

ANALYSIS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM OF TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ, THE BLUEST EYE, AND SULA

Michael C. Pickett

Associate Professor, National University, USA

Abstract

The three novels included in this review are *Jazz*, *the Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*. Based upon the profound themes present in Morrison's writings this article uses many of the tenants of the cultural critical approaches to review Morrison's use of the themes of music, memories, good versus bad, and the precious notion of perceived beauty.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Jazz

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* takes place in Harlem in 1926 and as much as the characters are enmeshed in seemingly chaotic relationships, the fast pace of the city and the omnipotent cultural relationship to jazz music materializes as the controlling force that inspires and enchants the characters. In addition, Morrison's use of a subtle shift in voice that further engages the reader.

Themes

The three major themes that I found within the text are that of (1) youth versus age, (2) music, and (3) memories.

Youth versus age. One of the key relationships that the text illustrated was that of Joe Trace, a 50 year-old man and Dorcas, a young girl in her late teens. This relationship developed in part because of the void relationship between Joe and his wife; according to Joe, "Violet takes better care of the parrot than she does me" (Morrison 49).

Music. Music as a theme, aside from the title of the novel, is present in varying ways throughout the text such as "A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone..." (Morrison 8) symbolizing jazz as a way of life. The symbolic music theme is so enmeshed within the text even to the extent that a girl left a young baby to retrieve *The Trombone Blues* from her apartment (Morrison 21).

Memories. As a third major theme of *Jazz*, the underlying notions of memories are prevalent throughout the text. Memories such as the uprooting of the African culture, the
Copyright © 2017, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

migration from the South to the North, and in addition, many of the characters have had broken and displaced families.

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* takes place in Lorain, Ohio toward the end of the Great Depression. The MacTeer's, while attempting to make ends meet, take in a border named Henry Washington and also a small girl named Pecola, who has come from a difficult family situation.

Themes

The two major themes that I found within the text are that of whiteness as a standard of beauty, and seeing versus being unseen.

Standards of Beauty. The story continually reiterates in subtle and not so subtle ways that the unspoken standard of beauty is being white and having blue eyes. This is reinforced continually throughout the story with the gifts of the little Shirley Temple dolls to the children. "It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls...blue-eyed Baby Doll" (Morrison 19-20).

Seeing Versus Being Unseen. Pecola, throughout her growing years, developed a strong desire to be seen as beautiful and to her, that meant having blue eyes rather than lighter skin. Pecola perceived that being seen as beautiful with keep her from disliking her and/or doing mean things to her. Eventually, she perceives herself as having the blue eyes wherein everyone avoids her because of her beauty.

I know. He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off... (195).

Sula

Within *Sula*, a somewhat different novel than the previous two, Morrison examines the character's relationships between good and evil. The story again takes place in a town called Bottom, Ohio. In essence, Bottom is actually the hilly portion of the adjoining land that the slave owners were "graciously giving" their slaves. As it turned out, the community grew and the land became more valuable and eventually the white townspeople began to take the land back as they could to further develop a golf course.

Themes

Again, as this novel was a little different than the first two - in that a major theme or themes were not as evident. *Sula* did illustrate life as tragedy in that two of the characters, Nel and Sula, were driven apart towards the end because of the types of life's circumstances that are mostly inevitable that one makes the types of choices that become their destiny.

Cultural Critical Approach

Based upon the profound themes present in Morrison's writings, I have chosen to use many of the tenants of the cultural critical approaches from which to examine these selected novels. My rationale for choosing this approach was based on the Morrison's use of the themes of music, memories, good versus bad, and the precious notion of perceived beauty.

From a cultural perspective music has played a large part in African American culture and Morrison has introduced it in some form or another in most of the chapters. Similarly, memories have a cultural impact for African Americans. As mentioned previously, the culture has been uprooted and marginalized for decades, thus memories serve to reinforce their heritage and cultural roots. By adding this approach of criticism to *Jazz* I intend to illustrate the some of the cultural work that Morrison performs through the roles of the various characters within the text.

In addition, *The Bluest Eye*, with its notion of perceived beauty, has been a component of African American culture since arriving to this country. The advent of slavery created a race that was perceived as ugly and stupid, thereby marginalizing a people and creating the need to see oneself as worthy and whole. I think that Morrison's attempt at creating the notion of the need for acceptance through *The Bluest Eye* developed a sense of understanding as to the trauma generations have been dealing with.

Lastly, in *Sula*, Morrison demonstrates the ambiguities that a culture finds themselves adapting to in order to maintain a sense of meaning within their lives is a major proponent of the issues that appear in the story. The tragedies that Nel and Sula find themselves involved in create a need for the reader to try to label each character as good or bad.

Cultural Critical Methods

According to Tyson (1999), cultural work reveals ways that our experiences are shaped from the cultural ideologies brought forth in the text. To illustrate some of the cultural work that Morrison performs through the roles of the various characters within her texts,

Morrison's novella are set in a time when America was feeling severe equality growing pains in the form of riots, etc., in the acceptance of the evolution of desegregation. Morrison fully takes advantage of the times by taking the reader deep into the individual traumas felt by the African Americans of that time. Examples such as:

...when the attendant came through, pleasant but unsmiling now that he didn't have to smile in this car full of colored people. (Jazz 30)

Illustrating that even attendants treated 'colored people' different than whites bringing a highly political point to surface in that *equality may only go so far*. Additionally,

The cooks would not feel obliged to pile extra helpings on plates headed for the curtain... (Jazz 31).

