

## “There she is”: Reconnoitering the Miasmatic Leanings of Joe Trace in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*

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Toni Morrison is a venerable master of her craft. In line with her tradition of superb fictional work, *Jazz* is a work that is too complex to produce a universal interpretation. The genius of Morrison lies in the fact that her novels compel readers to get involved as the interpretation is purposefully subjective. In *Jazz* Morrison has once again managed to accomplish a literary feat by skillfully capturing the history, essence, and spirit of a genre of music and translating it into enchanting literature. The shifting tone of the novel has to be absorbed and appreciated like the music after which it is named.

The whole plot of the novel is put on the first page. The triangle love story of Joe-Violet-Dorcas is presented, in the first paragraph, and the rest of the novel presents variations on this theme. Set in New York (Harlem) of 1920s, it is a story of passion, obsession and infatuation. The springboard of Morrison’s novelistic composition is a perplexing murder committed by a middle aged man called Joe Trace who kills his teenage mistress Dorcas Manfred in order to preserve the feelings their affair has produced. His faithful, diligent wife Violet mutilates the girl’s dead body at her funeral when she learns of the liaison. But afterwards she becomes obsessed with finding out everything she can about her husband’s lover. In this novel Morrison sketches the multifaceted and interlinked stories of the lives of the blacks in the time of the great migration within and outside this three-centered relationship.

*Jazz* resembles *Beloved* by being grounded in historical events. Like *Beloved*, it is also based on a true story as the inspiration for *Jazz* involves tragedy as well. Morrison once saw a picture that showed a young girl who had been shot while dancing at a party by an ex-lover. Although she was dying, she refused to name her killer thereby allowing him to escape. Morrison used this story to create a tale of adulterous passion, love, and jealousy and, most of all, the thwarted longing for connection between men and women, children and parents, human beings and life at large.

As jazz is called music of common people Morrison wanted to show how ordinary people lived and viewed that period in history. No doubt jazz influenced the structure and style of the novel but like her other works, it is concerned with those aspects of black history and experience which had

not previously been articulated. The novel isn’t called *Jazz* because it’s about jazz, the jewel of African American art or jazz musicians, but because its prose is the verbal equivalent having long, looping improvisations full of decipherable blues songs which focuses on terrible love, appalling death, resentful ire and also the calm of reconciliation. *Jazz* is just not only a story of rupture and violence but also of reunion and promise. It is about the lives of the people during that decade which the music helped to create and the novel like the music is, seductive yet melancholy, spirited yet unpretentious; it is at once a diatribe against and celebration of life.

Joe and Violet came to the New York City in 1906 leaving behind the traumas of their childhood. Joe sold cosmetics and Violet was a hair dresser. They had opposite yet complementary problems. Theirs is a story about the wounding and healing of two unmothered children who were abandoned by their mothers and they find each other. As both grow into adulthood, they simultaneously seek to forget and find the mother they lost through various strategies of denial and substitution. It is a well documented fact that children who are orphaned, abandoned, or denied nurturing mothers are psychologically wounded when they grow up. The loss of the motherly affections fractures and displaces a child’s developing self. However, in repressing the pain of this loss and in attempting to replace the mother in adult relationships, Violet and Joe move further from their own original selves.

As the sequence of events unfolds one discovers that they have not come together in the conviction of the uniqueness and rightness of their love as couples stereotypically do in the Western tradition. In an amusing variation to the cliché of falling in love, Joe literally falls out of “a walnut tree” (*JZ* 42) and lands at Violet’s side. The narrator says that they “were drawn together because they had been put together”. (*JZ* 42) The *raison d’être* for them to stay together is that they offer each other distraction from their painful loss of maternal affection which for Joe is symbolized as “all the redwings in the county and the ripe silence that accompanied them” (*JZ* 57) and for Violet as “the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small” (*JZ* 129).

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Joe and Violet are a childless couple desperately trying to come to terms with their frustrations and aspirations. Unfortunately they associate freedom with a childless urban life as a result their fragmented directionless lives propel them towards grotesque and absurd. Although they are born, raised, and married in the South yet they come to Harlem bursting with joy and hope.

