorcas' innocence, freedom, youth, and sweetness. While Dorcas paints Joe's fingernails, they experience a metaphoric orgasm, implying that their connection is more than merely physical. Although he does not realize it until later, his hunger for the young girl is really about his yearning for his mother. When Dorcas leaves Joe, he feels the same pain of abandonment he experienced earlier as a result of not knowing his mother and feeling discarded.

Joe does not handle Dorcas's breakup with him well. He responds in the only way that he knows how, as a hunter. He goes searching for Dorcas even after she repeatedly asks him to leave her alone. Joe even offers to leave Violet for Dorcas. Eventually, he kills the girl at a rent party. After he kills Dorcas, he sits at the window in his apartment and cries for months. Clearly, Joe mourns something other than his action and his lost love. Joe, like both Violet and Dorcas, grieves for his lost mother.

Eventually, he and Violet reconcile and grow close again. At the end of the novel, he is working at a speakeasy so he can spend his days with Violet. The two have an older, more settled love that can sustain them and that helps to heal the wounds of the past and their unfulfilled and impossible longings.

## **King**

King is Golden Gray's female cat.

## **L. Henderson Woodward**

L. Henderson Woodward is Helen Moore's father. Lila Spencer

Among the letters that Sweetness steals and opens, Malvonne discovers Lila Spencer's application to law school. Missing is the \$1 bill that was originally enclosed to pay for Lila Spencer's application fee. Malvonne worries about this theft and sends the money that Sweetness stole along with the application.

## **Malvonne Edwards**

Malvonne Edwards is the upstairs neighbor of Joe and Violet who rents a room in her apartment so that Joe can have a love nest for his affair with Dorcas. She lives alone and fulfills her emotional and psychological needs with other people's stories. She cleans offices in the evenings. The room that she rents to Joe belonged to her nephew William Younger, also known as Sweetness, before he moved west. Malvonne was the caretaker for her nephew since he was seven. After her nephew moves out, she discovers that the boy was a thief and that he has stolen several bags of mail. She tries to fulfill the wishes contained in the letters William stole.

## **Martin**

Martin is Dorcas's dance partner at her first party. He had been in elocution class with her, but was told to leave after the first day as the instructor believed that he would not be successful in mastering the nuances of standard English. Martin's dismissal from the elocution class is a commentary on the assimilationist aspirations of the African-American middle class.

## **May**

May is True Belle's daughter, Rose Dear's sister, and Violet's aunt. As a young girl, she loses her mother's presence and care when True Belle is forced to relocate to Baltimore with Vera Louise when it is discovered that Vera Louise is pregnant with Henry LesTroy's child. May is 10 when her mother leaves for Baltimore. She remains in the care of her father and her aunt, True Belle's sister.

## **Miss Ransom**

Miss Ransom is a client of Joe's. Joe leaves Miss Ransom's house just before he goes to Alice Manfred's for the first time and meets Dorcas.

## **Mr. M. Sage (Daddy)**

Mr. M. Sage is the intended recipient of a letter from an unnamed woman. The letter is in the mail bag that Sweetness steals and whose contents Malvonne attempts to resend. The letter to Mr. M. Sage is overtly sexual and makes Malvonne uncomfortable. The prospect of sending the sexual letter presents Malvonne with a conflict of interest. If she sends it, she feels she will be endorsing a relationship she views as inappropriate. Malvonne compromises with herself and sends the letter along with a cautionary note and an inspirational article.

## **Narrator**

The narrator of *Jazz* says she wants a long-term love like an old couple—a love that can be public. The narrator intervenes throughout the novel and shapes the story to her whim. She is, perhaps, the definition of the unreliable narrator. She cannot be believed or trusted with the story and is often incorrect about the motivations of the characters.

## **Neola Miller**

Neola Miller and her sister take care of young children while the childrens' parents are at work. Neola reads Psalms to the children in her care. She has one working arm. Her fiancé left her when she was a young woman and afterward, according to the stories she tells to the children, her left arm that had the engagement ring on it froze and curled up. She often tells the children stories about good behavior. She believes that these morality tales will help to control their actions when they are adults and prevent them from facing a situation like the one in which she finds herself.

## **Parrot**

After she tries to cut Dorcas's face at the funeral, Violet puts her parrot outside in the cold to fly or freeze. The parrot says "love you" and remains on the stoop for several days before, eventually, flying off to an uncertain end.

