

## **Jazz Zeitgeist: The Coming of Age of a New American Sound and Story In the Early Twentieth Century**

*Mildred M. Espree*

### **INTRODUCTION: MY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE**

The students in my junior-level American literature class are predominantly Hispanic. They range in age from 15-19 years old. Few of them have a strong foundation in American History or the rich cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s upon which to draw when reading the literature. Some have a vague memory of learning somewhere that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves or that Thomas Jefferson wrote the document that started the American Revolution. Many of my students have no sense of the powerful effects of first, the American Revolution and secondly, the Civil War and slavery have had upon the American experience of black and white Americans. For the most part, American literary allusions are lost upon them. I find that I have to teach the history behind the allusion and then reread the selected piece of literature several times before students start to internalize the impact a piece of literature has both historically and in their own contemporary social milieu. It is important to note that without the historical context and some notion of a truly lived experience that is relevant to a person's life, comprehension is limited and reading becomes a detached, perfunctory habit, instead of an exciting lively experience which engages the reader in the events he is reading. So, on behalf of my students, every attempt is made to make the experience of reading as real as film or another highly personal experience like listening to music or playing a musical instrument.

In my American literature class, we begin the year by reading the Puritans, the Enlightenment literature, and by following up on their outside reading assignment, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Huck Finn gives students a notion of the Romantic hero, but on a deeper level brings them face to face with their own issues of race and culture as they cope with the dialects in the novel and the use of the word "nigger." I choose to teach the contemporary conflict surrounding Huck's reference to Jim as Nigger Jim in the novel. Many of my students use this word loosely in reference to each other and only realize on a shallow level that the word refers to the 'bozal' or uncut African, or that it was once universally degrading, demeaning, and a fighting word to any American of African descent. My black students do understand on a visceral (gut) level, but are just as likely to use the word loosely in reference to each other while disparaging members of other racial groups for adapting the word for themselves. I am, in the contexts of the literature we read, able to point out such central ironies to them.

However, the power of language is somewhat lost on students until they think about it, and as I begin the year, I try to teach them just how far-reaching a word can be. As we plod through Huck Finn, an American classic, and then Bless Me, Ultima, a contemporary classic by Hispanic writer Rudolfo Anaya, we evaluate how the main characters, two young men, come to terms with issues within their culture. We examine

the role of language in each of the lives of these characters. Bless Me, Ultima contains many Spanish phrases and is set on the plains of New Mexico during and after World War Two. The main character, Antonio, struggles with the conflict of being a child of both the vaqueros of the plains and the farmers of the valley. His conflict is whether to choose the free-ranging lifestyle of the conquistadors of this father's heritage or the quiet, peaceful, Roman Catholic legacy of his mother's people. She dreams that he becomes a priest. In this novel, Antonio witnesses death and violence several times. The novel, a bildungsroman, is a story about a young man's rite of passage into his own history and the world of adults where he must choose a God in which to believe and a lifestyle for himself. The other main character of the novel is Ultima, a curandera, who represents the combination of both pagan beliefs, herbal medicine and Roman Catholicism. Students really appreciate this novel because it provides for them a culture-rich context to draw on as they attempt to understand the American experience. It also makes it easier to teach The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Huck Finn begins in Missouri and ends in New Orleans in what are a psychological journey as well as a physical journey for the two main characters, Huck and Jim. Students are given the opportunity to explore issues within their own culture and history and to examine a particular period in American literature. In this novel, Huck realizes in Jim the father figure he never had, and begins to question by his actions the whole social system upon which slavery was founded. By pairing these two classics in the Fall of the year, my goal is to help students find common ground as they explore determinism, Puritan beliefs, pantheism, paganism, Indian lore, and rationalism in the fiction and non-fiction in which they read. A major emphasis of this exploration is the idea that Americans and American writers have always attempted to answer three essential questions: a). What does it mean to be an American; b). How do I reconcile my immigrant heritage with the new American landscape; and c). Who is God, and what role does human nature and nature play in my understanding of spirit.

During the second semester, students study early Romanticism and transcendentalism, the Civil War and move right into the early twentieth century. Because of our block scheduling and the reluctance of many of my students to read extensively on their own, we rarely have enough time to cover poetry in depth, or to explore the role of oppression in the American creative experience. I do point out to my students that Americans were from the outset fleeing all kinds of oppression at the same time they were wiping out the Native Americans and enslaving West Africans. This powerful contradiction in the American rhetoric and the American reality as reflected in the own lives is not lost on my students, and once they realize its powerful connection to the history and literature, they begin to have a better understanding of their own lives and to embrace and take ownership of some of the problems in society. I also use these novels to discuss the border experience, another way of talking about being a part of two cultures, which is exactly what my black and Hispanic students are experiencing as they begin to forge their own identities and place in world. However, this experience, it must be

emphasized, is an American experience critical to all of our understanding of what it truly means to be an American.

