

Narratology: A Historical Perspective in *Jazz* of Toni Morrison

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Jazz is about trying to ignore (or skip over) the past. Morrison's *Jazz* seems to be in continuity with *Beloved*. The character of Beloved disappears without trace, which is reintroduced in the guise of Wild and Joe in *Jazz*. When Joe (Joseph) makes inquiries about his own parents he is told: "O honey, they disappeared without a trace." (Morrison, *Jazz* 124) The narrator narrates the story of Joe, how he changes to Trace. Joe was born in 1873 and was taken in by the Williams family, brought up with their son Victory. Changing of name seven times symbolizes new identity. The story of Joe and Violet, for instance, is intertwined with the history of late slavery. By taking the surname Trace, Joe re-signifies a history in which the power to signify had been denied him (he took the name because he had been told his parents had left "without a trace" [*Jazz* 124]).

Like *Beloved*, *Jazz* is an extremely open-ended text from a reader-response point of view. After the death of Dorcas, the vacancy has been filled in by Felice and the story goes on. Although the narrative of *Jazz* makes no secret of who killed whom, the conversation between Alice and Violet throws a shower of questions:

"Why did [Joe Trace] do such a thing?"

"Why did [Dorcas]?"

"Why did [Violet]?" (*Jazz* 81)

Though the question of who killed whom is easily answered, it remains a complex question in the history of Americans which *Jazz* attempts posthumously to answer. Although *Jazz* is part of a larger narrative that began with *Beloved* and moves on to *Paradise*, yet this book, Morrison achieves a singular identification of form and function by naming the novel after

a musical convention and then presenting manifestations of that musical form as part of the context in which the characters and events take shape. Almost every section of the novel mentions the omnipresence of jazz music as a counterpoint to the events of the text. About the music in *Jazz*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments, “Music and literature, rivals of the arts, have not coexisted without intruding on each other’s terrain,” (52-53) It is Morrison who dares to make them coexist.

While *Beloved* remembers the past in order to create continuity and coherence in the present, *Jazz* return to the past to form an idea of black existence for the future. *Beloved* tells about the struggles with slavery in the late 1800’s, and *Jazz* picks up right where that story is left. Professor Karen Carmean writes that Morrison selected the title *Jazz* because the word is known “for the most famous kind of black music, a special kind of music that aspires to come from and produce pure emotion.”(102) Morrison tries to organize her novel like a piece of jazz music. Carmean writes that “the novel, like jazz, has a fast opening, establishing a dominant note and theme, and then the novel breaks into different parts-various stories [passages] and voices [instruments]. The novel is inspired by the whole range of human feelings, just as jazz music is a musician’s vision of human emotions and life experiences.” (102)

Just as *Beloved* was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, *Jazz* is based on a real event. The idea for this novel is taken from a book of photographs called *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, by James Van Der Zee, a famous African-American photographer who worked during the Harlem Renaissance.

Morrison in *Jazz*, takes recourse more to the dramatic technique of “telling” rather than “showing” fiction, wherein the unreliable omniscient narrator does not maintain the purity of its objective and concrete narrative. He rather gets involved in describing the situation. In ‘telling’ mode of narration, the writer intrudes in the course of narrative and supplies information about the fictional materials, as in the following lines where the narrator supplies extra material to the narrative. When Violet enquires of Dorcas, She is told that “the girl wore what kind of lip rouge; the marcelling iron they used on her (though I (Narrator) suspect that girl didn’t need to straighten her hair)” (*Jazz* 5). The omniscient narrator knows what is needed and what is not. The

reader is quickly informed by the narrator of *Jazz* that no juridical or charitable agencies could understand or help the situation. Thus the mystery of the novel's present becomes a place of departure, for the search for an answer that can only be found in a retrospective telling. It reconstitutes the social history of America by constructing historical knowledge from the vantage point of its oppressed players. This novel also shows the breakdown of the spurious family of Violet and Joe who live a childless and therefore essentially futureless existence in New York. After they reach the promised country in Harlem, Violet is encouraged by the illusory promise of full participation in the American dream.

