Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweettooth for it....I break lives to prove I can mend them back again. And although the pain is theirs, I share it, don’t I?....What, I wonder, would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder? Without aching words that set, then miss the mark?
Chapter 6
The Jarring Notes of Race:
Private Sorrow and Public Redress in Jazz

**Jazz** traces the development of the unique sensibility of a fifty-year-old African American woman named Violet whose husband falls for a younger, lighter skinned girl called Dorcas, and murders her because she goes to a dance with someone else. Violet proceeds to the funeral with a knife and tries to disfigure the face of the dead girl lying in the coffin. She does not succeed, but the townspeople begin calling her Violent after this incident, start viewing her as insane and demented, and generally try to steer clear of her. Violet, however, emerges a fighter, and refuses to be vanquished by the harsh realities of her existence even though she comes very close to losing her mental balance at times. In spite of the fact that her life is marked by pain, poverty and hopelessness at every step, she fights relentlessly to regain the lost love of her husband and put the fragmented pieces of her life back together again. During her struggle, she is sustained by memories of her mother and grandmother, and assisted by a nurturing relationship with Alice Manfred - Dorcas’s aunt, as well as Felice - Dorcas’s best friend. Violet’s story, perhaps the most optimistic of all written by Morrison so far, is a story of the renewal of hope, and a
reaffirmation of life through continuing faith in the self. It suggests that in spite of the odds against them, black women can derive the strength to survive by creating the right balance between their history, community and individual selves. Carolyn M. Jones views Jazz as a novel "concerned with the theme of arming: of moving from the violence that wounds the self to a reconstructed identity that heals, that allows one to negotiate life in a full and vital way and to love." These words highlight the central concern of Jazz, and are epitomised in Violet's progression from Violet to Violent and back to Violet again. To become whole again, Violet must arm herself - but not with weapons of violence and jealousy. She requires, rather, the tools of self-confidence and self-knowledge, and the moral support of other black women like Alice and Felice. Once she succeeds in obtaining these, her fractured psyche heals, and her fragmented self becomes whole again.

The subtle metaphor of jazz music as a way of life for African Americans runs throughout the text in both form and content because Morrison is convinced that "for some black people jazz meant claiming their own bodies." Discussing the form of the novel with Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, she explains


2 Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction," with Elissa Schappell and
that "Jazz was very complicated because I wanted to re-represent two contradictory things - artifice and improvisation, where you have an artwork, planned, thought through, but at the same time appears invented, like jazz....I wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age, and to never use the word." In keeping with this trend, she has written Jazz in such a manner that it appears both extemporised and contrived at the same time - like the lives of the central characters. She says further in the same interview that "Jazz predicts its own story. Sometimes it is wrong because of faulty vision. It simply did not imagine those characters well enough, admits it was wrong, and the characters talk back the way jazz musicians do." The best example of this is the ambiguous and mysterious narrator who first predicts a certain outcome based on how each character will behave, but later takes back the words sheepishly, admitting that it was wrong. Like a jazz musician, Morrison outlines the entire plot of the book in the first paragraph. She, however, goes on to make liberal use of flashbacks during the course of the narrative to portray what can be viewed as the four stages of Violet's development from a scared, deprived, uncertain


3 Toni Morrison, Schappell and Lacour 116-117.

4 Toni Morrison, Schappell and Lacour 117.
teenager to a confident middle aged woman who finally decides to take full responsibility for and control of her hitherto shattered life. Her greatest achievement is that she learns to value herself as a worthy individual with various sustaining qualities like physical strength and emotional resilience. It is this realisation that allows her to counter the inferiority complex regarding her age and colour - an insecurity that had developed because Joe had fallen in love with a much younger and lighter-skinned girl. The stages in the development of Violet's sensibility do not, however, follow a consistently upward trend. In the first stage she is depicted as a morose, dejected girl - plagued by poverty and traumatised by her mother's suicide. This is followed by the second stage which is marked by her introduction to Joe, and shows a gradual uplifting of her spirits. At the peak of this stage, she has developed both physically and emotionally, and proves to be a willing and capable worker ready to meet all the challenges of rural or urban life. This stage, however, begins to wane a few years after she moves to New York with Joe, and her yearning for a child becomes first strong then unbearable. This is the beginning of the third stage of the formation of her sensibility. Her feelings of self-worth are at their lowest because she feels incomplete without a child, and starts living in a world of make-believe where she pampers an imaginary
daughter. This stage reaches its peak when she learns of Joe's infidelity and his subsequent, impulsive murder of Dorcas. At this point she is on the verge of losing her mental balance completely, and experiences a split in her personality which gives rise to two selves. She identifies with only one self, and observes the other with amazement. During this stage her feelings of self-worth and self-esteem dip to an all time low, and culminate in an unsuccessful attempt to stab Dorcas's face. The fourth and final stage of the development of Violet's consciousness begins when she seeks out Alice Manfred to learn more about Dorcas and by so doing, "solve the mystery of love" (5). It is this nurturing relationship with another black woman that ultimately plays a major role in leading Violet out of the blues. It helps her to see herself as an individual capable of loving and being loved - but perfectly able to survive without it if required.

