Jazz Study Guide

Jazz by Toni Morrison

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Jazz Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Chapter 1....4

Chapter 2....7

Chapter 3....10

Chapter 4....13

Chapter 5....16

Chapter 6....18

Chapter 7....21

Chapter 8....23

Chapter 9....24

Chapter 10....26

Characters....27

Objects/Places....31

Social Sensitivity....33

Techniques/Literary Precedents....39

Themes....44

Style....49

Quotes....51

Topics for Discussion....53

Copyright Information....54

Plot Summary

Jazz is the story of a love affair between Joe Trace, a fifty-year-old married waiter and part-time cosmetics salesman, and Dorcas, a seventeen-year-old girl. When Dorcas leaves Joe for a younger man, he tracks her down at a party and shoots her. Dorcas refuses to implicate Joe, declining medical assistance and telling everyone who asks about the shooter, "I'll tell you tomorrow."

Tomorrow, of course, she is dead. Joe's wife Violet, reputed to be a crazy woman, goes to the funeral with a knife and attempts to disfigure the face of the beautiful girl in her casket. Violet is strong, but finally the ushers wrestle her to the floor. She has only managed to nick Dorcas under the ear.

Crazy Violet has a brief affair with another man. When that fails to move Joe, she decides to fall in love with him all over, but she is unable to bring herself to do more than fix his meals and iron his handkerchiefs. Instead, she decides to fall in love with, or at least learn more about, Dorcas. She begins to write notes to Dorcas's aunt, Alice Manfred, and then visits her. The two women develop a strange, uneasy friendship. Alice Manfred even lends Violet an unsmiling photograph of Dorcas, which she takes home and puts on the couple's mantle. During long sleepless nights, Violet and Joe take turns going in the parlor and staring at the dead girl's photo.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Violet and Joe each confront their motherless past, their childless present, and develop a friendship with Dorcas's best friend, Felice. Many events over three generations contribute to the reader's understanding of the tragic story.

The novel is based on a photograph taken at the funeral of a beautiful young girl in Harlem who refused to implicate her murderous lover. Morrison provides a synopsis of the plot in the novel's first five sentences. She proceeds to riff on the basic story like a jazz quintet, adding layers of meaning and transforming the tale into one of transcendent love set against the somber backdrop of violence in Harlem and the vibrant sounds of prohibition-era jazz music.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The chapter opens with the narrator telling the story of Violet in a gossipy way. It is about a woman, who lives on Lenox Avenue with cages full of birds and windows full of houseplants. Her husband, Joe, lives there too. He is the one who feels one of those "deep down spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going." When his wife, Violet finds out what he has done, she goes to the funeral parlor and tries to disfigure the dead girl's beautiful face, to slash it with a knife. The men at the funeral parlor wrestled her to the floor, and throw her out into the snow.

Violet goes home and releases her birds, letting them fly away, dark shapes against the white snow. She even releases the yellow and green parrot that says, "I love you." Although Violet is skinny and over fifty, she decides to get back at Joe by having an affair, right in his own house. When that ends after a few weeks, she decides to fall in love with Joe again. This proves impossible when all she can bring herself to do is to iron his huge red railroad handkerchiefs and fix his meals.

Finally, Violet decides to learn more about Dorcas, the dead girl. From her neighbor Malvonne, who first told her of Joe's infidelity with Dorcas, she learns the address where the girl lived with her aunt. From the beauticians in the licensed shop, Violet learns what brand of lipstick Dorcas wore, and how she fixed her straight hair. She pesters Dorcas's aunt, a woman of independent means who does fine work off and on in the Garment district. Dorcas's aunt does not seek revenge against Joe. She does not want to bring any more attention to the girl's shameful behavior. She sees no point in throwing money away on shiftless lawyers or policemen. Besides, she has heard that Joe cries all day for his Dorcas, which is worse than being in jail, for him and his wife, if you ask her.

Attacking Dorcas as she lay in her coffin is not the first crazy thing Violet has done. There was the day her right foot moved back instead of front and she sat down, right in the middle of a busy street. When the policeman asked her what she thought she was doing, she lay down and closed her eyes. He would have taken her off to jail if people didn't insist she was just tired and helped her to someone's stoop to rest. Another day, she stole a baby right out of its pram. One minute she was sitting on the steps waiting for a hair appointment the Dunphy's forgot. The next, she was walking down the street with a baby in her arms, thinking how pleased Joe would be and laughing in delight. When the baby's big sister started hollering, a crowd tracked her down. Violet insisted she was only watching the baby while the flighty sister ran inside for a record, but not everyone believed her.

Joe does not know about Violet's crazy episodes. He does know that sometimes at home she says crazy things, like asking him who that beautiful girl standing next to him is, when nobody is there. Another time she mentions that a hearse would be outside tomorrow. Violet wonders if everybody blurts out crazy things sometimes, but she grows

more and more silent, to keep the craziness inside. Even so, it comes out when she least expects it, like when her hand finds the knife left in the parrot's cage, of its own volition.

Violet and the aunt, Alice Manfred, develop an uneasy friendship. Alice complains of the beautiful but hardheaded girl Dorcas. Finally, she lends Violet a picture of the beautiful but unsmiling Dorcas. Violet takes the picture home and puts it on the mantle in the parlor, where both she and Joe can see it. Deep in the night, they toss and turn, sleepless. They take turns going in the parlor to look at the picture. Joe sees the beautiful, sweet girl who loved him. Violet sees a hard, willful, stubborn girl whose hair needs to be trimmed on the ends. Violet feels herself beginning to love the hard girl in the photograph.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter, Morrison does the opposite of foreshadowing. She summarizes the plot of the entire novel in the first five sentences, and then transforms the story, chapter by chapter, until the reader realizes nothing is as it appears. Morrison uses repetition, telling the same story from different points of view, to layer meaning over meaning like the riffs of a jazz quintet.

The narrator paints a compelling portrait of 1920s Harlem as a city that is dangerous and exciting, violent and nurturing, where anything can happen, and not even the dead are safe. In the process, the reader learns a great deal about the narrator, a distinctly female voice who is gossipy as a beautician and wise as an old Auntie. The disembodied narrator has a sharp sense of humor, saying the vocalist in Slim Baker's band must be his girlfriend, because she sings so poorly. She is a keen observer not just of behavior, but also of the innermost thoughts and feelings of her subjects. She captures our attention with her first word: Sth. The phonetic sound often represented as a hiss, this is the noise that precedes whispered secrets.

Harlem is a city that makes people think they can do as they please and get away with it. Here, people have hope and strength; they are vibrantly alive, good and bad. Harlem is full of improbable, magical things like black men floating from the sky playing saxophones. Although the narrator loves Harlem, the description clearly reveals a city of great racism. It is filled with music and with every type of church, club, and mutual aid society, but also with fear and violence. The city is described ironically as having everything one might desire, but it contains no high schools or banks. It is at once dangerous, cozy, thrilling, and limiting. A single Negro surgeon visits the hospital, and Bellevue has graduated a class of colored nurses, although they are not allowed to wear the white nurses' caps. Colored veterans of World War I still wear their green great coats seven years later, because they cannot afford anything better.

Malvonne, Violet's upstairs neighbor, reveals herself as the antagonist early in the story. It is Malvonne who has provided Joe and Dorcas with a space for their clandestine

meetings. It is Malvonne who tells Violet of her husband's infidelity with a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl. Her unseen hand propels the motion of the novel.

Violet suffers from the double taint of racism and sexism. Even the best jobs that available for black women, like taking tickets at the movie theater, are not open to Violet. A talented hairdresser, she cannot afford formal training and therefore cannot get a license or a job at a real beauty parlor. Instead, she must "do heads" on the fly, trudging from one apartment to the next with the tools of her trade in her bag. Her best customers are prostitutes, some of whom tip her a whole dollar for a twenty-five cent job!

Morrison's language is rich and lushly alive, teeming and vibrant with both the good and the bad, as Harlem itself. She describes Violet courting a boyfriend at fifty as unseemly as an "old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind." The knife in the parrot's cage symbolizes the violence, pervasive and easy, that invades Harlem. Without conscious thought, Violet's hand reaches for a knife that has been missing for weeks, when it is time to go to the funeral parlor. Violet's growing affection for Dorcas, her urge to trim the dead girl's hair, foreshadows her close relationship with Felice. The narrator's descriptions of close and loving elderly couples foreshadow Joe and Violet's own relationship.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

With the birds gone, Violet cannot sleep at night. However, it is different for Joe. For three months now Dorcas has been the sweetness that made sleep possible, thinking of her as he lay next to his wife. He killed her when he felt that sweetness slipping away, to keep it forever. He remembers his first glimpse of her, buying peppermint candy that made her skin break out, her bitten nails, and afterwards, the way the bed pillows made a bird's nest of her hair. He replays the day they met repeatedly to himself, indelibly inscribing it on his memory.

Joe remembers when he and Violet were young and decided to leave Vesper County, Virginia. He recalls dates, purchases, events, even scenes. However, he cannot recall the feelings, and Violet is so silent he does not think she can, either. He chooses Dorcas the day he meets her, opening the door at Alice Manfred's when he delivers an order, in a way he never chose Violet. He remembers the way the train trembled coming into the city, the way he and Violet stood hip-to-thigh and clung to the baggage rack, as if dancing on the train.

The conductor, unsmiling since there are no white people in their car, walked through and announced breakfast. He secretly wished every black person would go into the dining car, now that they were far from Maryland and could be seated in the same car with white diners, with no hateful green curtain separating them. Violet and Joe cannot stand the thought of being separated by a table, so they continue to dance standing, hoping for a glimpse of the city through the train window.

Joe can tell Dorcas important things, things he never told Violet, like how the hibiscus smelled that day he sat in the twilight bushes and prayed aloud for a sign, any sign from his mother. Knowing that the confirmation from a crazy woman would shame him, he still yearned for it. He was sure it would make him the happiest boy on earth. Maybe she did stick her hand out, and it was just too dark to see.

Dorcas understands, better than Violet, better than anyone Joe's own age does, what it is like to feel nothing inside. She remembers the pop and the sting in her cheek the last time her mother slapped her. Dorcas spent the night across the street at her friend's, and the shouting woke her. People were running, shouting for water or buckets. Dorcas ran across the street to get her clothespin dolls, in a wooden cigar box on her dresser. She shouted in vain for her Mama to help her get them.

Alone in their secret rendezvous, Dorcas cries and Joe comforts her. She puts cream and clear nail polish on his hands, and they make love. Then he opens his sample case and gives her the present he brought, a special cream or trinket to buy her affection. She insists she wants him to take her to Mexico, a popular jazz club. At first Joe demurs, pointing out that they will be seen, but eventually he gives in.

They are at Malvonne's apartment. Joe has convinced Malvonne, against her better judgment, to rent him her second bedroom for a few hours each Thursday. He pays the large sum of two dollars per month. Malvonne lives alone with stories and newspapers. She works at night, cleaning offices downtown until they sparkle. She knows everyone's secrets, the white men's who work in the offices she cleans, and her neighbors' secrets.

After Malvonne's nephew, Sweetness, moved to Chicago (or some city ending with O), she found a twenty-pound sack full of stolen mail behind the radiator. She was going to dump the whole mess into a mailbox, but first she read them. Mostly, they were boring. There were a few she just had to reply to, though. One was a matchbook application to a correspondence law school from a young black girl. The dollar admission fee was long gone, and Malvonne could not spare a dollar herself. She was terrified if that girl did not get to be a lawyer, she would have to get a job where she wore an apron. So Malvonne put a note in the envelope, that she would send the dollar soon, and mailed it.

Malvonne put an extra penny stamp on a letter from a young mother named Winsome to her husband working in Panama, telling him she is taking the children back to Barbados to wait for him there. Malvonne attaches an article about the dangers of adultery clipped from a magazine on a love letter from Hot Steam to Daddy Sage. Still, she lets Joe convince her to rent him the spare room vacated by Sweetness.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The reader learns the beginning of Joe's affair with Dorcas from his point of view. Violet is silent and forbids Joe to touch her. Both Joe and Dorcas have lost their mothers; he was abandoned at birth, and she saw the house fire that killed her mother, although she only mourned her three clothespin dolls: Bernadine, Faye, and Rochelle.

