



Research Paper

Harmony and Dissonance: Exploring Rural vs. City Life in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's novel "Jazz," published in 1992, explores the contrasting experiences of rural and urban life for African Americans. The novel delves into the complex relationship between African Americans and the natural world, which was fractured due to the horrors of slavery. Over time, African Americans began to see the city not as something to fear but as a promised land. This shift raised several challenging questions: Could African Americans ever reconnect with the nature they lost? Was nature still a source of healing for their lives? Could the city and nature coexist in the lives of African Americans? Did they still yearn to return to the wilderness they had escaped from? Was the city entirely incapable of providing healing and fulfillment for African Americans? These questions have remained largely unanswered in the existing body of critical work on Toni Morrison's novel. Therefore, this study aims to provide answers to these ecocritical questions that persist when examining the novel.

Keywords: Morrison, City life, Nature, Culture, Urbanity.

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The intricate relationship between nature and culture is a multifaceted one, marked by numerous layers. In post-slavery America, these two realms were often perceived as mutually exclusive, with culture emerging only after nature's depletion. They appeared to be irreconcilable spaces. Cartin Gersdorf's work, "Nature in the Grid: American Culture Urbanism and Ecocriticism," offers a perspective on colonial Savannah, illustrating how it viewed nature and the urban grid as fundamentally opposing forces (Gersdorf et al., 2010). This perspective extends to the contemporary environmental landscape, where the distinction between wilderness and civilization remains evident. Cities are often seen as agents that compromise the integrity of nature.

The emergence of the new urbanism movement represented a departure from the earlier concept of urbanity. While the previous notion of urbanity emphasized the separation of the city from the countryside, the new urbanism movement stressed the need for interaction between these twin concepts of nature and culture, rejecting their isolation. This novel perspective on urbanism gradually influenced various other spheres, including literary discourse. The city underwent a reevaluation from an environmental perspective. This fresh approach to urbanity and the city became a prominent aspect of ecocriticism, evolving in tandem with the changing perception of the city. Michael Bennet and David W. Teague's book, "The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments," played a pioneering role in altering people's attitudes toward this new urban concept (Bennet and Teague, 1999).

To protect the environment, the prevailing inclination in America was to promote nature writing, with the belief that such literature would transform people's perceptions of nature. However, this form of writing did not foster a genuine love for nature; instead, it often portrayed the city as a malevolent force. As Andrew Rose pointed out, "The literature of conservation – almost wholly devoted to nature worship...is persistent in its demonization of the city" (Rose, 1999). The city was depicted as a workshop of devilry, consuming and destroying everything that nature had to offer for its survival. This myth was shattered, giving rise to a pressing need to redefine the relationship between nature and culture. This necessity for a renewed connection between the two extended its influence into various literary discourses and philosophical realms.

The novel "Jazz" emerged as a pivotal text that introduced a fresh perspective on the spatial relationship between nature and culture. According to numerous critics, the grid system forming the foundation of a city played a positive role. It was designed to provide protection against the adverse impacts of nature and enhance the well-being of city inhabitants. In contrast, prevalent biases against the city persisted among the masses, stemming from its perceived detrimental effects on nature. However, as society advanced, writers began

to challenge the anti-urban sentiments prevalent among earlier writers and environmentalists. Interestingly, while white Americans often harboured anti-urban sentiments and depicted the city in a negative light, African Americans, who had endured slavery in rural plantations amidst nature's challenges, viewed the city as a promised land offering economic opportunities and liberation from the horrors of plantation life in the wilderness. While white writers celebrated the wilderness and advocated for a return to pastoral living, emerging black authors like Morrison and Paul Auster argued that embracing the city was essential for regaining self-identity and breaking free from the traumatic past linked to nature.

Postmodern novelists subsequently shifted their attitude toward the city. While they acknowledged the city's negative impact on individuals, they no longer viewed a return to nature as the solution to this pressing issue. Writers like William Dean Howells and Frank Norris introduced a new dimension to the discourse, emphasizing the distinction between urban exteriority and interiority and between protected and unprotected city spaces. Importantly, this new concept of the city acknowledged the intersection of nature within the urban environment. This interaction between nature and the city on the same platform served as a catalyst and had a transformative effect on literary discourse, prompting the depiction of the evolving relationship between nature and the city. Morrison's "Jazz" was one such novel that illustrated this newly constructed relationship between the city and nature.

The novel "Jazz" focused on New York City in the 1990s, a place of great attraction for African-American slaves who had endured harsh conditions in the South. To these slaves, the North, especially New York City, symbolized freedom and a solution to the suffering and exploitation they experienced in slavery. During the Great Migration, they migrated to this dreamland in search of happiness. Cecil S. Giscombe noted that "Jazz" can be seen as an improvisation on the theme of "the melodious southern wild coming into the city" (Giscombe, 1994).