## **HOW JAZZ FITS IN**

This would be a good launching point in the spring for my fully integrated unit on the Jazz Zeitgeist. Because the music and the stories of the people reflect and are paradigms for all the major issues and paradoxes of the American experience, I intend to use jazz music and the stories of jazz musicians to talk about suffering as an integral part of becoming American, which is best exemplified in the history of the black man in America. This marginalization of the American experience for non-whites is also the seed, which blossomed into a plethora of music, art and literature. It has been stated many times that the only truly American contribution to music is the music of the American Negro. However, such a realization can only be understood as a part of a creative, adaptive process that began in suffering and was internalized and recreated by both blacks and whites. Suffering in America has been a black experience, but it is a universal human experience, often best articulated in the music of the black man.

So as we begin the Spring semester, I intend to bring the sights, sounds and mood of “The Jazz Age” into the classroom and allow students to feel it first and then research and report, read and discover their own meanings in the literature and the music. By the time the spring semester begins, students have been studying conflicts and contradictions within the American experience. They have written about what being an American means to them, and they have dissected, and analyzed allusions and references in Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1963 speech, “I Have A Dream.” It is a good time to discuss with students the freedoms afforded them by the U.S. Constitution as well as the unique contributions of black writers and artists to the American cultural landscape. By integrating the music, its history and the stories of the early twentieth century, I am hoping that a students will catch the glimmer of new hope, new beginnings, and a new faith in the American rhetoric that came with the end of slavery for a whole generation and the movement of rural blacks to the North. By juxtaposing these times and comparing it the hedonism and materialism of the times, I hope to show students the separate but emerging singular world of blacks and whites, that came about largely through the arts in key places like Chicago and New York. Into the smorgasbord, I will introduce Jazz, the contemporary novel by Toni Morrison as well as jazz in all of its early forms. Several other novels will also be added to enrich students’ understanding and perceptions of the varying themes of the music and its times.

## **A NEW AMERICAN CONSCIOUSNESS**

The main purpose of my unit is to show students, through literature and music, that a new American aesthetic was created out of the often-troublesome collision in America of African and European cultures. This unit will focus on jazz during the period from 1900 to

1935. It will primarily deal with the following musicians in chronological order: Joe Oliver, Dixieland, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker. By focusing on the social, historical, and cultural milieu that created jazz in the dawn of the twentieth century, students will encounter the time in history when black people were one generation removed from slavery, and were physically, but not psychologically, free except through the arts. This was still the era of “Jim Crowe”, blatant acts of violence, sharecropping, and segregation. A particular emphasis of this unit will be the biracial aspect of both the music and the culture, which produced it.

While I plan to teach several novel units, poetry and jazz will be used to stimulate writing and generate ideas for essays at the beginning of every class. My students keep a portfolio of their writing ideas and journal topics. Instead of only having students respond to a quote written on the board as a signal for critical writing, thinking, and reading, I plan to play the music of these early jazz artists, have them respond emotionally, artistically and in writing to the music at different times throughout the entire unit. Colors, markers, and paper, as well as the music will be a part of the classroom setting. I will also read the poetry to the students, talk about the historical period and have them make new connections between the people who made the music and the people who wrote the stories as well as the heroes and heroines in these stories. Poems from Gwendolyn Brooks, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes are among the selections chosen. Matching these Harlem Renaissance artists with Jazz artists from the same period will engage and inspire students to know more about both the poetry and the music. Students will then write in their reader-response journals about their feelings, reactions, and ideas about what they have read and heard.

From this springboard to writing, students will create their own poetry, music, and essays. This activity will be integrated into the first thirty minutes of class several times per week as can be accommodated to block scheduling. This activity will also launch the novel units as historical lectures are combined with the music. Focusing on how European music brought to the creative process large forms and organization, orderliness and protocol; and, how African music brought to the art form improvisation, (something that is done spontaneously which changes every time you do it) students will discuss and question what the real-world consequences of mass immigration and slavery has been. In a teacher-led discussion, students will discover how the great flexibility of the music for the Africans made it something that was attached to all events of life. European music, employed group harmonizing and the etiquette was different, while the communal fact of performing was common to both groups (Marmolejo). Students will complete mini-research reports on the time period studied as the teacher leads an on-going discussion of the various ways which, when Africans were brought to the United States, was a collision of cultures creating an “incredible marriage through incredibly different art forms” (Marmolejo).

