Morrison and Naylor: A Look at Narration

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by

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Abstract

Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor use narration to create fluid novels that require active participation by the reader. By combining the identity, ambiguity, and reliability of the narrators, the mixture of narrative voices, and the unusual format, Morrison and Naylor create novels that are full of variation. I have chosen to explore these variations and the similarities between the two books.

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In *Jazz*, by Toni Morrison, the narrator says, “[b]usy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I guess you’d say” (220). A more accurate comment on the novel itself could not be made or for *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor. *Jazz* and *Mama Day* are novels that serve as lessons in change and the ability for the reader to go along with the fluidity of the text. By using an ever-changing mode, the novels create a world that includes the reader and his or her powers of observation as an important source in figuring out the text. Morrison and Naylor use the ambiguity of the narrators, a combination of narrative voices, and unusual formats to create original narratives that require active participation from the reader.

In both texts, the identity of the narrator(s) is fluid and, to an extent, abstract. For example, as a character in *Jazz*, the narrator is assumed to be a woman by many readers and critics. Missy Dehn Kubitschek says, “the narrator herself is a character with a viewpoint” (*Toni Morrison* 151). The use of the word “herself,” along with the pronouns “she” and “her” found throughout Kubitschek’s work, defines the author as a female. While Kubitschek does not identify the narrator as a specific person, it is unmistakable that she believes the narrator to be a female.

Doreatha Drummond Mbalia says the narrator of *Jazz* is “characterized as secretive and gossipy” (635), traits that are stereotypically associated with women. It is “her gossipy nature” (Mbalia 636) that seems to have the narrator involved in the lives of the other characters. Upon closer inspection of the text, however, the gender of the narrator is relatively ambiguous. While sympathizing with people, saying, “come out more,” the narrator then says, “if you have been left standing as I have, while your
partner overstays at another appointment, or promises to give you exclusive attention after supper, but is falling asleep just as you have begun to speak — well, it can make you inhospitable if you aren’t careful” (Morrison 9). Nowhere in the line does the narrator explain his or her own gender or that of the “partner.” Mbalia explains the narrator’s comment on relationships by saying, “The narrator, and Morrison, has experienced problems with her mate just as have Violet and the other female characters” (636). To Mbalia, the narrator is an extension of the writer, and therefore must be a woman. In the case of Joe and Violet, however, both worked and had appointments, so the reference to overstaying “another appointment” could refer to either gender in the relationship of the narrator. Furthermore, the narrator does not clarify who made the supper that the “partner” falls asleep after, so we have no clue there, either. While Mbalia may feel the narrator and Morrison are “pseudocharacters” (636) in the story, stating, “the narrator, any narrator, is merely a reflection of her creator; the creator, a reflection of any other African woman” (635), the text gives no solid evidence, at least in this section, that the narrator is a woman.

A portion of Morrison’s novel that may lead the reader to believe that the narrator is a woman occurs near the beginning of the story. The narrator refers to Violet stating, “her name was brought up at the January meeting of the Salem Women’s Club as someone needing assistance” (Morrison 4), signifying that this information was first hand knowledge to the narrator as a member. The next line seems to dismiss that suggestion, however, as the narrator then refers to it as only “The Club” rather than saying we or I so as to be included in the group. The information the narrator has about the club could be
construed as another example of the knowledge of the narrator, rather than a reference to
gender.

The next occasion in which the narrator hints at gender is during the discussion of
Dorcas and her sexuality. The narrator says, "It is terrible when there is absolutely
nothing to do or worth doing except to lie down and hope when you are naked she won’t
laugh at you. Or that he, holding your breasts, won’t wish they were some other way”
(Morrison 63). These comments are of such a personal nature that the reader has
difficulty not believing that they are from firsthand experience. The problem for the
reader lies in the fact that the narrator makes comments in reference to both genders, with
the “she” in the first sentence and the “he” in the second. Once more, these words
maintain the ambiguity of the narrator’s gender.

During the narrative about Golden, the reader is again thrust into more personal
thoughts of the narrator, who says: “I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of
him. Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet, and contemplate his pain and by doing
so ease it, diminish it” (Morrison 161). Those readers who feel the narrator is feminine
may find a sense of longing for Golden, just as Violet experiences in the story. For
Violet, Golden is a dream, "my own golden boy, who I never ever saw but who tore up
my girlhood as surely as if we’d been the best of lovers” (Morrison 97). Perhaps the
narrator sees Golden in the same way, as an unobtainable, dream lover. Another
possibility is that the narrator may also desire to serve as a mother figure to Golden. It
would be instinctual for a mother to want nurture her child and try and ease their pain, as
the narrator suggests with Golden. On the other hand, another explanation of the
comment could be that the narrator is a man. Golden has his life disrupted not just by a lie from his mother but also by discovering he is a member of a race of slaves. “I don’t want to be a free nigger; I want to be a free man” (Morrison 173), is his response to a comment from his father. The narrator, experiencing this pain along with him as a man (and perhaps as an African American because the race of the narrator is also never revealed), thus may be making these comments out of a more fatherly role than that of a woman. As a father figure, the narrator may be trying to ease the pain of the young man, or at lease empathize with him. The comment has no overt sexual overtones; therefore, either gender could be responsible for the sympathetic words toward Golden.

