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Language as Codification: Contextualizing the Improvisational Dimensions of Toni Morrison's Jazz

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Abstract

The relationship between language and literature is an intrinsic component of literary analyses. Both are inextricably linked. Whereas literature takes its foundation from language, language in turn, is enriched by literature. In fact, literature expands the possibilities of language. This intricate link is what has given rise to the application of form and content in the explication of literary works. Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is being examined here in the context of the foregoing and related devices. The novel is a study in the juxtaposition of form and content in literary appreciation. In it, the Jazz age of the 1920s in America when blacks sought to liberate themselves from the codes and stereotypes of slavery is brought to life by the author. She deploys the symbolism of jazz music both as form and content. Using jazz as an improvisational device, she weaves powerful fables around the experience of the black personality in a slave era. The conflict between America's ideology of freedom and mechanism of oppression comes alive in the personality of the protagonist. The author resolves this conflict through the medium of jazz music which at once uplifts, liberates and endures. By so doing, the author does not just reconstruct and re-appropriate the ugly past of blacks in America, she imbues her language with its own code.

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Introduction

It was Ursula Brumm, a modernist critic, who once remarked that "we live in the age of symbolism in literature" (Brumm 354). Her remark was made in recognition of the temper of modernism which tends towards the pursuit of raw art and primitivism. This modern period's penchant for the unexplored has given rise to a sophisticated use of language usually conveyed through a medley

of metaphors, symbols, rhythm, pattern and other literary motifs.

For modern writers, these devices are not only seen as fashionable forms of expression, they have also come to be regarded as major criteria for literary evaluation. To appreciate better the use made of these devices by Toni Morrison, a fuller grasp of the symbolist movement and what it represents for modern critics is considered necessary.

Symbolism in Literature

One of the earliest critics who espoused on the concept of symbolism in literature is

Edmund Wilson. He describes the symbolist movement as the “second flood” of the tide of romanticism. He defines symbolism proper as:

An attempt by
carefully
studied means-
a complicated
association of
ideas
represented by
a medley
of metaphors –
to
communicate
unique
personal
feeling
(Wilson 195).

W.B. Yeats identified pattern and rhythm as the road to open symbolism. According to him,

The arts have
already
become full of
pattern
and rhythm.
Subject
pictures no
longer interest
us, while
pictures with
patterns and
rhythms of
colour...interest
us extremely
(Yeats 283).

In the view of Robert Scholes (Scholes 39-40), symbolism is the use in fictional design of an object to acquire metaphorical value

that points in the direction of meaning. When this is the case, he says, the object becomes a symbol. To Charles Chardwick, it is “any mode of expression which, instead of referring to something directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else” (Chardwick 1). It is, for him, an attempt to penetrate beyond physical reality to the world of ideas. In the view of Stephane Mallarme, symbolism establishes a mood, but we can extract this mood “by a series of decipherings” (Chardwick 1). But for William York Tindall, it is, “the outward sign of an inward state” (Tindall 337). It is a suggestive device. For him as well, it is an exact reference to something indefinite”.

Language as a Device

Toni Morrison employs the devices of symbolism, rhythm, pattern, metaphor and other literary and linguistic modes as tools for the realization of authentic female black characters. Through the use of these and other related motifs, the author portrays female black characters who are appreciated beneath the level of ordinary awareness. Through such compositions, events and characters assume more than ordinary significance.

For the author however, these devices of language are particularly tailored to suit the circumstances of the black woman in America. It is this predilection for race and

sex that makes Toni Morrison experiment with language and structure. She weaves fables and develops a mythological system. Her involvement in this peculiar use of language makes her remark that “it’s always seemed to me that black people’s grace has been what they do with language” (Watkins 48). On her language particularly, she says:

My language
is quiet; it
engages your
participation. I
don't describe
characters
very
much, my
writing
expects,
demands
participatory
reading, and
that, I think, is
what
literature is
supposed to
do. It's not just
about
telling the
story; it's about
involving the
reader.
The reader
supplies the
emotions (Tate
xix).