Examined chronologically, Violet is first depicted as a vulnerable young girl, the third of five sisters, whose childhood is marred by the atrocities committed by white practitioners of racist violence. Her father is one of the Readjusters - who roams the country from one corner to another, and does not come home or send money for years on end. Her mother, Rose Dear, is the only stable, sustaining presence in her life until their house is raided by a gang
of violent, rioting white men. Sensitive and impressionable, Violet is so severely scarred by these disruptive incidents that she decides never to have children because she wants to ensure that "no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?" (102). This is the first stage of the development of Violet's consciousness. She experiences early the handicap and horror of being both poor and black in a society that provides neither sustenance nor security to its minority members. She therefore makes the first major decision about her life - resolving never to bring a child into a world where it will always be hungry and deprived, and will constantly look up to her for things she cannot provide just because she does not belong to the privileged class of white people. The ramifications of this decision are grim. When black women are compelled to take such a step because they have been disillusioned by their encounters with the white world, they are not just avoiding childbirth. By curbing the new generation that will carry the race forward, they are, in fact, depriving their community of a chance to propagate itself. Violet is, however, very young at the time, and does not understand the larger, more serious implications of her decision. Her family's position improves slightly after Rose's mother, True Belle, arrives from Baltimore and takes charge of the house. In True Belle, Morrison creates a black woman
of real substance who nourishes her daughter's emaciated family back to health and happiness. Her act is all the more commendable because she leaves a well-paying job with a generous white employer and devotes herself selflessly to the welfare of her granddaughters. Jazz critics have, however, failed to comment upon Morrison's characterisation of Violet's grandmother as a woman who nurtures the deprived family physically - but passes on to it the lure and fascination of white skin and golden hair - epitomised in the figure of Golden Gray. Most other grandmothers in Morrison's work (especially Pilate and Baby Suggs) function as the crucial links to a rich ethnic past, and try to instil in the younger generation the values of Africa. In the portrayal of True Belle, however, Morrison departs from this norm - possibly to demonstrate the omnipotence and power of prevailing white values. She wants to suggest, perhaps, that women of all age groups are vulnerable to the dominant world view and are so dazzled by it that they fail to see the harm its emulation will cause to the next generation. Though True Belle pulls her granddaughters out of their depression, she cannot bring her daughter out of her trauma, and is helpless when Rose Dear commits suicide by jumping into the well one night. Rose Dear's life and death bear testimony to the fatal frustration that minority women feel at being unable to have
control over their lives and live the way they want to. She had worked single-handedly to give her daughters a decent life, but the white raiders of their modest home destroyed in a few minutes what had taken a lifetime of labour to build. The pathos of Rose's life and the inevitability of her death demonstrates the insecurity of the black woman's life in cruel white America. She has to live with the constant fear that everything she has struggled to achieve might suddenly be snatched from right under her - like a table or a chair - at any time.

When Violet is seventeen years old, True Belle asks her to accompany two of her sisters to work in the fields picking cotton in another town several miles away from their home. This is where she first meets Joe, and discovers that, for the first time since the events leading to the death of her mother, she has begun to feel emotionally secure in someone's company. Morrison writes that "nighttime was never the same for her. Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small" (104). Before she met Joe, Violet had associated night and early morning only with bitter sorrow and gruesome memories of the discovery of her mother's body. These morbid associations are, however, soon replaced by a
new joy arising from thoughts of Joe with the dawn of every morning. This change in her disposition - a result of her relationship with Joe - is very significant. It suggests that the feelings induced by her tragic confrontation with white men have been replaced by more positive ones because of her association with a black man. In his company, she works with enthusiasm, and changes from a girl who could not pick cotton even as fast as the twelve-year-olds, to become a “powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man” (105). This is the second stage of the development of Violet’s consciousness and abilities. Through her association with and subsequent marriage to Joe, she is able to exchange the earlier ineptitude and fear for a fresh self-confidence and a renewed zest for life. Morrison depicts Joe as a typical son of the soil - a strong, hardworking black man committed to and reverent of the land on which he works. Her characterisation of him can be compared with that of Porter’s in Song of Solomon and Son’s in Tar Baby. Just as First Corinthians and Jadine find a new identity and security in their relationship with these men, Violet benefits similarly from her association with Joe.

The second stage of the development of Violet’s consciousness continues as she matures both physically and emotionally through
five or six years of back-breaking work when she helps Joe by doing miscellaneous jobs while he also labours away at physically taxing tasks. They finally save enough to buy a decent piece of land, but are forcefully evicted from it by some white men who show them bogus slips of papers and claim that Joe has signed the property over to them. This episode illustrates the utter helplessness of African Americans living in mainstream America. Even though they theoretically have the right to property, it is constantly violated because nobody bothers to protect their interest. The wider implications of this fact are all too obvious. The black population appears to be doomed to a life of subservience to the majority culture. Not being able to own land means not being in a position of power where one is master of the self and has the opportunity to provide employment to others. It also means constantly having to work the land for other people, not being economically secure or independent, and allowing the land-owners to reap the rich benefits of their labour. Symbolically, the failure to successfully secure a piece of land suggests the inability of African Americans to possess a piece of America - to call a bit of the country their own - and be proud of it. Thirteen years later, when Joe and Violet move to New York, the pleasure they derive from the City is marred by the usual racism and prejudice that have traditionally continued to haunt
them. They are repeatedly humiliated when city officials ask them to move from one locality to another or travel in public transport reserved for coloured people.

