

## The Musical Composition of African American Narrative: Toni Morrison's *Jazz*\*

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Kim, Sook-He. The Musical Composition of African American Narrative: Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 69 (2018): 125-140. In *Jazz*, Morrison transforms her language into a powerful musical instrument that musically allows her words to play a rich and sorrowful melody, expressing the affliction and grief often experienced by African American. This paper demonstrates that Morrison, in creating her newly experimented narrative, *Jazz*, has chosen to model her work on a very specific structure of black art form called jazz music in order to expose the adversity and deprivation often encountered by African Americans. Thus, the analysis of the correlation between jazz music and this newly experimented strategies of the narrative is specifically discussed in this paper. (Daegu University)

**Key words:** Jazz Music, Toni Morrison, African American Literature, Narrative Structure, Collective Improvisation

### I. Introduction

*Jazz*, a historical literature written by Toni Morrison in 1992, consists of a series of linked events which reveal the portraits of various characters whose lives converge in the City in the years following the Great Migration, including the events regarding a few characters exploring their past experiences extending back to the mid-19th century in the deep South. Thus, as Caroline Brown summarizes, the African American historical expression of Morrison's work, *Jazz*, is "central to the recovery of the past, both personal and historic, and a re-envisioning of the future"

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for African Americans living in a conflicting environment (630). In order to realistically reproduce a series of events, Morrison has invented a new form of language. That is, Morrison has successfully experimented her work, *Jazz*, sounding like a piece of jazz music in revealing her admiration for the African American culture and the function it has played in expressing their spiritual longings and physical exertions; As widely known, African Americans have often denied in their rights to express their emotional as well as physical needs. Supporting this thesis, Sima Farshid noted, “She[Morrison] has made efforts to blur the distinctions between literature and music, the printed and the heard, the visual and the aural by making use of various techniques of the jazz in such an intricate way that her novel sounds like a piece of that music” (363). Consequently, according to Eusebio L. Rodrigues in his well-known essay, “Experiencing Jazz,” Morrison indisputably “wanted to make a truly aural novel” to depict their emotional despair and physical pain (737). Throughout her work, Morrison transforms her language into a powerful musical instrument allows her words to play a rich and sorrowful melody exposing the affliction and grief often experienced by African Americans.

Although there are varied assumptions about the origins of jazz music, most critics believe that it grew out of another African American form of music, the blues, which vocalized the aspirations, adversity, and distress of their transition not only from slavery but also from an urban lifestyle in the City after the Great Migration. According to Paula Gallant Eckhard, “The recurrent use of blues and jazz in African-American literature is not by mere coincidence. Instead, it emerges from a complex matrix which lies at the heart of African American cultural expression” (11). Specifically, jazz music reflects the yearnings of African Americans and reverberates the rebellious spirit of 1920s in the City to voice their agitation and beliefs. As S. Kim specifically states that jazz music “further provides us with a reliable image of genuine social, economic, and

political realities that are deeply implanted in American society. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate that Morrison, in creating her newly experimented narrative, *Jazz*, has chosen to model her work on a very specific structure of black art form called jazz music. That is, Morrison has made a conscientious effort to create a musical form that reveals the rebellious spirit of African Americans living in a socially unrested era of African American history. The analysis of the correlation between jazz music and this newly experimented narrative strategies is discussed in the following dimensions: thematic structure, narrative perspective, and rhetorical composition.

## II. The thematic structure

In the 1920s, the development of jazz musicality ran parallel to significant economic poverty and spiritual deprivation that affected a substantial part of the African-American community in the City. Jazz, as the newly created form of African American music, developed in every corner of the City incorporating and expressing its various elements of individual sorrow and agony of the black American community. As Eusebio L Rodrigues encapsulates, Morrison has successfully created a fiction depicting “what the music used to do, tell the whole wide world the ongoing story of her people” (736). It further “bridges profound historical transitions such as that of the black urban diaspora and project that heritage into an unknown and unpredictable future” (Scheiber 486). In describing incidents of inhabitants in the City, Morrison intentionally accommodates the words, imagery, and rhythms of jazz to describe the brutal conditions African Americans suffered while living in the City. Throughout her work, Morrison successfully utilizes the jazz music that sprang out of her people and expresses their exhilaration and joys experienced in the City. More often, however, she engages in a communal

affliction that ultimately serves as a depiction of grief for lost lives. The meaning of jazz music, in this sense, is in its connection to specific events, discourses, and representation of everyday experiences. As the most profound, cultivated, and emotionally satisfying response for the currently settled African Americans in the City, the newly developed jazz music essentially reflected the genuine and refined African American culture at the time.

