

An Analysis of *Jazz* from the Perspective of Intertextuality

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Abstract: *Jazz* (1992) is the sixth novel written by Toni Morrison, who is a contemporary African-American female writer and Nobel laureate in literature. This novel takes Harlem, New York, the “Jazz” age as the background, focuses on the murder of the black female middle school student Dorcas as the main focus, and traces the rough experience of Joe and Violet, a black couple in the south, who come to the northern city for seeking a living, get lost and finally find themselves back in the noisy city life. Influenced by the black family culture and on the basis of the intertextual writing, almost all of Morrison’s works revolve around black individuals, between individuals and groups, black culture and black history, etc., spreading the source of the national cultural classics of the black and their beliefs, in which Morrison makes artistic innovation in her deconstruction and effectively deepen their themes. They show the writer’s deep concern for the fate of the black community and the process of constantly exploring a way out for them. There are two main characteristics of intertextuality: one is the intertextuality at the level of discourse, which is mainly a reference to the theme and discourse; the other one is the intertextuality at the cultural level. Morrison fully satisfies the above two characteristics in the creation of *Jazz*, which shows as a typical intertextual writing. In *Jazz*, the whole novel is intertextualized internally and externally, not only showing the reader its intertextual writing within the text itself; Outside of the text, in terms of theme and discourse, the text is also intertextual with other different works, all of which convey the concern and exploration for the future destiny of the African-American community.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *Jazz*; Intertextuality

1. Introduction

Due to the limited space, this paper mainly analyzes the intertextual writings between *Jazz* and other external texts, taking the intertexts between *Jazz* and Morrison’s other two works: *Beloved*(1987)and *The Bluest Eye* (1967) as examples, in an attempt to provide a new perspective for the interpretation of Morrison’s other works.

2. Introduction to the definition of Intertextuality

The concept of Intertextuality was first put forward by Julia Kristeva, a French semiotician and critic. In her book *Semiotics*(1969), she wrote that “the text of any work is constituted like the Mosaic of many texts, and any text is the absorption and transformation of other text.”^[1] And Roland Barthes, the master of French postmodern language, believes that there is no text exists independently. The texts “mirror, absorb and transform each other, they form an interdependent and interconnected open network.”^[2] Therefore, intertextuality has become a defining term of postmodern criticism. While in postmodern writing, the author breaks the closure and emphasizes the openness and intertextuality between texts. The author has other texts that can be recognized by readers to varying degrees, which requires readers to give up the traditional way of criticism, turn to the cross-text culture research in the post-modern context, enter a new critical context, and have a free dialogue with all kinds of texts.

The theory of intertextuality can be interpreted as “the reference of one text to another text. There are various ways of this kind of reference: parody, artistic imitation, attachment, allusion, direct reference, parallel structure, etc.” Some theorists believe that intertextuality is the foundation of literature, that “all texts are woven from the material of other texts, whether the author is aware of it or not.”^[3] This text theory has greatly expanded the field of vision of literary research. As an outstanding African-American female writer, Morrison picks the materials of her stories from the treasure of African-American art, which is rooted in African culture. Her novels can be seen as a model of

intertextual writing. In order to better understand the deep connotation of her works and explore their artistry, it is necessary and important to read her works from the perspective of intertextuality.

3. The intertextual writing between *Jazz* and *Beloved*

First of all, both *Jazz* and *Beloved* are written based on true stories, and they are both intertextual with their previous texts. The plotting of *Jazz* is inspired by an actual historical event. In 1978, Morrison was invited to write the foreword to a photo book, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978), which included a picture of an 18-year-old black girl lying in a coffin in her makeup, accompanied by a text explained that “the girl had been killed with a silent pistol by her lover, but at the scene of shooting, the girl didn’t want to reveal the name of her lover, who was actually the prisoner. She saved enough time for him to escape from the scene.”^[4] And the story of *Beloved* is also written based on real historical events. It originates from a report in the *The Black Book*, “a collection of three hundred years of African American struggles for equality” and freedom^[5] which Morrison was responsible for at that time. In this book, there is a slave woman named Margaret Garner fled Kentucky with her children to Cincinnati, Ohio to escape from the sufferings as a slave. But her slave owners came to her house and arrested her. The mother, seeing her hopes of freedom shattered, killed one of her young daughter and then still tried to kill the other children before committing suicide. This historical event of *Beloved* has caused a great stir at that time and then many writers have reproduced it in their works.