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is examined in the context of the foregoing and related devices. *Jazz* is a poetic image. The story is told through the metaphor of Jazz music. During the Jazz Age of the 1920s in which the novel

is set, an attempt was made in various ways to rescue blacks from the ugly experience of slavery. In *Jazz*, the threat which love poses during slavery and reconstruction is brought to focus. In doing this, Toni Morrison is cognizant of the fact that black people's past was appropriated. Her vision in this novel is aimed at 'reappropriating' this past.

In the novel, love appears to be a venom, an indulgence which carries with it a lot of ominous foreboding. In order to divest love of its scary connotations, Toni Morrison brings us face to face with Dorcas Manfred and Joe Trace whose love affair is the quintessence of an ossified relationship that leads to disaster. To strip love of such pugnacious tendencies, Toni Morrison creates an atmosphere of Jazz music. Jazz plays in the background of the novel. The events move around in time and space, stitching together the past and the present. As Morrison herself reveals, "Jazz is speech, balm, consolation, entertainment. The book is a jazz gesture. Jazz is improvisational" (Vanguard 3).

For Toni Morrison, writing is another form of music. She creates the music in *Jazz* because she feels that black people of the time needed the music. The novel therefore replicates the information, the medicine, the balm that is found in music. Through this balm, the

oppressed black character is soothed and consequently made to realize his true self. In using the jazz gesture to reconstruct the image of the female black character, Toni Morrison strives to show that Dorcas is a victim of environmental determinism. Dorcas's questionable approach to issues of love is a lifestyle which she is brought up with in a disordered social setting. In her, there is a conflict between character and experience. To live her life outside of this becomes for Dorcas a herculean task. She succumbs to the pull of experience and gets ruined. The instability which the conflict between experience and character creates in Dorcas's life is even manifest in the narrator whose identity is uncertain and whose grasp on the narrative finally loosens. The effect is to introduce an instability intended to say something about the nature of the character and experience. Just as the narrator is not in control of the narrative, Dorcas is not in control of her life. She simply gravitates and hardly understands what she is doing. It is for this reason that Toni Morrison herself insists that:

You are
simply the
consequence
of things that
have happened
to you. You

have the
choice.
The fact that
the narrator of
the book
doesn't
always know
what happened
is part of that
conflict
between
imposed
knowledge,
fate, and
a dissonance,
an uncertainty
which is what
makes life
original
(Vanguard 4).

Due to the dilemma of imposed knowledge and fate, Dorcas, like the narrator, does not have a firm grasp over her life. It is in attempting to escape this imposed fate and knowledge that she flounders. Her death becomes, perhaps, the choice she has to make to be free from the everyday domain; a life anchored on other people's whims and caprices. By so doing too, she has led an original life. Thus, rather than condemn Dorcas for what may appear to be her frivolous lifestyle, she has freed herself from the fetters of race and sex and elevated her lifestyle above the ordinary. By terminating her affair with Joe, she breaks out of confinement and moves towards a higher realm.

Jazz as Improvisation

Toni Morrison, as she herself has revealed, writes with a deep appreciation of the music the world makes" (Kakutani 10). This is what she does in *Jazz*. In the novel, she uses the improvisations of jazz to show a certain quality in the people's lives. Jazz as improvisation is very difficult to invent. In the same vein, there is a certain intricate quality in the people's lives which the author is interested in. It is a life enriched with endless possibilities and at the same time suffused with danger. The city is jazz. It is energy and possibility and danger. It is equally a

place where incompatible realities collide. This idea of the city is what Toni Morrison explores in the Harlem of the 1920s. In the novel, she recreates black experience in the aftermath of slavery. This experience consists largely in confrontation with city life. The author posits that the danger in city life lies not in its bloodletting sense, but in its urbaneness. To be urbane and sophisticated, you have to confront the variety of difference and the mix in the city. This is what

Dorcas faces. Joe too comes face to face with it after spending the better part of his life in the woods. The realities become incompatible for both of them. But love urges them on. Dorcas dares the incompatible

realities but confronts demons in the process. For the author, America has an ideology of freedom and a mechanism of oppression. It is even the central concern of slavery. The contradiction inherent in this interests the author. Joe kills Dorcas because he wants to keep her away from other men.