Similarly, Morrison's experiment in transformative jazz captures the imagery of spiritual abuse as well as physical damages imposed on African Americans during slavery and its aftermath in the City. According to Roberta Rubenstein, *Jazz* is an example of a new musical form expressing both the painful deprivation as well as the creative exhilaration that marks the black experience in white America:

Born in urban environment, the City, jazz as new form of African American music became the first form of aesthetic statement in their culture to offer common emotional ground for the entire community beyond the class differences and prejudices that had developed among themselves. Remember – “re-membering” is a crucial compensatory process that might begin to ameliorate the pain of literal figurative, individual and communal, severances that cumulatively persist as cultural mourning. (161)

In this sense, Morrison intentionally incorporates jazz music in her narrative to represent the tragic circumstances of African Americans living in a hypocritical environment. Specifically, the common themes of suffering and misery arisen from aimless migration to the City are shown throughout her work. Morrison consistently expresses a jazz theme of “complicated anger”(59)<sup>1</sup> interwoven with strands of affliction, sorrow,

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter cited from Toni Morrison, *Jazz*. New York: Knopf 1992.

and deprivation of African Americans living in a white American society. In contrast to the optimism expressed in the beginning about the City life as an invitation to economic opportunity and spiritual freedom, the City becomes inscrutable and unreliable as the work progresses. The narrator tells about the sense of economic impoverishment and emotional anxiety often encountered in the City. The narrator finally warns the African Americans in the City: “be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time” (9).

Further, Morrison specifically laments on the emotional pain and physical deprivation in order to deepen her expression about the experience of adversity often felt not only by individuals who have been separated from parents, but also by a legacy of cultural dislocation and personal dispossession in the City. As Roberta Rubenstein pointedly states about the sense of loss: “Ineradicably woven into the fabric of African American experience is the cultural memory of injury and loss — lost lives, lost possibilities, lost parents and children, lost parts of the body, lost selves” (151). In this sense, the core of her work, *Jazz*, emerged out of the tragic circumstances of African American history representing the theme of misery that had arisen from economic impoverishment, emotional deprivation and physical brutality. As Lawrence W. Levine observes, “These characteristics have made black song an especially effective medium for complaint, protest, and the venting of frustrations” (240). Thus, the foundation of *Jazz*, similar to jazz music, is deeply rooted with the black experience of African Americans living in a brutal white American society.

Furthermore, in terms of cultural dislocation, the sense of the presence of psychological loss and physical agony often stems from children’s experience of involuntary separation or actual psychological abandonment by their parents. As historically known, African Americans were originally ripped from their families and involuntarily placed on

slave ships to be sent to America. The survivors from the slave ships were destined to lead their lives in constant spiritual deprivations, economic degradations, and abuses of body and mind without any other options given. As Arnold Rose states,

There is a tradition that white people exploit Negroes. In the beginning Negroes were owned as property. When slavery disappeared, caste remained. Within this framework of adverse tradition the average Negro in every generation has had a most disadvantageous start. Discrimination against Negroes is thus rooted in this tradition of economic exploitation. (70)

Similarly, deprived by their situation of the economic security that white Americans in the City took for granted, the African Americans in the City devoted the most part of their energies to the immediate hardship of survival in a new environment from involuntary separation and actual abandonment from their immediate family.

For instance, the orphans who were involuntarily separated from parents are prominently characterized in *Jazz*. As the work progresses, the City is suddenly redefined by an unexpected wave of African Americans protesting against white violence during the deadly East St. Louis riots of 1917. Joe, Violet, Trace, and Dorcas Manfred are the unfortunate offsprings of dead or missing parents who were somehow involved with the riots. Dorcas was orphaned:

Alice thought the lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. So many white killed the papers would not print the number (57).