Before talking about the intertextual writing between *Jazz* and *Beloved*, it is noticeable here that both the two novels have formed the intertextuality between the body text and the subtext within the text. “The participation of the subtext is considered to be an important characteristic of intertextuality in *Jazz* and *Beloved*. Subtext includes title, subtitle, foreword, notice to readers, illustrations and other subtext participation,”^[6] from which the readers can better understand the central intention of the text and the writer’s purpose of writing. Morrison is very good at making use of the intertextuality between the subtext and the body text, for the purpose of making readers can understand her creation background, creation source and creation intention, and deepening readers’ understanding of the texts of her novels. In the foreword of *Jazz* and *Beloved*, she explained the background of the text’s creation as well as the source, process and intention of her creation. She then intentionally made the subtext appear in the form of the prologue in *Jazz* and formed a strong internal intertext between the subtext and the body text.

From the above analysis, we can see that the internal texts exist in the two books. Now, we come back to explore the intertextuality between the creation of *Jazz* and *Beloved*. *Jazz* is set in Harlem in 1926 during the post-World War I. As we mentioned before, this work is also fictionalized on the basis of historical data. In the foreword, the author explains the source and motivation of her creation. She said that after seeing the picture of this pretty girl lying in a coffin and reading the photographer’s memories of the causes and consequences of her death. Since then, she “had decided on the period, the narrative line, and the place long ago.”^[7] The plot framework of the novel is based on these materials in the foreword to “The Harlem Book of the Dead”, it describes the hero Joe who was over 50 years old met and fell in love with an 18 years old girl, Dorcas, since being betrayed by Dorcas, Joe shot and killed her with a silent pistol. After the drama of Dorcas’ funeral, Joe’s wife Violet visited in person to try to understand Dorcas and find out why her husband cheated on her. In the end, Violet changed her attitude to Dorcas, reconciled with Joe, turned her hatred into love. In the foreword of *Jazz*, it also describes the process of Morrison’s creation of the work, and it took her “three years” to get the characters to form. In order to present 1926 America as it was, Morrison read “almost every ‘colored’ newspaper article, column, and advertisement from 1926.”^[8] In addition to that, Morrison’s family background and living environment also provide a rich cultural accumulation for her creation. In this way, after many preparations, Morrison finally completed her only full-length work named after music, *Jazz*. Besides what we mentioned before, Morrison also clarifies her intention at the end of the foreword, she takes love as its theme, and the music jazz is ubiquitous throughout the whole book.

As for the foreword of *Beloved*, Morrison wrote “Sixty million and more,”^[9] this is the number of blacks lost to slavery. *Beloved* is one of them, who doesn’t have a name, just *Beloved*. Morrison is good at using the way of telling stories to let some gradually forgotten history surface again, so as to dig out the deep trauma of human heart and dig out the trauma of a nation’s history. From the two books, we can see that the sorrow and pain of slavery has weighed heavily on the black people ever since. And the subtext is scattered among the texts in various forms, which intertextually with the main idea of the text in an implied way.

Secondly, *Jazz* and *Beloved* are intertextual with each other in the theme, and the subject of the two works echoes each other. On the one hand, the two works are intertextual on the theme of mother-love. In the foreword to *Jazz*, Morrison tells the reader that she will “follow *Beloved*’s focus on mother-love,”^[10] but actually this theme of mother-love is a little different in the two books, the theme of love in *Beloved* is a special kind of maternal love while *Jazz*’s theme of love is the lack of maternal love.