The entrance of Felice later in the story is also a point at which the reader may identify the narrator as a woman. After introducing the girl, walking down the street with an album and a package of meat, the narrator says, “Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her sauntering through the sunshafts like that” (Morrison 198). The self-doubting narrator echoes the self-doubting Violet, as Violet tries to reclaim her youth by mimicking Dorcas just after her death. The narrator could be seen at this point in the story as jealous of the youth and beauty of Felice that, if a woman, she may have also lost to age. Conversely, the doubt of the narrator may not be that of a woman but rather of a man who is questioning his account of the story. Perhaps the narrator’s comment is merely a foreshadowing of what the reader later determines to be the numerous errors made by the narrator as the story continues, therefore having nothing to do with gender at all.

The narrator also makes reference to physical strength in the story that may be a
sign of a feminine narrator as well. The words, “I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself” (Morrison 8) might suggest a reference to the difference in strength between men and women. Women tend to have weaker muscles, as Violet admits to herself when she says, “twenty years doing hair in the City had softened her arms” (Morrison 92). This assumption could also, however, refer to a man who is aged and has lost his muscle mass, discrediting the fact that this sentence insinuates only a female narrator.

While it is not possible to determine absolutely whether the narrator of *Jazz* is male or female, an alternate possibility is that the narrator is not even human. For example, Eusebio Rodrigues suggests that, rather than a person, the narrator is “a disembodied voice perhaps, the voice of the City” (748). The knowledge of the narrator, and the fact that it encompasses the city, makes the idea that the narrator is “the voice of the City” a feasible explanation. Rodrigues also compares the narrator to a Greek goddess by saying, “That it is the thunder goddess who narrates the story becomes clear at last in the first paragraph of the final section of *Jazz*” (749). The words “thunder” and “storm” along with the phrases “I the eye of the storm,” and “I break lives to prove I can mend them back again” (Morrison 219), serve as evidence for Rodrigues that the narrator is the thunder, or a thunder goddess. As a thunder goddess, the narrator is not limited to just the knowledge of the city (as would be the case if the City itself was the voice), but also knows about the lives of the characters before they came north, making this suggestion a viable possibility.

Another suggestion is that Morrison intends for the narrator to be the book itself.
At the end of the text, the narrator tells the reader to “make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (Morrison 229). John Leonard sees this as a literal plea for the reader to look at the book: “Where my hands were then was holding on to my copy of Jazz” (Leonard 718). The narrator has already admitted to having no muscles and being defenseless, leaving open the possibility that Leonard is correct and that the only way to read the lines is to do exactly as the book says. He goes on to say, “And, of course, the Voice is the book itself, this physical object, our metatext” (Leonard 718). If the narrator is the book, there is no gender, no thunder goddess, but rather words to be read that have been carefully written and shaped by the author.

Just like the narrator in Jazz, the narrator of Mama Day holds a kind of mystery. The reader understands that the voice of the narrator is someone within the community by the way the narrator describes the environment from the beginning. From the second line of Naylor’s story, “Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade” (3), to the description of Reema’s son and his misunderstanding of the meaning of 18 & 23 (10), the reader understands that the person narrating the tale has firsthand experience with the island and the inhabitants. It is when the reader comes across lines such as, “It’s what we call in these parts a slow fall” (Naylor 66), and “It belongs to us – clean and simple” (Naylor 5), that the reader realizes the narrator is constantly speaking in a plural sense. Instead of having a narrator, Mama Day has multiple narrators. Kubitschek describes the narrators as the “collective voice of Willow Springs in 1999” (“Toward A New Order” 79), suggesting that the narrator is not only more than one
person, but also that they are a part of the community of Willow Springs.

The descriptions about the island and its inhabitants that the narrators give leave the reader with the conclusion that Kubitschek is correct in her description. Only someone who is a part of the community would know such information and have such interest in the personal events of the inhabitants. The familiarity with life on the island, as well as the language used by the narrators, convinces the reader that they belong to or inhabit the island. As inhabitants familiar with the island, the narrators are able to convey life on the island through such sentences as:

You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car – you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word (Naylor 10).

Phrases such as “you done heard it” give the reader another clue that the narrators are from the island because the dialect they use fits that of the characters the reader experiences. For example, when speaking to Junior Lee, Miss Abigail says, “You ain’t hiding from Ruby is you” (Naylor 154), demonstrating a dialect similar to the narrators.

While key words such as “we” and “us” seem to make it apparent that the narrator is more than one voice, other theories have been presented. In describing the narrators, Paula Gallant Eckard says, “The Willow Springs voice” and frequently uses the term “it” rather than “they” to describe the narrators (130). Eckard explains that, “The Willow Springs voice frames the novel and serves in counterpoint with the other two voices that appear in the text” (130), making the use of the words “we” and “us” serve as a grouping of the narrator, Cocoa, and George, rather than a group of narrators. While Eckard is
unable to identify the narrator, she does categorize their place in the story. Eckard’s choice of words allow for only one narrator rather than a collective group as seen by Kubitscheck. Not only does Eckard use the word “voice” in a singular description, she also describes the voice by saying, “It is the spiritual voice of the community, that has knowledge of the past, is fully integrated into the present, and will likely continue into the future long after Miranda and others in Willow Springs are dead” (130). By using the singular “is,” Eckard is conveying that the narrator is singular rather than a group. While it is possible that the words “spiritual voice” could describe a collective spirit, Eckard’s comparison of Mama Day to the novel Oral History by Lee Smith refutes this. As Eckard says, “Miranda’s point of view is not delivered in first person, as in Granny Younger’s case, but rather through an omniscient voice that is somewhat like the community voice in Oral History” (130). Eckard differentiates between the singular voice in Mama Day and the collective voice in Oral History ruling out the possibility that her description of the narrator as a “spiritual voice” describes a group. Eckard also brings a supernatural aspect into the identity of the narrator by suggesting that the narrator not only knows the past, but also will live on long after the current inhabitants.

