

# The Narrator's Epiphany of Love in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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## Introduction

The novel *Jazz* has a musical style reminiscent of jazz from the opening of the novel. An unidentified narrator tuts and foretells the next scandal, another triangle with Felice. The tutting sound, “Sth,” implies the sound “of a needle finding its groove” on a record (Boutry 103). The narrator knows every character's past and believes that they are bound to the past like Joe: “[Joe] is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove on a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you” (120).<sup>1</sup>

Golden Gray and Joe's story in search of their parents are parallel in some ways. They are both orphans who search for their parents with a gun. But it is necessary to consider the presence of Wild with regard to the two orphans.<sup>2</sup> They are depicted in parallel in the narrative and are

connected by Wild in the narrator's tale. Golden Gray meets the pregnant Wild on his journey and witnesses her giving birth to Joe with his father Hunters Hunter.

Although Golden Gray and Joe's stories share some similarities, they make a contrast with regard to Wild. Joe runs the risk of violating the law of whites to search for his young lover Dorcas, though in fact he is really searching for Wild, his lost mother. On the other hand, Golden Gray finds Wild in the woods, rather than his father. Although Golden Gray and Joe take guns to see their parents, Golden Gray gives up killing his black father, while Joe shoots and kills Dorcas.

In Toni Morrison's works, the American myth seems to be undermined by making “good” and “evil” ambiguous and by changing the Fall into the paradoxical consequence of self-knowledge. Morrison has created new kinds of evil characters

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1 All page references to *Jazz* are from the edition: Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Plume, 1992), and are inserted in parentheses directly following the quotation.

2 Hunters Hunter first calls her Wild when she bites his cheek during the delivery of Joe.

who run the risk of violating the rule of an oppressive system to recover their identities. Although Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula Peace in *Sula*, Guitar Bains in *Song of Solomon* are portrayed as evil outsiders, their violation of the rules is necessary to liberate themselves from oppression. Their past always foreshadows their evil because the past embodies “unspeakable things unspoken” in an oppressive society.<sup>3</sup>

The narrator comes to evolve in narrating the characters’ past while the narrator explains their problems in their past. Though the narrator imagines the characters’ past and tells their story, the narrator’s authority decreases after the encounter with Wild in the narrative. Narrating Joe’s past, the narrator finds out that Joe fell in love with Dorcas in order to fill his “loss” of his mother, Wild. The narrator then comes across Wild in the narrative of Golden Gray’s search for his father.

It is to know both the pains of Golden Gray and Joe as well as Joe’s redemption through jazz that undermines the narrator’s control over the characters. The unconfident narrator comes to know the true love in Golden Gray and Joe’s story of love. In this thesis, I would like to bring to light Wild’s presence in the story

of two orphans Golden Gray and Joe Trace by dealing with their quest for their parents. The narrator’s epiphany of love related to Golden Gray and Joe’s love for Wild will be discussed to establish the significance of Wild’s presence in *Jazz*.

### 1 Golden Gray’s Love for Wild

The unidentified narrator presents Golden Gray’s pursuit of his father as a parody of chivalry. Golden Gray is the son of Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of a rich white landowner, and Hunters Hunter, Vera’s black servant. Golden Gray is spoiled and pampered by Vera Louise and True Belle, who is the grandmother of Violet, Joe’s wife. With his fair complexion and blonde hair, Golden Gray believes he is white until True Belle tells him that his father is a “black skinned nigger”(143).

Golden Gray tries to show “cavalierlike courage” in finding and killing his black father (142-3). He undertakes a journey to insult not only his father but also his racial heritage. Golden Gray’s journey is necessary for him as a ritual to gain his white manhood, since he believes in his superiority to his father’s blackness. He pretends to be a knight and wears “armor” as if to fight a vicious Dragon on his journey (160). Golden Gray regards

3 Morrison uses “unspeakable things unspoken” to express the legacy of Slavery in *Beloved* (1987) as well as in the title of her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” in which she argues for the Afro-American Presence in Canon. Cf. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 58, 199. Morrison also criticizes the romanticized past of American myth in an interview with Paul Gilroy:

We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it’s romanticized. This culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. (Gilroy 179)

himself as an innocent white knight and his father as a vicious dragon whom he is on a mission to destroy.