The main characters in *Jazz* all lack normal maternal love. Joe’s mother was a lunatic who gave birth to Joe and then hid herself in the Virginia woods to live in a cave. Joe has never opposed the love of mother, so he desperately longs for his mother. He searches for her three times, but to no avail. The absence of maternal love leads him to attempt to fill the spiritual void through other forms of love. Obviously, he couldn’t find that love in his marriage. His marriage to Violet has no emotional foundation, and the two even have little emotional interaction. Although they lived under the same roof, they were cold and had nothing to say to each other. After Joe met Dorcas, Dorcas’ adoration and thoughtfulness helped him find a sense of being recognized and valued. Although Dorcas is so young that she can be Joe’s daughter, it is Joe who gets women’s care and love from Dorcas. In this way, it made him feel the mother-love for the first time in his life, and it filled a void in his mind. To Joe, Dorcas became the symbol and embodiment of motherhood. Violet, whose mother Rose committed suicide by jumping into a well when she was only nine years old. Because her father had been out participating in the black movement for many years, the house was taken away, and Violet’s mother was seriously stimulated mentally and went to a dead end, which cast a heavy shadow on her young mind. Because of the lack of maternal love, Violet didn’t want to give birth to children, gave birth to children let her feel afraid, but not to give a birth to children makes her and Joe on a tense relationship, their lack of good communication also contributes to the disharmony between their relations. Violet’s mental imperfection was also reflected in the fact that she did not want children when she was young, but was crazy about having children when she was 40 years old. She turned her longing for mother into a longing for owning her own child. When this could not be achieved, she even went to steal other people’s children. Her desperate desire for children hides her deep yearning for her mother. At the end of the book, Violet forgave Dorcas from the bottom of her heart, because she thought that they were born in the same way of pain. She then regarded Dorcas as her own child, rather than his rival in love. At the end, it is the maternal love that binds Joe, Violet and Dorcas together. As for Dorcas, she witnessed the whole process of her parents’ death when she was a child, and watched helplessly as they were consumed by the flames of a race riot, which left a trauma that was difficult to heal. She lost both her father’s love and mother’s love at the same time, from this we can see that she was also deprived of normal mother-love. The simultaneous absence of paternal and maternal love made her heart blank. No one cared except the limited care of her aunt, and her love with Joe duly filled her mental void. So another reason the two become lovers is that they both lack maternal care.

The lack of mother-love makes their spirit and characters are not sound, in their process of seeking maternal love caused the dislocation of their relationship. The lack of maternal love in *Jazz* was a tragedy of racial conflict, while the different kind of maternal love in *Beloved* was a result of slavery. What Morrison focuses on in *Jazz* and *Beloved* is not mother-love in the traditional sense, but a different kind of mother-love. The reason why she continues *Beloved*’s theme of mother-love in *Jazz* is to arouse readers’ attention and thinking about the causes and harms of the lack of mother-love and different kinds of mother-love. In the foreword to *Jazz*, Morrison wrote about how to cherish and what to love in the face of slavery and emotional distortion, the ways to solve these questions continue to explore in *Beloved*, and one of solutions showed in *Beloved*, is that, “love is eternal mourning.”^[11]

Another themes that *Jazz* and *Beloved* intertextual with are the trauma and shame of slavery for black Americans, the main characters in the two books are all haunted by the trauma and shame of their own or their forebears’ pasts. The main characters in *Jazz*, Joe, Violet and Dorcas, are all orphans, living in an environment of racial oppression and violence, bearing the burden of history and the trauma of the previous generation. *Beloved* depicts that after the abolition of slavery, even after the slaves were restored to freedom, they still could not forget the pain and shame of the past. In order to get rid of these painful memories, they chose to escape, not to recall the past, but the more they escape, the more difficult it is to forget. *Beloved* shows the physical and mental toll of slavery. While *Jazz* shows the trauma and stigma that black people suffered in Harlem in the 1920s.

This chapter explains the intertextual writing between *Jazz* and *Beloved* from the perspective of the source of creation and the intersection of their themes. And from the point of view that the two novels are based on real events, we can see that Morrison does not simply rewrite the previous texts, but root the stories in the conflict between the black culture and American culture, try to interpret the history

and living conditions of African Americans, the unyielding spirit and the constant exploration of America black community way out to show readers through the text. In addition, Morrison also emphasizes that love is the main condition for the continuation and development of human beings, so she continues this theme in the two works.