Malvonne dabbles in the lives of those around her because she has no other outlet for her intelligence and talents. She is highly literate, intuitive, and understanding yet is employed in a menial job cleaning office buildings. In many ways, her lack of opportunity propels the action of the story. Still, she understands Joe's need for female companionship, and reluctantly agrees to rent her spare room to him.

Joe is an honorable man, and does not want to go to a prostitute or meet Dorcas in an alley. He has chosen Dorcas, in a way that he never chose Violet. Joe feels Violet chose him, or that they were thrust together, picking the same cotton harvest and knowing the same people. Regardless, their life is totally empty now and they have nothing to say to each other. He can talk to Dorcas, she takes away that empty feeling inside, and he cherishes her flaws, a certain sign of a powerful love.

Morrison uses irony in showing us Malvonne's intense fear that the young law school applicant will be stuck in a job where she wears an apron. There is irony, when Winsome, the young wife from Barbados, wonders why so many black men are dying in Panama, while the white men do great things.

Racism is explored in Joe and Violet's train journey north. The black porter fails to smile in the "colored" car. He does not have to, since no white people are around. He is eager, however, for every black person to go to the dining car for breakfast, now that they do not legally have to suffer the humiliation of being separate from the white diners. The passengers, a thrifty bunch who have brought their own bacon biscuits, seldom oblige. The economic injustices, from which the passengers are fleeing, from Chicago to Galveston, are further evidence of racism. Nevertheless, this powerful, lyrical city and the jazz it produces can transform people and things, from hot to freezing cold.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The chapter opens nine years earlier, in 1917, with Alice Manfred attending a parade with her newly orphaned niece, Dorcas. The cold, dark, silent men are marching to protest the race riots in East St. Louis that killed many blacks and whites, including Dorcas's father, who was pulled off a streetcar by the white crowd and stomped to death. His wife went home to try to forget the color of his entrails on the street, and was burned inside her house the same night. Neighbors ineffectively tried to fight the fire with buckets of water while the shiny new fire truck sat poised a few miles away, waiting for a fire in a white neighborhood.

The silent men march in the parade, carrying banners with promises from the Declaration of Independence on them. They do not trust themselves to speak. Instead, drums beat incessantly and say what the men cannot. The silent men frighten Alice Manfred, the same way the white men in the department store frighten her when they touch her, a woman of fifty of independent means, who has no last name in white neighborhoods.

Alice tries to protect her niece, dressing her in study shoes, frumpy dresses, teaching her to avoid any white male over eleven. Most of all Alice protects her niece from the music, that lowdown sticky music that can make a woman do anything. There is a "complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was the appetite." Whenever Alice hears that music, she thinks about the promise and the violence in the incessant drumming and clings to it like a lifeline. Sometimes it is impossible to keep the two apart. The music that frightens Alice makes Dorcas happy. She has thrilled knowing that it is always nearby, seductive and violent.

Dorcas cannot cry for her parents, but she sobs for her three clothespin dolls imprisoned in their wooden cigar box. She broods about how quickly the Rochelle's red tissue paper skirt flamed, and Bernadine's blue silk and Faye's white cotton cape burned. She ignores the coffin at the front of the church, and Aunt Alice's medicinal smell, and focuses on her clothespin dolls.

When she goes to work as a seamstress, Alice Manfred leaves Dorcas with the Miller sisters. The Millers continually call the police station, reporting which restaurants and clubs are serving alcohol during Prohibition, until they realize their information is both annoying and redundant. One sister, Neola, has a withered left arm, paralyzed since her fiancy left her. It lies cupped over her heart, as if holding together the shards. Dorcas is entranced with that arm, and with love so powerful it can paralyze.

By the time she's fifteen, Dorcas is sneaking to dances with her best friend Felice. Boys her own age see the sturdy shoes and sensible old-women clothes her aunt makes her

wear, and reject her. Joe Trace, a man of fifty, comes to her aunt's house to deliver the cosmetics he sells part-time. Dorcas opens the door for him. A meeting of the Civic Daughters is in progress, to plan a Thanksgiving fundraiser. Feeling safety in numbers, the women tease and flirt with Joe. They insist he eat with them.

Alice Manfred does not realize Dorcas is having an affair until she is already dead. After that, the last person she wanted to see was Joe Trace or his wife. However, she let the woman who sat down in the street into her home. Alice Manfred did not see clearly what happened at the funeral home, but Malvonne told her all bout it, all about Violet attacking the dead girl in her coffin. Now everyone calls Violet "Violent" instead. It seems to Alice that everyone is armed these days. Women have guns, knives, or poison. Those who do not have weapons are armed by Harlem itself, a weapon of sorts. Violet sends her notes. Eventually Alice lets her visit, and then she starts coming regularly. Alice mends the cuff on Violet's dress, and her coat lining, so she looks almost normal. The two women develop an uneasy, silent friendship.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The affair and its violent aftermath are revealed from Alice Manfred's point of view. Holding her small niece's hand at the parade, Alice is both frightened and moved by the cold, silent black faces. She reads the banners that say "All men are created equal" and "They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The men don't speak for fear they will start another riot, but the incessant drums say they will not stop, nor will they step down.

Alice Manfred enters into an elaborate conspiracy to protect Dorcas from the white men who accost black women on the streets with folded dollars in their hands. However, she cannot protect the blossoming Dorcas from the pervasive, seductive music, and the throb of her own body. Dorcas wears slinky silk underwear beneath her sensible clothes.

The Civic Daughters feel safe with Joe. He is an honorable man, above reproach, the kind of man who arranges the children's toys neatly when they leave them strewn on the sidewalk. The kind of man a woman can feel safe letting into her house with his sample case of Cleopatra cosmetics. The narrator reveals she is not omnipresent when she wonders what words Joe whispered to Dorcas, to start their affair.

Alice is amazed when she begins to look forward to the visits from Crazy Violet. She tidies Violet's cuff and mends her clothes so she looks almost normal, except for the hat she wears even in the morning. Morrison's lyrical, lush language is toned down during the initial encounter between Alice and Violet. The simple, spare language used instead becomes transparent and allows the reader to focus on the action, not the words.

Racism is apparent when a fire truck fails to respond to a call in a black neighborhood, causes the death of Dorcas's mother. Alice Manfred, mistreated by white men all her life, tries to protect her niece. Alice cannot protect herself from the hurtful remarks by

whites on the bus, when they urge their children not to sit next to her. Alice's experience brings Harlem itself into clearer focus, as the reader begins to understand both the seductiveness and the violence. It becomes hard to separate the music, jazz, from the location, Harlem.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After leaving Alice Manfred's, wearing a hat that makes her look like a crazy woman, Violet stops at the drugstore. She has first one malt, then another. She is trying to regain the hips and backside she swears she possessed as a young woman. After the attack on the dead girl, Violet felt she had split into two people, herself and Violent, whom she calls "the other Violet." The other Violet sees violence and the instruments of violence everywhere. It comes naturally to her, violent thoughts that Violet would never entertain. Violet relives the attack at the casket, seeing it though the other Violet's eyes. She remembers how the knife slipped and left just a tiny dent under one ear, instead of slashing the too-light, pretty face the way she intended.

The funeral ushers hesitated for a few seconds to act, realizing that this was a fifty-year-old woman, the same kind of woman who hollered out the windows for them to cut that mess out, who would not tolerate such behavior from any child, I don't care whose. When that happened, they cut it out, or took it down to the empty lot under the El tracks, safely away from the prying eyes of all the Aunties. Now, they have to stop this woman gone wild, and she fights back with the strength of a man. Overpowered, she runs home and releases all the birds from their cages. She even releases the nameless green and yellow parrot, which sits on the windowsill for days, unable to fly. He keeps repeating, "I love you;" words he never heard from Violet.

Visiting Alice Manfred, Violet begins to wonder why Joe loved the dead girl. She imagines him granting her the easy indulgences of infatuation, allowing him to spoon soft ice cream from his pint or to grab a handful of his buttered popcorn at the movies. She begins to envision Joe giving Dorcas silky underwear with roses and violets embroidered on them, and Dorcas patting Joe's firm thigh under the nightclub table.

Violet thinks when she met Joe she was looking for a magical, golden boy who had haunted her dreams. The golden boy was the child that True Belle, Violet's grandmother, lavished all her affection and care on for twenty-two years. True Belle continually speaks of this blonde boy, even as she cares for her five grandchildren. After Violet's father fled to the North to work, the men from the bank took all the family's possessions. Violet's mother, Rose Dear, collapsed on the floor, unable to move. Her five children gathered around her and took turns calling her name. The lived on milk or bread that neighbors gave them. True Bell gave up her cushy job in Baltimore and returned to care for her grandchildren.

After four years, Rose Dear threw herself down a well so narrow and dark it made the coffin seemed spacious. Perhaps because of the men and women hung in Rocky Mount. Maybe it was because of the young man in the church choir mutilated and tied to a log. Violet wonders what the reason was, that finally made Rose Dear give up forever. Three weeks later, Rose's husband returns to visit with his pockets full of candy for the

children, money and perfume for the adults. He brings a gift for Rose Dear, an embroidered satin pillow that would have been perfect in her casket, if only he had arrived in time. Three weeks later, he is gone again, only to return periodically bearing gifts.

True Belle sends Violet to Palestine to pick cotton, where she meets Joe. He falls out of a walnut tree she is sleeping under, like a fruit or a gift from heaven. Violet immediately chooses the boy with miss-matched eyes as her own. They talk all night, and by dawn Violet is never afraid of the dark again. When the cotton crop is harvested, Violet stays in the neighborhood working for a farm family to be close to Joe. His friends and adopted family are not surprised when Joe marries Violet. They are surprised when Joe, who loves the woods and hunting, decides to move to the city with Violet thirteen years later.

Joe does not want babies either, so the three miscarriages Violet has are not a problem. When Violet is forty, she begins to regret the daughter she could have had, if she had not washed her away in soap, salt and castor oil. She dreams of fixing a young girl's hair, and begins to imagine the girl looking like Dorcas.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter explores the attack at the funeral parlor, and its aftermath, from Violet's point of view. Morrison continues to play riffs on the same themes by laying additional layers of meanings on top of one another. In particular, the reader understands the healing effect of Violet's visits to Alice Manfred, on both the women.

The strength of the Harlem black community is illustrated in the scene of wise Aunties calling out of open windows to correct young men on the street. The entire community watches over and trains the young. They are never far from the eyes of a relative, friend, or neighbor.

In releasing the birds, Violet disowns the meager store of light and joy in her life. It is as if, unable to hurt Dorcas, she turns the violence on herself, destroying whatever she can. The birds symbolize hope, love, and joy. By turning them out Violet enters despair. The birds also allowed Violet to focus her attention on something other than Joe. Her affection is meager. She never tells the parrot "I love you" or even names him, but whatever small store of fondness she had is doled out to the birds, not her husband.

Releasing the birds is both an act of aggression against herself, and the first step in refocusing her life on Joe. Violet imagines Joe giving Dorcas silky underwear, and Dorcas patting his hard thigh under the table. She begins to fall in love with Joe again, and to love Dorcas a bit, herself. At the same time, she is angry, envisioning herself waiting on icy streets or hurrying to her next hair appointment while they make love. Violet thinks when she met Joe he was just a substitute for the golden boy she sought. She wonders if she was a substitute for an unattainable golden girl Joe sought, or if Dorcas was that girl.

The reader learns the story of Violet's mother, Rose Dear. Rose is helpless, trying to raise five children without an income. Eventually she commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. The major lesson Violet learns from her mother's despair is to never have children. This is a decision that is fateful for Violet, Joe, and Dorcas. The reader learns that Violet intentionally caused her own miscarriages with soap, salt and castor oil because she feared the responsibility of children. Violet wonders if Dorcas was a lover to Joe, or the daughter he never had.

The horrible racism of the times is fully exposed in this chapter. A mild young member of the church choir is horribly mutilated, and the men and women in Rocky Mount hung. Morrison gives no reason or excuse for either savage act. It is the lynchings, more than the constant responsibility of caring for five children that drives Rose Dear to suicide. Rose's helplessness and the lynchings convince Violet never to have children.