In an interview with Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison explains that the basic contradiction here lies in:

How to own
your own body
and love
somebody
else. Under
historical
duress,
where one
fights for
agency, the
problem is
how to be an
individual,
how to exert
individual
agency under
this huge
umbrella of
determined
historical life
(Rushdie 36).

What this means is that Dorcas is a victim of historical determinism. Given this basic contradiction in America's ideology of freedom and mechanism of oppression, Dorcas could not possibly realize her freedom. Instead, she pays the supreme price. The suggestion here is that Dorcas can hardly

be held responsible for her fate. The imperfect social system which breeds her is culpable.

In the novel, love is at the crossroads. Joe murders Dorcas because of love. Violet goes violent also because of love. These notwithstanding, love remains. The love is sustained by the jazz music which plays in the background. When after the funeral incident Violet thinks that she can wish away the love she has for Joe and the birds, she fails. She thinks she could accomplish the task by setting the birds free. But the second morning after the release of the birds, she discovers a light yellow feather with a tip of green in the cellar. She knows it came from the parrot. She remembers "my parrot" and the "love you" which it intoned to her. The sound from the parrot becomes for her a rhythm. The sound is an integrative force which urges her to be at peace with her own and she comes to see Joe for what he means to her. He is, to her,

My Virginia
Joe Trace who
carried a light
inside him,
whose
shoulders were
razor
sharp and who
looked at me
with two-color

eyes and never
saw anybody
else. Could
she have looked
at him and seen
that?...
What did she
see, young girl
like that,
barely out of
High School,
with unbraided
hair, lip rouge
for the first time
and high-
heeled shoes?
And also what
did he?
(Morrison 96-
97).

In pondering these questions, Violet comes to understand why things have gone the way they have. She comes to realize that Dorcas is one of the victims of her environment. She could not have acted otherwise given the circumstances of her history. But to claim Joe back is one thing Violet has to do. Here again, the "love you" rhythm comes into play. The message of love from the parrot begins to make sense to her once again. In appreciating the music from the bird, Violet comes to reconcile herself with the incident. She realizes that she has to hold on to Joe. She implores God to help her,

because I
know him and
loved him
better

than anybody
except True
Belle who is
the one made
me crazy about
him in the
first place
(Morrison 97).

because it was
part of the
linguistic
heritage of
my family,
moving up and
down the scale,
across it, in
between it
(Rushdie 38).

With this realization, Violet throws off her violence and wishes for more love. She replaces the birds and lives happily ever after with Joe. This reconciliation achieved through the rhythmic sound from the parrot is significant. The rhythm is one of love, and through it awareness is attained.

Using this literary device of rhythmic composition and jazz mode, Toni Morrison is able to imbue her language with its own code. Hers is a racialized language because Jazz is rooted in blackness. Having originated from New Orleans around the beginning of the twentieth century, it developed through various increasingly complex styles. This complexity is what Morrison appropriates. She uses this racialized language as she says,

To liberate
myself, as a
writer, from
these
codes. I want to
merge
vernacular with
the
lyric, with the
standard, and
with the
Biblical,

In liberating herself from the codes, Toni Morrison also liberates her characters. As both Salman Rushdie and Lorna Sage (Rushdie & Sage 23) point out, Morrison has invented a new language which is both demonic and rhapsodically poetic - colloquial, biblical, full of the rhythms of gospel music and curdling charm of the blues, swooping from domestic to tragic without a catch. Through the improvisations of jazz, she creates characters out of black experience but who, nevertheless, enrich the whole of literature.

Conclusion

In Jazz, Morrison achieves what Stephen Henderson calls the "mascon" image: a massive concentration of black experiential energy which powerfully affects the meaning of black speech, black song, and black poetry. In the view of Barbara Smith (McKay 22). Toni Morrison is a virtuoso writer. The music and painting she makes with words stun the

reader's sense at the same time that they convince her of their totally natural rightness. From our analysis of the novel, we can deduce that Toni Morrison defamiliarizes language to move it away from the realm of the commonplace. In doing this, she infuses the personality of the black woman into the network of symbols she creates. What she achieves through this sophisticated use of language is a portrayal of female black characters who are appreciated, beyond what they ordinarily seem to be.

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