4. The intertextual writing between *Jazz* and *The Bluest Eye*

Jazz and *The Bluest Eye* are intertextual with each other on the theme of cultural identity. Besides that, they are both intertextual with black music. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, an ordinary black girl, always wanted to have the bluest eyes. She dreamed of seeing the most beautiful world through the pure blue, without sin or discrimination. She never stopped begging for “the bluest eyes in the whole world.”^[12] She prayed daily, trying to impress God and get blessed. A year later, however, Pecola’s unrealistic hopes in a white supremacist society bring her more ridicule and bad luck, and she ends up being raped and spurned by her father and lost in the dream of blue eyes. The whole story is like a sad blues, permeating with a melancholy and low voice of black pain. In the book, Pecola’s dream of blue eyes can only be realized in a crazy psychedelic way, while another black girl in the book, Claudia, gets wisdom and encouragement from her mother’s singing. Her mother used to hum W·C·Handy’s classic St.Louis Blues, “I love that man like a schoolboy loves his pie, like a Kentucky Colone loves his mint and rye, I’ll love my baby till the day die.”^[13] The song expresses the complicated feelings of a black woman who finds out that her husband has another love but she can’t let it go. Such songs grew up with Claudia. It soothes her tortured heart and heals the wounded soul. It is because of that Claudia later recalled Blues in her childhood with emotion and said that “her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-ime to my name.”^[14] It can be seen that the reason why Claudia can still maintain a sound personality, cheerful personality and optimistic attitude towards life in this society dominated by white culture is precisely because she draws strength and courage from black music such as Blues music. And from this, we can see that only by being as sad and unhurt as Blues music can African Americans find their cultural identity based on their own culture.

Although the word “Jazz” does not appear in the texts of *Jazz*, the seemingly absent jazz tunes become the background music of the whole story. In the book, we can see that Violet stole the baby while the girl buys Trombone Blues; Dorcas loved Slim Bates; Phyllis bought records; Joe told Dorcas about his past in the background of jazz music; A jazz tune was playing at the dance when Dorcas was shot; The street band and the oboe player on the roof. It can be said that jazz music runs through the novel. Alice, Dorcas’s aunt, did not accept jazz at the beginning, because she had been affected by white culture for a long time and was extremely averse to such “only black music”, and therefore felt the loneliness brought by exclusion. Finally, she “could not resist the charm of jazz, accepted the culture of her own nation,”^[15] and thus found the sense of belonging generated by integration. This shows the process of self-identification and acceptance of black Americans, and also proves that black music is a medium that connects individuals and society.

The intertextual writing between *Jazz* and *The Bluest Eye* on the theme of cultural identity and their intertextuality with black music prove that the identification of African American’s cultural identity is long and arduous, African Americans should learn from Blues music which developed from a minor black music into a universal music form, to persevere their own culture and fight for their cultural identity in the American society. The strong vitality of black music and the fighting spirit of African-Americans are mutually set off, which is the evidence of the tenacious optimism of this race, or the integration of “Blues Spirit” as black people call it, the acceptance of national culture and the singing of Blues have opened a window for African Americans to the outside world.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies Morrison’s *Jazz* from the perspective of intertextuality, examines the novel in the broad cultural background, uses specific works to illustrate the literary level of intertextuality, emphasizes the relationship and function between the texts and the structure of the novels, and explores the deep connotation of the work.

Firstly, the pre-text of *Jazz* is “The Harlem Book of the Dead”. Morrison attempts to reproduce the repressed and enslaved history of African Americans through her works, and show the trauma and shame brought to them by this history. Secondly, Morrison infused *Jazz* with the notes of jazz music.

Finally, *Jazz* is intertextual with Morrison's other two works in themes. After understanding the above analysis, we may find it will be much easier to have the intertextual reading of Morrison's works. The intertextual writings between the three texts give them a new interpretation space, which makes the connotation of *Jazz* richer, the personality more distinct, and the creation style of postmodernism more obvious.

Through the above analysis of this paper, we can see that Morrison's intertextual writings form a huge network, and the meanings of these works are suspended in these interwoven factors. From the perspective of cultural thinking, Morrison's consciousness of works is rooted in the intersection of black American culture and white American culture, and this special cultural background makes Morrison try to explore the black's way out through the text. From the point of view of the themes of her works, Morrison emphasizes that love is the main condition for the continuation and development of human beings. All of her works have inherited the interwoven theme meaning of this theme spirit, which not only reflects its profound impact on the lives of black people, but also highlights the author's real intention of creation. From the analysis of the intertextual writings between Morrison's books, intertextuality serves as an open theoretical system as well as an open mode of literary criticism. It overcomes the high closure of individual discourse, provides narrative space for writers and reading participation space for readers. Through the three-way combination of author, the reader, text, and the author can better understand and interpret the texts.

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