No matter how the narrators or narrator are perceived, either as a group or an individual, the story contains a message. The narrators urge the reader to “[r]eally listen this time: the only voice is your own” (Naylor 10). Instead of following the example of Reema’s son, the narrators want the reader to listen and understand the story that is about to be told. The story is laid out in the text but it is up to the reader to pay attention, to work through it and to understand it. The only person who can fully appreciate the story
is the one who listens and applies the pieces of information given by the characters. By saying, “the only voice is your own,” the narrators relate that the reader the one is responsible for understanding the story written by Naylor. The narrators are speaking directly to the readers, urging them to listen to the story, to hear what each character is saying. It is apparent that the narrators are trying to convey this message when they say, “Pity though, Reema’s boy couldn’t listen, like you” (Naylor 10). Once the reader understands the message the narrators are trying to convey, that the story needs to be heard and not just read, the reader understands that, to a degree, the story is in his or her control. Reema’s son heard what he wanted to hear and, unless the reader wants to misunderstand the events that take place just as he did, it is necessary to pay attention. The readers are in control of just how much of the story they absorb because it is up to them to listen. The story about “Cocoa and George down by them oaks” (Naylor 10) is once again impressed into the mind of the reader, peaking interest for a continuation into the exploration of the text. It is at this point, “The author relinquishes control of the narrative, telling us that the story comes from within, from our own memories, our own voice” (Levy 279), making the reader a part of the story.

The inability for the reader to assign an identity to the narrators of either Jazz or Mama Day allows each reader some leeway to interpret the narrators. Just as Kubitschek and Eckard infuse their own beliefs into their analysis of Mama Day, each reader can determine the identity of the narrator (or narrators) from each text as they see fit. Jonathon Culler sheds light on the topic in his discussion of identity:

Consider the question of whether the identity of the subject is something given or
something constructed. Not only are both options amply represented in the literature, but the complications or entanglements are frequently laid out for us, as in the common plot where characters, as we say, ‘discover’ who they are, not by learning something about their past (say, about their birth) but by acting in such a way that they become what then turns out, in some sense, to have been their ‘nature’ (110).

While Culler is not specifically speaking about Jazz or Mama Day in his work, his ideas about identity can be applied to the narrators in the stories. The “nature” that Culler speaks of is different for each narrator depending on the reader and their own notions about the stories. By sticking to Morrison’s idea of improvisation and interpretation coinciding with the flow of jazz music in the text, each reader interprets (within the range the writer allows) the improvisation of the text and the information given. While Naylor is not using a musical muse such as jazz to tell her story, the unusual form of narration and the ability of the reader to internalize the story hold true as well. In both texts, the individual has the opportunity to form the stories and play with the text as they take in the information. The variability of the narrative structure, as well as the identity of the narrators, encourages readers to partake in the execution of the stories within the limits set by Morrison and Naylor in the writing.

In Jazz, the changing confidence of the narrator adds to the mystery of the story itself. The narrator begins the story by saying, “I know that woman” in reference to Violet and “[k]now her husband, too” in reference to Joe (Morrison 3). The narrator’s assurance shifts modes as the story goes continues. In the beginning, the narrator is full
of confidence about the observations and knowledge of the lives of the people. By the end of the story, however, the narrator confesses, “I invented stories about them -- and doing it seemed to me so fine,” as well as admitting, “I thought I knew them” (Morrison 220). The narrator’s confidence in knowing the characters wanes as the story goes on, reducing the reader’s ability to believe everything the narrator says.

Another example of the declining certainty of the narrator begins in the first chapter. The narrator tells the story of Violet, Joe, and Dorcas while ending the account with the arrival of Felice. The last line of the account says, “What turned out different was who shot whom” (Morrison 6), leading the reader to believe that within the new threesome of Violet, Joe, and Felice, one was shot by another. We find out at the end of the story, however, that the narrator is incorrect and no one else was shot. The narrator concedes to the inaccurate account by saying, “So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other” (Morrison 220). By admitting to the mistake, the narrator is conceding to limited knowledge of the story and the falsity of the previous statement.

Another occasion when the narrator admits to being wrong occurs during the narration of Golden Gray. It is also at this point that the narrator shows bias and negativity. After explaining the story of Vera Louis and the birth of Golden, the narrator accuses Vera of being false to him his whole life by saying, in reference to the length of his hair, “Almost every other thing she said was false, but that last bit of information he held to be the graven truth” (Morrison 143). This accusation becomes ironic when the narrator begins to tell the story of how Golden met Wild. The narrator tells the story, retells it with changes, then berates both accounts by saying, “What was I thinking of?
How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not inked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it?” (Morrison 160). The narrator admits that there has been a bias in the telling of Golden’s story and that he may have been portrayed falsely. This admission makes the narrator’s statement about Vera Louise’s falsities to her son seem invalid because the reader isn’t sure if the narrator is telling the truth either. The narrator, now admitting to imperfections, seems quite different from the person talking confidently in the beginning of the story.

