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Gatsby and Jazz: One Coin, Two Sides

By Sally van der Graaff

Major: English

Without the use of resources from Booth Library, I would never have been able to write this paper. Not only did they help me support my key arguments, they also helped me formulate – and repeatedly reformulate – the ideas that would later emerge as arguments.

I must admit that, given the task of writing a long research paper, I was a reluctant participant in the process. However, once I got started on the research, I was caught up in the ideas and their implications. Unfortunately, I had less time to devote to this project than I would have liked; but now I have been able to pursue some additional ideas and clarify them, again with the indispensable aid of Booth Library materials.

I am also indebted to the University of Illinois library for its online collection of journals, which also played an important role in the writing of this paper.

Sally van der Graaff

ENG 5000

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“*Gatsby* and *JAZZ*: One Coin, Two Sides”

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Toni Morrison’s *JAZZ* both tell the story of the American 1920s, but from opposite points of view. Fitzgerald and Morrison offer two compelling narratives of the societal shift that took place in post-World War I-era America, but although the accounts share the same general topic and historical era, it is otherwise difficult to reconcile the two American portraits that have been painted. It is as though the two authors are giving a description of the same coin, but one describes the front and the other describes the back. To the white population this decade was the Jazz Age, a time of disillusioned self-indulgence. But to the black community it was the Harlem Renaissance, a time of discovery and of the rebirth of the African-American identity.

Fitzgerald, heralded as the originator of the name “Jazz Age”, set his upper-class white characters against a backdrop of jazz music; however, his failure to acknowledge the Africanist origins of jazz has given him the appearance of just another opportunistic white man exploiting African-Americans. In his introduction to *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many*, Mark Helbling notes: “In the writings of the Lost Generation [F. Scott Fitzgerald and a few other post-World War I American expatriate writers], the Negro was depicted as a primitive. This was the image, for better or worse, that was thrust upon the writers of the Harlem

Renaissance.” Writing several decades later, Morrison has set her characters in the African-American environment that Fitzgerald ignored, the 1920s jazz capital of the world. From the vantage point of Harlem, New York, she uses the main characters of *JAZZ* to rebuke Fitzgerald and his white-centric portrayal as she reminds readers of the contributions of a disadvantaged group of people.

Morrison, whose interest in “literary whiteness” prompted her to write *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, offers much justifiable criticism regarding the way that African-Americans have been either ignored or exploited in white literature. Although she does not specifically discuss *Gatsby* in this book, she makes her feelings on literary whiteness clear enough that we may confidently apply them to other works. In *Playing in the Dark* she explains that African-Americans, when they are not ignored altogether in white literature, are used as props for the purpose of comparison: “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52, 53).

Nicolas Pici further clarifies Morrison’s sentiments and literary goals in his article “Trading Meanings: The Breath of Music in Toni Morrison’s *JAZZ*”: “There’s need now, suggest Morrison, to make fiction do what the music used to do, tell the whole wide world the ongoing story of her people.”

The story of her people, as outlined in *Playing in the Dark*, is one of abuse, misuse, and neglect, and it is these that she exposes through her fiction. In the case of *JAZZ*, she set out to reclaim the Harlem Renaissance that Fitzgerald appropriated when he renamed it the Jazz Age. In “what Was the Harlem Renaissance”, edited by Robert J. Allison, we read: “What exactly was the Harlem Renaissance? Was it a time when the Negro was in vogue, and did it represent a change in attitudes toward and among African Americans? Or was the flowering of the Jazz Age a cynical exploitation of black culture, as white musicians and writers, such as George Gershwin and Al Jolson, appropriated black culture to entertain white audiences?” Allison goes on to describe the situation in more depth:

Another important issue is the bizarre culture of white voyeurism that exploited, and yet promoted, performers of the Harlem Renaissance. Not only did whites flock to Harlem to see black performers in clubs, such as the Cotton Club, where black patrons were not permitted to visit, or to shabby speakeasies, such as the Clam Bake and the Hot Feet, but the international art world also had an intense interest in what was termed “primitive” cultures. With bootlegged liquor, titillating blues lyrics, sultry music, and long-legged beauties, the uptown white audiences relished in what was forbidden in or alien to their world. They dabbled in what they saw as erotic and primal, then went back to the comfort of their homes.