## **Philly**

Philly is the baby boy Violet may have tried to kidnap. When she is caught walking down the street with the infant, Violet says she is merely taking the baby for a walk. Most of the crowd, annoyed by Philly's sister's carelessness, is inclined to believe Violet, especially since she leaves her hairdressing supplies by the carriage on the sidewalk. Some who witness the incident, however, feel that Violet is trying to steal the baby.

## **Philly's Sister**

Philly's sister leaves her baby brother, Philly, in his carriage and asks Violet to watch him as she runs inside to retrieve the record, "Trombone Blues." Most of the crowd who witness the event condemn her as irresponsible and blame her for leaving the child in the care of a stranger for no good reason.

## **Rhoda Williams**

Rhoda Williams agrees to adopt Joe when his own mother, Wild, refuses to care for him. Rhoda breast-feeds the infant Joe along with her own biological child, Victory. The two boys grow up to form a bond closer than that of most brothers. When Joe grows up and asks about his biological mother, Wild, Rhoda tells him that the woman disappeared without a trace, so, with the misapprehension of a child, he assumes he is the trace in the sentence and adopts Trace as a last name.

## **Rose Dear**

Rose Dear is Violet's mother and True Belle's daughter. When Vera Louise becomes pregnant with Henry LesTroy's child, True Belle is forced to leave her family, including her daughter, Rose Dear, to go to live in Baltimore with Golden Gray and Vera Louise. Rose Dear is eight when her mother leaves for Baltimore. She remains in the care of her father and her aunt, True Belle's sister.

As an adult, Rose Dear has four children, one of whom is Violet. When, in her husband's absence, white men come to threaten her and repossess her furniture, they knock Rose Dear out of a chair although she is sitting in it at the time. Rose Dear never seems to recover from that fall. She and her family are dispossessed from her sharecropper's hut and forced to move out. After learning of her daughter's predicament, True Belle leaves Vera Louise in Baltimore and returns to her family. After her mother comes to stay with the family, Rose Dear jumps in a well and kills herself.

## **Sheila**

Sheila is Malvonne's cousin. When Joe goes to Alice Manfred's during the Civic Daughters meeting and accidentally meets Dorcas for the first time, he goes there with the intention of delivering Sheila's order to her and collecting payment.

## **Stuck**

Stuck is a friend of Joe's. When Joe has problems with Violet and later with Dorcas, he cannot talk with his friend about it. When Joe kills the girl, Stuck comes by with Gistan to tell him that they cannot play cards with Joe anymore. Their friendship is renewed by the end of the novel.

## **Sweetness (William Younger, Little Caesar)**

William Younger, better known by the ironic nickname of Sweetness, is the nephew of Malvonne and is raised by her from the age of seven. Believing that it is cool, William changes his name to Little Caesar. Malvonne still calls him Sweetness. After he leaves town, Malvonne discovers that he is a petty thief who has robbed at least one mailbox. Sweetness leaves Harlem headed to a city whose name ends in "o." Malvonne tries to right the boy's misdeeds by going through the letters he stole and replacing and resending the money the boy took out of them.

## **True Belle**

True Belle is the grandmother of Violet and the mother of Rose Dear and May. She has to leave her two daughters, Rose Dear and May, as well as her husband, under the care of her sister when she is forced to go with Vera Louise Gray to Baltimore. True Belle is a slave in the Gray household and is responsible for Vera Louise's care as a child and young girl. Having no choice, True Belle goes with Vera Louise to Baltimore after Vera Louise's family disowns her when she becomes pregnant with a black man's (Henry LesTroy) child. True Belle spoils the resulting child, Golden Gray, and dotes on the boy, but does not tell him that Vera Louise is his mother. She is particularly taken with his long, curly blonde hair. True Belle often smiles at Golden because she knows all along whom his father is and she seems bemused by the situation.

After the Civil War, True Belle transitions from being a slave to servant. Vera Louise begins to pay True Belle for her labors. True Belle leaves her job with Vera Louise in Baltimore when she learns that things are not well for her daughter, Rose Dear. Significantly, Golden Gray has already left Baltimore before True Belle makes the decision to return to her family.