Morrison uses the technique of repetition to emphasize the sexism within the farm community, where black men are paid a quarter a day to pick cotton. Black women are paid only ten cents, regardless of how much they pick. Repetition is used again in the story of the unlikely friendship between Alice Manfred and Violet. As this friendship continues to grow, Alice advises Violet to cling to what she has, to the good parts of her life with Joe. When Violet leaves the malt shop after her visit with Alice, for the first time Violet and the other Violet see the city the same way.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The chapter opens with a lyrical description of Harlem in springtime. Musicians play the blues on every street corner. People passing after a light rain see Joe sitting inside, looking out onto the street and crying. He wipes his tears with red handkerchiefs washed and ironed by Violet. The narrator reveals she is not omnipotent, when she wonders what Violet's next action will be. Perhaps she will set Joe's hair on fire.

Joe remembers seeing Dorcas for the first time, before he knew her name. She is just a beautiful high school-aged girl with creamy skin and straight black hair buying candy at the drugstore. He knows the candy makes her cheeks and forehead break out, but he would not have it any other way. He loves even her imperfections. When he goes to Alice Manfred's to deliver the cosmetics, she was there. He learned her name is Dorcas. He tells her things he never told anyone else, even himself. He feels new again, like when he named himself.

Rhoda and Frank Williams adopted Joe at birth, when their son Victory was just three months old. Rhoda named him Joseph after her father, but they never thought to give him a last name. When he was three, Joe asked where his parents were. Rhoda replied they had disappeared without a trace. To Joe, it seemed he was the trace they disappeared without. So when the schoolteacher asked his name, he replied Joe Trace. He told Victory his real mother and father were coming back to get him.

When he was twelve, the hunter's hunter picked out Joe and Victory to learn tracking and hunting. He was the best in Vesper County, and it was a huge honor to be chosen as his apprentice. The white men said he was a witch doctor, because they did not want to say he was smart. After Joe married Violet, they farmed Harlon Ricks's land. Ricks sold the land, and Joe's $180 debt, to Clayton Bede. Soon the debt was $1,800, from interest and what Bede said were higher prices for fertilizer and supplies. Violet worked the farm and plowed Bede's land behind a mule while Joe worked in nearby towns. It took five years, but they paid off the debt.

Like a fool, Joe dreamed of buying his own land. The bankers took it with two slips of paper he had never seen or signed. So, Joe and Violet decided to move to the city. In 1919 he walked all the way with the colored troops of the 369, celebrating the end of World War I. They believed war was ended forever and equality was just around the corner, until Violet started sleeping with a doll in her arms. Too old to have children, she had begun to long for one. In a way Joe understood, but it made him feel excluded.

When Joe imagines Dorcas, he thinks of eating a sweet apple, biting into the crisp flesh and consuming the entire thing, even the core. He imagines being Adam, the first man to taste an apple, and thinks it must have been worth expulsion from the Garden of Eden. He uses the tracking skills he learned from the hunter's hunter to trace her, just

as he had tracked his mother. He carries his gun in his hand because he wants it to never end, the sweet taste of apple. First, he goes to the beauty parlor, and they tell him she has been in on Saturday, not today. The blind twins are playing the blues there. Afterwards, Joe wonders if it is him or the music that shoots Dorcas. He is jealous of all the young men he sees on the street, young roosters who do not have to search for women. Girls flock to them. He goes back to the park where they first met, dreary now and covered with melting snow. He has to take his sample case and pretend he is there on business, so they will not be thrown out of the park in a nice white neighborhood. After he shoots her, he wants to stay there and keep her from falling, from hurting herself.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter five explores Joe's history and his affair with Dorcas, and her death, from his point of view. Joe feels he choose Dorcas in an important way, whereas Violet was thrust upon him by fate. Joe realizes that Dorcas has been lying to him, telling him she was singing with the church choir in Brooklyn when actually she has been out dancing with boys. The hunter's hunter, nameless in Joe's saga, will play an important part later in the story.

The reader learns that Joe himself is motherless, adopted at birth by a kind black couple. He does not miss having a father because he has Frank and the hunter's hunter, but he alludes to the fact that he tried to track down his mother just as he is now tracking Dorcas. Once again, Harlem and jazz are irrevocably linked, with Joe unsure if his actions are caused by his own jealousy, the spring city or the music the blind twins are playing in the beauty parlor.

The apple symbolizes sin. As sweet and luscious as his time with Dorcas is, Joe realizes he is committing adultery by being with her. He is so besotted he does not care, and thinks that being expelled from Eden is a small price to pay for tasting the first apple.

Racism is illustrated in Clayton Bede's overcharging the Traces for fertilizer and supplies, inflating their debt. When Joe tries to end the cycle of poverty by buying his own land, unscrupulous white men cheat him out of it. Even in the city, when times are tight, shop owners double the price of beef in Harlem but leave the price the same in white neighborhoods. The only difference, in Joe's view, is that here, if a man protests, a hundred others will join him. At home in Virginia, he protested alone. Joe secures privacy for himself and Dorcas by sitting down next to two white men. Offended, the white men leave in a huff, and Joe can be alone with his young lover. There are no illustrations of sexism in this chapter because it is told from Joe's point of view, and he is unaware of any such thing.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

When True Belle, Violet's grandmother, returned to Vesper County, Virginia to care for her five grandchildren, she had her wages sewed into the hem of her dress. Ten golden eagle dollars, the total earned in twenty-two years of working for Vera Louise Gray, the white woman. The children are living with their mother in an abandoned shack, foraging for okra, dried beans, and berries in the forest. Rose tells people her husband just gave up and left, fed up with the price of coffee and his eldest daughter's twisted legs. She never says anything about him belonging to a party that supported the vote for black people.

True Belle cares for the children for eleven years, long enough to see Rose kill herself. She fills Violet's head with stories of that magical boy, the beautiful golden-skinned, golden-haired child she cared for during all those years in Baltimore. Vera Louise Gray told everyone the child was a foundling she had taken an interest in, but True Belle knew better. True Belle knew right away, what was going on. She knew back in Virginia when a certain black youth was seen riding out with Vera Louise. She washed the girl's personal linen, so she knew before anyone else that a child was expected. They never spoke of it.

The only people who did not know were the black youth himself and Vera Louise's father. When Vera Louise's mother tells him, his "left hand patted around the air searching for something: a shot of whiskey, his pipe, a whip, a shotgun, the Democratic platform his heart - Vera Louise never knew." He looked hurt, then angry. He knew what fate awaited her, for there were seven mulatto children on his own land.

Vera Louise's mother never says a word. She just leaves a lingerie case of money on her pillow. She leaves so much money it is an insult, far more money than anyone needs for seven or eight months in a strange city. Such a large quantity of money says, "leave, and don't come back." She took her personal maid, True Belle, with her to Baltimore and set them up in a house where Vera Louise is considered a freethinking suffragette. True Belle hopes Vera Louise will help buy her children and husband out of slavery, but Vera Louise hoards her money. She even keeps True Belle's wages "in trust" for her, to prevent the help from getting ideas.

When the baby is born, True Belle fell instantly in love with his golden skin and hair. It takes Vera Louise much longer. Eventually they both dote on the boy child, named Golden Gray. Vera Louise refuses to acknowledge that she is the child's mother, and never tells him his father is "a black savage" until he is eighteen. Shocked, furious, Golden Gray is determined to track down his father, even to kill him. True Belle tells him his father's name, and gives him directions to the man's cabin in Virginia.

Golden Gray sets out in his two-seat phaeton with a fine black horse, to confront his father. As he draws closer to the cabin, he stops to adjust his luggage and sees a naked pregnant black woman in the trees. Turning around to run, she hits her head against a tree and falls down, unconscious. Golden Gray decides she is a vision, adjusts the luggage, and then starts to drive away. The woman, and his own reaction to her, frightens him, but he returns to see if she is an illusion. Finding her still there, he picks her up, covers her with his coat, and props her in the carriage. He feels she is his talisman. Somehow, by confronting his father carrying this unconscious black sprite, he will curry favor from the man he wishes only to kill.

Golden Gray is relieved when the woman does not recover consciousness. He reaches the cabin of his father, Henry Lestory, a hunter and tracker of some tiny reputation. He carries his luggage into the deserted cabin, cares for his horse and changes out of his wet clothes before he thinks of the naked woman. Golden Gray carries her inside, and lays her on a cot. Her nakedness excites and revolts him, so he covers her with a green dress he finds in a trunk. A young black boy arrives to care for Lestory's stock, and washes the blood from the woman's face.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter, ostensibly about Violet's grandmother, True Belle, is actually about the boy Golden Gray. Abandoning her own two girls to be raised by relatives, True Belle goes to Baltimore with Vera Louise and lavishes all her attention on the marvelous, golden, almost-white boy. The pregnant black girl carries elements of magical realism. The reader is not sure if she is a vision, a sprite, the devil, or a figment of Golden Gray's imagination. Real or imagined, she symbolizes all the most powerful, and therefore most feared, aspects of blackness to Golden Gray.

Morrison uses repetition to tell the story twice, once seen through Golden Gray's eyes, and again with the narrator's commentary. This gives the story greater resonance and emphasis. Gray's disregard for the pregnant black woman is clearly shown when he cares for his horse, and changes out of his wet clothes, before bringing her inside. He treats her like an object that exists exclusively for his own purposes.

Lestory is the hunter's hunter who honored Joe by accepting him as an apprentice. The man's legendary exploits and reputation are totally eclipsed for Golden Gray by his color. In Gray's world, a black man can never be anything good or admirable. He searches for Lestory because he holds only contempt for him. True Belle feeds this contempt of black people by continually praising the beloved Golden Gray to her grandchildren, who grow up in awe of such a fantastic being. Violet, in particular, wants to marry such a golden boy, although she knows it is not possible.

Sexism is apparent in the attitude of Vera Louise Gray's father towards his daughter's pregnancy. It is perfectly acceptable for him, or other white men, to father mulatto children by black slave women. However, any pregnancy by an unmarried daughter is shameful. A pregnancy with a black child is unthinkable, and unforgivable. Morrison

uses irony to illustrate the inherent sexism of a white man "sowing his wild oats" and a white woman's "permanent mortification."

Racism is apparent in Golden Gray's sudden self-loathing when he learns, at the age of eighteen, that he is half black. It is even more clearly illustrated by the fact that although Vera Louise must legally pay True Belle wages after the Civil War, she withholds them. When True Belle finally convinces her employer that she is terminally ill, and needs to return home, she is give the accumulated wages for twenty-two years of hard labor. It amounts to just ten dollars. All of the suffering Violet and her siblings go through is caused by the white men's retribution towards her father. His sin is belonging to a political party that supports the vote for black men.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Thirteen years after Golden Gray finally brings himself to gaze at the wild black girl, pregnant girls and old grandfathers are still being warned about her. They say she lives close, just on the edge of the cane field. Young men cutting cane with machetes dream of loping off her head, half fearful, half lustful. She is not a legend. People remember the crazy woman, when she came, where she stayed, and that strange boy she liked so much.

When Henry Lestory, the hunter's hunter, gets back to his cabin, he finds Honor, the neighbor boy, washing blood off the wild girl's face. A white man stands in the room, half drunk on Lestory's own corn liquor. When Lestory demands an explanation, the white man calls him "Daddy." Henry shakes his head and insists he never knew he had a child. The wild girl screams and goes into labor. It is not an easy birth. The child fights all the way, and the girl is hardly any help. When the baby is finally born, the wild girl refused to hold it or nurse it. When she bites Henry Lestory's hand, he names her Wild.

Golden Gray confronts his father, and asks him why he never tried to contact him. Lestory wonders about what he was supposed to do. Ride up to the plantation house and ask Colonel Gray for the girl's address? Maybe he should request the beautiful green dress the girl used to wear when they went out riding, as well? Golden cannot argue when Lestory says the only reason he came was to see how black his father was. Golden is sober now, and his first thought is to shoot the man, tomorrow. Maybe it was the wild girl who changed his mind.

Thirteen years later, the entire plantation burns. The cane field burns for months. All the black residents flee, to Crossland or Goshen or Palestine looking for work. Joe and his adopted brother Victory, both thirteen, also go. Joe is at first afraid of the wild woman, then embarrassed. He is obsessed with finding her, and yet tries to reject her. One day while Victory and Joe are joking about the wild woman, Henry looks right at Joe and says, "You know, that woman is *somebody's* mother and *somebody* ought to take care." Joe is positive Henry is trying to tell him Wild is his own mother.