Joe struggles to find his identity. At 53, he falls for Dorcas who is just 18, old enough to be his daughter, and shoots her in a paradoxical attempt to keep her. He is not arrested, not even accused, "because nobody actually saw him do it" (JZ 11-12). The grief of the past treads on the heels of the present. The narrator cautions "you have to know when to love and when to quit" or, like Joe Trace, "you can end up out of control or controlled by some outside thing" (JZ 9) Killing Dorcas discharges the pent-up misery and humiliation of his past. Joe who is psychologically wounded by the loss of his mother, needs Dorcas acknowledgement that he belongs to her. Unfortunately Dorcas too abandons him and does not claim him. Joe is an abandoned and adopted child, and his identity is one that he creates for himself out of the traces of meaning that are available to him, consequently he gives himself the last name 'Trace' because he cannot find a trace of his mother. Joe's falling in love with Dorcas is as unexpected as his murder of her inexplicable. Joe kills her without knowing which piece of his life he is trying to erase or rearrange. According to Freud, the first and most important relationship in life is the bond between mother and child: the relationship that all future relationships are based upon. Joe never experiences this type of bond with his mother nor does he experience a mother's unconditional love. Unfortunately he never receives any maternal love from his surrogate mother as well. A kind of "nothingness" begins to grow inside him from the time he is just a toddler. This lack of motherly affection from his surrogate mother, combined with the understanding that his real mother abandoned him, inflicts a deep psychological wound upon him. Interestingly at no time does he mourn the absence of his biological father. It was his need for a mother's love grows into an uncontrollable obsession.

As he closes in on his betraying lover, he also recalls his abandonment as a baby and his desperate search for the wild woman said to be his mother. When Joe goes in search of Wild what he wants from Wild is confirmation that "she was indeed his mother? And even though the confirmation would shame him, it would make him the happiest boy in Virginia" (JZ 50). His pleas for confirmation go unanswered. Gradually he tries to forget Wild but she remains "always on his mind" (JZ 207). Years later, Joe finds in Dorcas the mother he never knew and wants from her the love he never had. His obsession with his

mother now becomes transferred to an obsession with Dorcas. Joe never finds his mother however he does find Dorcas. In searching for one Joe also searches for the other. Wild and Dorcas eventually merge to become one person. Joe's fascination with his mother—"where is *she is*?" (JZ 184) gets transferred to an obsession with Dorcas, yielding to "*There she is*" (JZ 187). The kind of love and relationship that he stalked in the forests of Vesper County of Virginia which he found in the streets of Harlem.

Morrison does not brand Joe an immoral man. Even though he has shot Dorcas Morrison paints him as a decent older man. Although one can sense that he has no control over his act of violence yet the emotions which propel him toward Dorcas on the night of the shooting are not the ordinary passions of violence: rage, fury, malice, anger. Morrison neither provides explicit reasons for Joe's violence nor gives compellingly accounts for the horror that Joe feels compelled to inflict. Shooting Dorcas is the exception in his otherwise blemishless life. Prior to killing Dorcas, Joe is "A nice neighborly, everybody-knows-him man" (JZ 93). He is a man whom women trust immensely, confiding and establishing something of the rapport usually reserved for other women. He is the man whom women welcome in their midst, one with whom they feel safe. He is attended by a laughing, flirtatious gathering of women. Joe's voice reminds the black women of "home" they left behind or never had. Yet he proves fatal to one black woman!

In choosing Dorcas, Joe performs the gesture of recognition that he desired from his mother. Dorcas not only fills up his dreadful emptiness of being alone and want of mother-love, but as a young girl Dorcas actually symbolizes the mental picture of Wild that Joe has of her. He thinks that Dorcas is what he has found at the end of the trail, what he has been searching for. Hence, the act of love also becomes an act of adoption. Dorcas proves to be the end of change for Joe, and the beginning of new insight through which he struggles to establish and sustain a personal identity. Joe imagines that his childhood lack will be fulfilled, that he can change at last from child to man and grow up, rising in love. He addresses Dorcas variously as a lover, a father and a motherless child. However, their relationship cannot sustain the weight of this triple association. Predictably, Dorcas abandons the father-figure for a younger lover, and once again Joe is faced with the problem of coming to terms with loss. Joe's never-ending 'hunt' for his mother culminates in Dorcas' 'shooting'. His deprivation is such that he has had no experience of grieving and acceptance, only of a gaping chasm. With the death of Dorcas, Joe is, at last, able to grieve the loss of his mother and move beyond the grief toward forgiveness and acceptance.