For example, African culture did not have twelve-toned chromatic sounds. The African artists adapted European instruments to create the sounds they wanted. Like poetry which focuses on figurative language and symbolism, jazz music evolved from slave songs which were encoded messages about work, to keep the rhythm, or oppression, to create a cathartic effect, or directions, in order to go North. One example is the slave spiritual called, "Follow the Drinking Gourd." It is an excellent example of an encoded message in the singing. The message is to go in the direction of the Big Dipper which always points northward, which was the direction of freedom. The jazz instrumentation of the African-American artists would be similar to this. It also contained encoded messages about empowerment through possession, for the first time in African-American history, of their own lives. The very act of creating such bold, powerful, and individualistic sounds was an expression of empowerment. The music would begin to have some themes that were different. For example, the sounds would reflect the stories of the lives of the people; it would, for the first time following slavery, be about ownership and self-possession as well as the claiming of each other -- love between a man and a woman, and ultimately about the joy of liberation. The plots of the novel units I plan to teach can only illuminate and further educate students about the lives and consciousness of black and white people during the first third of the twentieth century. The stories themselves, with explanation from the teacher, will help students examine how the worlds of black and white artists converged and diverged to create the radical improvisationist art known as jazz, as well as the distinctive literary consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age.

By playing the music, discussing the setting, and asking from the outset the major discovery question, "What, if anything, created a Jazz 'zeitgeist'?" students will uncover a uniquely American consciousness about a people and country which has always existed on the fringes except through their music, and more recently mainstreamed through the teaching of literature. This consciousness belongs to the historically multiracial people of the Gulf Coast, predominately black, and largely concentrated along the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast. Historically documented, the journey that jazz has taken can be traced with reasonable accuracy. It ripened most fully in the redolence of New Orleans. This seems beyond dispute although a few revisionists support other theories of its origin. But around 1885, according to the 1950's jazz expert, Arnold Soundcard, writing in Atlantic monthly, "The almost legendary Buddy Bolden and Bunk Johnson were blowing their cornets in the street and in funeral parades which have always enlivened the flamboyant social life of that uncommonly vital city. At the same time, it must be remembered, Scott Joplin was producing ragtime on his piano at the Maple Leaf Club in Sedalia, Missouri; and in Memphis, W.C. Handy was evolving his own spectacular conception of the blues" (Sundgaard, 3). This cultural history is ripe with burgeoning understandings of what it meant to be black and Creole at that time in New Orleans. This history is replete with myriad root systems. For example, jazz, at the beginning, relied on a variety of traditional ballads and songs more than it did on new compositions. "Tiger Rag," is a tune from an old quadrille, evidences of which still cling to the notes.

Sundgaard says that most of this “music grew out of fertile memories and springing from ancestral roots rather than conscious study.” To this day, jazz is still known as “Head Music.” “Inspired by musicians who could not read music, jazz developed in the streets of New Orleans for several reasons: the need for it was coupled with the talent to produce it and a favorable audience to receive it; also in New Orleans there was the lively tradition of the “second line” at street parades, which was made up of young people eager to imitate the elite among the adult performers.” Louis Armstrong, Kid Ory, Omer Simeon, Wingy Manone, George Lewis, Barney Bigard. . . were graduates of the “second line” (Sundgaard 4). There was an intense rivalry between the various burial and marching societies, all of whom took great pride in their musical prowess. This combined with the cultural melting pot and Bacchanalian playground known as Storyville, where mansions were not prejudiced against any form of art, created a ripe place for jazz to be born. Another thing that helped this music thrive was that the black bandmen applied their own vocal technique and feeling to European instruments, which fell into their hands. These musicians already had spirituals and blues as a part of their heritage. The profound emotional overtones of the singing were translated to their playing with the result creating a new music form.