Nevertheless, his rite of passage to gain his white manhood by defeating the vicious dragon changes into an encounter with a girl named "Wild." On his journey, Golden Gray comes across a black girl, naked and soaked in the rain. Before the encounter with Wild, Golden Gray is intending to brag about his coolness in fighting with the monster upon his return to Baltimore. According to the narrator, in his journey to prove his manliness, Golden Gray plans to commit patricide as if fighting with a monster, therefore the black girl seems a monster in Golden Gray's eyes. In her surprise at seeing Golden Gray, Wild hits her head while trying to escape, falls unconscious on the ground with her forehead bleeding.

At the sight of Wild, Golden Gray is overcome with nausea, and he tries to believe, "it was a vision . . . there is no naked black woman lying in the weeds" (144). He is shocked by the blackness of the young woman and her pregnancy, thus he does not accept her presence as a real woman. For Golden Gray, Wild is the squalid black "other," since he cares for beauty and refinement of clothing, as in his silk blouse with shell buttons, fine trousers, and authentic leather boots. So Golden Gray avoids touching her and

even tries to leave her. Golden Gray's second thought to save Wild is first condemned by the narrator: he is "lying," and a "hypocrite" (154).

However, the narrator realizes the fact that Golden Gray fears being attracted to Wild:

But I know better. He wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils. Except this monster without scales or flaming breath is more dangerous for she is a bloody-faced girl of moving parts, of luminous eyes and lips to *break your heart*. (154-5, italics mine)

The striking beauty of the black girl is depicted in her "luminous eyes and lips to break your heart", and is the reason for Golden Gray's falling in love with Wild and for his conversion away from his debilitating "crime of innocence" toward experience, or redemptive self-knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Golden Gray is afraid to look at Wild's eyes and lips, for doing so will cause him to fall in love with her and accept his identity as a black man.

Eventually, Golden Gray does not take his gun out from his trunk. According to the narrator, he postpones his mission. "It must have been the girl[Wild] who changed his mind," explains the narrator

4 In *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (1989), Terry Otten asserts the Fall motif and the ambiguity of "good" and "evil" in Toni Morrison's works, from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Beloved*. In Morrison's works, the innocence of whites turns into "the crime of innocence," and the Fall motif becomes paradoxical. Otten argues that Morrison uses "a fortunate fall" in the American myth to depict the initiation of characters from innocence to experience as a means of escaping from the white man's Eden and discovering their identity, which has been muted in oppression.

(173). Wild's eyes have the power to transform Golden Gray's "crime of innocence" of killing his father into the experience of knowing his identity as a black man. Hunters Hunter tells Golden Gray to choose "white or black" and if he "chooses black", he has to "act black, meaning draw [his] manhood up" (173). He chooses "black." He lives with Wild in the rocks of Virginia. Golden Gray abandons the white society of Baltimore to gain his black identity, and then he abandons his luxurious life as a white man in the North in order to live with Wild. Golden Gray and Wild retreat into the shelter of a rock formation and they are not seen in civilized society.

Nonetheless, People in the black community regard Wild as a madwoman without even seeing her. Wild's insanity is hinted at by Hunters Hunter to Joe: "She got reasons. Even if she crazy. Crazy people got reasons" (175).<sup>5</sup> If Wild had a reason to going mad, it seems to have been her abuse and isolation from society. Wild never speaks, but instead laughs or hums, living at the margins of the black community. Wild is mute and finds her shelter in her madness as well as in the cave.

Wild's unseen presence is invoked by the sign of redwings, "the blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings" (176).

Black sharecroppers working in the cane field can sense Wild's presence when they see the signals of redwings. Hunters Hunter, an expert tracker, relies most on "the signals of redwings" because Wild has something about her which the bird likes (176). The author utilizes the sign of redwings to suggest Wild's yearning for freedom.<sup>6</sup> After giving birth to Joe, Wild refuses to hold him in her arms and escapes into an uncivilized life at the margins of society. Wild abandons the role as a mother and also refuses to live in civilized society. Wild cannot be free except by escaping from community and hiding in the rock cave.