Though Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* characters were not among the voyeuristic whites who went “clubbing” in Harlem, if they had gone to the Cotton Club they would see a thoroughly racist representation of the Old South in terms of the décor and motifs, not to mention hearing the African-inspired “jungle” music of Duke Ellington (*When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 209 - 210). As it was, oddly enough, they visited Manhattan

without visiting Harlem — a Manhattan neighborhood — to take in a jazz performance. Thus, inexplicably, the sole Africanist presence in *Gatsby* consists of two brief scenes in Chapters Four and Seven. In Chapter Four, Nick relates:

As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. "Anything can happen how that we've slid over this bridge," I thought; "anything at all. . . ."

The spectacle of black men riding in a limousine driven by a white man, far from being a positive one, was presented by Fitzgerald as ridiculous and laughable, not to mention unbelievable. In a condescending tone, the men are referred to as "bucks", and they are ridiculed in the description of their eyes as "yolks" that roll in stereotypical fashion. The only thing missing is the black men bowing and saying, "Yes, massah." Then in Chapter Seven, a "pale, well-dressed negro" is the sole witness to the accident that has claimed Myrtle's life. Apparently this is Fitzgerald's idea of including blacks in his New York City-based story.

To add insult to injury, Fitzgerald includes a clear reference to jazz music in Chapter Three of *Gatsby*, but without the slightest hint of the African origins of this genre. At one of Jay Gatsby's lavish parties, the orchestra conductor announces that they will play a special selection:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried. "At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff's latest work, which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers, you know there was a big sensation." He smiled with jovial condescension, and added: "Some sensation!" Whereupon everybody laughed.

“The piece is known,” he concluded lustily, “as Vladimir Tostoff’s JAZZ HISTORY OF THE WORLD.”

The name “Jazz History of the World” is repeated once more on the same page, but again linked with Vladimir Tostoff’s name as if it were a European genre and not an African one. Interestingly, Fitzgerald later wrote in his article “Echoes of the Jazz Age” his sentiments concerning the way that, in his view, the Jazz Age had passed from the hands of the youth into those of the older generation, a situation he compared to “a children’s party taken over by the elders, leaving the children puzzled and rather neglected and rather taken aback” (from Cowley’s *Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age*, 179). Again, no reference is made to jazz music – the foundation of the Jazz Age – and certainly not to the originators of jazz.

To this kind of Africanist presence (or absence), a writer like Toni Morrison must respond; so she did. Thinking about jazz music and the call-and-response musical technique that it popularized, in which the melody is played by one musician and echoed or responded to by one or more other musicians (Pici, 4), we may posit that *Gatsby* was the call and JAZZ was the response. Not only does this fit the pervasive use of jazz techniques that Morrison has employed in the writing of this book, it also makes sense culturally, as call-and-response is a cultural phenomenon that originated in Africa and was brought to North America by African slaves (Snead, *On Repetition in Black Culture*, p. 150 of *Black American Literature Forum*, v. 15, no. 4). Therefore, in addition to laying rightful claim to the incredible success of jazz

music, Morrison is shining a spotlight on African heritage. And, cleverly calling her account *JAZZ* (using all capital letters and an italicized typeface for emphasis, as well as in possible response to Fitzgerald's use of all capital letters in "Vladimir Tostoff's JAZZ HISTORY OF THE WORLD") to ensure that readers would not miss the point on *this* trip to New York City, she continues the chronicle of blacks in America by describing their new urban reality after the Great Migration from the rural South.

In addition to these writing goals, Morrison is making a statement about Fitzgerald and the way that African-Americans were treated in *Gatsby*, as well as a broader point about the way that blacks have been continually marginalized in our society. Not only is she using call-and-response as a musical technique, she is taking it a step further and *signifying*, or writing a parody of *Gatsby*. In his book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates explains signifying, which is the rhetorical form of call-and-response. It is based upon a writer, for the purpose of parody, either repeating another writer's structure verbatim or "[repeating] a form and then inverting it through a process of variation", which, Gates notes, is "central to jazz" (Gates 103, 104). What Morrison has done, then is this: She has taken the two main characters of *Gatsby* and created two characters for *JAZZ* that are parallel in some ways but opposite in others. In the clues that she left for her readers, it is clear that she hoped the parody would be understood and a deeper meaning gleaned from it.

On the surface, Morrison's Joe and Violet Trace are just an older black couple living in Harlem, New York. It is their tragic story that is told in *JAZZ*, and it is they

who carry most of the plot through its circuitous route from introduction to conclusion. But a closer examination reveals that Toni Morrison has also used these characters to convey deeper meanings that are disclosed only when Joe and Violet are compared to Tom and Daisy, the main characters of *Gatsby*.