Among the Creole and working class, elites and the prostitutes, the feelings were similar, their consciousness’ all stirred together to create an atmosphere for what William Wordsworth defined as poetry, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” It was poetry with brass horns, in the hands of a recently emancipated people, the blacks, and a people less recently emancipated from a history of European feudalism and abject poverty, the whites. Only when Storyville was shut down in 1917 did the musicians migrate to Chicago’s Southside. Just this move created some changes, but the Depression proved to be a greater threat. Because of the northward migration, away from sharecropping and the debilitating effects of Southern living as well as the historical necessity of shutting down Storyville, the music became homeless and started to change (Sundgaard 4). This unit will not focus on the twenties in Chicago, except, perhaps through the novel units. But it is important to note that dispossessed jazz musicians found on the South Side of Chicago a home which was similar to the French Quarter of New Orleans. It was no different in many ways from Storyville. If the greatest goal of art is to find your own voice, then the New Orleans musicians had done that largely by imitation at first, then assimilation, and finally by innovation. They found their own voice through the development of technique. One important example of this was the collective improvisation of Joe King Oliver and his Creole Band, which was later refined by Louis Armstrong, who would express himself as a featured soloist in “West End Blues.” Created in Chicago in 1928, this song and the trend it created makes an important statement “about what’s going to happen to the black man in America,” and from a macrocosmic view, what will happen to American culture as it becomes increasingly more integrated and innovative in art, music, and literature. Ironic and important to note, this merging of black and white cultures has been largely ignored by the news media and by politically traditional bureaucratic institutions. In jazz music itself, it was the spiritual,

personal and intellectual nature of the music that made it important to American youth and musicians themselves during the first third of the twentieth century.

For the musicians of this “Head Music,” jazz became a spiritual force and not a commodity to be bought and sold. Where it was bought and sold or became too commercialized, as in the case of Swing, it became sensational for a while (in the late thirties) but lost its vitality and strength because philosophically, it was not being enriched. Spirituality must be nourished. Jazz was a twelve-tone free-form music in its original state. But the original New Orleans musicians did not know the range of their instruments, only the uniquely personal nature of a spirituality born out of slavery and oppression; Creole culture as defined by the French and Spanish; as well as the American landscape known as the melting pot, which was superimposed on an existing culture during the 1800’s following the Louisiana Purchase. Philosophically, this unit will emphasize the origins of the music and the culture, which created it.

The novel units themselves will emphasize stories in the lives of people who were affected by and who influenced the music. Some of the stories include the story of the fictitious Creole heroine, Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening; the trials of the biracial Janie and black Teacake, of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God; the fictitious, but all-endearing purveyor of the lost or elusive American Dream, Jay Gatsby of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby; and the controversial, but insightful narrative by Nella Larsen about the complicated historically true account of Passing. These novels have been chosen for their ability to reconstruct and deconstruct the myths and often-unrecorded stories of the early part of the twentieth century. The unit will tie together these works with Toni Morrison’s modern account of life in the early twentieth century, Jazz. The entire class will read Jazz, while the other novels will be read in groups of three or four, reported on and exchanged with another group until every student has read a minimum of three novels. The music we call jazz is itself, a mixed-race aesthetic. Morrison frames her novel around the themes and structures of jazz aesthetics. Since jazz is a mixed-race aesthetic, which despite its popular association solely with black culture, is neither a wholly white nor wholly black tradition. It is both in that it has its origins in black Creole and white Southern culture. This notwithstanding, there is no argument that jazz is about black people who found love and violence, spirituality and inspiration, pain and joy, as they attempted to navigate the troubled waters of America in the first third of the twentieth century. The central issue of hedonism and materialism, primarily in Anglo-American culture during the 1920s will be explored in The Great Gatsby. I will attempt to demonstrate with the novel, the grotesqueness of the nouveau rich society, which Fitzgerald so carefully details in this novel. This will also, by exploring the character Tom’s racial attitudes, give students personal insight about the differences in the lives of black and white Americans during this time.

One other theme this unit will clarify and explore is the role of women during the teens, 20s and 30s. By completing “character bone structures” of the women in these

novels and by researching the lives of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, students will research, write, and discuss how the novelists and the musicians help to create a new world mind and pave the way for a new understanding and appreciation of what blacks and whites could create together. Art was neutral territory and the same restrictions, while blatant in larger culture, were somewhat more relaxed in the expression of this art, particularly at its inception, during the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance. Students will examine what was going on in the world during this time frame, from 1900-1935. They will find that movies such as “Birth of A Nation,” “King of Kings” and the Broadway production of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” were prevalent, at the same time frame studied, as prohibition, W.W.I, and The Great Depression.

