Jazz - Improvisations of Life through Jazzy Structure

Heather Miller

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Toni Morrison tells the story of Jazz much as a jazz band-leader would direct a performance; she does it with a jazzy improvisational flair. Jazz incorporates musical elements ranging from the instrumental metaphor of “coughing clarinets” in speakeasies to the idea that “music will solve and dissolve any question” (Morrison 64; 188). Jazz, set in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, centers on the fractured relationship between Joe and Violet Trace. Jazz’s first paragraph gives us the basic focus of the story:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church (3).

The Traces’ twenty-something yearlong marriage is falling apart for more reasons other than Joe’s infidelity. Throughout the story Violet and Joe trace the mistakes they made; they try to patch the cracks that have formed. Ultimately they come to understand that together they make the song whole; together they complete the set list. Their syncopated improvisation called life keeps their story going.

Jazz music evolved from the blues as a representation of the plight of slaves. In Souls of Black Folk, DuBois eloquently explains that “And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience...” (113). In 1807, Washington Irving alludes to a friend’s depression as having the blues (Tirro 114). In African societies, “music often expresses what could never be expressed in everyday life; the concept of talking drums and a private language reserved for a subculture are elements that seem to have continued unchanged right through slavery and into jazz” (Tirro
Music can be a venue for expression that was repressed in everyday life; music can be an outlet for frustrations, fears, and hurts. Joe falling in love with “an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” echoes with the cries of a blues song – Joe sings the blues by killing Dorcas – he feels a pain so profound, that the only avenue for relief is to sing about it, ostensibly, to murder Dorcas (Morrison 3). The narrator again evokes the blues with “Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man...Joe probably thinks that the song is about him. He’d like believing it” (119). Specific color reference aside, several layers form the description of a man. He is a blues man, so he plays the blues. “Black and bluesman” describes a black many who plays the blues, and “Blacktherefore blue man” implies that the man is sad because he is black. The progression through the layers of blueness leads to the narrator’s assignation that Joe is hearing his plight all around him because he is low down and deep, not only in the blues, but in his blues.

Even Violet’s emblematic name coincides with the blues. The color spectrum lists colors from reds to blues as: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet. Violet is furthest from the passion of Red and closest to the shadows of Black at the end of the spectrum (Brantley 28). Violet is “the bluest of the blues”, both in color and music (28). Violet shares the blues with her clients in a type of call and response, which we also see in blues and jazz. She shares the story of Joe’s infidelity, and as a response, her client commiserates with her. Stories of men carousing with women behind the back of a devoted wife are a mainstay of the blues (Tirro 136). Billie Holiday’s “Stormy Weather” is an apropos example of a lady singing the blues: “Life is bare, gloom and mis’ry everywhere/ Stormy weather/ ...When he went away the blues walked in and met me” (Holiday 6, 8, 10). As the precursor to jazz, blues is an older form of jazz. If we accept Violet as a representation of the blues, then Dorcas is a representation of jazz. Throughout the novel, Violet represents old things, while, in contrast, Dorcas represents all things new and exciting. At one point following Dorcas’ murder, Violet learns Dorcas’ dance steps...
and is compared to “an old street pigeon” (Morrison 6). Violet desperately wishes to move forward out of her blues, and into the jazz that is Dorcas.

We also see the story of Jazz unfold through the different perspectives of the narrator. These perspectives become competing soloists, who deftly unfold the melody of the plot, passing the story in solo pieces, which separately are incomplete, but together stack to make one off-beat but cohesive set list. Each chapter in Jazz is a syncopated improvisation vamping from the riff in each previous section; each narrator is a new rote soloist pushing the groove of the story forward in new and interesting ways. Once the chapters are combined, the story is more complete. Much like a jazz set list, each new reading of Jazz brings new and different understanding. Once a story is told or a song is played, it is never told or played in the same way twice. Rice asserts that a jazz aesthetic “is created by visible stylistic devices that approximate those used in the musical tradition ... such as ... improvisation, rhythm, and non-closure” (Rice 424). Morrison intentionally uses a jazz aesthetic, as she describes in her interview with Alan Rice: “The point in black art is to make it look as a jazz musician does, unthought out, unintellectual as it were, so the work doesn’t show, to be able to do it on the spot” (424). The “unthought out” portion comes through improvisation, or creating something on the spot without preparation. Repetition ties the improvised solos together and organizes a piece of music. A soloist improvises based upon the assumption that a specific riff, or pattern of music, will be repeated. The music the soloist makes between the repetitions is made up with only an idea of where to begin and where to end. In Jazz Violet and Joe’s journeys through their own syncopated lives become the improvisation of the story. We know they have a beginning, hope they have an end, and enjoy the journey in between.