The third stage of the formation of Violet's sensibility, and the accompanying downfall in her self-esteem, begins when she enters her fortieth year. She starts yearning for a child, and the longing manifests itself in wishful thinking. Her obsessive desire for a child shakes her mental balance, and when she cannot bear the thought of being childless anymore, she buys a doll, and pretends that it is her daughter. She starts sleeping with her, feeding her, singing with her and doing her hair in little-girl styles. After she is accused of trying to steal a baby from the roadside when she picks it up to rock it, the feel of the baby in her hands continues to haunt her, and she begins to imagine a "brightness that could be carried in her arms" (22). Since Violet longs unbearably for a child, she glorifies the concept of motherhood, and feels incomplete because she does not have a little one of her own. This is also the time when she retreats into her shell because she cannot trust herself to speak sanely. She imagines that there is a corpse in her head, and begins holding conversations with it. She finds, as a result, that she has "stumbled into a crack or two. Felt the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to
themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). Since she realises her abnormality but is helpless against it, she "shuts up" and begins to "speak less and less..." until, "over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him" (24). Her husband feels angry because he cannot understand why she has suddenly become so quiet, and the anger finally turns into frustration. Violet and Joe are gradually growing apart. The confidence that he had helped nourish in her finds itself wavering again due to a communication gap. Doreatha D. Mbaila contends that "if women are socialized not to have a voice, it is especially important for them to communicate, with themselves and their mates. Doing so helps each to grow; a person can be remade through her relationship with the other."5 Violet's silence may stem from personal reasons but it is, at bottom, an extension of her confrontation with white society. It recalls earlier incidents like the raid on her house, the snatching of her land, and the forced moves from one black neighbourhood to another - during all of which she simply obliged - but never spoke. All these incidents add up to deprive Violet of her voice, and culminate in her inability to express her desire for a child to Joe. Joe, too, fails to comprehend her sense of loss and longing, and cannot prevent her from wandering into her

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strange "cracks." Morrison describes these cracks as dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She...sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done...But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene....But the globe light is imperfect too...it shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything....Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles on to these cracks.... (22-23)

For Violet, these "cracks" indicate a divided self. Her personality appears to have split into two parts. She has the feeling that one part of her watches on while the other part carries out everyday chores and continues with the normal business of living. One of these parts gradually mutates into an aggressive, overbearing one, which she eventually classifies as "that" Violet - a self separate and apart from her true, original one. Jones comments that these cracks are "...spaces that Violet should be able to fill with her own narrative voice, bringing the discrete experiences of her life into story, and they are also a form of knowledge."⁶ Violet's peculiar

⁶ Jones 485.
tendency to say unrelated things out loud becomes a “form of knowledge” because it helps her, albeit unknowingly, to foresee Joe’s affair - “who is that pretty girl standing next to you?” (24). In order to pull herself back together again, however, she must succeed in healing these cracks by understanding and accepting the key events of her life - no matter how painful the process may be.

While Violet is trying to face the harsh reality of her childless life, and losing her mental balance in the bargain, Joe meets and falls in love with Dorcas and even murders her - all in a span of three months. Violet is stunned by these unexpected events. She grabs a knife from one of her bird cages, reaches the funeral in a mad frenzy and tries to stab her dead rival’s face. Her attempt is thwarted, but people begin to call her Violent after the incident. Various organisations working for social welfare consider helping her, but find that she does not really fall into any of their categories as a person deserving help. “Her name was brought up at the...Salem Women's Club as someone needing assistance, but it was voted down because only prayer - not money - could help her now” (4). The assumption here is that support systems can only help a person in material terms, but she must get relief for the soul on her own. Morrison’s observation that “the Club...left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it” (4),
implies that the support system, designed and operated by the majority culture, is not right for the black woman if she is seeking emotional rather than financial help. Since Violet has no friends or sympathetic confidants, she is left alone to deal with her grief and come to terms with her husband's infidelity and subsequent crime.

When Violet learns that her rival Dorcas was not only lighter-skinned but also much younger than her, she becomes painfully conscious of her age and colour. Along with this awareness comes also a resentment of all adolescent girls and, in a conversation with one of her customers, she stereotypes them as "these little hungry girls acting like women. Not content with boys their own age...they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see-through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what" (14). Violet's uncharitable thoughts about teenage girls stem from her own particular experience. Her words reflect her anger at youth and helplessness at her own advancing years. Morrison depicts here the insecurity that older women experience when they are forced to confront youth and beauty - assets that they themselves can never have anymore - but which can be used to take away what is rightfully theirs. She highlights once again the destructive aspects of a majority culture that emphasises the importance of both youth and beauty while
undermining the value of actual sustaining human qualities -
qualities which husbands too fail to see in their wives. She feels
angered by the devotion and faithfulness Joe exhibits toward
Dorcas even though she is dead.