When possible, and depending on availability, we will watch and discuss these films in class, and explore the themes and visual impact of a time long past. During this time frame, both black and white America were largely rural and this began to change as a result of the great Industrial Revolution of the 19th century that realized its fullest potential during the early twentieth century. I hope to both capture and recreate the atmosphere of the time and the films will be an important part of achieving that. But most importantly, the music and its mood sums up a central theme of these transitional times and defines the nature of the zeitgeist -- these times were fun and free, simple and complex, but overwhelmingly not self-conscious. They had to do with finding sheer joy amidst pain, of playing and teasing, and creating a sprightly wit even through the tears. Sundgaard touched on these issues as early as the 1950s. He writes,

“Since the time of New Orleans, jazz has run the gamut from simplicity to complexity. Life, it has been observed, has run a similar course. If jazz is a reflection of life, as it seems to be, why then has it aroused such antagonism among so many people? First, I think, because it challenges complacency . . . Secondly, because it refuses to be bridled the accepted and equivocal standards of society. Thirdly, because it is never still, it does not hesitate to press forward on every boundary of the emotions no matter how they may be denied. However, most of all it has tried to speak without guile or circumvention to the troubled mind and bewildered heart. As long as doubt and loneliness exist, this music will try to speak to them. There will always be people who do not wish to listen; to them, the music is disturbing and they deny the existence of bewilderment or they wish to escape its deeper meaning. Nevertheless, logic or ridicule cannot quell disturbances of the mind and heart. As long as this is true, jazz—as a voice from within—will find expression and survive” (Sundgaard 11).

Here jazz is already being defined as a part of the lives of a people troubled from within, the consequences of slavery and oppression, and from without, by the existing laws and restrictions on their lives, their ability to assimilate, and their very movements (Jim Crow). But even in his limited vision of this as a troubled music, Sundgaard is predicting that jazz will survive because it is a voice from within, most often and especially of a people who were only beginning to express in words what their hearts needed and

desperately wanted. I want my students to feel that as well and develop a moral consciousness that comprehends the nature and breath of that definitive period in the early twentieth century.

## **JAZZ HISTORY STUDIES FOR USE WITH LESSON PLANS**

### **Poems and All That Jazz**

In Jazz Styles, by Mark Gridley, he gives several pertinent pieces of information, which will be useful for this unit. Gridley attributes to New Orleans the beginnings of Combo jazz. “The best known were trumpeter Louis Armstrong and clarinetist-saxophonist” Sidney Bechet.

Jelly Roll Morton was the most significant composer-arranger from New Orleans and his finest recordings were made during the 1920s in Chicago...The New Orleans Rhythm Kings, created a white parallel of the New Orleans Combo style that is today called “Dixieland” (Gridley 53).

Other significant musicians covered in Gridley, which will be highlighted in this unit, are as follows: Sidney Bechet’s “Blue Note Horizon” can be paired with Langston Hughes poem, “Daybreak in Alabama.” And Jelly Roll Morton’s version of “Maple Leaf Rag” which is a variation on Scott Joplin’s song by the same tune can be paired with the historically poignant poetry of Jean Toomer, particularly poignant is “Brown River, Smile,” which traces the history of joy and pain on the American experience. He begins, “It is a New America, to be spiritualized by each New American. Writing in the early twenties, Toomer would capture the contradictory rhetoric of the New World and its bittersweet glimmer of hope. The old ragtime music was also about hope and for that reason is paired with this poem” (Black Voices 378).

1) “Joe ‘King’ Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band” was an all-star New Orleans Group, which at various times had most of the best black New Orleans Jazz musicians in Chicago. Trumpeter Joe Oliver (1885-1938) had worked with several New Orleans bands, then moved to Chicago in 1918, worked with several more bands, and finally formed one of his own. Gridley says “several recordings made under Oliver’s leadership in 1923 are often cited as the first recording of black New Orleans Combo Jazz. A key musician in Oliver’s Band was the then young Louis Armstrong” (Gridley 55).

Music to be paired with: Jean Toomer’s poem, “Cotton Song,” in Black Voices, page 377

2). New Orleans Jazz was first recorded, according to Gridley, in Chicago and New York, not in New Orleans. “The Original Dixieland Band, a collection of white musicians, organized a band in 1916 and played in New York in 1917. They were under

the leadership of Nick LaRocca (1889-1961). Even in the 1990s, Gridley says, “musicians were forming Dixieland jazz bands in the style of this group.

Music to be paired with: Melvin Tolson’s “Dark Symphony” and “Andante Sostenuto” (Black Voices 388-389). These poems are historical and somewhat bitter. I want to use them to show the stark contrast between the reality of the Negro and the uplifting hopefulness of this Dixieland music as interpreted by white musicians.