Paradoxically, in Joe's pursuit of her mother, the rock inhabited by Golden Gray and Wild becomes the Garden of Eden. Joe discovers the burrow of Wild and Golden Gray in his third trial to find his mother. Joe accidentally gets into the stone room behind the rock. Joe smelled the cooking oil and sees Golden Gray's luxurious belongings, but his search for mother ends in vain.

## 2 Joe's Love for Dorcas/Wild

The second story in search of his parent to be discussed is that undertaken by Joe Trace, who named himself so because his parents "disappeared without a trace" (124). Joe cannot tell anybody about

5 Wild has only once appeared behind Hunters Hunter and touched him with her fingertips. Hunters Hunter plays the role of Joe's surrogate father and teaches him hunting. Hunters Hunter is the only person who tries to understand her and hints at the fact that Wild is Joe's mother: "You know, that woman is somebody's mother and somebody ought to take care" (175: emphasis is original).

6 Bird imagery in Toni Morrison's works signifies freedom, as in Pecola's birdlike gesture in *The Bluest Eye*, or Sula's return to Bottom with a plague of robins in *Sula*. The color of redwings, black and red, resembles the bleeding Wild when she encounters Golden Gray.

his mother until he meets Dorcas. The narrator knows that Joe has searched for his mother three times, something about which Joe has never even told his wife Violet. Joe goes into the woods to find his mother and begs the hidden Wild, "Give me a sign, then. You don't have to say nothing. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go" (178). Although all he wants to see is her "sign" to gain his identity as Wild's son, his trials are in vain. Joe expresses his anger and sorrow only by shooting his empty rifle in the air, and then feels ashamed that she was a "not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother" (178).

Although Joe feels ashamed and tries to forget Wild in "the City" (as the narrator refers to New York), Joe falls in love with Dorcas since Joe cannot overcome his "motherlessness" (167). When Joe first meets Dorcas, he recognizes a slash in her cheek as "faint hoofmarks" (130). Eusebio L. Rodrigues points out that Dorcas in the Bible means gazelle (Acts 9: 36-41), which resembles Wild's image of a doe. Rodrigues argues that Joe has hunted for his mother in vain and discovers Dorcas in the City as her alternate (Rodrigues 740). Even if Joe himself is unconscious of loving Dorcas in place of Wild, the image of Wild as a doe forms an identification with Dorcas' mark of "hoofs" and her biblical name, gazelle. Since his secret mother Wild continues to haunt him, Joe needs

Dorcas as someone to whom he can tell about his pursuit of Wild.

Joe explains to Dorcas that he has changed himself seven times before he meets her, and he is "fresh, new again" with Dorcas (123). Joe has moved far from the South to "the City," since he was exiled from rural Virginia, where black people had to leave their homes to escape from white racists' lynching and discrimination (6). Joe travels with his friend Victory from Vienna to Palestine. Palestine is associated with Canaan, the Promised Land in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Joe's journey from Palestine from "the City" is both the history of oppressed black people in the age of the "Great Migration" and the archetype of man's hope to find the Land of Promise. Joe changes himself anew like Adam and leaves Eden to get freedom in the City.

Although Joe says he did not fall in love but "chose" Dorcas and "rose" in love with Dorcas, his affair with Dorcas is related to the Fall (135). For Joe, Dorcas is the reason why he breaks his heart and leaves Eden:

... I told you again that you were the reason *Adam* ate the *apple* and its core. That when he left *Eden*, he left a rich man. Not only did he have *Eve*, but also he had the taste of the first *apple* in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red

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7 Cf. Genesis 12:7.

peeling *break his heart*. (133, italics mine)

Joe associates his love for Dorcas with original sin. Here again, Joe's heart breaks by eating the first apple Adam ate in his fall. Just as Golden Gray's own heart breaks when he sees Wild's eyes, Dorcas is also the reason why Joe experiences his fall.