When all plans to punish Joe fail, Violet decides to find out
every single detail about Dorcas and thus "solve the mystery of
love" (5), i.e. find out what exactly it was about her that made Joe
fall so madly in love with her. She locates the girl's address and
parentage, visits her regular beauty parlour, and identifies the kind
of lip rouge she wore as well as the marcelling iron that they used
on her hair. She also identifies the Band that Dorcas liked, and
learns the dance steps she used to do. These acts indicate the
disturbed state of Violet's mind, and her extreme obsession with the
dead girl. Through her emulation of Dorcas's lifestyle, she wants to
experience firsthand the feel of being like Dorcas, i.e., being young
and light skinned, and therefore attractive to Joe. She also meets
Dorcas's school teachers, and finally goes to her aunt's house to see
her belongings. This last act is the most significant as far as the
development of her consciousness is concerned. Her journey
forward into her own self begins with her journey (backward) into
Dorcas's past, and her sensibility develops through her association
with Dorcas's Aunt - Alice Manfred, and best girlfriend - Felice.
When Alice first allows Violet inside her house, the first question she asks is, "Why did he do such a thing?" (81) · referring, of course, to Joe's murder of Dorcas. Violet responds with a question of her own, "Why did she?" (81), after which Alice asks, "Why did you" (81) · referring to Violet's attempt at stabbing her dead niece's face. Violet simply replies, "I don't know" (81), and the visit ends there. This response indicates that Violet is still unsure about her action and the motivation behind it. She is still in a daze, and unable to think clearly.

On Violet's third visit, Alice notices a loose thread running from the sleeve of her dress, and mends it meticulously without a word. This act shows Alice's nurturing quality, and her willingness to assist another woman in spite of all the unpleasant events that have preceded their introduction. Symbolically, Alice's effort to re-stitch the sleeve marks the beginning of the support that she will henceforth lend to Violet and thus help her sew the loose ends of her life back together again. The lessons that Violet learns from her are, however, as subconscious as the effort at mending is deliberate. She tells Alice that she has come to her house to learn more about Dorcas, and determine why Joe found her so desirable. Alice reproaches her by telling her that if she does not know her own husband well enough to understand the motive behind his pursuit
of Dorcas, nobody can help her. This candid response suggests that Alice is actually encouraging Violet to think and analyse these issues for herself instead of depending on others for ready-made answers to complicated questions. She wants Violet to come to a better understanding of her husband, to comprehend the motivation behind his act, and make amends accordingly.

Alice gradually begins to look forward to Violet's visits which are now always interspersed with confidences and confusions, questions and queries each woman puts to the other. These brief chat sessions help both Violet and Alice to confront issues they had hitherto been postponing, and give them the courage to face the realities of life by understanding it better. Mbalia writes that “this bonding between women, this sisterhood, allows African women not only to talk, but also to cry and to laugh. All three are signs of healing.”

The implication is that African American women, subdued by the majority culture, and faced by a plethora of alien values, draw emotional strength and moral support from one another. Alice learns almost as much from these discussions as Violet. It is during one such visit that Alice tells Violet that she must not look upon Dorcas as an enemy just because “she was young and pretty and took your husband away from you” (85). Her

\[1\] Mbalia 633.
words are meant to make Violet realise the ridiculous nature of both her jealousy and her act. They are also aimed at exonerating Dorcas of the charges that Violet has been levelling against her. She implies that the fault lies with Joe because he fell into the trap of youth and beauty - assets that he should have been mature enough to overlook in favour of the redeeming qualities of his own wife.

After this visit, Violet goes to her regular drugstore, and sits there sipping a milkshake and ruminating. She begins wondering “who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things” (89). This is the first time that Violet actually tries to confront the other part of her personality that seems to be acting according to a will of its own. As she thinks back to the events that took place in January, she begins attributing her violent act to “that” Violet.

*that* Violet...knew...where the funeral was going on...and the right time to get there....Before she knew what was going on, the boy ushers’ hands...were reaching toward the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl’s haughty, secret face....then the usher boys were joined by frowning men, who carried *that* kicking,
growling Violet out while she looked on in amazement. (90-92)

She recalls the entire incident of the funeral stabbing, and the pictures pass through her mind like images on a movie screen. She sees two Violets at the funeral. One is her original, rather absent-minded self - the part of her that did not even know where the butcher knife was - the part that could only watch as the woman who had disrupted the funeral was unceremoniously thrown out. The other Violet is that Violet - the part of her who knew the funeral venue, and was aggressive and angry enough to try stabbing a dead girl's face before being chased out of the premises. Jones elaborates that “Violet must realise that ‘that Violet’ is she. Only then can she become the true Violet: bring the two kinds of knowledge together through the process of mourning her losses..., and the strength that she left in Virginia, the strength that let her claim Joe Trace.” Violet's is, at present, a divided personality. She is not a complete person because she has not realised yet that both Violets are a part of her. She is not even aware of the kind of loss she has suffered, and the half person that she has become. At this stage, she is merely torn between the two halves of her self - comfortable with one, and puzzled about the other. As her mind wanders, she begins wondering about Dorcas, and the point that
repeatedly haunts her is that of all the men available to her, Dorcas took a man who was old enough to be her father. This inability to accept Joe’s relationship with Dorcas stems from her exposure to Western values which suggest that romance is possible only between the young and the (physically) beautiful. She tries to imagine the two of them together, and pictures Dorcas where she herself should have been. She is angered by the thought that her husband and his girlfriend were sharing cosy, romantic moments in Malvonne’s apartment while she was busy working hard to make ends meet: “while I was where Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody’s kitchen to do their hair. Huddled in a doorway out of the wind waiting for the trolley?...I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears...and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the earlobe” (95). When she makes the comment about the knife striking the neckline, it marks the point where the two Violets momentarily become one. She had hitherto been seeing the Violet who stabbed Dorcas as that Violet, but now comes close to accepting that she and that Violet are the same: “And that’s why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin

8 Jones 485.
where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to” (95). When the facts of Joe's adulterous behaviour actually sink in, Violet feels so outraged that she begins to identify with the Violet who stabbed Dorcas, and justifies her impulsive act. The phrases “get me down” and “keep me down” (emphasis mine) imply that she is no longer viewing that Violet as an other, but as part of her own self. Once she accepts that it was she herself and not some other part of her personality who had stabbed Dorcas, she is better able to confront her divided self: “NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town,...wearing my skin and using my eyes...that Violet is me!” (95-96). Since she feels outraged at her husband's audacity, she starts identifying with “that” Violet, and condones her violent act. She thus begins to see in “that” Violet an image of herself as she had been a few months into her courtship with Joe. She thinks back to the old, strong Violet - the Violet who had braved the fear of snakes and the anger of white masters to be with Joe. Her mind wanders again as she recalls Joe's infidelity. She wonders what he saw in Dorcas: “A young me with high-yellow skin instead of black? A young me with long wavy hair instead of short?” (97). These thoughts highlight Violet's inferiority complex regarding her age and colour. She still lays emphasis on youth and physical beauty,
and holds their absence responsible for her husband's disinterest in her.

Violet thinks back to her last miscarriage, and feels convinced that the child she lost would have been a girl as old as Dorcas. She begins to see in the dead girl an image of her own daughter as she would have been had she been born. There is, however, a lingering regret that she realised all this too late: "When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter...Who lay there asleep in that coffin? Who posed there awake in the photograph? The scheming bitch...who came into a life, took what she wanted and damn the consequences? Or mama's dumpling girl? Was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled the womb?" (108-109). Violet is confused about Dorcas, and seems to share a love-hate relationship with her. She loves the Dorcas who symbolises the daughter she could not have, and hates the Dorcas who took Joe away from her. Just as she sees two Violets in her own self, so she views Dorcas as a divided self too - darling daughter and husband snatcher. She goes to Alice's house with these thoughts one day, and tells her that had the circumstances been different, she would probably have loved Dorcas too. On this occasion she is holding her coat lapels tightly together to prevent Alice from seeing the torn lining. During the
course of the emotional conversation that follows, Violet asks in wonder, “Where the grown people? Is it us” (110), and Alice, on hearing the question, unconsciously exclaims out loud, “Oh. Mama” (110). Morrison reinforces here the significant role of mothers who continue to provide support and give direction to their daughters throughout life. When she hears Alice’s cry, Violet too finds herself remembering her mother. She wonders if, all those years ago, Rose Dear too had felt the same way and had killed herself. With these thoughts, she moves a bit closer to understanding the mother whose suicide she had always resented, and whose absence had left in her life a void she could never fill. As they recall their absent mothers, each woman is silent, and lost in her own thoughts. Then Alice finally takes Violet’s coat and starts mending the lining. When she hands the mended coat back to Violet, the narrator comments that the stitches are fine and invisible to the eye. Alice’s words slowly soothe Violet’s consciousness almost as perfectly as her stitches mend the rips in her clothes. Just as the stitches cannot be distinguished from the fabric, so her conversations cannot really be labelled as counselling sessions - but act as just those to heal the cracks in Violet’s personality and make it whole again.

On her next visit, as Violet watches Alice ironing, the latter tells her that Joe will “do it again...And again and again and again”
(112), but when Violet talks of throwing him out, Alice does not agree. She tells her that if “You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it” (112). Violet asks her whether she should fight, and Alice says, “fight what, who? Some mishandled child who saw her parents burn up? Who knew better than you or me or anybody just how small and quick and this little bitty life is?....Nobody’s asking you to take it. I’m sayin make it, make it!” (113). Alice wants to make Violet realise that instead of holding other people like Dorcas responsible for her miseries, she must learn to shoulder her own burdens and develop the strength to take credit for her failures and successes. During this long and emotionally charged speech, Alice puts her iron down on the dress, and the yoke gets burnt through. She is agitated at first, then sees Violet smiling, and both of them start laughing loudly. Jones explains that the value of this laughter lies in the fact that “it does not deny or forget the worst of life, but it endures in the face of the worst....[and] indicates a potentially positive aspect of the double consciousness: the insight that allows one to see the self as an ‘other’ and to love the ‘other self.’”

9 This is exactly what happens to Violet. She still remembers the uncertainty, the jealously, the hatred that had followed her discovery of Joe’s infidelity and crime,

9 Jones 487.
but now takes a mature perspective of it. It is almost as if she is watching another Violet stabbing a dead girl - but is fully conscious that it is not the alien "that" Violet of before - just her own self doing something foolish: "crumpled over, shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was" (114). Violet finally understands the absurdity of her accusations and her violent act - the senselessness of attempting to kill a dead girl. She is, at last, able to laugh at the whole situation - to view it critically without taking herself too seriously and thus drowning in self pity. This spontaneous and free laughter that she shares with Alice marks the culmination of all the lessons she has learned from Dorcas's aunt.