3). Trumpeter Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) is often called the father of jazz according to Gridley, “Aspects of Armstrong’s work that musicians appreciated so much because he showed that New Orleans collective improvisation need not be the only approach to horn work. Intelligently developed solos could also be used to stir audiences. Armstrong is known as one of the first great soloists in jazz history” Gridley (88).

Music to be paired with Melvin Tolson’s “Lento Grave,” where he says, “The centuries old pathos in our voices, saddens the great white world, and the wizardry of our dusky rhythms conjures up shadow shapes of antebellum years” (Black Voices 389). Two other poems by Tolson “Tempo Primo” and “Larghetto” touch on these themes. Tempo Primo talks about the New Negro: “The New Negro strides upon the continent in seven league boots” (390). These poems are the perfect accompaniment to Louis Armstrong’s “I Gotta Right To Sing the Blues.”

4.) The Armstrong singing style influenced many popular singers including Billie Holiday and Bing Crosby, according to Gridley. “In this way he affected American music beyond the boundaries of Jazz. Armstrong popularized scat singing, a vocal technique in which lyrics are not used. The voice improvises in the manner of a jazz trumpeter or saxophonist” (Gridley 73).

Music to be paired with “Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B” (Black Voices 429).

5.) Another great singer of the early jazz years is Bessie Smith (1894-1937). According to Gridley, Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues, “ was the most famous early blues singer.” She had enormous talent and influenced many singers outside the field of jazz. “Smith had a voice so powerful that it could be heard over the sound of a band, even without using a microphone. Gridley adds that it had “a weighty quality that added to the unusual intensity of her effect.” “Her manner was aggressive and hard hitting. She played with the pitch and size of her sound to extract maximum blusiness” (82). It is important to note that jazz instrumentalists imitated the sounds of the blues singers, and later it became common for jazz musicians to employ blues singers in their bands and vice versa.

“St. Louis Blues” to be paired with Gwendolyn Brooks poem, “The Mother” (Black Voices.461). Bessie Smith says in her song that she is a good old gal who is just been treated wrong. Brook’s poem might be more appropriately called “The Abortion”

since it is about the lives she stole because her man was treating her wrong. Another selection that can be used with this poem is Bessie's "Lost your Head Blues." "Homage To the Empress of the Blues," by Robert Hayden will close this study of the great Bessie Smith. It is a poem written especially about her. (Black Voices 443). "Black Mother Praying," a poem by Owen Dodson will also be included and address with the songs of Bessie Smith. (451).

6.) Billie Holiday (1915-1959) is the most influential singer associated with jazz since the early 1930s, Gridley says. "Holiday often formed her tones as a jazz hornman, with a whine that had a blues flavor. Like jazz instrumentalists, she did always give songs a straight reading, although she had excellent diction. Instead she varied her delivery creatively...by manipulating rhythms in order to transform songs" (105). Additionally, he says "that her method of delaying the arrival of certain words or phrases is almost indistinguishable from rhythmic displacements used by trumpeter Louis Armstrong, one of her main influences." Holiday's greatest claim to fame was that she was original and fresh.

Holiday songs to paired with Langston Hughes poetry: "As I Grew Older," "Daybreak in Alabama," "Dream Variations" and "Dream Boogie" (Black Voices 426-429). These poems seem to bet fit the tragedy of molestation, abandonment, exploitation, and drug abuse, which characterized the life of Billie Holiday. I plan to have students research her life and listen to her music, which I will provide. Of particular interest will be "There Ain't Nothin'," "Southern Trees," "I Covered the Waterfront," "My Man," and "God Bless The Child."

7.) The last musician to be covered is Charlie Parker. He is the musician who contributed most to the BOP and is considered the most important saxophonist in Jazz history. Gridley says that Parker astonished other musicians "with his tremendous fertility of melodic imagination, unprecedented mastery of the saxophone, and the dizzying pace with which he was able to improvise." Parker's solos were densely packed with ideas. During his improvisations, his mind seemed to be bubbling over with little melodies and paraphrases of melodies. It was a though he had so much energy and enthusiasm he could barely contain himself.