As the reader learns of the bias the narrator demonstrates in the storytelling, the reader may form a less than favorable opinion of the narrator. However the reader decides to interpret the narrator, it is impossible to deny the narrator as a character in the story. For example, by the end of Jazz, the narrator comes to terms with “how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness” (Morrison 220). This admission may change the opinion the reader has formed of the narrator as a biased and erroneous character to that of compassion for one who readily admits fault. On the other hand, it could also pit the reader against the narrator because they now understand the extent to which what they have read is based on the false information of the narrator. No matter what opinion the reader has about the narrator, the unreliability of narrator is a device used by Morrison to improvise on the structure of the story, allowing the reader to make sense of the novel.

The narrator in Jazz is less reliable than those of Mama Day. The narrators’ words mingle with the thoughts of the other characters throughout the book with a few exceptions. For example, the first chapter of the book is completely the perspective and thoughts of the narrators. None of the other characters have a real voice in this section
except for what the narrators quote. Another portion of the book that belongs solely to
the narrators is when the death of Little Caesar is revealed. Even in this portion the
narrators expose no personal feelings, as does the narrator of Jazz, but rather stick strictly
to the story. The actions of Ambush and Bernice are explained but in no way are the
emotions or personal thoughts of the narrators brought into the story. This section of the
story is a sample of Naylor’s narrators standing outside the action and giving only the
necessary facts. While the narrators of Mama Day may not always be omniscient, there
is a difference between the narrator of Jazz and the narrators of Mama Day, as Naylor’s
narrators do not give false or misleading information.

While the reliability of the narrators may or may not be a question, the fact that
the narrators are not the only ones telling the stories is apparent. In Jazz, the story is told
from many perspectives. The narrator begins the story with a one-word sentence, “Sth”
(Morrison 3). While “Sth” is not a word definable by the reader, it holds a mystery that
beckons the reader to continue with the text. This one word sentence by itself can be
described as the “cautionary female whisper” (Rodrigues 748). This explanation of the
mysterious one word sentence is that it is a sound, made as a hush, urging the reader to
take heed and listen to the story about to be told. Mbalia says of the “Sth”, that the word,
or “(sound), like buzz, is both the name of the sound and the sound of the name” (624),
likening it to s jazz music where the “songster, song, and song telling are one” (624).
While either interpretation is viable, the word, or sound, depending on the reader, is a
mystery that the reader participates in solving as the text is read.

After the mysterious one word sentence, the narrator begins to briefly explain the
characters, what has occurred, and what will be explained in the story. The husband and wife are described, as well as the scene at the funeral, with just enough detail to intrigue the reader. While explaining Violet’s grief, the narrator also includes a short paragraph about “the January meeting of the Salem Women’s Club” and their consideration of Violet as a candidate in need of monetary assistance and the fact that “it was voted down because only prayer – not money – could help her now, because she has a more or less able husband (who needed to stop feeling sorry for himself)” (Morrison 4). Though the reader is not reintroduced to this subject later in the text, the issue with the Salem Women’s Club is a glimpse of the attitude that the community, as well as the narrator, has toward Violet and her husband. The reader is, at this point, unsure of the narrator’s place in the story: will the narrator be coming from a third-person, omniscient perspective, from third-person limited, or from a first-person perspective?

Morrison and Naylor choose to break the traditional rules of narration and combine categories, forming “a bridge between first-person and third-person narration” (Mbaila 635). This combination of categories allows the reader to get a clearer picture of what is occurring in the story as well as demonstrating an interesting way of telling about the history of the island and its inhabitants. Rodrigues favors the unusual techniques by saying, “A totally objective narrator would have been too distant, too impersonal; an ordinary first-person one too involved, too limited, to understand the tribulations of a people” (745). By refusing to adhere to the basics of the three categories of narration, the reader is given a more intimate portrait of the characters and their lives.

The next few paragraphs help to explain Violet’s state of mind from the narrator’s
perspective after the incident. The reader begins to see Violet’s desperation for a way out of the situation as she first gets a boyfriend to get back at her husband for his infidelity and when that fails she tries to understand the girl he replaced her with. “Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house” (Morrison 4). The narrator then concedes, “Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can’t say” (Morrison 5). It is here that the reader begins to associate a third-person limited perspective because it is Violet and Joe’s story being told and the narrator is unsure of the information. These descriptions of Violet and Joe from the perspective of the narrator, while perhaps not a complete account of events, are important because they give the reader insight to the story that they are beginning to explore.

Other parts of the story display the reader as third-person omniscient. For example, the reason Violet does not have children stems from her mother’s depression and suicide. The reader is told about the sad occurrence when the narrator says, “Rose Dear was free of time that no longer flowed, but stood stock-still when they tipped her from her kitchen chair. So she dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun” (Morrison 102). Violet then explains that because of her mother’s death, she decides never to have children and says, “Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?” (Morrison 102). The combination of the narrator and Violet telling the story helps to explain the development of “Violent,” her need to cut the corpse of the dead girl, and the death of Violet’s alter ego.
Another example of the narrator using a third-person omniscient perspective is with Joe. The reader is given insight into Joe’s search for his mother, the failure of his marriage, his affair, and the hunt for and killing of Dorcas, all of which are explained in some part through by the narrator. The reader is also exposed to the thoughts of Alice, Dorcas, and Golden Gray with the assistance of the narrator. It is the ability of the narrator to get into the mind of all of these characters which may lead the reader to accept the narrator as a third-person omniscient narrator.