The novel is made up of ten sections that have no numbered divisions or chapter headings but follow each other with unequal lengths and pick up the story at unexpected places in the narrative track. The structure and the chapter layout do not give adequate knowledge about the plan of the writer. *Jazz* is divided into ten parts that appear intentional—but if they correspond to anything specific, one cannot reach at a conclusion

The most problematic part of the novel is the narrator; the narrator's ambiguity. One cannot reach a conclusion as to who is the narrator of the story. The reliability of the narrator has been one of the fundamental questions of traditional narratology ever since Wayne C. Booth first introduced the concept of unreliable narration in 1961 in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. The reliability of a narrator may be put to doubt in several ways, and the truthfulness of any narration in fiction as such has also been questioned. Unreliable narration is often linked with mental illness and instability, the voice of a broken mind.

The narrator of *Jazz* at times tells the readers that "I haven't got any muscles, so I can't really be expected to defend myself" (*Jazz* 28) Yet at other times, it seems to be a human being who knows the disappointment of lovers, "of missed opportunities" (*Jazz* 29) There are also instances when this narrator appears to be omniscient, opens up details no one but an author could know. For instance, Joe Trace's three trips in search of Wild. On an other occasion the voice is subjective and limited. This narrative voice destabilizes a reader's reading of the novel. It seems to tell the story as a character within the novel, yet positions itself within the text, narrating the facts. The narrator also asserts complete control over the plot, as an author would:

“well, it’s my storm, isn’t it? I break lives to prove I can mend them back again” (*Jazz* 219) here, the narrator seems unreliable. Note, for instance, the following:

And when I was feeling most invisible being tightlipped, silent, and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They know how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them-and it seemed to me so fine-I was completely in their hands (*Jazz* 220)

At times this voice admits its lack of omniscience: “I have been careless and stupid and it infuriated me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (*Jazz* 160) Philip Page goes to the extent saying, “This narrator straddles the conventional dichotomy between third-person (external) narration and first-person (internal) narrator, destabilizing traditional concept of narration. (Page, Traces 60) One cannot figure out who is telling the story. The narrator seems to keep changing personalities—or shape shifting. Sometimes it seems like a gossipy neighbour or relative; sometimes the narrator is like a cat or a small dog who strolls in and out of people’s home; and sometimes the narrator is either God or the Dude who drives the Goodyear Blimp. Perhaps, the epigraph of the novel tells more about the narrator.

I am the name of the sound

and the sound of the name.

I am the sign of the letter

and the designation of the division.

“Thunder, Perfect Mind,” (*The Nag Hammadi*)

Critics and readers speculate differently about the narrator. Some argues that it is a character within the text, the author of the text, the voice of the city, or the voice of Jazz. In an interview, Morrison comments that, “the voice” is meant to convey that the book was talking, writing itself, in a sense This voice can also be read as that of language itself; the language which continually aims at objectivity. It creates perfect design as well and becomes the handmaid of the

reader. Readers are given a large responsibility in the textual world that is *Jazz*. At times the readers are not guided by any reliable person or narrator who can stabilize its meaning. (McKay ii) Doreatha Mbalia notes, “With this type of narrator, Morrison is teaching us to read differently. You can’t depend on the narrator for that matter.” (Mbalia 123) John Leonard, in review of *Jazz*, for the first time suggests that “the narrative voice is the voice of the novel; the book itself.” (36-49) Last two paragraphs of the novel show it clearly:

I envy them [Joe & Violet] their public love. I myself have known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it-to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrounded my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I lone the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that’s the kick.*

But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have waited for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (*Jazz* 229)

The words in italics speak the last speech of the narrator i.e. the book itself. This process is not one-sided. It is rather a mutual process—one has to make and remake the novel through narrative. The narrator only realizes it at the end: “when I invented stories about them...I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy”. (*Jazz* 220)

In *Jazz*, Morrison multiplies the usual dramatic core of the usual montage of flashbacks, repetitions with variations, and slanted perspectives to relate the theme with jazz music. It is not designed to develop the plot but to produce a kind of justification for actions that seem to challenge understanding, as if stories did not need to be told.

Morrison's technique of using an unreliable narrator generally contributes to enhancing the effectiveness of the story, of true events over the limited perception of a narrator. But, the narrator's self-disqualification does not allow the readers to dismiss the character that she represents as unfit. In fact, her confession of incompetence ends in an appeal for understanding from the readers that things replicate during the progress. She is the Voice of the City, not just a gossiping voice like Malvonne; she is a multiplicity of voices. More than just a voice or a point of view—she is a changeable and an image of the reader that the author would probably like to imagine for her story.