The poet most appropriate for treatment with Charlie Parker is Leroy Jones. Born in 1934 Jones, who would later change his name to Imari Baraku, would write his poetry with Jazz and blues in mind and would imitate their rhythms. His poetry was radically black and he saw the role of the black artist as someone who should be an ambassador of blackness. Jones would write of study of the history of the blues and the people who made it. Some of the poems included are: "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note," "Look for You Yesterday, Here you Come Today," and "The Death of Nick Charles." Charlie Parker Songs to be included with these selections are "Lady Be Good," "Embraceable You" "Crazeology #1 & #4" and "Parker's Mood."

## NOVEL SYNOPSIS

Jazz is an improvisational novel that proceeds along with a singular voice almost at break neck speed. The voice of the narrator drops bits and pieces of information here and there. We learn of a woman and a flock of birds, a man who has shot his girlfriend to death, and a wife who tries to cut the dead girl's face at a funeral. The narrator offers no explanation for these events and just hurries to tell everything without stopping.

According to Eusebio Rodrigues in his critical essay, "Experiencing Jazz," "this is a musical score that has to be made to spring into audial life, into sound and rhythm and beat, the inner ear listens to what one reads, and the words begin to take wing, to leap into sound." He uses this example from the text:

Blues man, Black and bluesman. Black therefore blue man.  
Everybody knows your name.  
Where did she go and why man. So lonesome-I-could-die man  
Everybody knows your name.

(Jazz 119)

One notable thing about Jazz is that it has no chapter or chapter titles. The book is separated by blank pages and the sections to each part are unequal. This make the book confusing to the read unless you realize it is a stream-of consciousness jazz to put down in words. What is hard to follow is the story of Joe, and Violet and Dorcas, the main characters whose lives intersect. Joe and Violets lives are set against the terrible conditions in the South of segregation, exploitation, illiteracy, and poor wages in demeaning jobs. Joe and Violet travel north and are in love with each other at the beginning of their lives, and Morrison's rhythm changes to match the theme of migration.

"Trains carry them there, and Morrison's phrasing enacts both the rhythm of the wheels and the cascading swirl of sensations just before they enter the city" (Rodrigues 159 in Contemporary Critical Essays). The notable thing about the novel is that it does not insist on definite meanings but has been compared to Louis Armstrong's West End Blues.

"Played in a low register, at a slow blues tempo, the seven subsections (pp. 219-229) use stretched blue notes to restate and to purify earlier experiences of joy and pain" Rodrigues 166). Like jazz by Armstrong these is a solo, the inciting incident in the marriage when Joe kills Dorcas. The story intersects with other stories but always ends up focusing on repairing the relationship between this couple, who end the end, after much suffering and despair, find each other again.

At one interlude, we see Joe and Violet at the end, lying on a satin quilt remembering their lives (Jazz 224-225). Rodrigues describes them this way: "Darkness

dissolves as we listen to this slow soft music, that like Joe's two colored eyes, like Joe himself, is both sad and happy, a music of sibilants..." In this improvisational solo about black lives, the words stir our memories and we know better than to try to figure out what it all means. Morrison wants us to feel meaning just as if we experience a piece of moving music.

Morrison in *Jazz* never explains why Joe kills Dorcas. Indeed Dorcas may have been in Joe's mind a kind of surrogate mother. One must infer the meaning here. Perhaps it is because he does not wish to be abandoned again as he was by his mother. Jazz music features in this story include telling the story from different perspectives and call and response.

Other issues addressed in Morrison's *Jazz* include abjection, (total despair) dissociation, and miscegenation in the character of Golden Gray, who must come to terms with and force readers to come to terms with their perspectives on mixed race characters in the story and in culture at large. Golden Gray experiences wary intensities of love and hate in his attitudes toward different Negroes in different contexts. Gray has to deal with his own racial hatred of other Negroes and his self-hatred because he does not know his white father.

Angela Burton, writing in Contemporary Critical essays, writes, "As neither wholly black nor wholly white, and neither clearly slave nor clearly son, the mixed race figure, then has historically existed as an anomaly in the ideological system of racist economies. In generating cultural anxieties (in both black and white communities) such figures have functioned as the abject, threatening the stability of both sides of the racist binary."

In *Jazz*, Morrison focuses on the identity politics of such a figure that, impossibly trapped between two mutually exclusive racial categories, is ambivalently positioned as neither wholly white nor wholly black – hence, he is named Gray. Burton adds that in her figuring of Golden Gray, Morrison explores abjection in relation to both sides of the binary: oppressor/oppressed and ... deconstructs the authority of racism itself" (Burton 175).

Morrison attempts to dispel, as Frederick Douglas also did, the notion of the tragic mulatto. Douglas saw the prevalence of mixed race people as capable of "Doing away with the force of the argument that slavery and the racism from which it grew, were right" (Burton 174).