In fact, since these two fictional couples are more different than they are alike, Morrison's intention is not immediately apparent. However, true to form, she has left several clues that impel the alert reader to consider the couples in juxtaposition. The first is the fact that both Daisy and Violet have flower names; the second is that the name of one of the other jazz characters, Golden Gray, appears to make reference to Gilda Gray, a performer who is only mentioned in *Gatsby* but whose first name, coincidentally, means "golden." In addition, both Gilda Gray and her namesake have curly, golden hair.

Since the most obvious clue — the flower names "Daisy" and "Violet" — concerns the female characters, we will examine them first. Daisy is a young, attractive socialite who lives the privileged life of the idle rich in a beautiful Long Island mansion; nevertheless, she experiences considerable pain as a result of her husband's barely concealed extramarital affair. Delicate and pale as the daisy for which she is named, she is also cultured but vacuous, as her inane utterances reveal. Although she is the proud mother of a three-year-old daughter, her priorities lie not in motherhood but in self-gratifying social interaction.

By contrast, Violet is an older woman who could be considered beautiful except for the fact that she is also too thin. Far from being a socialite, she is not even really social; considered odd by her peers, she is ostracized from the Harlem community in which she lives her decidedly unprivileged life. In stark contrast to Daisy's idle boredom, Violet longs for a few moments of rest; but faced with the necessity of making rent payments on her shabby apartment, she labors daily at her job as an unlicensed beautician. Neither delicate nor pale (most violets, particularly African violets, are "colored"), she bears the nickname "Violent" for a violent act that she has committed, and she is in fact darker than the average African woman. Violet is not a woman of culture, but she does have one positive attribute that Daisy does not: a depth of character that is belied by her lack of cultured speech. Like Daisy, Violet is hurt by the fact that her husband is having an affair; but unlike her, she longs for the state of motherhood that will never be hers.

The characters of Tom and Joe also invite comparison. First their names: Tom and Joe were both extremely common names in the 1920s, according to the Social Security Administration, and the fact that each name contains three letters and one syllable further emphasizes their similarity. Regarding appearance, Tom is a comparatively young, handsome white man, though his formerly slender athletic build has thickened somewhat with approaching middle age. Of impeccable pedigree, he comes from a background of "old money" and has consistently experienced a life of privilege, which may be the reason that he has developed into an arrogant man. Accordingly, he has made as many enemies as friends, but that does not hinder his

high self-esteem. Though he is a graduate of an Ivy League school and his extreme wealth permits him to be a man of leisure, he is anything but a gentleman. Tom is a manipulative bully who philanders openly without regard for the feelings of his wife, though he is hypocritically incensed when she has an affair with her old flame (Gatsby). The fact that his choice of lover (Myrtle, whom he meets on a train) is so haphazard and quite beneath his social position further demonstrates that material wealth does not make one a person of quality.

Joe, on the other hand, is older, though still attractive. His family background is the opposite of Tom's: Adopted at a young age, he is devastated when he is told that his mother left him and disappeared "without a trace"; this revelation so impacted him that he chose "Trace" for his last name. Joe is a hardworking man who labors as a waiter and a cosmetics salesman, both humble jobs befitting his lack of pedigree and low level of education. However, he is well liked within his community, particularly by the women, because he is a gentleman who goes out of his way to do kind things for others. In spite of his reputation as a decent man, though, he is far from perfect. Unable to bear his wife's mental breakdown, he pursues a secret affair with a teenaged girl; then, unable to bear the rejection of his young lover, he murders her in a very public way.

The characters of Myrtle (Tom's lover) and Dorcas (Joe's lover) also are inversely parallel. Myrtle is older, married, a little overweight, and pretentious

concerning wealth that she does not possess, while Dorcas is young, single, thin, and pretentious concerning allure that she does not have.

The reader who realizes that Morrison's characters are intended as a parody of Fitzgerald's will benefit by examining them in greater depth to see who is shallow (Tom and Daisy) and who is not (Joe and Violet); who is truly loyal (Joe and Violet) and who is not (Tom and Daisy); and which society is the better one – the upper-crust white one, or the economically disadvantaged black one. Which one was making the cultural contributions, and which was only taking the contributions of another?

Also inviting comparison are the themes of *Gatsby* and *JAZZ*. While the American Dream and the hollowness of the upper-class life are major themes in *Gatsby*, they are minor themes in *JAZZ*. Conversely, violence, motherhood, and race are major themes in *JAZZ* but minor themes in *Gatsby*. Morrison, always clever in her use of literary conventions, has most likely used this comparison as both a means of providing another clue and another way of using music theory (major and minor keys) – jazz musical theory in particular (call-and-response that shifted echoing passages from major to minor keys) in her writing. In addition, combining the two books provides a new theme, that of cultural contribution versus cultural theft.