The above passage is yet another example of the enmeshed marginalization and constraint of true freedom felt by Morrison's characters as Americans. An example of the felt loss of self worth can be found in *The Bluest Eye*:

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed because they believed they were ugly. (The Bluest Eye 38)

In an even larger political statement, Morrison describes a more detailed description highlighting the disparity of the times demonstrating the involvement of societies "...larger social structures with which these particular acts" (Tyson 295) are to blame.

Alice, however, believed she knew the truth better than everybody...her brother-in-law...wasn't even in the riot; he had no weapons, confronted nobody on the street. He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death. (Jazz 57)

To represent the African American cultural growth pains from an ideological perspective, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is demonstrative of the illusion of how we perceive beauty, regardless of culture. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's obsession with "fitting in" created

such turmoil in her reality perspective that she firmly believed in the transformation. Additionally, having the transformation completed, she now contrived yet another escape from reality in the denial that people now wish not to look at her because of her beauty. According to Stam and Shohat (1994) many of our “histories” are in the process of being reconstructed and this is an area that Morrison dealt with in her early reviews in the literary critiques. Once accepted, Morrison’s stories are being seen as to having an element of realism that has been overlooked in American literature.

Cultural Critical Methods Conclusions

In applying the cultural critical approach I set out to illustrate some of the cultural work that Morrison performs through the roles of the various characters within the text. According to Tyson (1999), some of the questions that apply to cultural criticism and literature are (295):

1. What kinds of behavior, what models of practice, does this work seem to enforce?
2. Why readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
3. Upon what social understanding does this work depend?

To address the first question, this work addresses the open continuance of the marginalization of the African American people in the United States. Additionally, Morrison details horrific incidents of racist behaviors and while fictional, similar behaviors have been well documented throughout history. The portrayal of the killing of Alice’s brother-in-law in *Jazz* demonstrated a reinforcement of a social system that, at the time, was somewhat boundless. In other words, even though killings were against the law, the enforcement of the law was not uniform throughout society. Another example found in *Sula* when she accidentally throws Chicken Little in the river, the man finding the body would not have retrieved it had it not been a child. This exposition demonstrates the severe marginalization that the African Americans dealt with on an ongoing basis.

For the second question, Tyson (1999) argues that African American literature has been stifled over the years and has just recently come into its own recognition. I think that readers, especially those that have not been exposed to cross-cultural literature, would be particularly interested in these works. I think that our ‘typical’ history texts have overlooked a great deal of the suffering and anguish the African Americans have been through over the

years and works of this type allow us to rethink our social programming to understand the traumatic events that have affected many.

Lastly, a basic understanding of the time and place that America was in at the time would be a requisite for a better understanding of the text's underlying meanings and themes. For instance, a reader from Asia may not understand the metaphor and symbolism that jazz music had to the culture at the time. Additionally, for cultures unfamiliar with multiple ethnicities, such as Sweden, Norway, etc., the marginalization that the African Americans of the time went through in Morrison's texts may seem peculiar or unrealistic.

Further Avenues of Inquiry

As I had mentioned previously, cultural criticism approaches are enmeshed within the themes of Morrison's stories. Some avenues of further inquiry that my analysis suggests are:

1. In cultures that have been suppressed or marginalized for many years, what long-term psychological affect does this pose on future generations?

This question addresses the theme of 'memories' and how many of the characters portrayed by Morrison had broken families due to the conditions of the country and awful circumstances to which the African Americans.

2. How are cultures that have been marginalized, such as the African American, identify psychologically with the suppressing culture, e.g., such as the Jews that were working in the concentration camps for the Germans. They saw their role through the psychoanalytic defense mechanism of identification.

This area of inquiry addresses coping mechanisms that individuals in disparate situations use to deal with, and "work through" their lot in life. As with Morrison's text, music was seen as a psychological "out" and way to sublimate unacceptable feelings and redirect them into socially acceptable behaviors. Future inquiry could look into the ways that music helps culture develop coalitions of strengthened rejuvenation in order to cope with abnormal situations in life.

A third area of inquiry could address:

3. What is the psychological evidence that age plays in cultural underpinnings? In other words, as individuals age within a given culture, how does society view the older generations within the context of value?

Given these three areas of future inquiry, I think that the critical methods applied to Morrison's *Jazz*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula* provide a better insight into the realities of the time as well as a deeper understanding of the psychological underpinnings of the sequence of events that were seemingly unpredictable. Lastly, understanding the subtle relationships between the tenants of cultural criticism provides readers with a more comprehensive and appreciative interaction with the stories.

Works Cited

Morrison, T. (1973). *Sula*. New York: Vintage.

Morrison, T. (1994). *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume.

Morrison, T. (2004). *Jazz*. New York: Random House.

Stam, R. and Shohat, E. *Contested Histories: Eurocentrism, Multiculturalism, and the Media*. In Goldberg, D. (ed.). (1994). *Multiculturalism: A Critical reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

Tyson, L. (1999). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. New York: Garland Publishing.