"It was appropriate for Morrison to use jazz aesthetics to frame a novel dealing with the issues of racial hybridize and interracial or "transgressive" love is also supported by the fact that during the 1920's, where the novel is set, the Harlem night clubs where jazz was consumed, were places where blacks and white intermingled freely" (Burton 175).

From the 1920s to the 1940s, jazz was seen as white music, says Burton, quoting Nelson George, who further states, that it was a neither wholly white nor wholly black aesthetic. In the 1920s – the temporal setting for Morrison’s *Jazz* – jazz was regarded as a New Orleans music played in somewhat different styles by blacks and whites. She further states that the reason the music was so easily appropriated by whites is that the clubs were white owned, and the musicians themselves were often black Creoles who were more European in their habits and attitudes than many of their white counterparts.

“Playing a crucial, and perhaps dominant, role was a group of people of mixed blood called black Creoles, who lived in New Orleans and its environs... In addition she states, certainly the work of renowned jazz ‘greats’ indicates the influence of Creole culture. Billie Holiday was of mixed race, Louis Armstrong originally played with King Oliver’s Creole Band, while Duke Ellington played alongside musicians of mixed cultural origin and in 1931 recorded a seven-minute composition, ‘Creole Rhapsody’” (Burton 176).

Jazz music, like Morrison’s novel, both in its formal aesthetic structures and its cultural origins, both represent the melting pot of ethnic communities. This is precisely what I am trying to teach my students about the American experience. For although jazz is set in 1920s Harlem, and tells a story about that period, it can also be read as a parable of contemporary black America because the issues have not changed. Golden Gray, according to Burton, can be read as a person who is a simile, a metaphor, for the body politic of contemporary black America. “Since the major Civil Rights’ Acts of the 1960s black America has been torn by ongoing debates as to what should constitute the culturally dominant conception of African-American identity” (Burton 189).

In addition, it must be pointed out that Creole identity has largely been ignored since that time and there have been many inventions of myths about that identity. However, for the most part, that identity and the people who truly own it, have been unchanged.

The texts of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Passing* and *The Great Gatsby* will be treated as supplements and further explore of the themes addressed in *Jazz*, both from black and white perspectives.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

**Black Voices.** This collection of poetry by Harlem Renaissance writers contains the poetry, biographical information, and a history of the era. It explores the issues and movements in black history during this period.

**Bloom's Reviews.** This text contains a comprehensive critical examination with a study guide of the issues in Zora Neale Hurston's **Their Eyes Were Watching God**.

**Critical Essays on Toni Morrison.** Because of the critical review of **Jazz** as well as the useful information about the issues and consciousness of black people, this text will provide a resource for the actual unit plan, which will revolve mainly around this novel.

Dahl, Linda. **Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen.** New York: Pantheon, 1984. I hope that this text will provide more information about the lives of these women and how they affected both larger culture and jazz

Gridley, Mark. **Jazz Styles: History and Analysis.** New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000. Thus far, the classroom text has provided me with the most information about Joe Oliver and Charlie Parker, as well as technical information about technique.

Hentoff, Nat, and Albert J. McCarthy, Eds. **Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World's Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars.** New York: Rinehart, 1959. I like the fact that this text was written in the 1950s. It will provide insight into the early attitudes of the critics and what they were saying at the time. There seems to be some disparity between the more modern revisionist approaches to the music. I am not sure what I will discover here.

Kennington, Donald. **The Literature of Jazz. A Critical Guide.** New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994 {1988}. I do not know exactly what this contains yet, but it looks promising.

Ogren, Kathy J. **The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz.** New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. This text will balance the previous text with a modern perspective and may provide some indication of what changes in perspective have taken place, particularly about the early twentieth century music.

O'Meally, Robert. **Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday.** New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991. This is for biographical information and I may be able to pair material here with characters in the novel units.

Panassie, Hughes. **Louis Armstrong.** New York: Da Capo, 1980. More for information and because he was so special.

Perritti, Burton W. **The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. I just liked the title and I hope this recent account will provide some insight into what I have coined the “Jazz Zeitgeist.”

Placksin, Sally. **American Women in Jazz, 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Lives, and Music**. n.p.: Wideview Books, 1982. This is for historical purposes.

Sundgaard, Arnold. “Jazz Hot and Cold.” *The Atlantic Monthly*. July 1955. I am already using this rather comprehensive article about Jazz History.