Later that day, Violet goes to her regular drugstore where she thinks back to this last visit, and recalls every single detail of her conversation with Alice - especially the laughter that followed the accidental burning of the yoke. When she walks out sometime later, she notices that spring has come to the City. The most significant fact, however, is that her 'other' part ("that" Violet) also notices the arrival of spring at the same time. This is the beginning of the fourth and final stage of the development of Violet's consciousness. The two parts of her personality have finally come together to make an integrated, whole, self. This key scene shows
Violet’s journey back to reality - her acceptance of the facts of life as they are - and her acknowledgement of springtime in spite of these harsh truths. Her winter of discontent is finally over, and has given way to the spring which will allow her to start life on a new, more optimistic note. Joe’s courtship of Dorcas had begun in October and ended in January. Violet’s visits to Alice continue through February and March, and usher a season of new beginnings for her. Morrison reiterates here that Alice, a black woman, finally does for Violet what white run social service organisations could not: instil a sense of faith in herself, exploit the potential within her to the maximum, subdue her self-conscious, unsure self, and enable her to emerge as a strong, independent woman. In Alice’s company, she gets back the voice she had lost, i.e., she is able to express herself verbally in the other woman’s company, and thus allow herself to fully explore, analyse and understand her thoughts and actions.

The fourth stage of the development of Violet’s sensibility, and her new awakening as a self-confident woman is marked by three significant events. First, she stops wearing her coat on warm days because she is no longer conscious of her “missing” behind, i.e. her less than adequate hips. This step indicates that she has stopped laying stress on physical assets, and has learned to accept herself as she is. Second, she returns Dorcas’s photograph to Alice -
indicating that she has buried her painful past after reconciling herself to it, has forgiven, and will attempt to forget. Third, she welcomes Dorcas’s best friend, Felice, to her house, and strikes a rapport with her. Violet’s willingness to be friendly with Felice suggests that she has matured considerably, and does not suffer from a complex about her age and colour. She is no longer afraid that some adolescent girl will again come along and snatch her husband away from her. When Felice begins visiting her regularly, she tells her that she made a mistake because she wanted to be “White. Light. Young again” (208), and it “messed up” (208) her life. These words highlight the extent of the damage caused by the majority culture’s priorities. In Violet’s case, the obsession with colour and youth had begun early. She had started craving for both as a result of her grandmother’s stories about Baltimore and her adoration of Golden Gray. Jones contends that Golden Gray is “light, bright, and therefore, all right. He is the Dorcas in Violet’s mind, the image of what she ought to be to keep Joe’s love and to be a whole self. She has to rid herself of this image in order to be whole.”¹⁰ Both Dorcas and Golden Gray had youth, beauty, and a light skin in common. Both existed in Violet’s mind as ideals of what she should be in order to be appreciated and loved. Now,

¹⁰ Jones 489.
however, she desires neither youth nor beauty, but rather holds her
craving for them responsible for the trying circumstances of her life.
She explains to Felice that she got rid of the other woman inside her
by killing her, and then killing “the me that killed her” (209), and
the person who is left is “Me” - the real Violet, the original Violet
not ridden by silly complexes. Felice asks her why she stabbed
Dorcas, and Violet replies that she did it because she “lost the
lady,...put her down someplace and forgot where” (211). When
Felice asks how she found her, Violet replies simply that she
“looked” (211). This conversation suggests that Violet has finally
understood herself, and is now able to answer questions she could
not before. She has sorted out her priorities, and is living according
to them. Her main purpose now is not to take revenge on a dead
girl or a grieving husband, but rather to strengthen her existing
relationships, and take up her life from where she had left off. She
feels confident because she knows that she only has to turn inward
to her self for sustenance and comfort.

Felice also helps Violet and Joe to come together by making
Joe see the other side of Dorcas. Her words portray the dead girl as
a scheming go-getter and two-timer who let herself die by refusing
medical assistance and help. She convinces Joe that Dorcas was
not worthy of the kind of selfless love he was willing to bestow on
her. Jones claims rightly that “Felice, who becomes a daughter, also sees the best of Joe and Violet.” This observation suggests that Felice replaces Dorcas in Joe’s and Violet’s life. She appreciates Violet for her simple honesty and straightforward nature rather than viewing her as a crazy, violent woman. She is largely responsible for the attempt that Joe and Violet make in trying to build back their marital relationship. Morrison describes their newfound closeness thus: “lying next to her, his head turned toward the window, he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing. Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts...to distribute to them all” (224-225). Jones comments that Joe’s and Violet’s “pasts are concretized and sanctified, brought into the present in the image and act of sleeping with the beloved, who is parent, lover, and child.” This observation indicates that Joe and Violet are able to bury the troublesome ghosts of their pasts because they discover in each other what they had been looking for all their lives: the absent parents, the dead lover, the daughter they never had. As husband

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11 Jones 490.