Through the jazz aesthetic, Jazz is imbued with the rhythm and cadence of jazz. The jazzy feel often comes from the breaks and repetitions in jazz. Sentence structure in many of the jazzy sections is short and almost broken. For example “Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man” (Morrison 119). The clipped sentences force a pause that becomes musical. The sentences together form a riff that begins with blues and continues through with hyphenates.
Each sentence in this quotation is longer than the next, and the addition of the hyphenates extends the words spoken in one breath between the pause breaks creating the same breathlessness jazz soloists experience at the end of a solo. We again experience the jazzy feel through onomatopoeia and repetition with

Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain’t nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else (60).

The “ick” sound in licking, licorice, stick, and licking mimic the percussive sound of a drumstick’s click. The repetition of the “ing” words knowing, licking, tickling, beating, and blowing push the reader along with their perpetual motion.

Music is as alive in Jazz as the city is. The city responds to the music: “...in that part of the City – which is the part they came for – the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool (Morrison 51). The music changes the climate of the city, but it also changes with the climate of relationships within the novel. It changes from the freezing cold contempt of Violet and Joe’s dying marriage, to the white-hot burning passion of Dorcas and Joe’s affair, only to simmer to a slow burn with the cool comfort of Violet and Joe's relationship by the close of the novel. The changes are akin to the progression of music from blues to jazz.

Violet’s conflicted internal syncopation draws the reader in when she kidnaps an infant. Her transition from quirky but sane hairdresser, Violet, into an insane kidnapper, Violent, jars the reader. Violet takes great pains to contain her mental instabilities; however, her true madness seeps through the cracks when she uses logic to explain that the kidnapping was harmless. Her rhetorical question of “Would I leave my bag, with the stuff I make my living with if I was stealing your baby? You think I’m crazy?”
changes the key of the piece (Morrison 21). There is no question that she is crazy, but no one is going to tell her to her face. She is having an internal cutting contest with “Violent”. Violet and “Violent” engage in a cutting contest with their actions. In jazz, a cutting contest is “two or more soloists alternatively improvise on the same tune with the ultimate goal of ‘cutting’ or outplaying the opponent by countering, subverting, expanding, and ultimately topping the opponent’s musical ideas” (Grandt 308-9). The soloist’s compete with each other to play the best riff. Her outburst is akin to one soloist outplaying another. Both know who played better, who improvised the melody and twisted the modulation better, but neither one will admit defeat or victory. While we almost see her as a villain for kidnapping a baby, Violet’s memories of her desire for children, which came “Just when her breasts were finally flat enough not to need the binders the young women wore to sport the chest of a soft boy, just when her nipples had lost their point, mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer”, surprisingly lull us back into empathizing with her, thus winning the cutting contest for Violet (108).

As the novel progresses, we see Violet become Violent. Her duality is the cutting contest spiraling out of control. Violet is the tune she plays on good days; however, on bad days, on crazy days, she plays “Violent’s” tune. Violet’s view of herself is skewed, as she does not see with the eyes of the people around her. Alice explains that when people talk about Violet in the context of Dorcas’s death and disfigurement “the process had changed the woman’s name. Violent they called her now” (75). Violet acknowledges the cutting contest by thinking about the other Violet. She wonders: “who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things” (89). Violet separates herself into Violet and that Violet, who everyone else calls Violent. She recognizes the competition within herself, and feels like a bystander in the daily goings on of her life:

She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done (22-3).
Much like competing soloists completing a piece of music, “Violent” is the missing piece of Violet, together they make the song whole, together they complete the set list. Their cutting contests and syncopated improvisation of life keeps the story going.