Henry says you can always find Wild because the redwings love her. Wherever there are more than four redwings, Wild is there. Once, after a successful dawn fishing, Joe hears the musical tinkle of a women singing in the forest, near a riverbank with a hibiscus bush. He calls out, and the singing stops. Another time, he finds a burrow behind the hibiscus bush and climbs into it. On the other side is a crevice with a cooking fire. Inside the crevice are a green dress, a doll, a photograph, a set of silver brushes and a cigar case, such as a wealthy young man from Baltimore might carry in his luggage. The pants and shirt Golden Gray wore on that day thirteen years ago are there, as well. Joe waits all day but Wild never returns. Years later, after Violet has chosen him, Joe returns and sits on the riverbank near the hibiscus. He can feel

someone breathing nearby. He asks for a sign, a small acknowledgement that she is his mother. It is growing dim and in the twilight, he cannot see any sign.

Wandering the icy January city streets looking for Dorcas, Joe knows she would never choose one of those self-centered young roosters. He is confident he will not find her clothes mingled with those of another man. He just wants to find her so they can be happy together, again.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter continues the saga of Golden Gray and Wild from Henry Lestory's point of view then segues into Joe's point of view. Golden Gray accuses Henry Lestory of not caring for Vera Louise, but the reader suspects he does. The green dress Golden pulls from a trunk to cover Wild's nakedness sounds like the same dress Henry describes Vera wearing on their rides. After the fire, Joe is pretty sure Henry has moved nearer to her family's plantation, but no one knows for sure.

The story of Wild and Golden Gray is left ambiguous. The reader is fairly certain they loved each other, but they do not seem to be together now. How or where they parted, or how long they were together is unclear.

Scenes of Joe's tracking of Dorcas and his searches for his mother are interwoven, indicating they are intertwined in his mind. Violet wonders if Joe is searching for an unborn daughter in Dorcas, but the reader suspects he is searching for a wild young mother he never knew.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

This chapter presents the attack, from Dorcas's point of view. The language is simple and transparent, and doesn't interfere with the flow of the action. Dorcas is completely happy at last. She is at a party with adults, drinking and dancing with Acton. He is a handsome young man with no gray in his hair. All the girls are after Acton, and he would never dream of buying Dorcas a present. She likes it that way. When she is with Joe, she feels she has all the power. He adores her no matter what she does. With Acton, she has to be careful what she wears and how she laughs, or he will take up with someone else.

When Dorcas breaks up with Joe, she tells him it was all the sneaking around. Really, it was the sense of power. Dorcas wants to be with someone young, someone other girls admire, not with an old man she has to hide. She knows Joe will come looking for her, even though she told him not to. Maybe then, Joe will see her with Acton and realize she is happy.

When Dorcas finally sees Joe, he is crying. She is falling and does not understand why. Acton lays her down gently and tries to brush blood off his jacket. They are all asking her questions. They want her to say Joe's name so they can go after him. They will take away his sample case with Rochelle, Bernadine, and Faye inside.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter reveals the end of Joe and Dorcas's affair, and the shooting, from her point of view. The chapter is short, and packed with action. The reader learns why Dorcas left Joe. She wants a man she can discuss with her girlfriends, not someone who is married. Dorcas wants a young man she can admire and look up to, who is coveted by other girls. She does not want a tired old man. She does not want to wield all the power in the relationship. Dorcas tells Joe not to follow her, but she knows he will disobey.

Acton betrays his disregard for Dorcas. He is preoccupied with cleaning her blood from his jacket, rather than giving her medical care. Dorcas's friend Felice and the others ask her to name her attacker, but she refuses. She tells them, "I'll tell you tomorrow."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

It is spring and the strains of jazz float down from the roof, where musicians play. Violet has returned Dorcas's photo to Alice Manfred. The empty space on the mantle stares like an accusation. Violet sees a beautiful girl climbing up the stairs on Lenox Avenue, a record under one arm and a half-pound of stew meat under the other. The girl is Felice, Dorcas's best friend. Felice asks if they have a silver and black opal ring she lent Dorcas, but she learns Dorcas was buried wearing her ring.

The ring is special to Felice because it was a gift from her mother. Her parents worked in Tuxedo when Felice was little. Felice lived with her grandmother, and her parents only visited for two and a half days every two weeks. On one visit, Felice's mother took her to Tiffany's to pick up a package for the white lady she worked for. Felice wanted to know why Mama had to run errands on her day off, but Mama shushed her. At Tiffany's, Mama showed a note from the white lady so they could go inside. While they waited, Mama and Felice tried on some rings, until a white man in a nice suit came over and told them to stop. After they got home, Mama gave Felice the black opal and silver ring. Mama said the white lady gave it to her, but Felice knows she stole it from Tiffany's. It makes Felice happy that Mama did something to get even with the white man. It makes her sad that Mama gave up her principles to do it.

While she is visiting the Traces, Felice talks about Dorcas. She tells them how Dorcas was always getting other people in trouble, egging them on to steal things. Dorcas always liked having secrets. That is why she was with Mr. Trace. She liked sneaking over to Felice's house to put on the filmy underwear and silk stockings he gave her. Everything was like a movie to that girl, and she was the star.

After she broke up with Joe Trace, Dorcas worked hard to get Acton, because all the other girls wanted him. She bought him presents and did whatever he wanted. After Joe Trace shot her, Dorcas did not want them to call the ambulance, because she was afraid Joe would get into trouble. Felice called the ambulance, anyway. They did not come until the next morning. They said it was because of the ice, but Felice knows it was because it was black people calling. When Felice and Joe are alone in the living room, Felice tells him Dorcas's last words. "Tell Joe there's only one apple." Violet invites Felice to dinner on Friday, and Felice accepts. After dinner, Violet offers to trim the ends off Felice's hair.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The reader learns of Joe and Dorcas's affair, and Dorcas's death, from Felice's point of view. Felice's view of Dorcas as a scheming, self-absorbed brat rings truer than Joe's idealized version. Felice thinks that Dorcas was only with Joe because he bought her

presents. He also gave her an opportunity to sneak around and tell lies, which she enjoyed. Joe insists that the Dorcas he knew was sweet, even if she did not show that side to other people. Even after Felice learns the Traces do not have her ring, she returns to visit them. Violet sees Felice as the daughter she never had. She is happy to cook for Felice, and trim her hair. The nature of Joe's relationship with Felice is unclear. Is she his next lover? A daughter he never had? Or the young, wild mother he's always searched for?

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The narrator talks about the nature of pain, how she thought she understood the relationship between Violet, Joe, and Felice, and now is not so sure. Felice walks slowly back from the store, nobody's hammer, alibi, or toy. Alice Manfred moves back to Springfield to work for a white woman she knows.

Joe gets a job at a speakeasy called Paydirt, so he can spend the afternoon hours with Violet. Sometimes after a hair appointment, he meets her at the drug store for a malt. After supper, they play poker or listen to Malvonne gossip, so she can pretend she did not betray both of them. They take the new bird Violet bought on the roof to listen to the music. At night, Joe and Violet curl up together and whisper under the covers.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Through the narrator's eyes, the reader understands that Joe and Violet have found new peace together, with Felice as a sort of foster daughter.

Characters

The Narrator

Curious, inventive, and well informed, the narrator is a major character in this novel. The distinctly female voice is as gossipy as a young hairdresser is, but as wise as an old Auntie. The entertaining, insightful and lyrical narrator knows and sees much more than any one character, yet she is not aware of everything. She admits initially misunderstanding the role Felice plays in the lives of the Traces. Alternately disembodied ("I have no muscles") and concrete ("my feet"), she is pervasive yet completely un-godlike. Speculations on the narrator's identity range from goddess and musical instrument, to jazz itself, with the spirit of the book being most likely.

Violet Trace

Fifty-years-old and toothpick-thin, with short, smooth hair, Violet Trace has lost any hips, butt, and chest she once had. Nevertheless, she is beautiful, with boot-black skin. Violet works as an unlicensed hairdresser, "doing heads" in clients' homes. After her husband of thirty years, Joe Trace, has an affair, she drinks double malts in an attempt to recover her lost hips.

Violet is the middle of five children. Her father was run out of their small Virginia town for supporting a party that favored giving the vote to black men. Her mother, Rose Dear, struggled to support the family but white men repossessed everything they owned. Rose collapsed in despair, as each of her children tried to rouse her in turn. The children were living in an abandoned shack with Rose, eating whatever they could forage. Violet's grandmother, True Belle, left her undemanding job in Baltimore to help Rose raise the children. Four years later, worn out from the poverty, Rose Dear committed suicide by throwing herself down a well. Violet found her mother dead the next morning.

True Belle sent Violet and her sisters to Palestine to pick a bumper crop of cotton, and there a beautiful young man fell out of the tree, literally at Violet's feet. His name is Joe Trace, and before the night is over, she has chosen him. They are married within a few months. After three miscarriages, Joe and Violet decide to move to Harlem, which they call "the city." Violet becomes increasingly "crazy" and violent during their time in the city, until the events surrounding Joe's affair lead her to reconcile with her husband.

Joe Trace

Joe is the fifty-something husband of Violet Trace. He works as a waiter and part-time salesman for Cleopatra cosmetics. His mother, an insane woman named Wild, abandoned him at birth. He was immediately adopted by Rhoda and Frank Williams. The Williams have eight other children, including a son named Victory, who is just three

months older than Joe is. When very young, Joe asks Rhoda what happened to his real mother and father. Rhoda tells him they disappeared without a trace. Joe understands this to mean he is the trace they disappeared without. When he goes to school, he gives his name as Joe Trace.

Joe is honored to be selected by the hunter's hunter, Henry Lestory, as an apprentice, along with Victory. The two boys love the woods and hunting so much, everyone is surprised when Joe marries Violet and they decide to move to Harlem. As Violet becomes increasingly silent and starts sleeping with a doll, Joe begins an affair with an eighteen-year-old girl, Dorcas.

Malvonne

Malvonne is the ultimate busybody. An insightful, intelligent woman who cleans office buildings at night, she has no other outlet than dabbling in other people's lives. As far as the novel has an antagonist, it is Malvonne. Much of the action is propelled by her interference in the lives of those around her.

When Sweetness, Malvonne's nephew, steals a bag of mail and hides it behind the radiator, Malvonne reads it. Most of the letters are boring, but a few inspire her to action. Malvonne adds a note to the law school application of one young woman, and mails it. She is terrified that without intervention, the young woman is doomed to a menial job. Malvonne also includes a magazine clipping on the pitfalls of adultery in a love letter from "Hot Steam" to her "Daddy Sage."

Joe Trace rents a spare room from Malvonne, to meet with Dorcas. It is through Malvonne that Violet learns of Joe's infidelity. When Violet attacks the dead girl in her coffin, it is Malvonne who tells Alice Manfred.

Dorcas

The seventeen-year-old girl who has an affair with Joe Trace, Dorcas is perhaps the least detailed character in the novel. Joe sees her as sweet and shy, while her best friend Felice sees her as manipulative. After leaving Joe for Acton, a man nearer her own age, Dorcas is shot by Joe at a party. When Felice finally calls the ambulance, they fail to respond to a black neighborhood until the next morning.

Dorcas has a troubled history of her own. As a nine-year-old girl, both her parents were killed in race riots in East St. Louis. Dorcas's father, a pool hall owner, was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death in front of his wife, by a white crowd. Returning home that evening, Dorcas's mother died when their house caught fire. The shiny new fire truck refused to respond to a call in a black neighborhood. Dorcas observed the blaze from across the street, where she was spending the night with her best friend. Unable to mourn such huge losses, Dorcas can only cry for her three clothespin dolls burned in their wooden cigar box: Rochelle, Bernadine, and Faye.

Alice Manfred

After her parents' deaths, Dorcas comes to Harlem to live with her maternal aunt, Alice Manfred. Alice is a woman in her fifties of independent means. She is a skilled laborer, and a seamstress in the garment district who does fine work by hand.

Alice is a widow. Her husband engaged in an affair with another woman, and Alice insisted he choose between the two. He chose the other woman, and left Alice. Just seven months later, he was dead. Alice becomes friends with Violet after Dorcas's death, reluctantly at first. She counsels Violet to stay with Joe through infidelities, to hold onto the good parts of their relationship, regardless of his actions.