While both third-person perspectives are seen at different points in the story, the reader is also exposed to a first-person perspective from the narrator. The narrator frequently shifts from the minds of the characters to sentences beginning with the word “I” or “me” describing the narrator’s life. This is especially true in the final chapter of the novel. The narrator constantly refers to “I” with such sentences as “I ought to get out of this place” and “I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me” (Morrison 220). The narrator is not limited then to the story of Violet, Joe, and the rest of the characters, but also infuses a personal perspective in the tale.

The narrator is not the only one to tell the story from a first-person perspective. While the narrator gives the reader insight into the minds of the characters at times, various characters also give a first-person perspective of their lives. For example, Joe describes his seven changes from a first-person perspective. “I couldn’t talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn’t told myself. With her I was fresh, new again. Before I met her I’d changed into new seven times” (Morrison 123). By allowing Joe to speak from a first-person perspective, the reader is given insight to intimate thoughts and
details that otherwise may not have been revealed. Dorcas is another character who speaks from a first-person perspective. "What I wanted to let him know was that I had this chance to have Acton and I wanted it and I wanted girlfriends to talk to about it" (Morrison 189). Dorcas tells her side of the break-up and gives the reader a point of view of the situation beyond that of the narrator and Joe. Moving the narration from the narrator to the characters brings another perspective for the reader to absorb.

By combining the possibilities for narration and creating a unique narrator, along with allowing the characters to narrate portions of the story, Morrison chooses to "improvise on traditional methods of presenting a story" (Mbalia 635). This improvisation is "what jazz (and Jazz) is all about" (Mbalia 635). The inimitable narrator and narrative is similar to the new music of the time period in which the piece is written, the jazz that was the driving force of the story and the form. For example, Eusebio Rodrigues describes the text as "a musical score that has to be made to spring into audial life, into sound and rhythm and beat" (734). The narration as well as the story is the "sound and rhythm and beat" of the music itself (Rodrigues 734). The story and the way in which the text flows connect the music that Morrison introduces as a part of the culture in the story as well as the music of the text. The musical score in the text and "[t]he improvisational nature of jazz implies continual redefinition of any role" (Kubitschek, Toni Morrison 153), allowing for the altering perception of the reader as they take in the text. Morrison achieves this "improvisational nature" and redefinition of the music with the narrator, the characters, and the way in which they collaborate to tell the story. The narration is ever changing, mysterious, and intriguing, similar to jazz music in that
neither the narrator nor jazz music fit into traditional formats.

Naylor follows Morrison’s jazzy lead by also using a unique structure in narration. At one point, the reader sees third-person narration. In his essay, “Hope from the Ashes: Naylor, Faulkner, and the Signifying Tradition,” Mark Simpson-Vos describes the narrator as third-person, explaining that “[i]n combination with the other narratives, the community narrator helps the reader to understand” (30). In identifying the narrator as third-person, the reader is brought into the minds of several characters at different points in the story. For example, as Mama Day and Cocoa walk through the family cemetery, the narrators explain the conversation of the women as well as their actions and how they use “[a] bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot” (Naylor 150). It is at this point that the narration shifts to the first-person perspective of John Paul as he explains, “I had six brothers born before me, five that lived” (Naylor 151), along with his take on other family history. While John Paul’s section is short, it is an important addition to the story because it exposes the reader to important information about the past as well as adding to the fluidity of the text.

The conversations and thoughts of Cocoa and George are also revealed to the reader as they eavesdrop into their lives throughout the book. For example, while Cocoa and George are becoming a couple and learning to understand one another, Cocoa’s comments help the reader to understand her frustrations with George and her own inability to put her pride second to her love for George. For example, during an argument about George’s obsession with football, Cocoa vocalizes, “Selma was having a huge Thanksgiving dinner party and I wanted to show you off, but you were going out of town
for a game” (Naylor 122). By allowing the reader to overhear the conversation taking place, the reader is introduced to their private life. The differences between Cocoa and George and the ways in which they choose to communicate reveal more about the couple because their conversations are in first-person perspective. The reader experiences the couple’s conversations on several other occasions in the book and these, along with their thoughts, assist the reader in understanding not just the story, but the characters and the personalities Naylor gives them as well.

George’s inability to communicate with Cocoa is also portrayed in his words and thoughts. George admits that, soon after being married, he realizes, “I was living with a stranger, there was no way around that” (Naylor 141). Through his dialogue, George acknowledges his inability to understand his wife. Rather than communicate with her to understand her as his wife and as a woman, he chooses to take the matter into his own hands. It is at this point that he reveals, “I did what I normally did when a subject was new to me: I bought books” (Naylor 141). Instead of vocalizing, questioning, and communicating with his wife, George chooses to buy books. Books are important tools in George’s life and this instance is another example of how his life as an orphan, limited in human affection and understanding, distances him from people close to him. As an orphan, George’s source of knowledge for many of life’s questions was books. As an adult, books continue to be his source of knowledge. The words and thoughts that George and Cocoa convey to the reader allow a personal and unknown side to be revealed as the reader partakes of their intimate conversations.