This cultural theme continues in the juxtaposition of the books' two settings. It is entirely possible that Toni Morrison, considering Tom and Daisy's magnificent mansion with its stately white pillars and verdant, wide-swept lawns, was inspired to supply a background of "darkies laboring in the fields" reminiscent of the plantation

backdrop on the stage of the Cotton Club. In a very real sense, Morrison has allowed Fitzgerald to supply the foreground – the white-centric version of history – and taken it upon herself to paint in the background – the rest of the story. This description, offered by historians Ken Burns and Geoffrey Ward, is illuminating:

“Nostalgia for the antebellum South set the Cotton Club’s bizarre theme – the big stage was designed to resemble the veranda of a plantation house, complete with tall white columns and a painted backdrop of slave cabins and live oak trees draped with moss. The main attraction was a lavish floorshow in the Florenz Ziegfeld tradition that featured songs, dances, and lots of light-skinned, lightly clad chorus girls billed as “Tall, Tan and Terrific.” Black patrons were generally barred, but black entertainers were presented as good-looking and glamorous. And the music and choreography, costumes and stage rivaled the best of Broadway. The tremendous ironies inherent in Cotton Club shows provided Duke Ellington with ample opportunities to grow as a composer, as he aimed both directly at and over the heads of the club’s clientele.” (*Jazz: A History of America’s Music*, p. 147.)

Looked at in this way, Tom and Daisy become the plantation owners and Joe and Violet their slaves. By extension, then, Tom and Daisy’s society now represents the whole of white slaveholder society, and Joe and Violet’s society represents the entire oppressed Africanist people group.

Morrison has used Fitzgerald’s characters and their home for the purposes of comparison in the same way that white authors have often used Africanist characters (*Playing in the Dark* 52, 53), with a particularly unflattering result. Placed side by side, Tom and Daisy and their home, considered by many to be vastly superior to Joe and Violet and their home, are ultimately found to be inferior. This is not an insignificant comparison. In fact, it appears to be the main purpose of Morrison’s book, as well as a beginning point for serious reflection, which will in turn present

valuable lessons to those who want them – to those who, with a view toward racial reconciliation, are willing to look at both sides of the coin.

Annotated Bibliography

Allison, Robert J., ed. "What was the Harlem Renaissance?" *History in Dispute*, vol. 3. Detroit: St. James Press, 2000. This journal article was written from the viewpoint that the Harlem Renaissance was not only a cultural expression of African-American life, but also a political and social movement and a cultural and intellectual expression of African-American life. Dr. Allison, a graduate of Harvard University, is chairman of the history department of Suffolk University in Boston, MA, and publishes prodigiously in his field. This article was tremendously helpful in the process of writing the paper, as it explained the Harlem Renaissance succinctly and in a way that was sympathetic to the Africanist point of view.

Burns, Ken, and Geoffrey C. Ward. *Jazz: A History of America's Music*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 2000. Central to my understanding of the Jazz Age - Harlem Renaissance dichotomy, this fascinating description of the Cotton Club was also the key to my understanding of Morrison's writing of *JAZZ*.

Cowley, Malcolm, and Robert Cowley. *Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966. This book provided a good background of the 1920s, especially as they related to F. Scott Fitzgerald. As it included Fitzgerald's own work ("Echoes of the Jazz Age"), a retrospective of the era, it was essential to the accurate development of my own paper with regard to Fitzgerald's apparent attitudes.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. This book provided a thoroughly scholarly, but also interesting overview of the Africanist custom of signifying. It was essential to my understanding of signifying relative to parody, and thus to my insight into what I take to be Morrison's aim in writing *JAZZ*.

Helbling, Mark. *The Harlem Renaissance: The One and the Many*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999. This book provided more essential background toward my understanding of the Harlem Renaissance.

Lewis, David L. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Random House, 1981. This particular book was indispensable in the formation of my thoughts concerning the historical context of both *JAZZ* and *The Great Gatsby*.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Random House, 1992. Reading Morrison's own writings on the subject of literary whiteness was essential to my understanding of the issues and to her motivation in writing *JAZZ*.

Pici, Nicholas F. "Trading Meanings: The Breath of Music in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *Connotations* 7.3 (1997-98): 372-398. This book provided a rare insight into Morrison's methods and motivations, pertinent to the subject of this paper.

Snead, James A. "On Repetition in Black Culture." *Black American Literature*

Forum, vol. 1:Theory (Winter 1981): 146-154. Without this book, I would not have had the depth of understanding of repetition, signifying, and call-and-response that I needed for the writing of my paper.