12 Jones 491.
and wife lie together, they find in each other's company the strength to face their painful memories, and make new, happier memories. The narrator concludes that "it's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers...and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond,...and...way down underneath tissue" (228). This comment implies that Violet and Joe have discovered a love that transcends physical attraction. They have become one emotionally and spiritually, and age and beauty no longer affect the way they feel about each other.

_Jazz_ demonstrates how one woman fights for her survival and succeeds, and what role other women play in enabling her to reassert herself and reaffirm her worth as an individual deserving love and respect. Since the black sisterhood plays such an important part in the novel, Morrison paints quick but detailed portraits of Alice, Felice and Dorcas - all three of whom contribute in one way or another toward the development of Violet's consciousness. The author also shows, however, that each woman's own sensibility too develops out of the repercussions of living in a racist society. Dorcas, for example, loses both her parents during the East St. Louis race riots when she is barely nine years old. Her father is pulled off a streetcar and kicked to death - just because he is black - an innocent victim of a gruesome crime inspired by racial hatred.
The same night, as she sleeps over at a friend's house just across the street, her own house is burned down by rioters. Her mother burns alive inside. The fire engine is called but does not come - since it is a black neighbourhood and therefore not considered worthy of emergency aid. After the death of her parents, she goes to live with her mother's sister Alice, who brings her up strictly, and coaches her in self-protection (against whites) and self-restraint (in the company of whites). Highlighting the form this training finally takes, Morrison writes that she "instructed her about deafness and blindness...in the company of whitewomen who spoke English, and those who did not...Taught her how to crawl along the walls of buildings, disappear into doorways, cut across corners in choked traffic - how to do anything, move anywhere to avoid a whiteboy over the age of eleven" (54-55). Since Alice has herself felt belittled and humiliated during her encounters with members of the majority culture, she does not want her niece to face the same disrespect and disgrace. These precautionary steps on her part paint a sorry picture about race relations in the United States. The legacy of hatred flourishes and is passed on from one generation to the next because each race feels justified in protecting its youth from the harm they think the other community will inflict on it. The feelings of resentment are so strong that members from two
communities do not even give each other a chance to exchange views and learn to respect one another. Alice does not even allow her niece to wear makeup, high-heeled shoes or clothes that highlight a woman's assets - for fear that these will attract the unwanted attention of white men who will compulsorily view her as a prostitute or loose woman. The author suggests that it is unfortunate that young black girls are forced to curb their natural growth, development and longing for fashionable things just because the male gaze will necessarily objectify them. Though Morrison herself is not in favour of clothes and cosmetics that girls buy in the hope of becoming beautiful and attractive, she feels that they should reach that understanding by themselves rather than having such abstentions forced on them. The results of these unnatural restrictions are disastrous because such girls grow up rebellious - wanting undue attention, and obsessively leaning toward the very things that have been forbidden them. None of her aunt's admonitions can, for example, curb Dorcas's natural "boldness" - a boldness that became part of her the night her father was killed, and her mother, her dolls, and her house burned down. It is this innate boldness, a result of white aggression on her black soul, that enables Dorcas to resist her aunt's stringency and dream

\[13\] Please refer to chapter 1 and chapter 3. Morrison depicts the futility of Pauline's and Hagar's attempts to recreate themselves in white propagated
“of that life-below-the-sash as all the life there was” (60). Dorcas feels incomplete unless she can define herself in terms of a physical relationship with men. It is this lust for male companionship and attention that leads her, during her adolescent years, to go after both Joe and Acton. Unfortunately for her, neither of these men can fill the “inside nothing” (38) that she had started out with. This “inside nothing” remains as such because she tries to fill it with material things like clothes, jewellery, makeup, and even sex - none of which are meaningful in the end because they decorate and gratify only her body whereas her soul and spirit (“inside”) remain starved. She emerges, ultimately, as a selfish girl who has no regard for anyone in her community. She is willing to have a relationship with a married man - even though she knows that doing so would harm another woman - and one from her own community at that. Her total disregard for her aunt, and her whole attitude in general stems from a skewed personality - a personality distorted by race prejudice and made worse by the emotional scars left over from the horrors of a childhood spent in the riot-torn city of East St. Louis.

Like Dorcas, Felice too has been shaped by unfortunate confrontations with an adverse white world, but she turns out to be
an entirely different kind of girl - perhaps because her experiences were not as traumatic as Dorcas's, and had more to do with loss of status than loss of life. The memory that stands out most clearly in her mind is, of course, of the disastrous visit to the prestigious, whites only, department store with her mother. She cherishes the silver opal ring not because of its value as a jewel, but because of what it signifies, and how much it meant for her mother to go against her principles and innate honesty to rebel against the injustice of prejudice by stealing it from the display tray. This episode demonstrates that race prejudice brings out the worst in both the aggressor and the victim of the aggression - making one callous and the other belligerent. In spite of this humiliating experience, Felice grows up mature and sensible - probably because she understands life and people in a way that Dorcas never did. Her sympathetic understanding of Joe and Violet brings her closer to them than Dorcas could ever have been. She cares about her own family too, and is willing to share the responsibility for work. Unlike Dorcas, who never assisted her aunt, Felice helps her grandmother and parents by doing little errands for them. She emerges, ultimately, as a strong woman who is "nobody's alibi or hammer or toy" (222). Morrison suggests that Felice has learned to be independent at a young age and, therefore, wants to develop
without societal pretensions (trying to be what she isn't) and pressures (being forced to behave in a certain way). She does not leave room for anybody to exploit her, and thus clears the way for herself to grow according to her own priorities and preferences.

