

Jazz as postmodernist literature



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Ross Murfin defines postmodernism as, “ A term referring to certain radically experimental works of literature and art after World War II” (Murfin 397).

According to Murfin, postmodernism, like modernism that preceded it, involves separation from dominant literary convention via the “ experimentation with new literary devices, forms, and styles” (397).

Participating in this departure from literary norms is Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, a historical novel depicting the lives of black Americans living in Harlem at the height of the nineteen-twenties. *Jazz* embraces the postmodernist style through its unconventional use of narration that incorporates a unique stream of consciousness and the identification of the narrator as the physical text itself.

Stream of consciousness, while popularized by modernists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, takes on new eccentricities in postmodernist works such as *Jazz*. While not without nuance, *Jazz* encompasses sections of text that are not the painstakingly crafted, lyrical streams of consciousness as seen in *Ulysses* or *Finnegan’s Wake*; Morrison’s narrator can approach violence and disorder typically untapped in modernist works. The Bedford Glossary states that postmodernist works frequently embrace a level of “ cacophony and chaos” (Murfin 397), and this can be applied especially to *Jazz*’s stream of consciousness narration. A striking example occurs as Violet sits in a corner store, ruminating over her husband’s lover and her own deteriorating mental state. As the narrator mediates her thoughts, and Violet becomes more agitated, the narrative discourse changes. Grammatical conventions fall away as sentences run on or end abruptly, paragraph breaks stop entirely, and profanity becomes frequent as ideas become less eloquent

and more guttural as if staccato notes in the narrator's song. Finally, the narration makes a dramatic shift in point of view, leaving third person "she" and adopting first person "I". A paragraph that begins as thoughtful and lyrical as the rest of the text begins to turn to phrases like, "...keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no that violet is me!" (Morrison 95-96).

Morrison, using not only diction and rhythm but by changing the very rules and perspective of her own narration successfully conveys not just the thoughts but the unstable, chaotic emotional state of a character. This is the postmodernist stream of consciousness: going against modernist conventions to portray the often unpredictable and tumultuous machinations of the human mind.

Despite the undeniable sentience and agency presented by the narrator, it would be problematic to qualify them as having the "human mind" of the characters they depict, as Jazz's narrator is not human. Morrison, in the same way she breaks literary convention in the style of her narrator's voice, also brings a postmodernist element to her narrator's identity, creating a narrator that is not within the world, yet not totally distant from it. The last pages of Jazz confirm their true nature, addressing the reader directly, "I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick" (Morrison 229). The narrative is mediated by none other than the book itself. In a historical context, postmodernism involves stepping back; a distancing

of oneself from the long cord of history while examining and bringing into context every metaphorical inch and loose thread from the postmodern to modernity and into the ageless pre-modern.

In the same way, as a book, *Jazz* steps back from the volumes of literature that precede it, being a book that comments upon books; a text aware it is a text. The narrator claims to have a role in its story, and even doubts the authenticity of its own reportage, stating, “[Joe and Violet] 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” (220). The narrator, or rather, *Jazz*, implies that both they and the narrative’s characters are aware of their existence as spectacle. In doing this, Morrison separates the reality of the narrator—the plot—from the lives of these fictional characters, bringing into question the veracity of the entire tale. *Jazz* even admits that there are unknowns: “It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I’d never dreamed of” (221). In raising these questions, Morrison raises questions on literature as a whole. What is a narrator? How are they separate from the characters which they describe? Narrators can be unreliable, but to what extent can that unreliability reach?

Jazz is a book aware of itself. I typically avoid using the term “book” in literary essays. I find it weak and ineffective when weighed against terms like “work” or “the text”. In similar fashion, I avoid using first person perspective, or “I” voice, but *Jazz* seems to warrant an exception to these conventions just as it flouts literary tradition in a capacity so postmodernist.

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So, I will permit this essay to admit being an essay, although it makes for a weak conclusion, “ because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229).

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*, Vintage International, 2004. Murfin, Ross and Ray, Supryia M. “ Postmodernism”, *The Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms*, Third Edition, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008, pp. 397-398.