The narrator in the end of the novel tells that she (it) had believed "life was made just so the world would have some way to think about itself, but that it had gone awry with humans because flesh, pinioned by misery, hangs on to it with pleasure...I don't believe that anymore. Something is missing there. Something rogues. Something else you have to figure in before you can figure it out" (*Jazz* 227-28). With these words the narrator affirms the transitory nature of the narration as something that cannot occur outside the text. There is nothing outside the narrative and the reader has to enter into it for full understanding of the text that links the performative and connotative functions of *Jazz*. The closing words of the novel "[I'd say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now." (*Jazz* 229) are a declaration of freedom.

Jazz is written in the third person past tense, with an omniscient narrator. The point of view changes from chapter to chapter, shifting from Joe, Alice Manfred, Violet, and Golden Grey, to Felice and back. It is this shifting perspective that lends the story its framework and depth. Each person's way of receiving things deepens his/her understanding. By the end of the story, the simple facts outlined in the opening sentences have been strengthened and transformed into a complex web. The narrator tells the plot in the first two pages:

Sth, I know that woman.Violet that is as bad as jail. (*Jazz* 3-4)

The opening word of the novel, “sth,” introduces the reader to the colloquial narrative voice that will recount the whole story, which tells the tale of Violet and Joe. The narrator speaks casually and uses idiomatic expressions and slang phrases, thereby suggesting an atmosphere where stories and urban tradition are swapped frequently. The very first paragraph tells the story of Joe and Violet in abbreviated form. The rest of the novel will go on to flesh out the tale and lead the reader backwards and forwards in time and in and out of the consciousness of key players. The narrator’s assertion, “I know that woman,” and later, “Know her husband too” is significant because it demonstrates that the narrative voice that hovers over the plot is a part of this community and has witnessed many of the events.

Like many of the sections in this novel, the second section is marked off with a fully blank page that must be turned before continuing on with the story. The blank page serves as a pause in the jazz-like structure that informs and shapes the prose, language and narrative tempo. As with a jazz piece, themes from earlier segments are revisited and fleshed out. Section-1 ends with the words “I love you” (*Jazz24*) and Section-2 picks up this theme and continually uses it, as the first words of Section Two are “Or used to.”(*Jazz27*)

As the novel’s stories are told and retold, the narrator digresses to explore the lives of secondary characters and the stories of black people as a whole. On the train north to the city, the narrator suddenly gives us a glimpse of the world from within the perspective of an attendant who “never got his way.”(*Jazz31*)

On page number 40 after just two lines blank gap, the narrator starts describing about Malvonne and how she is convinced by Joe to spend some time with a female [Dorcas] for some conversation in her apartment. The narrator often mentions a character’s name in relation to a certain plot event and then branches out from that point to a discussion of his or her life or personality. While in the previous section, the narrator had been describing the meetings between Joe and Dorcas in Malvonne’s apartment, now the focus switches to Malvonne herself.

This continual shifting of focus is also reflected in the characters’ different attitudes towards jazz music, which was played all over Harlem during these years. Alice Manfred fears the music that drops down to places below the buckled belts. Like Wild, Alice Manfred wants to remain unseen and disappearing into the cracks and shadows of the city without being bothered by hateful whites. She considers invisibility a virtue and tries to teach her niece “how to crawl

along the walls of buildings, disappear into doorways, cut across corners in choked traffic, how to avoid a white boy over the age of eleven.” (*Jazz*55)

The music, just like the City and the other characters of the novel, changes when considered from different vantage points. The narrator urges her reader to consider the different viewpoints and often contradicts herself, moving quickly from feeling sympathy to feeling disdain for the characters. However, several pages later the narrator says about Dorcas that the girl was a pack of lies. The horror of fire and losing one’s mother connects Dorcas and Joe and allows them to share one another’s anguish.

Just after three dots in the middle of the line with a gap, the narrator narrates the scene. In March of 1926, a few months after Dorcas’s murder, Alice Manfred waits in her home for a visit from Violet, an unlikely visitor but one that Alice no longer minds. The hat becomes the connecting thread that carries the narrator from one train of thought to the next. Section three ends with Violet sitting in Alice’s apartment, wearing “a hat in the morning.”(JZ 87) and section four opens with a description of “that hat,” (JZ 89)

The structure of the novel is also suggestive, just as jazz, in which one performer takes on the theme of another and plays variations around it, so the different performers in the text take on each other’s themes, between sections of the novel. For example, the two short sentences below strike the same key-note; the first concludes a chapter focusing on Violet, whereas the second opens with a section focusing on Joe’s past: [Violet] noticed ... that it was spring. In the City. (*Jazz* 114) And when spring comes to the City people notice one another. (*Jazz* 116)

As the novel progresses, the middle-aged female narrator who seems to speak at the very start of the book becomes more and more depersonalized and starts to inhabit the empty spaces between and within novel’s characters. While at the opening of the novel, she seemed to know Joe and Violet no better or worse than the other members of their community, now the narrator seems to know these characters more intimately. The narrator immediately appears to be another character in the plot, one to whom the reader will eventually be introduced, but she slowly starts to fade and seems to be—at different times—a stand-in for the jazz music of the era or for the city landscape itself.