Felice

Felice is Dorcas's best friend ever since she moved to Harlem. Most girls at their school choose friends based on skin color. Light-skinned Dorcas and dark-skinned Felice are an exception. They are regularly greeted with cries like, "Hey buttermilk, where's the fly?" Felice sees Dorcas as an instigator, someone who always wants other children to steal or pull pranks. She does not approve of Dorcas's affair with a man in his fifties, and at first thinks she is only doing it for the gifts Joe gives her. Three months after Dorcas's death, Felice visits the Traces and they become friends. In many ways, Felice becomes the daughter the Traces never had.

Acton

Acton is the handsome young man Dorcas leaves Joe for. He is arrogant, and criticizes everything Dorcas does. She it completely besotted with this "rooster," who is admired by all her friends, and gives him gifts. When Dorcas is shot, Acton is more concerned with getting the blood off his jacket, than Dorcas's survival.

Golden Gray

Golden Gray is the illegitimate child of the white daughter of a plantation owner, Colonel Gray, and the black hunter's hunter Henry Lestory. When Vera Louise Gray becomes pregnant, her family sends her away permanently. She takes her maid, True Belle, to Baltimore with her. True Belle is completely besotted with Vera Louise's golden-skinned, golden-haired child. Vera Louise tells the boy he is a foundling, and never acknowledges she is his mother. She allows the boy to believe he is white, only telling him his father is a "black savage" when he is eighteen.

Henry Lestory

The fabled hunter's hunter, Lestory is called a witch doctor by white men who do not want to acknowledge his skill and intelligence. Joe Trace is honored to be chosen as an apprentice to Lestory. Lestory has an affair with Vera Louise Gray, the Colonel's daughter, but never learns of her pregnancy until Golden Gray confronts him.

True Belle

Violet's grandmother, True Belle is a maid to Vera Louise Gray. At the age of twenty-seven and still a slave, she is compelled to move to Baltimore with Vera Louise, abandoning her two daughters. True Belle chooses to stay in Baltimore long after emancipation, caring for her darling Golden Gray, Vera Louise's illegitimate son. When True Belle returns to Vesper County, Virginia to care for her grandchildren, all she can talk about is the wonderful golden boy.

Wild

The naked, young, pregnant black woman encountered by Golden Gray on the way to his father's cabin is named the Wild girl. When the insane girl bites Henry Lestory, he calls her "wild" and it becomes the only name the reader knows. Wild gives birth at the cabin to Joe Trace, but refuses to care for him. The baby is adopted by Rhoda and Frank Williams. Wild continues to prowl around the community, living in a crevice on a riverbank or in a cane field. Henry Lestory finally implies to Joe that Wild is his mother, when he is twelve.

Rose Dear

Violet's mother was abandoned by her own mother, True Belle, at the age of eight. She was left in the care of an aunt. Her husband is forced to flee Vespers County for participating in a political party that supports the vote for black men. Rose Dear is left to raise five children alone, with no income. When the white men repossess everything the family owns, Rose Dear collapses. By the time True Belle returns to help raise the children, they are living in an abandoned cabin, foraging for food. Four years later, Rose Dear commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. Violet discovers the body the next morning.

Objects/Places

Harlem

Harlem is a central feature in the book. The interdependent black community is home to every comfort and form of assistance, as well as to unthinkable violence. When Joe and Violet move to Harlem, they think it is beyond perfect.

The Trace's Apartment

Joe and Violet Trace live in a comfortable apartment in Harlem. The furniture, although not new, is arranged in a way to provide the maximum convenience to its residents, rather than to impress visitors. The spacious dining room features houseplants against the windows, deep comfortable chairs, and plenty of space for Violet to fix her customers' hair.

The Birds

After Violet attacks the dead girl in her casket, she returns home and frees her birds, putting all of them out the window into the snow. The yellow and green parrot who says "I love you" is unable to fly, and lingers on the window for days. The birds symbolize the meager hope, joy, and love in Violet's life at that point. She is turning her anger and despair in on herself, by releasing them. Paradoxically, it is only by releasing the birds and redirecting that attention to Joe, that she is able to recover.

The Apple

When Joe is courting Dorcas, he insists their love is like an apple. He swears that if he can bite into the crisp flesh and consume the apple to the core, he will be like Adam. Joe would gladly be expelled from Eden in return for tasting the first apple. The apple symbolizes both the sweetness of love and sex, as well as Joe's awareness of sin.

The Knife

When Violet leaves the apartment to disfigure the dead girl at her funeral, her hand automatically finds the knife that has been lost for weeks. It is lying in the bottom of the parrot's cage, where she used it to trim marble from the bird's beak and claws. This is the first action of the person Violet calls "the other Violet," a being capable of unthinking violence.

Vespers County, Virginia

Joe and Violet are originally from Vespers County, Virginia. This is the original home of Rose Dear, True Belle, Vera Louise Gray, and Henry Lestory. It is a rural environment full of racism and lynchings.

Malvonne's Apartment

Malvonne lives upstairs from Joe and Violet Trace. She has a spare bedroom after her nephew, Sweetness, moved to Chicago (or some other city that ends in O). When Joe Trace needs a place to bring his young girlfriend, he convinces Malvonne to rent the extra room to him, against her better judgment. This decision proves fateful, as Malvonne eventually tells Violet of Joe's infidelity, setting her violent attack on Dorcas into motion.

The Black Opal Ring

On the night of her death, Felice lends Dorcas her best black opal and silver ring, because it matches her bracelets. The ring is important to Felice, and she wants it back. Months after Dorcas's death, Felice visits the Traces to see if they have the ring. They do not, but the visit begins a healing friendship for all of them.

Hair

Violet is a talented hairdresser, but she never had supervised training, so she is unlicensed. Unable to get a job in a beauty salon, she must travel to her clients' homes, or have them come to her apartment, to do hair for less. When Joe wants to find Dorcas, the first place he goes is to the beauty salon, where he knows she has a weekly appointment. When he learns she has lied to him about getting her hair done on Saturday, he knows she is seeing someone else.

Speakeasies

Although he is reluctant to be seen in public with her, Joe takes Dorcas to several speakeasies, including a club called Mexico. Despite Prohibition, alcohol is readily available in Harlem, and speakeasies are common. At the conclusion of the story, Joe has a job at a speakeasy. He works at night, which allows him to spend the afternoons with Violet.

Social Sensitivity

Shortly before she won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first ever awarded to an African-American woman writer, Toni Morrison released Jazz, the second novel in her trilogy of "ourstory." (See the biographical entry on Morrison for an explanation of her particular concern that history has been a political and social construct reflecting primarily the views of white males.) The trilogy is her narrative of the African-American voyage from slavery to the contemporary situation of a still-divided American society.

The first book in this trilogy, Beloved (1987; see separate entry), addressed the immediate effects of slave culture in the struggles of the heroine Sethe, her motherin-law Baby Suggs, and her eventual lover Paul D, to rebuild their lives after harrowing escapes from slave plantations, relocations to Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from slave territory, and Sethe's desperate act—murdering her daughter to prevent her ever suffering the ignominy of being enslaved. Set principally some fifty years later, Jazz takes up the "Great Migration" of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when African Americans, suffering under the Jim Crow patterns of segregation that had developed in the American South since the early days of Reconstruction, migrated hopefully to the large industrial cities of the North seeking freedom, jobs, and relief from officially supported racist policies. Although Jazz literally treats as its plot a murder that occurred in Harlem in 1926, Morrison's larger context is a migration that began in hope and the promise of participation in the American dream of freedom and dignity for all citizens, but after a quarter of a century resulted in a ghettoization of urban blacks about which Morrison's narrator has mixed feelings. Like the hero of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), Morrison's characters find the new freedom of Harlem a mixed blessing at best.

Since the Nobel Prize and her unexpected lionization in popular culture, on the Oprah Winfrey television program among other media events, Morrison has added a third volume to her saga of the AfricanAmerican experience. Paradise (1997) addresses one deliberate response to racism by African Americans: exclusionism. The inhabitants of Ruby, an Oklahoma community of the mid-twentieth century, systematically exclude European Americans from their village and their councils. One minor incident shows a white family seeking di rections in the village store and being directed out of the town with very little ceremony. The family subsequently dies in a storm everyone recognized as inevitable even while they directed them out of town.

In effect, Ruby is a secessionist community, one of what the novel portrays as several in the western regions of the South.

This book, set primarily in the mid-1970s, deals with a specific community of African Americans that has become itself segregated, that, in the opinion of one of its characters, privileges inhabitants on the darkness of their skin pigmentation. Ruby has grown up as an introverted enclave—the title Paradise offers several levels of irony—partly in response to white racism, but more explicitly in reaction to the exclusion of the band of "founders" from other isolationist black enclaves. While the overt discrimination

by the white culture breeds resentment, that by other blacks creates a profound, lasting sense of injury and outrage. This series of events is so fundamental to the founding of Ruby that it has come to occupy a central role in the community's folklore; it is passed from generation to generation as "the Disallowing," a rationale for the austerity of the town's public policy. Much like the local events that become the narrative center of Jazz, this "Disallowing" is an example of Morrison's abiding concern with the way folk culture works, by institutionalizing events and persons as part of a culture's needed myth-construction.

Thus all novels in the trilogy, covering slightly more than a century of American racial strife, deal in one way or another with enclaves or ghettos that are the result of racism and the omnipresent threat of genocide by a reactionary white population. Beloved deals with the creation and establishment of an anticommunity, a gathering of ex-slaves and free persons in a context of oppression, with African Americans caught between the continuance of racial attitudes from slave times and the emergence of a white reaction that would eventually become codified as the infamous Jim Crow laws. From this perspective, Jazz is the fulcrum novel of the trilogy. Slaves' descendants, seeking their share of the promised American dream, migrate to the North, to the cities, seeking freedom and opportunity. One of the novel's finest moments recalls the 1906 journey of the protagonists Joe and Violet Trace, across the Maryland state line into Delaware, where the Jim Crow laws did not formally exist, and their exhilaration as they danced into the city intoxicated by the rhythm of the train on the tracks and the promise Harlem held out to them: They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And ... they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back" (emphasis added to indicate that Joe's and Violet's is a representative, not unique, experience).

The theme of urban promise and the Great Migration has its precedents both in American literature and Morrison's own work. The hero of Ellison's Invisible Man goes to Harlem full of naive idealism and selfish expectations, only to be crushed by the city itself. An entire family is overwhelmed by their urban relocation in James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953).

Cholly and Pauline Breedlove in Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970; see separate entry) escape humiliation in the South only to find frustration and broken dreams in their northern city. But in no book about the Great Migration has the sense of hope and disappointment been drawn so effectively. Even on the train to the city, readers feel the rhythm and force of Joe and Violet's shared belief that this is, indeed, the promised land.

The power of this portrayal of hope makes all the more graphic Morrison's representation of the dashing of those expectations— not by a single act of aggression, like the effort to "reclaim" escaped slaves in Beloved or "the Disallowing" in Paradise, but by a gradual wearing down of the principal characters' lives and expectations. Twenty years elapse between this entry into the city of promise and the novel's central event, but by the end of that time Joe and Violet have been transformed from the vibrant

traindancers of 1906. She has turned into an aging eccentric who keeps caged birds in her apartment; he has become a tired, bored hotel waiter with a sideline, selling women's cheap beauty potions. He does this as much to keep himself busy as to make money, for friendships seem rare for Joe in the city, and Violet has become withdrawn.

As a symbol of her regressive isolationism, she took up sleeping with a doll in her arms in 1926.

Both principal characters, as well as many minor ones, express what amounts to a curious nostalgia for their southern past, when they were victims of literal discrimination, but they nonetheless had a feeling of belonging. In fact, Violet at one point associates Joe's loss of vigor with their escape from the rural Virginia community in which they were in fact victims of overt white racism but not of the kind of estrangement they both feel in Harlem: "my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, [who] could make anybody stand in cane in the middle of the night." This is not to say that Violet has forgotten the repression in her home country; recalling her courtship, she also remembers chopping extra wood "so the crackers [racist whites] had enough and wouldn't be hollering for me." So it is not a transformation of memory that converts Violet's youthful enthusiasm for New York into a sense of inescapable isolation and sorrow. She recalls how very bad it was in the South, but she still associates youth, hope, and vigor with the South and emptiness, barrenness, and dread with the North. Similarly, Joe, although he has a much more complex view of his own evolution, has come to depend on his love affair with a teenager, Dorcas, whom he eventually murders, to supply the vitality and purpose that has disappeared from his life since he moved north.