Several characters in the book use the first-person perspective. As shown,
"George and Cocoa both speak in past tense and first person as they recount the details of their meeting, courtship, and brief, tragic marriage" (Eckard 131). While, as Eckard points out, George and Cocoa both speak in first person, it is more than one first-person perspective. The fact that George, Cocoa, and the narrator all have points at which they are expressing their words in first-person perspective is just one way in which Naylor plays with perspective in the narrative. For Eckard, this combination of voices enhances the novel. Eckard says of the narrator, "this omniscient voice provides a sense of real time and immediacy as it alternates with the individual voices" (130). The narrator is an integral part of not only narrating the story, but also of reminding the reader of the tense of the story, as the characters frequently use past tense.

The back and forth narration of Cocoa and George and the different perspectives each character gives about the way they met, their lives as a new couple, and their time on the island allow the reader to choose a viewpoint. For example, when Mama Day tells George to go to the hen house, to the "old red hen," and "take this book and cane in there with you, search good in the back of her nest, and come straight back here with whatever you find" (Naylor 295), any number of reactions may be had by the reader. The reader, being sympathetic to him, could respond as George later does and feel that she is "a crazy old woman" (Naylor 296). Naylor also displays enough of Mama Day for the reader to understand that she has a reason for asking George to perform the task and that his response is due to his logical sensibility. George and his no-nonsense, scientific approach to life and Mama Day’s faith in man and nature are just two of the views of life that Naylor presents.
Cocoa and George are not the only characters that reveal intimate details through their thoughts and words using first-person perspective. The reader receives information about Mama Day and her life during the quiet times in which she thinks about her life as well as those around her. Without her thoughts and words, the reader would never learn why Mama Day sacrificed the possibility of a life as a wife and mother because of her "[g]ifted hands, folks said. Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own" (Naylor 89). It is because of her gift that she is a woman who never marries and is childless. It is also only during her thoughts that the reader learns that even Mama Day, the resident most knowledgeable in the history of the island, doesn't remember the name of Sapphira and "can't tell you her name, 'cause it was never opened to me" (Naylor 308). Only through the narrators, the ones who seem know even more about the past than Mama Day, does the reader learn of Sapphira's name and how she began the island that belonged to no one but her descendants.

An interesting factor of the narration in the sections about Mama Day is that it is, at times, difficult for the reader to differentiate between the narrators and Mama Day. For example, after Mama Day visits Carmen Rae's home in an attempt to nurse her ailing child, the question "Could she give her a little medicine to work the worms out her baby?" is asked (Naylor 192). The sentence itself leaves a question as to who is speaking. Is Mama Day referring to herself by saying "she" in her thoughts, or are the narrators speaking out the thoughts of Mama Day. Two sentences later, the narrators appear to be speaking. "Miranda guessed that all them children coulda used a good worming with a dose of warm castor oil and jimson" (Naylor 192). The fact that the
character’s name, Miranda, is used rather than “I” demonstrates that the narrators are the one conveying the thoughts. Throughout the sections about Mama Day, the reader is thrust into areas in which it is difficult to determine just who, the narrators or Mama Day, is conveying the thoughts. Because the word “I” is rarely used in these sections, the reader is seldom given a clear answer. The narrators and Mama Day seem to melt into one at certain points in the narration and only when Mama Day’s first name is used, is the reader able to differentiate between the two.

While at times the narrators seem to be third-person omniscient, other points of the book demonstrate Naylor’s ever-changing narrative. One way in which Naylor achieves this is that the narrators admit to not being all-knowing. During the first chapter, the narrators describe Sapphira as “A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending on which of us takes a mind to her” (Naylor 3). Omniscient narrators would have been able to describe Sapphira in detail to the reader. The mixed description of Sapphira reveals that her appearance is not a piece of information known by the narrators, or that perhaps because of the multiple narrators, each remembers her in a different way. The death of Bascombe Wade also calls into question the knowledge of the narrators. The narrator tells three versions of how Sapphira’s husband died by saying:

Somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose, laughing in a burst of
flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons – by person or persons unknown (Naylor 3).

The only certain piece of information the narrators have about him is that he was buried at Chevy’s pass where his tombstone is present (Naylor 3). The location of his tombstone is common knowledge to all of the island inhabitants, demonstrating that this piece of information is hardly evidence of all-knowing narrators. While the narrators are unsure of just how Bascombe died, the fact that he and Sapphira lived is fundamental to the inhabitants of the island and to the text itself. As Eckard explains, “Sapphira’s deeds establish the cultural and racial nascence of Willow Springs, and generations later her story pervades the consciousness of the entire community” (129). Without Sapphira and the history she establishes, the foundation of the community, and the novel, is lost.