As the story unfolds, we are introduced to the characters Joe Trace and Violet Trace, who became part of the Great Migration of the 1920s, moving from their original home in Virginia to New York City. Joe and Violet joined the ranks of thousands of African-American migrants who transitioned from rural areas to urban centres between 1830 and 1930. Their decision to move to the city was driven by high expectations. For them, city life represented a dream world that promised an end to their miseries. The migration was not only an attempt to escape the legacy of slavery but also to improve their economic prospects, thereby enhancing their quality of life. In their minds, the city held the allure of a promised land, even before they physically arrived there. Remarkably, for the characters in "Jazz," the city was not a place of hatred or alienation. To these African Americans, predominantly from the South, the city brought positivity and warmth. Their past in the South was marked by torment and exploitation, making the city a source of relief from their previous miserable lives. Consequently, the city did not evoke feelings of alienation; rather, it was a place where they left behind the spectre of their painful past. However, it's important to note that the North was not devoid of problems. Violent attacks on Southern blacks dampened their spirits, but the city's promise of economic opportunities that were unavailable in the South continued to attract them. The city became a place where the aspirations of the dispossessed could find expression, even though it also posed continuous threats of violence, rendering both past and present unsafe territories for the characters in "Jazz."

In fact, after the abolition of slavery, African Americans faced a different form of oppression. While they were no longer forced to work on plantations, they still had to find work to survive. The system of sharecropping and subpar living conditions in shacks replaced slavery. However, in this new system, African Americans were often not fairly compensated for their labour. Sharecroppers, many of whom were illiterate, were deceived by landowners who reaped the benefits of their hard work. Despite their strenuous efforts throughout the day, sharecroppers often received little to no pay at the end of the year, while the shacks they lived in offered minimal protection from the elements. Given these circumstances, when opportunities for employment in the North arose, African Americans eagerly embraced them because they offered the promise of improving their lives, which had long been steeped in misery. The lynching of blacks was another painful issue faced in the South, as white residents resented losing their former slaves and used terrorist attacks to intimidate and threaten African Americans. Lynching and hangings served as harsh reminders that true freedom remained elusive. The South became a place of suffering, while the North appeared as a land of promises. Harlem, in particular, became the epicentre of African-American culture, where blacks believed they could regain their dignity and liberty. The hope of the "new Negro" found expression in the prospects of this new city, encapsulated in lines like, "I'm strong... and indestructible" (Paquet and Anne, 2001).

Upon arriving in this unknown land, African Americans fell in love with the city, full of hope and aspirations. Despite small houses and unattractive jobs offering meagre salaries, the city was a place they cherished. Over time, this temporary affection transformed into enduring love. However, this deep-seated love and admiration for the city brought disillusionment to African Americans. As the characters in "Jazz" grew alongside the expanding city, their affection for it became superficial. In the process, they stopped loving

themselves and each other, leading to a detachment from their own identities. This transition, brought about by the city, proved detrimental to their well-being. The Northern City presented its complexities and challenges, and the dominant love for the city was understood only in the context of its harsh realities. Furthermore, African Americans found themselves trapped in a situation where they couldn't easily relinquish the city. As a result, they began to trace their past to reconnect with their roots, hoping that by associating with those memories, they could create a habitable environment within the city. Notably, African Americans viewed nature and culture as intersecting facets of their lives, aligning with the concept of new urbanism, which emphasizes the overlap of city and countryside. The absence of either component created a void in the lives of African Americans, a void experienced by characters like Joe and Violet Trace.

Joe and Violet belonged to the third generation of slaves and had heard about the horrors of slavery from their ancestors. Their generation had witnessed the suffering and lynching of black slaves, coupled with economic exploitation by white landowners. These factors led them on a journey to the city. Despite discrimination during their journey, where white passengers were treated with respect while black passengers were overlooked, Southern slaves were happy to embark on this journey to their dreamland.

However, disillusionment with the city became evident in their later lives. Despite their initial enthusiasm, the monotonous routines of city life led to a disconnection from nature, which Joe, in particular, seemed to forget entirely. Trapped in the busy urban life, Joe grappled with conflicting feelings about the city's impact on him. He was unable to determine whether the city was ultimately beneficial or detrimental, expressing his dilemma with the words, "There is no air in the city, but there is breath" ((Paquet and Anne, 2001).

Once again, we can observe how the love for the city and the love for nature were perceived as antagonistic forces that could not coexist harmoniously. They were seen as mutually exclusive, with no common ground for them to intersect. This stark division between the two realms of nature and urban culture created a sense of alienation for characters like Joe. Joe, a woodsman and a nature enthusiast, found it exceptionally challenging to assimilate into the city's culture. Despite his earnest efforts, he couldn't suppress his longing for and attraction to nature. For Joe, the city's culture and his deep-rooted connection to nature conflicted. If these two forces, nature and urban culture, could have coexisted harmoniously, Joe might not have experienced this profound sense of alienation. This is the key point that Toni Morrison aims to convey through the character of Joe. According to Morrison, instead of segregating these twin concepts of nature and culture, she uses her character Felice to advocate for their association. In her perspective, the union of nature and culture in the urban environment is the genuine solution that can bring happiness to the lives of African Americans. Morrison's voice, channelled through her character, questions, "How many trees can you look at?" (Paquet and Anne, 2001), suggesting that a balance between nature and culture is essential for a fulfilling life.

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