Alice's story, like that of Felice, is also a story of strength and survival even though she has been a victim of severe racism and sexism. Morrison introduces her as a woman who has been "frightened for a long time" (54). She is frightened of "Illinois,...Springfield, Massachusetts,...Eleventh Avenue, Third Avenue, Park Avenue,...and Fifth Avenue" (54) because in these classy cities and elitist areas black women have no respect, and are treated like dirt. She recalls them as places where "whitemen leaned out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms...where salesmen touched her...as though she were part of the goods they had condescended to sell her" (54). She feels that the white male gaze objectifies her by viewing her as a thing to be possessed - or worse - as something that can be purchased with money. Even salesmen act as though they are doing her a favour by selling her the items she requires. This blatant sexism is also accompanied by racism - made obvious by the fact that nobody wants to associate with her merely because of the colour of her skin. The white women travelling on the bus, for example, do not allow
their children to sit near her: “don’t sit there honey, you never know what they have” (54). This simple admonition is not just a temporary warning. By preventing their children from sitting next to black women, these mothers are actually propagating a culture of hate, and distancing the gap between two cultures already caught up in the web of hostility and prejudice. Alice learns here that the malaise of racism has not even left foreign women untouched - that even “women who knew no English at all...moved away from her if she sat next to them on the trolley” (54). The foreigners (mostly European white women) coming to these places take their cue from the majority culture, and view African American women with distaste - automatically assuming that any contact with them will contaminate them both physically and otherwise. All these acts of literal distancing are symbolic of a conscious movement away from a sub-culture viewed as inferior and therefore unworthy of association. It is due to these early traumatic experiences that Alice grows up as a woman afraid of the streets and of men. She, however, possesses several nurturing qualities - qualities which come to the fore when her beloved niece is killed. She knows that Joe shot Dorcas, but does not complain to the police because she feels that he really repents his act. This generous gesture bears testimony to her forgiving nature, and highlights the concern she
feels for members of her community. Even more creditable is the fact that she not only allows Violet to visit her house, but also restores her lost sense of self. In teaching Violet, however, Alice herself learns a few lessons too. By letting Violet into her house, and gradually building up a relationship with her, she learns to banish her fear of the street. By hearing Violet talk, and listening to her own words, she also forgives her husband and his mistress, and rises above her distrust of men. She even leaves New York and moves back to Springfield after overcoming all the fears it had hitherto held for her. Morrison concludes that the few things which Alice now requires for her contentment include “the cheerful company...of someone who can provide the necessary things for the night” (222). This statement indicates the enormity of the change that has come about in Alice’s life. She has risen above the bitter experiences of youth and middle-age, and has learned to accept men - acknowledging at the same time that all of them are not alike and cannot therefore be stereotyped. Back in the city of her origins, she plans to live out the last years of her life in peace, contentment, and a sense of security born out of a renewed confidence in her self.

Of the four women portrayed in the novel, only Dorcas does not live to redeem herself. She is the only character who does not see or acknowledge her flaws, and who shows no desire to improve
the circumstances of her life - save by pursuing men who are all wrong for her. Violet, Felice and Alice, on the other hand, emerge the stronger for their experiences and trauma. They learn lasting lessons about life and love from each other and from themselves. Much before she wrote *Jazz*, Morrison commented in an interview that "classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. *Jazz* always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord....And it agitates you....There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that - because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more - that you can't have it all right now."14 *Jazz* conveys this impression of yearning and longing perfectly. Though there is a sense of satisfaction that Violet, Felice and Alice have found a certain completeness, confidence and wholeness, there is also an awareness that this is just the tentative beginning of things - that there is more to be desired and had. In the final analysis, nevertheless, *Jazz* emerges as a novel of optimism and survival. Violet becomes a contemporary tragic heroine representing the modern African American woman who fights hard to live a decent life, to make both ends meet, and to hold on to what she has. During the course of these events, her courage fails sometimes, but

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the beauty of her story is her determination to recover lost hope through an in-depth knowledge and deeper understanding of her weakness and, by overcoming them, join the fragmented pieces of her life back together again. She has the resilience that her mother lacked, and is therefore able to emerge victorious in the face of trying circumstances. Morrison makes a strong statement of hope in *Jazz*, and demonstrates that black survival in a white world depends largely on the support that African American women are able to extend to each other. Though Violet's concerns (for a happy home and loving husband) may seem limited and narrow to the casual reader, the author suggests that they are most significant because the entire image of the self depends on their acquisition. For a woman to feel truly and completely victorious, however, she must recognise her inner strengths and fight for her rights. What is important ultimately, is not whether she is able to regain a lost love or resettle her desolate house, but rather to understand that she is worthy of love, affection and respect - regardless of whether a particular person or a group of people gives it to her or not. The same understanding must come not only to all African American women but also to repressed classes, minorities and marginal groups the world over so that they are better able to fight and survive the race prejudice and gender oppression that have haunted them throughout history.