The section in which Dorcas is shown in a party where she was shot at is narrated in the present tense. The verbs denoting inner processes of thought or feeling can be used as signals of shifting point of view. The reader is shown as a guest at the party. Just as we had wondered about the identity of the narrator now the reader is led to question his or her own identity. The following lines from the text reveal this aspect:

“He is coming. I know he is because I know how flat his eyes went when I told him not to. And how they raced afterward. I didn’t say it nicely, although I meant to. Get away from me. You bring me another bottle of cologne I’ll drink it and die you don’t leave me alone. (*Jazz*189)

Here, in the last line the author has not used punctuation mark. The following lines denote the disturbing mind of Dorcas:

“He said, you can’t die from cologne.
“I said, you know what I mean.
“He said, you want me to leave my wife?
“I said, No! I want you to leave *me*.
“He said, Why? (*Jazz* 189)

When the narrator speaks to us and addresses the reader with “you” she is speaking to someone within Harlem’s black community, for whom “you” is used. The reader’s own identity begins to slip away just as the narrator continues to resemble less of a person and more of a spirit. Morrison’s narrative voice floats like the party spirit that “lifts to the ceiling where it floats for a bit looking down with pleasure on the dressed-up nakedness below.”(*Jazz* 188) Dorcas’s repetition of the phrase “He is coming for me” (*Jazz* 189) becomes her own refrain in the greater jazz structure of the book.

There are other elements of speech in *Jazz* that are reminiscent of the musical genre. For example, the characters do not always speak in formal or complete sentences. At times, there are just enough words to convey a general idea or impression, and the reader must fill in the perceived gaps. The astute reader picks up on this fact on the very first page of the novel when scanning through the quotes from this first part. The narrator is describing a woman and she adds, “Know her husband, too” (*Jazz*3). The absence of the subject, ‘I’, mimics colloquial speech; irrelevant details are omitted and the reader has to pick up the narrative “beat” or lose the

novel's rhythm completely. Proper English is rejected as false in this novel; instead, Morrison's characters must express themselves in their own authentic voices, even at the possible expense of losing the reader.

Jazz moves back and forth between earlier times and the early twentieth century, introducing a densely populated collection of characters in two different locations. As with jazz music, the narrative structure of Morrison's novel disrupts expectations that the reader has developed while reading conventionally written texts.

Another aspect of the narrative structure of this novel that is reminiscent of jazz music is the way in which the same story is played out again and again, but in different ways. The narrator of *Jazz* explains the essential elements of the plot, but reworks and revises them in multiple retellings. Each time she does, a new voice or new perspective emerges, layering on new meanings.

Thus, the third-person omniscient narrative executed by an unreliable narrator for the purpose of 'telling' rather 'showing' the lives of migrated slaves gives to *Jazz* an integrity by taking a historical event on the pages of the novel. Morrison has delineated the story of Dorcas, Violet and Joe. At the same time, the technique does suffer from certain limitations. Some events of the novel need re-consideration. The first is the fact that, contrary to the expectations of the narrator, Felice is adopted by the middle-aged couple as their own daughter instead of becoming the next victim of their craziness. In the underlying logic of the novel, not only has she become the daughter they never had, but has also changed into a substitute for Dorcas. She redeems the dangerous qualities in Dorcas and prolongs the epiphany she appears to have experienced before she died. The second event is why, after a period of mourning, does the Trace couple become reconciled? At the end of one of Felice's visits, they start dancing to the music drifting from the house across the alley (*Jazz* 214). The community seems to have forgotten their violent acts of the past winter, and the couple finds a place to rest and talk "on any stoop they want to" (*Jazz* 223). Their narrator also remembers a scene of past but forgotten tenderness, "an evening, back in 1906" (*Jazz* 225). With all its limitations, however, Morrison has made a very effective use of the technique in this novel which successfully communicates the novelist's view of the changing history of slaves and of jazz; the music.

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