Joe talks with Dorcas and touches her to fill in the blank of his "motherlessness." After Dorcas leaves Joe for the young man Acton, he tries to get Dorcas back, since he cannot endure motherlessness again. Joe's pursuit of Dorcas is juxtaposed with his search for his mother. Joe's five-day search for Dorcas in the City that is far from Eden is narrated in a way parallel to his pursuit of Wild.

He is a long way from Virginia, and even longer from *Eden*. As he puts on his coat and cap he can practically feel Victory at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas. He isn't thinking of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender. She is female. And she is not prey. So he never thinks of that. He is hunting for her though, and while hunting a gun is as natural a companion as Victory. (180, italics mine)

Joe moves further away from Wild's rock cave in Virginia, which is Morrison's version of the Garden of Eden. Joe is

thinking about trying not to shoot a doe, as instructed by Hunters Hunter. "He isn't thinking of harming her" has a double meaning of reaching Dorcas and Wild, because the figures of Dorcas and Wild are fused in Joe's mind. Hence, Joe finds Wild in Dorcas and shoots Dorcas with a silenced gun.

Joe barter his rifle for a handgun and rides the subway in search of Dorcas. Joe's exchange of rifle for handgun signifies that he is no longer a hunter who never shot a doe in the rural South, but "dangerously free" to touch Dorcas with the violence of the City.<sup>8</sup> Joe's monologue, "I had the gun but it was not the gun--it was my hand I wanted to touch you with," explains his reason for shooting Dorcas (130-1). Joe violates the law to touch Wild by shooting Dorcas with his handgun. His "touch" is paradoxical, since Joe cannot touch his loved one without harming her. Joe's problematic violation hurts not only Dorcas but also himself, because it deprives him of her forever.

Herbert William Rice argues that Joe and Dorcas are an allegory for Adam and Eve:

They are introduced to death, to the necessity of working for a living. They are led out of the Garden and into the hard reality of the world . . . as the City where Joe and Dorcas live. (Rice 131-2)

As a consequence of his tracking Wild, and

8 Morrison depicts "dangerously free" people such as Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison explains that Cholly, Ajax in *Sula*, and Guitar in *Song of Solomon* violate the white law to gain freedom, and that their fearlessness is "a kind of self-flagellant resistance to certain kinds of control" which is "fascinating" to her (Tate: 125-6).

his fall to knowledge of the reality of the world, Joe loses Dorcas forever.

Nevertheless, Joe's fall to regain the lost Paradise is redemptive, as Jan Furman argues. The paradox of good people committing "horrible deeds" may be redeemed in Otten's analysis of criminality in Morrison's novels, because innocence is worse than guilt (Furman 5). Felice delivers redemption to Joe and Violet, represented by the fact that her name means felicity. Joe is told that Dorcas let herself die to give him time to escape. Felice gives Dorcas's message to Joe: "There's only one apple . . . Just one" (213). Joe interprets Dorcas's message as being that her love is referred only for Joe.

Joe cannot go back to Eden like Golden Gray because he has eaten the very first apple and tasted Dorcas's love in the fall. However, Joe no longer searches for his mother or lover in the City. Joe overcomes the absence of Dorcas and Wild, then learns to imagine their presence through jazz. Joe swings to the jazz music that streams to his apartment through the open window, and begins to dance with Violet. Joe finally finds companionship with Violet and can imagine his "home" in the South through jazz, the music of the black race.

### 3 The Narrator's Epiphany of Love

As her name signifies, Wild's presence is felt in the wilderness, and she changes not only the plot of Golden Gray's pursuit of his father, but the narrator's control over the characters' past. Wild is not "a story"

and is "still out there-and real" (167). Wild is the only character that is not depicted as a participant in the narrative by the narrator (like Golden Gray, for instance), but as a real presence.

The narrator's reflection in the tale of Golden Gray functions like improvisation in jazz and it changes the tune of the tale. The narrator's story becomes unreliable when the narrator comprehends Golden Gray's pain in missing his father. The repetition in telling of Golden Gray's journey makes the narrator understand his pain, and then causes the narrator to regret seeing only the surface meaning of his actions. The narrator regrets having called him a "hypocrite" and admits having a limited imagination. The narrator's thus far authoritative narrative then changes in tone, like jazz.