After Rose Dear's suicide, True Belle raises her four grandchildren, including Violet. True Belle lives with Violet and her sisters 11 years before she dies, which is enough time to see her son-in-law return four times and for her to make six quilts and 13 shifts. It is also long enough for her stories of Golden

Gray to affect Violet and for the young girl to think less of herself by comparison. Violet's career choices, mid-life crisis, and low sense of selfworth derive from the legacy of True Belle's Golden Gray stories.

### **Vera Louise Gray**

Vera Louise Gray raises and adores a blond boy, Golden Gray, as her protégé who is actually her own bi-racial child. Vera Louise is the daughter of Colonel Gray, a slave master and plantation owner. She has a sexual encounter with Henry LesTroy, an African-American man, which results in her pregnancy. As a result Vera Louise is disowned by her family and they give her a great deal of money to leave town. Vera Louise gives birth to a son named Golden Gray.

Following the Grays' disowning of their daughter, Vera Louise moves with True Belle to Baltimore where they raise Golden Gray together. Vera Louise keeps largely to herself, reads, and explains to acquaintances that Golden Gray is an adopted protégé. The two women spoil and overindulge Golden Gray. Vera Louise never tells LesTroy, Golden Gray's father, about the boy and does not tell the boy about his parentage until he is 18.

### **Victory Williams**

Victory Williams is one of Rhoda and Frank Williams's sons. He is three months older than Joe and the two are raised like brothers after the Williamses decide to adopt Joe. Victory thinks that his parents will be upset when they find out that Joe gave himself the last name Trace instead of Williams when asked about his last name in school. Victory hunts with Joe—they are both picked out to become hunting men by Hunter's Hunter, Henry LesTroy.

### **Violet's Father**

As a result of threats of vigilante violence against him, Violet's father does not live with his wife, Rose Dear, and their children. Because of circumstances never made completely clear in the novel, it is dangerous for Violet's father to return to his family. As a result, he visits the family periodically. When he arrives, he is always bearing gifts for everyone, but is not able to provide the continuous support they need to survive. His absence is a source of grief and longing for Rose Dear and may contribute to her mental decline and eventual suicide. Violet thinks of her father as a dashing character who brings presents to her and to her sisters but who never is a constant presence in their lives. After Rose Dear's death, Violet's father comes again, bearing gifts. Not knowing about his wife's death, he brings her a pillow she will never use. He visits periodically over the next several years and then is never heard from again. After she moves to the city, Violet wonders if he is still alive.

### **Violet Trace**

When *Jazz* begins, Violet is a 50-year-old resident of Harlem described as "skinny . . . but still good looking." Violet is a freelance hairdresser who is unable to resolve her feelings about an affair her husband, Joe Trace, has had with a young woman named Dorcas. When Dorcas ends the relationship, Joe fatally shoots her at a rent party. Violet realizes that the shooting is evidence of her husband's adoration of his lover. Violet longs for this kind of love and her desire leads her to peculiar acts such as trying to stab Dorcas's body during the girl's open casket funeral, sitting down in the middle of a busy Harlem street, trying, possibly, to kidnap an unattended baby, and releasing her pet parrot into the New York winter air because she cannot stand its repetition of the phrase "I love you." These acts earn her the nickname Violent in her Harlem neighborhood.

Violet becomes obsessed with Dorcas. She wants to know everything about Dorcas so she can discover why her husband loved the girl with such intensity. She begins visiting Dorcas's guardian and aunt, Alice Manfred, and she even keeps a picture of Dorcas on her mantel. Violet's obsession feeds Joe's and the two become caught in a cycle of selfdestruction that is rooted in their pasts. Some of the

troubling events in Violet's childhood include the suicide of her mother, Rose Dear, and the influence of her grandmother's stories. Violet's grandmother, True Belle, returns to Vesper County from Baltimore to take care of Violet and her siblings upon learning of Rose Dear's death. When True Belle leaves Baltimore, she abandons the service of her white mistress, Vera Louise Gray, and Vera Louise's mixed race son, Golden Gray.

In addition to her two miscarriages, another of Violet's unresolved problems is her inability to attain the kind of adoration her grandmother, True Belle, expressed when telling stories about Golden Gray. Eventually, both Joe and Violet find resolution of their marital discord through their shared grief and through their interactions with Dorcas's friend Felice. The couple begins listening to music again and even purchases another bird that they revive with their songs.