In jazz, modulation occurs when the music changes keys through the change of the tonic or center key. In Jazz, “Violent” modulates the composition into a minor key, to a darker place in which “Violent” sees weapons in railings, knows where lost knives hide, and pushes past ushers to cut a dead woman. Violet sees everything Violet does through her own eyes. She seems to have split the two, unable to accept that she is also Violent, in an act of self-preservation, creating the cutting contest. Violet is the steady beat of the tune, while “Violent” tears in like the scream of a saxophone and makes the audience look up and pay closer attention. Violet sees the cutting contest as cracks. Cracks are minor imperfections, and cracks can be repaired; however, cracks can also lower the value of an object. Violet’s cracks happen suddenly, and inconsistently. They wind their way through her life improvising her behaviors. One crack may cause her to sit in the street, another may lead her to steal a baby, and yet another may induce her to reply to a client’s appointment request with “Two o’clock if the hearse is out of the way” (24). The cracks are part of Violet’s syncopated life. “Violent” fills the gaps crated by Violet’s cracks. At some point, Violet moves into the gap and “Violent” takes control, like it is her turn in the cutting contest. Joe recognizes Violet’s shift: “Violet is still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: “I love you” (24). It is as if Joe recognizes that sometimes “Violent” wins the cutting contest, as she did when she cut Dorca’s face.

We see the narrator accent the story unexpectedly through Violet’s newfound obsession with Dorcas. We are surprised to learn that Violet “wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too” (Morrison 15). Violet’s obsession with Dorcas is surprising, as she has just attempted to disfigure her corpse. The situation shows syncopation with the back and forth of Violet’s actions:
When she isn’t trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl’s hair; when she isn’t cursing Joe with brand-new cuss words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head; when she isn’t worrying about his loss of appetite, his insomnia, she wonders what color were Dorcas’ eyes. (15)

The back and forth between focusing on Dorcas and Joe alternatingly further illustrates the syncopated dance in which the story engages. The ebb and flow of interaction and solitude creates the complicated post-murder tune Violet and Joe compose both independently and dependently.

While the first paragraph provides us with a foreshadowing of the story to come, the entrance of Felice leads us to believe that history will repeat:

It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the City Violet saw, coming into the building with an Okeh record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to examine the record and that’s how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom (Morrison 6).

While it seems that history will repeat and Joe will fall for Felice, we learn that the narrator has improvised much of Violet and Joe Trace’s story:

So I missed it all together. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past as an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable – human, I’d guess you’d say, while I was the predictable one (Morrison 220).
The narrator expected Joe to fall in love with Felice, wallow in his blues, and murder her. Likewise, Violet was expected to retaliate and crack. The difference between the foreshadowing of the first chapter and the near end of the book forms a deceptive cadence, or lack of completion. In music, a cadence is a resolution, generally found at a transition between movements or the close of a piece of music. A deceptive cadence occurs when the composer composes what sounds like what will be a resolution; however, the resolution never occurs, leaving the sound suspended. Our expectations that Violet and Joe will repeat history are fooled by the deceptive cadence Felice’s entrance creates. On one hand, we have the expectation of repeated history, while on the other, our expectations are suspended and held over through the actual, relatively happy ending of the novel. Instead of the historical repetition, we are witness to the final jam session. In jazz, once everyone has played their solo, the group comes together in a jam session. Ralph Ellison calls the jam session “the jazzman’s true academy” (Ellison 245). Violet and Joe come together in their own jam session:

Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn’t be there. Shouldn’t be looking at them doing that (Morrison 214).

Violet’s dance steps are no longer chicken pecking, and Joe’s smiles are for her again. Together they dance in the same fashion they did on that train to Harlem so long ago. At some point, we learn to suspend our own expectations, as Violet and Joe Trace are anything but predictable.

The improvisational nature of Jazz plays a large part of the jazzy feel. Paired with the jazz aesthetic, the story of Jazz comes alive. Through repetitions, cutting contests, syncopations, and unexpected endings, we enjoy the set list that is Jazz. In an
interview with Dana Micucci, Morrison tells us “Jazz itself is one of the most vital artistic forms in the world. It symbolizes and incredible kind of improvisation, a freedom in which a great deal of risk is involved” (275). Violet and Joe Trace are no strangers to risk taking. Violet went off on her own to work away from home, and Joe embarked on a journey to find his father. Together, they come together and improvise a life together. As readers, we started with the beginning and perceived end of their story, it is the in-between syncopations and improvisations through the jazz aesthetic that keep our attention and draw us into the story.

Works Cited