One final social concern common to the three novels is the presence of violence within the marginalized community. Beloved revolves around Sethe's taking the life of her child to prevent the baby's being returned to slavery, an act that weighs profoundly on her conscience. The child's spirit haunts the house in which Sethe and her younger daughter live after the sons have moved away. Joe's murder of Dorcas, along with Violet's subsequent mutilation of the corpse at the funeral, comprises the central event of Jazz. This is by far the most difficult to explain motivationally among the acts of violence that serve as central events in the novels. Joe loves Dorcas, and even claims in his own narrative that his intention was never to harm her. But then again, he had a gun in his possession as he searched for her over several hours, so we as readers have to cast some doubt on Joe's repeated professions that he never intended to hurt Dorcas, to wonder if his professions represent a reconstruction of his personal history in the creation of his narrative. In any case, his act of violence does not rule out his continuing love and dependence on his victim. Paradise begins and ends with an assault on "the Convent," an old mansion in which several women have taken refuge from a variety of traumatic experiences in the larger world.

While the Convent is no longer a formal home for religious sisters, it has become a sanctuary for people whom the dominant males in the town consider eccentric, dangerous, or a threat to the stability of their enclave—in short, uncontrolled females.

The novel's first sentences reveal the violence, sexism, and racism that are at the nucleus of Paradise: "They shoot the white girl first.

With the rest they can take their time." The entire narrative becomes a probing, an explanation of the causes of this act of violence and its impact on Ruby's citizens— not all of whom, it turns out, share the attitudes of the leading citizens toward the Convent or its inhabitants.

Although Jazz focuses on one crime and its consequences, it resonates with emblems of evolving strife between the races in America, with a parallel emphasis on the effects on the African-American community of white violence and the threats thereof: for the most part, a variety of effects reasserting alienation and marginalization. Three instances of racial violence and its impact on African-American characters will serve to represent the many in the novel.

The most obvious example of systemic racism and its consequences is Rose Dear's suicide. Her daughter, Violet, is psychologically wounded by this memory. As a direct result, she vows never to have children. Some of the consequences for Violet's personality are discussed under the "Themes" section, but all of them bring grief to her and those around her. But how are Rose Dear's suicide and its impact on her daughter consequences of racism?

Morrison's narrator is cagey about this, only hinting about possible causes and leaving it to the reader to decode which or how many causes really apply. Among the possibilities on which the narrator speculates are the "four-day hangings in Rocky Mount [North Carolina]," and the "young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to a log." While neither event can be established as a cause of Rose Dear's despair—indeed, the narrator professes not to be certain whether she knew about either but clearly implies that both are contiguous in time to Rose Dear's death—both are symptomatic of a pattern of racist violence that could drive one to despair.

It is very clear, however, that the eviction Rose Dear suffered was central to her state of mind when she killed herself. And by indirection Morrison establishes that the eviction was a consequence of Violet's father's political activism. He eventually joined the Readjuster Party, a group dedicated to advancement for black people. When the sheriff's people evicted Rose Dear and confiscated most of her possessions, they showed her the "paper her husband had signed saying they could." But we and the characters do not know why the husband signed such a document, or whether this happened because of duress or threat, or for that matter, what the document actually said. We do learn, however, exactly what the document's subtext was: "Nothing on the paper about the husband joining a party that favored niggers voting." From this indirection readers should conclude that Rose Dear's suicide was brought about by despair arising, at least in part, from an eviction that was the result of her husband's participating in a political initiative, an effort to claim political power for exslaves and their descendants.

A more general social cause, the East St.

Louis, Illinois, riots of 1917, is mentioned several times throughout the book. These riots, responding to violence against and opportunity denied to African Americans, eventually resulted in the strengthening of the National Urban League. According to Morrison's account, more than two hundred died in the East St. Louis riots. Moreover, Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, witnessed a solemn procession relating to this crisis, presumably a protest march, in New York.

This violence in the Midwest, while forming a context of racism and repression throughout the novel, also affects Alice's life directly. Two of the East St. Louis dead are Dorcas's parents. Neither was an activist, but both became victims. Her father was "pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death" while trying to get home from the poolroom he owned. His wife died when their house was deliberately torched. The ultimate victim of this racial violence is Dorcas, orphaned to her aunt's care in distant New York. Partly because Alice is ill prepared for child-rearing, but mainly because of her fears based on racist violence against her brother and sister-in-law, Alice parents overprotectively. As a result of Alice's efforts to seclude her niece, Dorcas rebels against what she perceives as unreasonable prohibitions. Part of her rebellion is expressed in her attraction to jazz music, which Alice despises as a manifestation of moral breakdown, as well as fashionable clothing and entertainment. A much more dangerous part of Dorcas's rebellion is expressed in her love affair with a man old enough to be her grandfather, but one who is gentle and generous.

Moreover, in his recollection of his personal story, which he describes as a series of six "changes," Joe Trace identifies the final one with the summer of the riots, but the relationship between systemic racism and his self-definition is explicit: "those whitemen took that pipe from around my head, [and] I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me." Whether the "pipe around [his] head" is literal, a description of overt physical violence, or symbolic, a representation of repression and duress, it is clear that the riots had a formative effect on Joe's development as a person; he calls it a rebirth. Like Alice, he does not know exactly how the riots started; his list of possible causes that set it off resembles, but does not mirror, hers. But that they happened is part of the African-American narrative and part of the omnipresent threat of white violence against blacks that forms the cultural backdrop for Jazz.

A final example of systemic racism does not concern Joe or Violet directly, and does not even involve much violence; but it suggests the evolution of racism from the overt, flagrant, brutal tactics of the Jim Crow era to the more insidious, but profoundly hurtful, ways of racism in modern times. Dorcas's best friend, Felice, becomes involved in Joe's and Violet's lives after the double crime (the murder and mutilation). She tells Joe and Violet her story about her mother, who aspired to middle-class respectability and deplored both activism and funkiness.

In Tiffany's jewelry store, Felice's churchgoing mother has an epiphany. Although she and her husband knew about injustice and racism, she did not expect to be mistrusted simply because she, a black woman, was standing at a jewelry counter in a ritzy downtown store. There to pick up a package for her employer, she is accused, implicitly, of intending to shoplift by a floorwalker who attributes his suspicion to "policy. We have

to be careful." Outraged by this suspicion based on nothing more than a racial stereotype, the mother makes the suspicion true by committing unethical acts that deviate completely from her normal character. A moral and upright person, she steals a ring from Tiffany's, then lies about it when she later gives it to Felice.

Thus, this minor incident of racial stereotyping and its consequences suggest a vast theme for Jazz, that the moral price of racism, while often reflecting the depravity or indifference of those who practice it, can have a wearing effect on the moral character of the victims as well.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Although Jazz is part of a larger narrative that began with Beloved and moves on to Paradise, it is much more daring and sophisticated than either of the other novels in its literary technique. With this book, Morrison achieves a singular identification of form and function by naming the novel after an indigenous musical convention, 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. Finally, the novel emulates structurally the properties of a jazz improvisation, developing a melodic (plot) line then improvising variations on that line. Much as solos in a jazz group are passed among various instruments and players, in a seeming competition for the listeners' attention and approval (but this competition is also a collaboration, in which the sum of the performance is greater than any one musician's solo), Jazz uses many voices to tell two complementary narratives. One story centers on Joe's murdering Dorcas and its consequences, whereas the other is the Reconstruction story concerning the birth and maturation of Golden Gray; the obvious link is that Gray's story has become family folklore that fixed Violet's values in so distorted a fashion that, even after all the suffering, she explains the needs that drove her to madness as wanting to be "White.

Light. Young again."

Indeed there are many solos in Jazz. The most improvisational is by a narrator who tells both stories, but a narrator who may not be a trustworthy witness to events. To counter the deliberate uncertainties presented by this unreliable narrator, who con tradicts herself and presents dismissive judgments of her characters, Morrison permits Joe, Felice, and even Dorcas to tell their own fragments of the greater story. Moreover, she uses limited omniscient narration to tell Violet's and Alice Manfred's personal histories.

In this adaptation of a musical form, Morrison builds on the example of E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime (1975) which portrayed the events of 1900-1919 from a contemporary, postmodernist perspective by emulating the rhythms and techniques of ragtime music, itself a precursor of jazz. Both novels allude to musical forms and reconstruct from a distinctly postmodernist perspective the history of two contiguous, indeed overlapping, time periods. Like Doctorow, Morrison lays out a theme for development and emulates improvisation while she develops that motif, perhaps introducing another variation as she does so. For example, both novels emulate the more classical musical convention of the overture, which has been transformed as the introduction to pieces for both ragtime and jazz presentation. The traditional overture set forth all the major motifs and themes of a suite or opera for elaboration and development later. Similarly, the first chapters of Ragtime and Jazz each announce the entire plot of the novel in skeletal form. Morrison announces in the opening chapter the murder, the mutilation, Violet's effort to kidnap a baby, Felice's eventual arrival at Violet's apartment, and even True Belle's legacy of adoring the legend surrounding Golden Gray, as well as the ubiquity of jazz as an auditory background for the action of the novel. Moreover, she introduces the unreliable, judicial voice of her narrator, although, as readers, we do not yet know

enough to be adequately suspicious about what that voice tells us. For example, she predicts that Felice's arrival would lead to "that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue," with all its implications of salacious conduct, but the eventual relationships among Felice, Violet and Joe are anything but scandalous—they are positively domestic. The novel will subsequently extricate and develop each strand of this very complex narrative. Thus Jazz is a fiction that emulates jazz as a musical convention and employs representations of jazz music as an auditory backdrop and as one symbolic manifestation of the allures, joys, and temptations of the city, which becomes the narrator's central preoccupation.

Morrison once described her intention to write a "talking book," and in Jazz she actually attempts this literary technique.

Her narrator is in many ways the most enigmatic presence in the entire book. A useful step in understanding the nature of this narrator is to establish what the voice is not. We do not hear any identifiable character's voice as the primary narrator (we do hear, however, the clearly individuated firstperson narratives of some characters). The principal narrator is not a presence in Harlem in 1926 or a character in the Reconstruction narrative centering on True Belle and Golden Gray. Morrison's apparent intention is that the voice we are hearing is the sound of the book itself. At least this seems to be the implication of the final moment, in which the narrator confesses (we can speak of the narrator as female for linguistic convenience, and for obvious reasons, as a specialization of Toni Morrison's authorial voice) her envy of Joe's and Violet's "public love" and laments her inability to say "aloud" the words of commitment and love: "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." If we assume that the "you" is the reader—us—we logically infer that our hands would still be holding the open book as we finish reading it, prior to shutting it. If this is true, it follows that Morrison is offering a reader-response theory of fiction in her very narrative. Her narrator—the book— recognizes that the act of reading is not completed with the closing of the book. As readers we continue to reinvent, deconstruct, and reconstruct the patterns of signification that any author may see in or attempt to represent in her stories or characters. She realizes that the "true" meaning of the text is the one we "make and remake" by cogitation, reflection, response. It takes therefore a joint effort of writer, reader, and characters to create the holistic literary experience.

Because of this strategy we, not the narrator, become the final arbiters of truth within Morrison's representation. Like Louise Erdrich's Chippewa nation novels (Love Medicine, 1984; The Beet Queen, 1987; and Tracks, 1991), we as readers must negotiate among contradictory narratives manifesting competing interpretations of reality. We must decide the truth among Violet's limited omniscient version of reality, Joe's firstperson central story, and so on. What we cannot depend on is an authorial voice to arbitrate these competing claims for us.

This narrator is no umpire for her audience.

Although, from time to time, she claims to have omniscience, she proves to be the least reliable of all the tellers of the stories that make up Jazz. The characters' versions of the truth, because of Morrison's placement of them in a literary text, at least implicitly acknowledge their author's biases. By contrast, the narrator does not admit a bias; she initially presents herself as authoritarian, all-knowing, and incapable of error in assigning motives or interpreting events. But as Morrison presents her, the narrator goes through three distinct changes: from the gossipy, judgmental presence who begins the story through the risk-taker coming to terms with her own fallibility as a witness to events or a creator of them, to a subdued metafictionist aware of the limitations of all fictional constructs, including the one of which she is the source and a part.