However it is Violet's reaction which is shocking. If Joe's cruelty knows no bound than equal cruelty is expressed by Violet when she disfigures the dead body of Dorcas. She broods over her attempt to disfigure Dorcas' face. Suffering a deep sense of betrayal Violet's response to her husband's infidelity is a fragmenting anger that propels her first to mutilate the dead girl's face and then to find out all she can about the girl. Thwarted in her jealous rage for revenge, Violet becomes obsessed with the seductress who stole her husband's heart. She plots to win Joe back by learning all that she can about Dorcas so she can become her. Violet loses everything from her peace of mind to focus, direction and she has little to fear from perceiving and speaking the truth. Wholly detached from the ethical judgment of her peers, Violet embarks upon a search to know everything about Dorcas. She wants to find out "what kind of girl" (JZ 104) Joe would choose over her.

Violet is herself a multi-faceted woman but unfortunately possesses many identities within herself and from time to time stumbles into an indeterminate state. The narrator describes Violet's lunacy as "cracks because that's what they are. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day" (JZ 34). Violet describes her own condition in terms of "that other Violet" (JZ 111) and it soon becomes apparent that the development of 'that other Violet' helps Violet to find the way to her life. What appears to be a literal fragmentation of her psyche is in fact a means of survival. 'That Violet' is actually the decisive, tough, strong Violet who used to live in the South. Once in the city, Violet becomes more concerned with possessions than with love and communication. So what happens when the authentic self is not nurture? One loses or puts to sleep the person one is like Violet does. The self has to be known and loved and as Morrison says there is a need to recognize, affirm, and celebrate what she calls *me-ness*. Violet is alienated from her original self. Each attempt to recover her lost self through a chain of substitutions deepens the cracks of her splintered self and distanced her from Joe. The pain of unrequited love damages Violet's developing selfhood.

What appears on the surface to be just the story of a sordid affair turns into a subtle exploration of the mysteries of love. Joe and Violet are two lonely people whose love for each other can not penetrate dense walls of disappointment and pain. Eventually it is Violet's obsession with herself that drives Joe to commit adultery and then murder. Indeed, it is Violet's silence which causes Joe to act crazy and impels him to the younger woman. When he can no longer turn to his wife for companionship and intimacy, Joe looks for someone else and discovers his own comforts in Dorcas, a girl with a "sugar-flawed skin" (JZ 40) that

he finds irresistible. At the time Joe meets Dorcas, he has been living in a drab and dreary home where his wife has taken to sleeping with a doll under her pillow and talks only to her parrot that chirps "I love you" (JZ 1). Dorcas fills up Joe's "inside nothing" (JZ 52) and as Joe pursues Dorcas, he does so to stave off the silence and emptiness.

Looking from Joe's point of view he tries to retain the bonding with his mother by suspending it through Dorcas' death. Termination of Dorcas is a way of preventing her from re-enacting his rejection by Wild who had left Joe motherless, her presence tormenting out of reach. Cut deeply by his mother's tacit rejection of him, Joe develops a distorted idea of love which ultimately leads to his ghastly act of murdering Dorcas. It is the end of Joe's effort to touch his mother's hand. This terrible monstrosity bears witness to Morrison's assertion that "violence is a distortion of what perhaps we want to do" (An Interview with Toni Morrison 139). In this sense the murder of Dorcas is an act of love, a desperate attempt for Joe to remain linked with his mother and to remove the inside nothingness.

However murder cannot be condoned; but in probing the ethical blurring of "the monstrous potential of love" one becomes conscious of the grey areas of human love. Joe's misguided quest and insecurities lead him to kill his impetuous mistress to show his dislike of his lover's infidelity. But the question is does a man who has been unfaithful to his wife and betrayed his lover have any right to ask for faithfulness? Dorcas might have been unfaithful to Joe but he had no right to do what he did! Joe tries to measure the capacity of love against the past and fails miserably. The denial of love compels him to recover love lost at the enormous cost of an impish young girl's life. With every step that he takes forward he keeps moving backwards.

Morrison turns the conventional ethical values upside down. In a world twisted and distorted by brutish oppression, innocence assumes a criminal nature, and evil becomes a reinforced force. Joe's killing of Dorcas is far more than the murder by an aberrant lover. Murder becomes the 'signifiers' of love camouflaged in a terrifying act. As Morrison herself has said "Sometimes good looks like evil and sometimes evil looks like good" (Intimate Things in Place 216).

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