Her parents were innocent victims of the violent race uproar that consumed East St. Louis riots in 1917. Her father was stomped to death and her mother died when their house was completely burned down. As Morrison states, Dorcas' father was "pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death," and her mother "burned crispy" (57). Along with Dorcas' parents, Morrison intentionally focuses on visual horror as she describes the scene of grandmother to further stress the spiritual loss and physical pain: Dorcas' grandmother refuses "to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse" (101).

Another example of the horror, Violet was orphaned during adolescence. Her father deserted his family to seek his fortune, leaving his wife, Rose Dear, to raise their five young daughters alone. When Rose Dear was brutally dispossessed from her sharecropper's hut, she eventually moved her family to an abandoned shack: "In the midst of the joyful resurrection of this phantom father, taking pleasure in the distribution of his bounty both genuine and fake, Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she had thrown herself into — a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in wooden box" (101). Before long, however, she found herself with broken spirit making it unbearable for her to continue her intolerable life. Unfortunately, she drowned herself in the well when Violet was twelve leaving her daughters in the care of her grandmother, True Belle: "And then Rose Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun" (99).

Still another, the stories of Joe and Violet are set against the bleak conditions in the South at the time: segregation from their family, the exploitation of labor by white landowners, the miserable wages paid by government, brutal eviction from lands and houses from white landlords, and finally, the injustices and deceptions practiced on African Americans by white community. As Arnold Rose adds, "Even now, war and postwar

prosperity have only pushed Negroes above the line of semistarvation or dependency. They own little property; even their household goods are usually inadequate and dilapidated. Their incomes are not only low, but irregular. Thus they live from day to day and have scant security for the future" (68). For instance, as *Jazz* states, in 1901 Joe and Violet were evicted from a piece of land they had bought, but Joe does not criticize, only stating, "Like a fool I bought, they'd let me keep it. They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed" (126). The cultural relocation in the City is collective and brutal without suggesting any solutions that may enable the process of mourning to be resolved. Thus, the thematic structure of Morrison's *Jazz*, analogous to the theme of jazz musicality, emerged out of the tragic circumstances of African Americans to express their physical suffering and emotional misery arisen from economic impoverishment, emotional distress and physical abuse in the deep South, including the City after the Great Migration.

### III. The narrative perspective

Morrison in her work, *Jazz*, deliberately engages in a process of blending narrative perspective that is consistent with an established musical pattern of African-American music, jazz. As Jurgen E. Grandt states, "Perhaps the most jazz-like aspect of the novel's technique of storytelling is its narrative voice" (305). That is, Morrison intentionally makes use of various narrative voices to arouse jazz musicality. The written language of the work directly reflects the structure of instrumental variations of jazz. For instance, Morrison's narrative voice withdraws from linear narration by switching back and forth in time and place invoking new voices. In her work, Morrison designates the narrator as the authoritative voice in order to highlight its function not as a person but as the sound of a jazz music. In the beginning, that voice exults as it witnesses the



emergence of a new command in the City: "Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. . . . History is over, you all, and everything's ahead is last" (7). According to Anne-Marie Paquet Deyris, the City at the time "was not even a city within the city, but the capital of black America" (219). As shown, the narrator celebrates the new era in the center of black community along with the emergence of new economic opportunity and cultural pride. Surprisingly, the capital of black American community, the City, was becoming a land of opportunity and freedom for all African Americans dwelling in the City.

Suddenly, a mysterious first-person narrator "I" enters the narrative. As in the beginning part of the work, the narrator mostly functions as a mere spectator who observes people in the City what they say and do: "I am crazy about this City. Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. . . . Below is shadow where any blase thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women" (7). Soon after, a series of random comments are made by the narrator: "I haven't got any muscles, so I can't really be expected to defend myself. But I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it's making sure no one knows all there is to know about me" (8). As indicates, the narrator speaks in different tones and rhythms that convey the presence of varying tones and rhythms in much the same way that jazz music is presented through various musical instruments. In this sense, the narrator resembles a jazz musician who constantly invents, embellishes, rambles, and experiments with new rhythm and tones while playing his music.