A flashback midway through the novel reveals a young Violet in 1906 as she travels 15 miles from her birthplace in Vesper County, a small, fictional African-American community in Virginia, to pick cotton as an itinerant worker. Although strong, Violet is not a good cotton picker. While working, she meets Joe, her future husband. The two first connect when Joe, sleeping in a walnut tree, literally falls on Violet. After this encounter, Violet never returns home. The narrator describes Joe and Violet as "dancing" into New York City and Harlem as they ride the train north from Virginia. Their dancing evokes the rhythms of the city and alludes to the title of the novel. When the couple arrives in Harlem, they feel at home, as if they have finally found a place to belong. Joe and Violet represent the thousands of anonymous African Americans who migrated from the South to the North in search of economic opportunities and freedom from racial oppression and violence.

## **Walter**

Walter is Felice's father. He works in a place called Tuxedo and when he comes for brief periods to the city he likes to sleep and to be waited on by the women in his life. He also relishes reading newspapers. Later in the novel, he gets a job working as a PULLMAN PORTER.

## **Wild**

Wild is Joe Trace's mother. Golden Gray discovers her, pregnant by the side of the road, as he travels to find his father, Henry LesTroy. When Wild sees Golden Gray, she flees from him and runs headlong into a tree, knocking herself unconscious. Golden Gray is disturbed by the woman and does not want to put her into his carriage, but, ironically, feels he is too chivalrous to leave her by the side of the road. Golden Gray puts the naked, pregnant Wild into his carriage and drives with her to Henry LesTroy's. When he gets to the house, he places the woman on the bed, only after caring for his horse.

After giving birth to Joe, Wild is taken care of by Hunter's Hunter, Henry LesTroy. Wild will not touch or tend to her child, Joe, who was given to the Williamses to raise. Joe, the child of the wild woman, needs to be nursed by another woman, Rhoda Williams, in order to stave off impending death. Wild's refusal to nurse her child may be an indication of her symbolic rejection of motherhood.

When he becomes an adult, Joe searches for his mother in the woods. There are legends about Wild. Wild is said to disturb the minds of the men cutting cane and to cause women to lose their unborn babies. Joe finds traces of Wild in a cave in the woods but never sees the woman herself.

## **Winsome Clark**

Mrs. Winsome Clark is the author of one of the letters that William Younger (Sweetness) stole from a mailbox. Her husband was working on the Panama Canal. She and her children are in a bad living situation and plan to return to their home in Barbados.

## **Conclusion**

*Jazz* is the story of a love affair between Joe Trace, a fifty-year-old married waiter and part-time cosmetics salesman, and Dorcas, a seventeen-year-old girl. When Dorcas leaves Joe for a younger man, he tracks her down at a party and shoots her. Dorcas refuses to implicate Joe, declining medical assistance and telling everyone who asks about the shooter, "I'll tell you tomorrow."

Tomorrow, of course, she is dead. Joe's wife Violet, reputed to be a crazy woman, goes to the funeral with a knife and attempts to disfigure the face of the beautiful girl in her casket. Violet is strong, but finally the ushers wrestle her to the floor. She has only managed to nick Dorcas under the ear.

Crazy Violet has a brief affair with another man. When that fails to move Joe, she decides to fall in love with him all over, but she is unable to bring herself to do more than fix his meals and iron his handkerchiefs. Instead, she decides to fall in love with, or at least learn more about, Dorcas. She begins to write notes to Dorcas's aunt, Alice Manfred, and then visits her. The two women develop a strange, uneasy friendship. Alice Manfred even lends Violet an unsmiling photograph of Dorcas, which she takes home and puts on the couple's mantle. During long sleepless nights, Violet and Joe take turns going in the parlor and staring at the dead girl's photo.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Violet and Joe each confront their motherless past, their childless present, and develop a friendship with Dorcas's best friend, Felice. Many events over three generations contribute to the reader's understanding of the tragic story.

The novel is based on a photograph taken at the funeral of a beautiful young girl in Harlem who refused to implicate her murderous lover. Morrison provides a synopsis of the plot in the novel's first five sentences. She proceeds to riff on the basic story like a jazz quintet, adding layers of meaning and transforming the tale into one of transcendent love set against the somber backdrop of violence in Harlem and the vibrant sounds of prohibition-era jazz music.