Another intriguing piece of evidence about the knowledge of the narrators comes during a brief introduction into the heritage of the island. The narrators, explaining the history of community, including the seven sons, question the lineage of Miss Abigail and Mama Day by saying, “(ain’t Miss Abigail and Mama Day the granddaughter of that seventh boy?)” (Naylor 3). The interesting detail of the question is that Naylor encloses the question itself in parenthesis. The parenthesis may indicate to the reader that the question is one that the narrators are truly asking or that the narrators are stepping away from the story itself to verify information. Jonathan Culler says of omniscient narration, “there seems in principle no limitations to what can be known and told” (90). To stay true to Culler’s definition and describe the narrators as omniscient, the reader must feel
confident that the narrators are sure of all the information given. By questioning their facts, the narrators are questioning themselves, leaving the reader to question the knowledge of the narrators. However the question was being asked, either in the mind of the narrators or in a manner of verification, the questioning of information leaves the reader feeling that the narrators may not able to be labeled as all-knowing. The fluidity of the narrators’ perspective, with its many possibilities, provides the reader another chance to make sense of the text.

Jonathan Culler, speaking about narrators in general, also describes the next sample of the narrators’ perspective, first person. “First-person narrators may be the main protagonists of the story they tell; they may be participants, minor characters in the story; or they may be observers of the story, whose function is not to act but to describe things to us” (Culler 86). The final example in Culler’s definition describes the role of the narrators in the story. As minor characters, the narrators use “us” not only to describe the group but also to be included as a part of the community while telling the story of the island and its heritage. For example, in describing to whom the island belongs, the narrators say, “It belongs to us” (Naylor 5). The use of “us” in this particular sentence signals that the narrators are personalizing the story and using the perspective of first-person.

It is this combination of the narrators and their various perspectives, interchanging with the words of the main characters of the text that Gary Storhoff describes as Naylor’s “dramatic advance in her artistic talent” (35). The ability to provide the reader several views of similar events gives an unusual and creative way to experience the story. Mama
Day says, “Just like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside” (Naylor 230). The various perspectives presented by Naylor are representative of the various sides described by Mama Day. Each character, including the narrators, presents a different view.

Eckard sees this mix of narrative voices as a “process of revealing the past” (122) through the various perspectives. While reading Mama Day, the characters seem to tell their stories in the present tense. The first chapter of the story reveals this to be false. The voices of the characters are telling about the past as it happened to them then. The narrators are clear about the fact that the events have already occurred (although they give clue as to how the story ends), but the reader experiences the story from the present tense. It is this distortion of time that Eckard explains, “is a part of a complex process that reveals the rich and prismatic quality of the past” (122), and is an essential part of the way the story is written.

Jazz and Mama Day have more in common than just the techniques the authors use in the narration of the stories. The format of the two books, the arrangement and presentation of meaning, also has many similarities that affect the reader’s response to the text. In Jazz, Morrison splits the book into ten chapters. Between each chapter, a full, blank page is found. Within the chapters are several sections that are split off from one another by several blank lines. The separated sections within the chapters assist in denoting when the narration is changing from one character to another. This separation within the chapters allows Morrison to change the point of view from one character to another while maintaining the topic at hand. For example, the seventh chapter begins
with the narrator discussing Dorcas at an adult party with her new boyfriend. After the narrator has set the stage, the print skips lines and moves into Dorcas narrating her own section of the story. Both the narrator and Dorcas are describing the same thing, the party, her happiness with the new boyfriend, with Dorcas adding her own take on how she broke off her relationship with Joe and the fact that she knows that he will not leave her alone. It is this section that becomes almost a jazz tune in itself because Dorcas repeats the line, “He is coming for me” (Morrison 189) throughout her narration like the chorus of a song. The narrator breaks in during Dorcas’ speech and, once again, extra lines are added to denote the change in character. These extra lines seen separating the various sections add to the fluidity of the text by not only signaling a change in narrator, but also by allowing for a pause in preparation for the next voice. It is different from the blank pages between chapters because the full, blank pages are more of a preparation for variation in topic, rather than just voice.

*Mama Day* takes a similar approach to the format. The book is separated into three sections. The first is the seven pages beginning the tale in which the narrators introduce the story. Two blank pages separate each of the two sections following the first chapter. Each section begins with a page displaying the roman numerals I and II for the sections. Within each section, just as in *Jazz*, are smaller sections that are separated by extra lines to indicate the change in characters narrating the section. Like Morrison, Naylor uses these extra lines to show the change of narrator while keeping the story going in the same direction. For example, as Cocoa and George each give their own perspectives about the first time they met during her interview, the reader is treated to
separate sections from each character that feed off of one another. As Cocoa enters the office and sees George for the first time, she says,

I entered the third on the left as I'd been instructed and there you were: blue shirt, knitted tie, nice teeth, and all. Feeling the box of mint toothpicks press against my thigh through the mesh bag as I sat down and crossed my legs, I smiled sincerely for the first time that day (Naylor 22).

Cocoa is conveying to the reader not only what she sees by describing his clothing but also how she feels by telling about the sincerity of her smile. Immediately after Cocoa finishes telling her part, the page goes blank for several lines and then begins with, “Until you walked into my office that afternoon, I would have never called myself a superstitious man” (Naylor 22). George picks up immediately in the same place that Cocoa left off, giving the reader his perspective as well. It is this trade off of narration between the characters, and the fact that it is separated by a few lines, that helps create the fluidity in the story for the reader.