The gossipy, judgmental presence begins the novel not with a word but a sound of condemnation, perhaps even contempt, for one of the key players in the story: "Sth, I know that woman [Violet]." Beginning with a pre-speech sound, presumably the sucking of air though the teeth, with its implicit dismissal or judgment, the narrator quickly claims complete knowledge of Violet's as well as Joe's and even the community's motives. Her confidence extends to joyfully privileging her own affection for the city itself, a claim she will later reverse: "I'm crazy about this city," she says while enumerating several apparent improvements in opportunity for African Americans—but these will soon be countered by the many manifestations of continuing prejudice in the city, the most obvious of which is the tardiness of the medics' coming to minister to the dying Dorcas. Moreover, the narrator shares much of the joyous anticipation Joe and Violet felt when they encountered the city: "I have seen the City do an unbelievable sky." She extends her narrative judgment to the characters as well as the city: about Dorcas, she says, "I always believed that girl was a pack.of lies."

Quickly, however, the tone shifts. Each new chapter is introduced by a somewhat more subdued tone, and the narrator loses much of her cockiness and sense of superiority. As she begins to ponder the complexity of Joe's motives, she introduces a new tone of authorial uncertainty: "I've wondered about it." Despite her claims that she knows Joe well, she understands him as a stereotype, a "blackthereforeblues man" and can only offer the notion that the "City spins you" once one gets on the City's metaphorical track, as the explanation of the inevitability of Joe's killing Dorcas.

As she probes deeper into her characters' psyches, she also delves more profoundly into her own areas of doubt. Although she prides herself on being "curious, inventive, and well-informed" [emphasis added], she relinquishes her claims or pretensions to certainty: "Risky, I'd say, trying to figure out anybody's state of mind." As she comes to doubt her construction of the characters' psyches, she also comes to realize that as a narrator, even as a book, she cannot be sure that she controls the very creation that is the content of the novel. Although she experiences one more moment of judgmental narration, dismissing Golden Gray on the quest to confront his father as a "hypocrite," she realizes that the characters, not the author or narrator, are exerting control over the narrative itself. When Felice visits Violet and Joe for the first time, the narrator confesses, "She makes me nervous"—but not for any reasons the narrator cites. Felice makes her "nervous" because she has an insider's view of experience, as Dorcas's friend and confidante, as the person who listened to Dorcas's last words. Felice knows

truths about Dorcas the narrator simply cannot claim as her own. Unlike the confident voice we encountered at the beginning of Jazz, this narrator, like most of her characters, has grown painfully aware of her fallibility.

In her final manifestation Morrison's narrator seems chastened, almost humbled by the characters' intractability—their refusal to conform with her thematic design. As Felice enters the picture, bringing with her an implicit challenge to the narrator's authority, the narrator herself has a period of reflection in which she rethinks her control over the very narrative she is creating, thereby extending Jazz into the area of metafiction, or stories about the fiction-making process as analogous to the creating and processing of ideas themselves. As a metafictionist, however, Morrison's narrator is chastened, even subdued. She begins with a reversal of her attitude toward the city itself, which she has said she adored, and extends her reconstruction to the notion of writing: "I ought to get out of this place.... It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound human. I missed the people altogether." As she reflects candidly on the discrepancies between what she expected of her characters and what they did, apparently despite her plans for them, she comes to a fresh understanding of the relation between creator and creation, one that directly challenges traditional assumptions about the control an author can expect to exercise over her work: "They [her characters] knew 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 doing it seemed to me so fine— I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy." As she realizes that her characters, not her design, govern the action, the narrator comes to understand the arrogance of promoting a singular, themedriven view of experience. She believes that her creations' needs and hopes propelled the narrative to a chorus of competing systems of reality, from Joe remorse through Alice's sorrow and Rose Dear's despair.

While she as fictionist wanted to direct their lives, her characters were "thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of."

In its narrative evolution from traditional, assertive, even arrogant modes of discourse to metafictional uncertainty, Jazz situates its author once again at the very forefront of literary innovation, of raising in new ways the right kinds of questions about narrative authority, the relation of the creator with the thing created, and the degree to which the reader understands his or her own thought process by contemplating analogies between human thought and the creation of a literary fiction. By adding the dimension of innovative jazz motifs in the narrative made of words, she enriched both the content and form of her innovative "talking book."

IDEAS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS mony, that give the written text its Any discussion of Jazz will probably deal with questions of motivation and of verisimilitude. Although a powerful verbal construct in itself, is Jazz a faithful representation of the Great Migration? Although this discussion has mentioned novels by Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Richard Wright that treated the same cultural phenomenon in similar ways, is this a "literary" or a scientific, verifiable way of reading the effects of this very important cultural phenomenon, one whose impact we feel profoundly with us today?

One way to approach this is to read essays or books by historians who specialize in African-American cultural patterns, to find challenges to or corroboration of the hopes and disappointments Morrison, Ellison, and others portray so powerfully.

A related issue is the whole question of motivation. Are Joe and Violet's crimes believable? Do we understand all the forces that drove them to aberrant acts? Do we need to? Similarly, is Dorcas's refusal to name her assailant credible? Is it consistent with the hedonist Morrison portrays Dorcas as evolving into?

1. Discuss the "presence of jazz" in Jazz.

Music is experienced in different ways by the various characters. Does the music form a single background for the action, or a plurality of backgrounds, depending on which character's perspective is closest at any given time?

2. Analyze the music of language in Jazz.

Select a few passages, perhaps those in which Morrison describes the music on the Harlem rooftops, and look for sound systems, patterns of euphony and harmusical quality.

3. Should Joe Trace have been punished for his crime? He took a life. Should he have been imprisoned, perhaps executed, for this? Why was the crime not dealt with in normal police and prosecutorial procedures?

4. Is the friendship of Alice Manfred and Violet credible? Is it sufficiently motivated? Do such friendships happen in real life? Even if they do, does the representation of this evolving relationship ring true?

5. What are the implications of Golden Gray's encounter with Joe's mother Wild on his journey to harm his father? Can Gray's sense of aversion, fascination, and duty be reconciled? What are we to make of the hint, on Joe's final search for his mother, that Gray has himself "gone wild"?

6. What does Dorcas's fascination with Acton, a man in many ways Joe's opposite, suggest in relation to the larger themes of Jazz? Acton does not return Dorcas's love; he seems according to Felice's report a taker rather than a giver. Should Dorcas's attraction be explained as: (a) a factor of age? (b) a psychological need to suffer abuse? or (c) a validation of Alice's, Violet's, and the narrator's claims that the city will erode the values of individuals?

7. How do you interpret Violet's buying a new bird at the end of the novel, and Joe and Violet's letting the jazz from the Harlem rooftops inside their apartment?

Themes

Themes

Jazz is thus the pivotal novel in Morrison's fictional exploration of what critic Denise Heinze has called the "debilitating impact of history on black families" (Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 143, 1994).

It is simultaneously, however, about the breakdown of a spurious family and the reestablishment through the suffering of a fractured but functional family unit. Scarred by her memory of her mother's suicide (she threw herself down a well in response to several injustices described in the "Social Concerns" section), Violet decides never to have children. She and Joe live a childless, and therefore essentially futureless, existence in New York, one that catches up with them as the years go by. After they reach the "promised country" in Harlem, she apparently reconsiders, perhaps encouraged by the illusory promise of full participation in the American dream, but she has a series of miscarriages. As a result, Violet becomes increasingly eccentric, transferring her capacity for maternal and connubial love to the captured birds she keeps in her apartment (in a rare instance of heavy-handed symbolism, she teaches one parrot to say "I love you"), but she eventually begins to fantasize about the children she might have had—those she miscarried. At one point she expresses her maternal frustrations by stealing an infant from a baby carriage when the child's care-giver steps inside a store to buy a jazz record. In a minor variation on the central event of the novel, the folks in Harlem handle the matter of Violet's attempted kidnaping internally; they know better than to involve New York's white police in such a matter.

By contrast, Joe's sense of family is sublimated in his work as a cosmetics salesman, then in his love for Dorcas, who substitutes both for the young mother who denied him (her name, symbolically, was "Wild") and the energetic Violet he fell in love with when, as a young man, he fell out of a tree and landed upon her. But Joe is not freed from his childhood denial. As an essentially fatherless child, he took a name based on the absence of any concrete sense of family: since the family that cared for him told him his mother vanished "without a trace," Joe named himself "Trace." (In Jazz, as in Song of Solomon [1977; see separate entry], Morrison is fascinated with the origins of post-slave names for people who were once named as properties.) Moreover, Joe launched three distinct searches for his mother, one occurring after his marriage. He journeys into Virginia's woodlands, only to find Wild's lair, with signs of cohabitation—"But where is she?" (Joe cannot know the evidence suggests that Wild's partner is Golden Gray, the beautiful mulatto lad whose legends in the narratives of True Belle, Violet's grandmother, distorted forever Violet's sense of beauty.) The searches clearly indicate how profoundly Joe is scarred by this maternal rejection. Moreover, Morrison intersperses Joe's memories of learning to hunt from a great woodsman he knows as Hunter's Hunter, who is in fact Golden Gray's father, with his quest across Harlem to find Dorcas. Ironically, this mentor's admonition against killing something "tender" runs through Joe's mind as he searches for Dorcas. Just when he decides to ignore his

mentor's main theme is never clear; readers may decide for themselves just how much of the killing of Dorcas is really aimed at the youthful mother who refused to love Joe.

Thus, despite their youthful enthusiasms and their shared desire to create a new life in New York, Joe and Violet never really became a family. They remained a couple, childless, and scarred by paternal absence and maternal rejection (in Violet's case, we should recall that friends and relatives of a victim of suicide often feel a profound sense of repudiation and unworthiness). In time, Violet's decision to remain childless backfires on her, and her reproductive system does not cooperate with her new goal, to have a family late in life. She becomes eccentric and withdrawn—one of her nicknames in the community is "Violent," after her attack on Dorcas's body. Eventually her angst at not creating a family erupts in the attempted kidnaping and the scene the funeral home. Joe takes refuge in his extra work as a cosmetics salesman, and later in the affair with Dorcas, which has obvious and disturbing psychological implications; she is explicitly a surrogate for his lost mother, who was a teenager when she bore and abandoned him, as well as a surrogate for the youthful, vibrant wife he married in Virginia. Most explicitly, Dorcas is Joe's link to his past, someone to whom he can tell, then come to terms with, his own story: "I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself. With her I was fresh, new again." This new relationship is for Joe a means of self-discovery, of reexamining his past, of reconstructing a family illusion when the spurious family relationship has fallen apart—until jealousy and suspicion compound the issue.

One of the fundamental paradoxes in Jazz is the reconstruction of the family unit through grief and suffering. As Alice learned early in life, calling the police is no answer to problems in a ghetto, and no official investigation of Dorcas's murder or Violet's behavior in the funeral home ever takes place. Violet and Joe are left alone—to some degree shunned by the local community— to deal with their guilt, to suffer their way to reconciliation. Violet's path is through forming common bonds with Alice, her victim's aunt. She seeks out Alice and tries to know and understand the young woman she had attacked as her enemy even in death. After she initiates a very tense meeting at Alice's apartment, an intimacy develops, based on shared experiences as black women and on a shared interest in keeping Dorcas's memory alive. Alice can confide in her new acquaintance her own frustration that her austere rearing of Dorcas may have led to her wildness, which in turn resulted in her death. Eventually, through their mutual interchanges, Alice can come to terms with her own wish to do violence to her enemy in the past, when her husband left her for another woman. Although Violet's explicit intention in seeking out Alice was to find a place to rest—"I had to sit down somewhere"—she begins to feel maternal love for the Dorcas she encounters in Alice's stories, to find that they shared much more than an affection for Joe: "I was a good girl her age ... Till I got here. City make you tighten up." She keeps Dorcas's picture as a way of associating her victim with the daughters she miscarried and with her own lost youth.

As she and Joe move gradually toward reconciliation through their mutual guilt and suffering, they reconstruct their illusory family with a synthetic one. Felice, Dorcas's best friend, enters their apartment (she is among the first to do so since the crimes) to locate

the ring her mother stole, which she had loaned to Dorcas the night Joe murdered her. Gradually she develops a nurturing relationship with both Joe, an object of curiosity for her as her friend's antiquated lover, and Violet, the crazed woman Felice had seen slash her friend's corpse and the subject of so much local gossip. She learns that the ring was buried with Dorcas, but her conversations continue with them over a substantial time, and she learns to care about these people as well as to tell them her family narrative and to work out some of her own conflicted feelings about Dorcas's death. In this artificial family, there is a sense of understanding, caring, and sharing with few demands. For example, when Felice visits, she brings records; Joe has at last consented to buying a phonograph. Violet does Felice's hair for free—perhaps as close to a fully functional family unit, uniting in a common cause and sharing labor as well as affection, as anything in all of Morrison's fiction.