As the work progresses, the perspective of an omniscient narrator who allegedly seems to possess significant knowledge about various characters suddenly appears. While adopting the omniscient narrator's perspective, the first-person narrator surreptitiously disappears as the life story of major characters becomes apparent. Morrison now describes the three main characters from this omniscient narrator's perspective: Violet, Joe, and

Dorcas. Joe Trace, a middle-aged man, has betrayed his wife Violet due to the feeling of loneliness in his married life. Because of suspecting Dorcas, his lover, of having an affair with another man, Joe finally murders his young lover. Since Joe's identity is not disclosed, the police cannot arrest him although all his friends know that he has murdered her. After learning her husband's betrayal, Violet attends the Dorcas' funeral to cut her face. Interestingly, the setting of the narrative defines the course of events in the same way that the harmonic structure of a musical variation of jazz music does. That is, as Paula Gallant Eckhard claims, "With an omniscient, blues-like knowing, the narrator speaks about the human dramas played out in the City. It possesses a keen awareness of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the principal characters, particularly Violet and Joe Trace" (13). As shown, an omniscient narrator, in contrast to first-person narrator, is engaged in the creative process of the narrative that is similar to musical characteristics of jazz. The omniscient narrator speaks in varying perspective and tones that convey the presence of different perspectives in much the same way a jazz music is performed through various musical instruments.

For instance, both the first-person and omniscient narrator of *Jazz* are deeply involved in the same fictional world of the work by freely expressing her own feelings and thoughts about various incidents in the story. The narrator openly states her impassioned feelings toward the City: "I'm crazy about this City" (7). She also tells us about her isolation that has resulted in lack of knowledge about people due to her separation from them: "I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind" (9). As further supported by Edward Dauterich, though she [the narrator] often speaks to emphasize the direct and abrupt nature of her knowledge, she admits herself that she does not actually know the characters: "I can't say" (5). Toward the end of the story, she has lost her trust in the City: "I he narrator does not seem to know where it is going" (29). In this

sense, the narrator seems to thrive on misery and sorrows in the narrative, and its very form captures the unpredictability of jazz music at the same time. Perhaps, the most jazz-like aspect of Morrison's work, *Jazz*, is its narrative perspective of first-person and omniscient narrator deeply involved with communal activities of the City. As Eckard again claims that musicality of "jazz is the essential narrator of the novel" (13). Similar to jazz music, the interpretation of the narrator is no doubt dependent on the vagaries of constantly changing narrative perspectives as they relate to individual experiences and communal incidents. Thus, it is certainly true that *Jazz* is "a novel narrated by jazz, or at least narrated in a profoundly improvisational and performative way" that is analogous to jazz music (Jewett 445).

#### IV. The rhetorical composition

The most discernible transformation of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is its rhetorical composition that resembles jazz music. Morrison has structured her work in the mode of the jazz musicality that is based on the improvisation of the musical score. Modeling her literature on patterns of aural adaptation originated from an African American jazz music, Morrison has successfully managed to diverge this particular literary work from the more familiar African American rhetorical configuration. As Dirk Ludigkeit indicates,

Whatever one may think of Morrison's politics on race in America, their primary source and its manifestations in her work are unquestionably tied into her awareness and re-enactment of African-American cultural traditions. Her work, and specifically *Jazz*, is the product of a continuing process of adaptation and reinvention of literary forms based on altered content that is characteristic of African-American literature as a culturally autonomous field of

aesthetic production. (182)

Morrison's inherent affirmation of a specifically African-American cultural heritage allows *Jazz* to present a powerful statement on American racism. Yet, by employing African American musical techniques in her work, Morrison was able to harmoniously blend the distinctive qualities of literature and jazz music into one complete artistry. The apparently improvised sections of her work are structured like the pieces of jazz. That is, by generating a musical language in her work, she was able to write "an aural novel that sounds like a piece of jazz music" as stated by Farshid (371). As a result, Morrison has successfully created an original style of African American literature by blending the oral and written aspects of African American experiences in the City that are unique.