While there are similarities in the formatting of Jazz and Mama Day, there are also differences. The ten chapters written by Morrison all have a word or a theme that moves from the end of one chapter to the beginning of the next. Chapter two, for instance, ends with a discussion of the weather in the city, “From freezing to hot to cool” (Morrison 51). This discussion of weather is carried on in the beginning of chapter three with the narrator saying,

Like that day in July, almost nine years back, when the beautiful men were cold.

In typical summer weather, sticky and bright, Alice Manfred stood for three hours
on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums

(Morrison 53).

The narrator mentions the word "weather" in both chapters as well as the sensations that the various seasons can bring: freezing, hot, cool, cold, and sticky. All of Morrison's chapters follow this pattern with words or thoughts connecting the end of one chapter to the beginning of the next. It is the flow of the book, the music of the narrative.

Naylor doesn't follow suit with Morrison in her book. The first chapter is not connected to the first section of the book by any similar words or thoughts but rather goes from a recommendation by the narrators to listen, to Cocoa narrating her first look at the man she would come to know as George. The first and second sections of the book, while tied together by theme, narrative, and sense of place, have no distinct ties with words to one another, as do the chapters in Jazz. Section one ends with Cocoa wondering how her relationship with George will change with their visit to Willow Springs because, "any summer we crossed over that bridge would be the summer we crossed over" (Naylor 165). While the story continues chronologically with the next portion of the book, the direct play on words or thoughts seen in Jazz is not seen in Mama Day. Section two begins, "Miranda is having the kind of day that's best spent in bed" (Naylor 170). The frame of time is the same as Mama Day and Miss Abigail prepare for the arrival of Cocoa and George in section two. While the theme, narrative, and sense of place is the same between chapters, Naylor's format does not include the direct connections with words and thoughts that Morrison makes.

The formats in which Morrison and Naylor choose to display their narratives add
to the fluidity of the texts. In Jazz, Morrison takes a musical approach to her format. Rodrigues says, “In this, she is like Louis Armstrong, who played a number of instruments” (736). As the author, Morrison chooses to have not only the narrator tell the story, but also other characters within the text. In this way, just as Louis Armstrong played many instruments, Morrison is playing the words and thoughts of many of the characters in a collaboration that forms the text. Rodrigues also says, “Unlike the clearly demarcated movements of a symphony, the sections of Jazz never come to a complete stop. Like nonstop sequences during a jam session, they keep moving restlessly on and on, giving the text a jazz feel” (740). This statement explains the way that Morrison uses words and thoughts that end one chapter and begin the next. The novel is a nonstop sequence that continues yet is restless and full of variance. Morrison “uses her language instrument to try out some daring modes and techniques of play and to create the informal, improvisatory patterning of jazz” (Rodrigues 740). The “play” is in the way Morrison uses the collaborative voices of the narrator and the characters to improvise the story. While the narrator and characters are telling the story, it is up to the reader to “actively participate in the process of musicalizing the text before it will yield up all its meanings” (Rodrigues 737).

Mbalia agrees with Rodrigues’ assessment of the format Morrison uses. To Mbalia,

Morrison’s structuring of her text follows the jazz pattern as well. Jazz musicians build upon each others’ works and, in so doing, discover themselves in others. The building process consists of a series of variations on a common theme
whereby the artists take parts of this and parts of that (639).

Everything in *Jazz* is a building block to the bigger part of the story. The identity, ambiguity, and reliability of the narrator, the combination of narrative voices, and the format Morrison uses all come together. The flow of the text is like that of jazz music, full of variations.

The variations are found not only in the text, they are also found in the way each reader perceives the story. Kubitschek says, “No two performances of a jazz piece, even by the same musicians, will be identical” (*Toni Morrison* 142). In the same way that no two jazz performances will be the same, no two people will read the book in the same way. Kubitschek also explains, “Jazz makes change, originality, and unpredictability within a recognized structure into central parts of musical process” (*Kubitschek, Toni Morrison* 142). The recognized structure, in this instance, is the book itself. Each reader will have a common experience with the book but will take away different portions of the novel. The way Morrison manipulates the combination of narration and format brings about the originality, as well as the differentiation in the way each reader makes sense of the story.

While Naylor does not have as direct a connection with music in *Mama Day* as Morrison does in *Jazz*, many of the same qualities associate Naylor’s work with jazz music. Just as Morrison, Naylor uses the ambiguity of the narrator, the combination of narrative voices, and the unusual format to bring together a story with a unique flow. Simpson-Vos describes Naylor’s use of many voices to narrate by saying, “These multiple narratives blend to reinforce rather than contradict each other” (29). Just as in
jazz music, which uses many musicians with a variety of sounds, the voices come
together in a variety of perspectives to form the story. The format used by Naylor, with
the voices and perspectives changing as the sections shift, is also like jazz music. The
characters build upon each other’s words to form the story. While various sides are told,
as with Cocoa and George and their interchanging sections, the viewpoints may vary, but
the fluidity remains.

Morrison and Naylor achieve that changeable, human aspect that the narrator of
Jazz speaks of in their narratives. The format of the narration creates a fluidity that
provides each reader, within the grounds set by the authors, a chance to interpret portions
of the text. As writers, Morrison and Naylor permit their readers to explore and
participate in deciphering the stories. Cocoa says to George after his death, “[b]ut when I
see you again, our versions will be different still” (Naylor 311), and just as the couple has
different views of the story, so will the readers.
Works Cited