The narrator has a crisis of confidence about the failure to foretell another scandal. The characters in *Jazz* are not simply trapped in their past; they also try to overcome it and make a fresh start in their lives. The narrator changes emotionally love of the City to adoration of Wild's rock cave in Virginia. The narrator discovers, "Now it's clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me . . . . Sometimes they even felt sorry for me and just thinking about their pity I want to die" (220). The narrator cannot endure being seen by people and wants to disappear like Wild into the cave.

Therefore, the narrator comes to yearn

for the rock of Wild to hide in peace. Through the narrative of connecting the characters' past, the narrator is altered and comes to adore Wild's rock in Virginia. The narrator feels the presence of Wild and reaches "home" in the rock.

I'd love to close myself in the peace left by the woman who lived there and scared everybody. Unseen because she knows better than to be seen. After all, who would see her, a playful woman who lived in a rock? Who could, without fright? Of her looking eyes looking back? I wouldn't mind. Why should I? She has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me. Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret.

Now I know. (221)

Finally, Wild's rock cave changes into a "chamber of gold" for the narrator (221). The shelter filled with sunshine found by Joe is depicted as a "golden chamber" by the narrator. When the narrator imagines Wild's golden chamber, the narrator is seen, embraced and understood by Wild.

The rock of Wild's residence is "both snug and wide open," this contradictory place is the ideal "home" which is difficult to exist in reality (221). In her essay "Home", Morrison draws a distinction between house and home.<sup>9</sup> According to

her definition, "house" means a racial building while "home" means an open place without race. The characters in *Jazz* are oppressed and deprived of their "home" in the South. Although *Jazz* portrays the Great Migration of African Americans in the 1920s to escape lynching and to search for better lives, Wild's presence conveys the "home" they lost in the South.

Morrison alludes to Wild's rock cave as an ideal "home", since the narrator calls Wild's rock cave a "golden chamber". The epiphany of love takes the narrator back to Wild's golden chamber, the author's idealized "home". In *Jazz*, Wild transforms not only the narrator but also the African American peoples' traumatic past by turning it into an imaginative home, an Eden in the wilderness of the South.

## Conclusion

In *Jazz*, both "the crime of innocence" and "the fall" motifs are elicited in Golden Gray and Joe's love, and the presence of Wild in Eden establishes Morrison's paradoxical interpretation of these Biblical themes in their journeys. Golden Gray abandons his vow to the "crime of innocence" to his patricide, in his encountering with Wild. On the other hand, Joe is rejected in his quest to see Wild's "sign" as his mother, yet knows that she is "[e]verywhere and nowhere"

9 Cf. *Jazz*, 221. Toni Morrison identifies Wild's rock in *Jazz* as "home" in her essay "Home":

In my current project I want to see whether or not race-specific, race-free language is both possible and meaningful in narration. And I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place "*already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed, a view slanted for light and bright autumn leaves but not rain. Where moonlight can be counted on if the sky is clear and stars no matter what. And below, just yonder, a river called Treason to rely on.*" ("Home" 9, italics mine)



(179). For Joe, Wild's rock becomes paradoxical home, an Eden, yet he cannot go back there after the Fall.

The allusion to the abandoned children's fall from innocence to experience in *Jazz* is still problematic. The consequences for Golden Gray are problematic, because he has to give up ever returning to the deceptive white Eden in Baltimore and is banished with Wild from human society. Joe's fall is problematic too, but he overcomes his traumatic past by feeling and touching their "home" through jazz.

Toni Morrison uses Biblical themes and reinvents the fall motif of Western culture in an African American text, employing jazz as a symbolic thread. The narrator's epiphany of love brings about "home" of love as Eden in the imagery. Eventually, Wild turns out to be not only "somebody's mother" but also an African American "mother," yet the presence of "home" can be felt through the experience of jazz in the City.

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