Morrison, for instance, intentionally uses her language as her musical tools to experiment with some atypical techniques to create the improvisational patterning of jazz music in her work. In terms of improvisation, a visual layout of *Jazz* shows that it does not have any indication of divided chapters and chapter headings to guide the readers. The text has been divided into section with blank pages in between chapters to force the readers to pause. However, although the chapter divisions are deficient and the sections with blank page in between are apparently shown, the sounds of words in the work seems to move smoothly: "But where is she?" at the end of the section is a striking question about Wild, the mother whom Joe looked for in Vienna. The question is answered in two blank pages later, "There she is," starts the next section, however, referring to Dorcas in 1926 in the City (184). Also, like jazz improvisations, each response opens into a new direction. That is, the first section of the work, for example, stops with the words "I love you" (24). The section that follows beginnings with the answer "Or used to" (27) reflecting on Violet's loneliness in response to her

husband's new interest in his young lover, Dorcas. Lastly, the narrator also engages in call-and-response, a technique of jazz music. For instance, Morrison's jazz narrator initiates a series of calls-and-response when depicting how African American women are in the City:

Did the world mess over them?  
Yes but look where the mess originated.  
Were they berated and cursed?  
Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself.  
Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores?  
Uh huh (78).

Thus, the sections of *Jazz* never come to a complete stop as they move restlessly giving the text a feeling of jazz musicality in every incident in the work. That is, the rhythm of the work endlessly moves like a raft floating in the Mississippi River in the deep South without any sense of direction given.

Moreover, Morrison uses the rhetorical device to intensify the beat of her work, *Jazz*, in order to expose their joys, sorrows, and despair of African Americans living in the turbulent City. Although the voice used in *Jazz* in the beginning is warm and human, an authoritative voice is in command as the work progresses. The harsh roar of the consonants and the commas are intentionally introduced in her work to indicate the need of inspiration to speed up the beat of the narrative: "juke oint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music" (59). It allows for an interruption in the rhythmic and melodic statements which take the music back to a previous beginning. Then sentences suddenly continue with run-on adjectives: Dorcas has a "cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail" face (12). According to Rodrigues, along with the use of uncommonly long adjectives, "punctuation and repetition combine to set in motion rhythms that amplify the significance of this story" (738). Again, the deliberate

use of unusual adjectives in *Jazz* tend to speed up the beat of her work recreating the powerful reverberation of jazz musicality. In this sense, Morrison intentionally employs punctuation, adjectives, and other linguistic elements in distinctive ways to imitate jazz music and to transform the narrative text into a musical composition.

## V. Conclusion

The recurrent accommodation of jazz musicality in African-American literature, *Jazz*, emerges from a complex environment which lies at the center of African-American aesthetic expression. As shown, Morrison's literary form of musical expression in *Jazz* mingles oral and written expression that is unique for African Americans. That is, Morrison thematically writes the black experience through the use of literary techniques that inventively borrowed from the structure of jazz musicality. For instance, whenever describing incidents, Morrison's style of writing commands a jazz interpretation. That is, Morrison intentionally accommodates the words, imagery, and rhythms of jazz music in her work to describe brutal lives of African Americans dwelling in the City. By doing so, she reclaims a distinctly and uniquely African-American cultural tradition and at the same time calls for a reformation of the lives of African Americans living in the world that is hypocritical and deceptive.

Specifically, the theme of jazz music, similar to the thematic structure of Morrison's *Jazz*, emerged out of the tragic circumstances of African Americans to expose their physical torment and emotional anguish from their aimless migration from the deep South to the City. Morrison in her work laments on the emotional suffering and physical deprivation in order to deepened her expression about the experience of spiritual distress felt by a legacy of cultural dislocation and personal dispossession in the City. In this sense, it is no doubt that the thematic structure of

Morrison's work, *Jazz*, contains thematic elements derived from jazz music that is unique for African American culture. In addition, a narrative voice is engaged in the creative process of the work, *Jazz*. That is, similar to musical qualities of jazz, the narrator speaks in a varying perspective that conveys the presence of different points of view much the same way a jazz music is played through various musical instruments. For instance, in the same way that the personality of the musician is very significant in composing a jazz piece, both the first-person and omniscient narrator of the work are deeply involved in the same fictional world of the work freely expressing her own feelings and thoughts about various incidents. Still another, in terms of rhetorical composition, the deliberate use of alliteration and uncommonly long adjectives in *Jazz* tend to speed up the tempo of her work recreating the powerful impact of jazz flavoring. In this sense, Morrison employs punctuation, adjectives, and other linguistic elements in distinctive ways to imitate jazz while transforming the literary text into a musical composition. Therefore, it is no doubt that *Jazz* certainly offers a unique language for creative presentation that can be artistically incorporated into the existing structure of the African American literary world.

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