The family theme, always central to Morrison's work, is intertwined with the themes of the inevitable loss of the past and the possibility of growth through suffering.

Joe and Violet, as well as Alice Manfred, have to learn to cope with the dashing of youthful expectations, as time and society impinge on their hopes. Perhaps they have to learn to settle for less, to accept the diminution of hope as time erodes their youth and expectations, as cultural and environmental conditions change. But Violet and Joe do make progress. They suffer greatly and come to terms with their past. It is not that they forgive or excuse their past actions: Joe confides to Felice, "For the rest of my life it'll be me [who is responsible for Dorcas's death]." Violet feels that she has changed, but what she did cannot be forgiven or ignored. So what these characters have been able to do is to accept their past and their guilt. As a result, they experience a mature and supportive love, one Morrison's narrator implies is valuable and even exemplary: "I envy them their public love .. . That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else." It is Morrison's most overt and powerful statement on the redeeming power of suffering and acceptance—that most fundamental tragic theme in western literature.

Mothers

Joe, Violet, and Dorcas are all motherless, and the loss affects them profoundly. Violet's mother, Rose Dear, committed suicide when Violet was just sixteen, by throwing herself down a dark, narrow well. Violet discovered the body the next morning.

Rose Dear's own mother, True Belle, abandoned her at the age of eight when True Belle moved to Baltimore to care for Vera Louise's baby. True Belle was still a slave at the time, so the move may have been involuntary. However, the betrayal was complete. True Belle remained for twenty-two years after she was freed, and devoted all of her attention and affection to Golden Gray. Even when caring for her own grandchildren, True Belle cannot stop bragging about the wonderful golden boy.

Both of Dorcas's parents were killed in the race riots in East St. Louis. Her father was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death by a white crowd. When the family home caught fire with her mother inside, the fire engine failed to respond to a call from a black neighborhood. Dorcas's mother died, but she is unable to process the enormous loss. All she can think about is the loss of her three clothespin dolls, Rochelle, Bernadine, and Faye.

Joe is perhaps most affected by being motherless. The child of the young crazy woman Wild, he was abandoned at birth. Rhoda and Frank Williams adopted him, and raise Joe as his own, but the loss continues to chafe. Throughout his life, right up until the night he kills Dorcas, Joe continues to search for his mother.

Racism

A close and personal portrait of racism is at the heart of the novel. At Joe's birth, Golden Gray confronts his father Henry Lestory, a despised "black savage." Gray cannot find anything in the man to admire, despite his many gifts. Violet's father must flee Virginia after he joins a political party that supports the right to vote for black men. His absence leaves the family impoverished and in debt. Eventually it leads to the suicide of Violet's mother, Rose Dear.

Both of Dorcas's parents are killed in race riots in East St. Louis. Ostensibly, the riots are because southern blacks migrating to the north are taking jobs from whites. Dorcas's father, however, was born in the north and owns his own pool hall. The riots seem to be merely excuses for outbreaks of violence. When the family home in East St. Louis burns, the fire department refuses to respond to a black neighborhood. When Dorcas herself lies bleeding from a gunshot, the ambulance does not arrive until morning.

Joe and Violet attempt to buy land in Virginia, and are cheated out of it by white men. They decide to move to Harlem to get away from poverty and racism, but still encounter plenty of both. Whites refuse to sit next to even the most respectable of black people. While a few black doctors and nurses exist, the people the Traces know personally have only the most menial of jobs.

Sexism

Sexism is as rampant as racism in the novel. It is entirely acceptable for white landowners to father mulatto children, but when Vera Louise Gray becomes pregnant by a black man, it is unforgivable. Women who harvest cotton earn ten cents per day, compared to the twenty-five cents per day earned by men.

Malvonne's incessant meddling in her neighbors' lives is a response to the lack of opportunity of her own. She is an intelligent, insightful woman, but the only job open to

her is cleaning offices at night. Unable to find an outlet for her talents, she wreaks havoc with the lives of others. She first provides a trysting place for Joe and Dorcas, then tells Violet of their affair. When Violet tries to disfigure the dead girl's face in the coffin, Malvonne is the one who attempts to tell Alice Manfred of the incident.

Ironically, Malvonne is disturbed when she finds a young woman's law school application in the mail stolen by her nephew, Sweetness. She is afraid that unless she goes to law school, the girl will have to work in a menial job, such as the one Malvonne herself has. Perhaps projecting the devastation of such a loss, Malvonne adds a note to the application and sends it on.

Harlem

Harlem in the 1920s is much more than just the setting of this story. The novel abounds in lush, lyrical descriptions of the thriving interdependent black community. Harlem is filled with every type of group, social club, association and mutual aid society. The churches are so large and powerful, so much a part of Harlem's social life, they are called by nicknames. To Violet and Joe, moving to the City in their thirties, Harlem seems much more than perfect. There are certainly more opportunities here than anywhere else for black people.

Yet the city is far from idyllic. Many of the available jobs are still menial and low paying. Women wear dowdy clothing and walk close to buildings to avoid any white man over eleven. Young shirtless black men hang out on street corners at all hours of the day and night. There are many speakeasies, and violence seems to be everywhere. Every corner in Harlem is permeated with the sounds of jazz.

Jazz

It is difficult to separate 1920s Harlem, Prohibition, and jazz. On every rooftop in the spring and summer, jazz musicians lick their 'licorice sticks,' or clarinets. The low tones of saxophones and strident trumpets are everywhere. The music is at once sultry, sexy, filled with hope, violence, longing, and despair. There is something about it that makes you feel a little better, then a lot worse.

Jazz is the violent, thriving, throbbing force that compels the action, and a symptom of it. Young girls dance with fancy men to the strains of jazz at rent parties or in speakeasies. Violet steals a baby boy when his teenaged sister runs into the house to fetch a record for her friend, leaving the baby unattended. When Joe Trace goes to hunt for Dorcas with a gun in his hand, he is not sure if it is because of the way he feels, or the sooty blues being played by the blind twins in the beauty shop. He suspects if they had been playing a gospel song that things would have ended differently.

Style

Point of View

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 perceptions deepen the reader's understanding. By the end of the story, the simple facts outlined in the opening sentences have been strengthened and transformed into a complex web.

Setting

Jazz is set in Harlem in the 1920s. The narrator's lush descriptions evoke the setting as unlike any other place on earth. Harlem is a refuge for black people inside a large, hostile city. Yet, it is relentlessly violent and highly exploitative. Like the landscape of eighteenth century novels, the interdependent black community in Harlem becomes a character in the novel.

Language and Meaning

Morrison's language is as rich, complex, and improvisational as jazz music itself. It draws the reader into the community with seductive language typical of the time. Each character has a unique vernacular that identifies him or her. Morrison rejects the Eurocentric symbolism of mainstream fiction and instead creates a world where earth represents abundance and fertility, not evil or dirt. Water is pale, colorless and lifeless. In this vein, she describes the huge orange sun over Harlem as "beautiful as an Iroquois."

Morrison rejects novels that create an all white world, and rejects the conventions of language that exclude and oppress African Americans. Instead of saying men, women and children are interested, Morrison says, "That kind of fascination, permanent and out of control, seizes children, young girls, men of every description, mothers, brides and barfly women, and if they have their way and get to the City ..." Her language, lush as a tropical Rain Forest, evokes strong visual and sound images.

Structure

The structure of the novel *Jazz* is exactly like a jazz quintet playing riffs on a familiar theme. Morrison's structure relies heavily on her consummate power to transform

stories into sagas with multiple levels of meaning. The entire plot of this novel is revealed in the first five sentences. The author proceeds to elaborate on the story, retelling it from different points of view, until almost all our assumptions about the original tale are transformed. The narrative moves freely between different time periods, and sometimes different view points, within the same chapter.

The novel consists of ten chapters. Chapter Eight is mostly action, where the reader sees the shooting from Dorcas's point of view. Chapter Ten is essentially an epilogue, completing our knowledge of the eventual destinies of the characters. Each of the other eight chapters, told from varying points of view, rings important changes on a story that is more complex than the reader first imagined.

Quotes

"Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me. Rest of the time, she's cooking pork I can't eat, or pressing hair I can't stand the smell of. Maybe that's the way it goes with people been married long as we have. But the quiet. I can't take the quiet. She don't hardly talk anymore, and I ain't allowed near her. Any other man be running around, stepping out every night, you know that. I ain't like that. I ain't." Chapter 2, pg. 49

"You didn't come here to say you sorry. I thought maybe you did. You come in here to deliver some of your own evil." Chapter 3, pg. 80

"Snakes around her crawl the ground at night. Now who's softheaded?" Chapter 4, pg. 104

"We born around the same time, me and you," said Violet. "We women, me and you. Tell me something real. Don't just say I'm grown and ought to know. I don't. I'm fifty and I don't know nothing. What about it? Do I stay with him? I want to, I think. I want ... well, I didn't always ... now I want. I want some fat in this life." Chapter 4, pg. 110

"It's not a thing you tell to another man. I know most men can't wait to tell each other about what they got going on the side. Put all their business in the street. They do it because the women don't matter all that much and they don't care what folks think about her. The most I did was halfway tell Malvonne and there was no way not to." Chapter 5, pg. 121

"I can conjure what people say. That I treated Violet like a piece of furniture you favor although it needed something every day to keep it stead and upright." Chapter 5, pg. 123

"She had long hair and bad skin. A quart of water twice a day would have cleared it right up, her skin, but I didn't suggest it because I liked it like that. Little half moons clustered underneath her cheekbones, like faint hoofmarks." Chapter 5, pg. 130

"I wanted to stay there. Right after the gun went thuh! And nobody in there heard it but me and that is why the crowd didn't scatter like the flock of redwings they looked like but stayed pressed in, locked together by the steam of their dancing and the music, which would not let them go. I wanted to stay right there. Catch her before she fell and hurt herself." Chapter 5, pg. 130

""'Suppose I did, eh? What'd be the next step? Go up to the Colonel? Say, look here, Colonel Gray, I been wondering where your daughter got to. We ain't been riding in a while. Tell you what you do. Tell her I'm waiting for her and to come on out. She'll know the place meet at. And tell her to wear tat green dress. The one make it hard to see her in the grass.' Hunter passed his hand over his jaw. 'You ain't said where they at. Where you come from.'" Chapter 7, pg. 172

"'I messed up my own life' she told me. 'Before I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn't have nothing but we didn't miss it.'" Chapter 9, pg. 207

"Mrs. Trace looked at him but I knew she was talking to me when she said, 'Your little ugly friend hurt him and you remind him of her.'" Chapter 9, pg. 209

"Stuck? Well if you mean did I like what I felt about her. I guess I'm stuck to that." Chapter 9, pg. 212

Topics for Discussion

The July 1917 parade in Harlem protests the black people killed in race riots in East St. Louis, including Dorcas's parents. The cold, silent men march carrying banners with promises from the Declaration of Independence. What did the banners say?

Why are the men in the parade silent? What is the message of the incessant beat of the drums?

Morrison's language is usually lush and lyrical. During key action scenes, like Alice Manfred's first encounter with Violet, the language becomes simple and stark. Why did the author choose to write that way? Do you notice the change in language when you are reading the book?

Violet's family suffers a great deal from the racism in their native Virginia. What are some examples of this racism?

Why is Golden Gray so disturbed to learn that his father is a black man?

When Dorcas's father and mother are killed in a race riot in East St. Louis, all she can think about is her three clothespin dolls, Rochelle, Bernadine, and Faye burning up. Why?

Why does Vera Louise Gray have to move to Baltimore when she's pregnant? Are there other children who are part black, part white on the plantation?

After Violet learns of Joe's affair with Dorcas, her first reaction is violence. She goes to the funeral and tries to disfigure the dead girl's face. Is that the best solution to the problem?

How do Violet and Joe eventually resolve their problems?

In East St. Louis, when Dorcas's house catches fire, the fire truck does not respond because it is a black neighborhood. Does the ambulance respond in Harlem, when Felice calls it for Dorcas after she is shot? Why or why not?

Is Harlem a good place or a bad place for black people in the 1920s?

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994