

The Effects of Trauma due to Jim Crow and Slavery in the Grieving Process for African Americans

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Human life follows a continuous pattern that ends in death. It is the final point to where everyone must arrive, yet even with this knowledge, grief becomes part of the acceptance process when a death occurs. In psychology, the most well-known and accepted model of grief is the one suggested by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. The Kübler-Ross model cites five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kübler-Ross). In *Jazz*, Morrison suggests that the grieving process needs a communal context given the historical crime of slavery and Jim Crow since the acceptance becomes the hardest stage to arrive to for the grievers.

Disorders related to the grieving process have become fairly recent in the field of research in psychology among which prolonged grief or complicated grief can be found. Prolonged grief is “characterized by a cluster of symptoms highlighted by an overwhelming sense of yearning for the deceased, persistent difficulty with acceptance of the death, and dysfunction in carrying out a normal life” (as cited in Goldsmith 354) and has been shown through the study carried out by Goldsmith that “bereaved African Americans represent a high-risk group for the development of PGD” (360). Scholars in the field of bereavement studies, have tried to approach “a social-constructionist viewpoint that takes into account factors like culture, ethnicity, religion and community in furthering grief unique to a person, place and time” (as cited in Goldsmith 353) in which those factors represent elements that the Kübler-Ross model fails to address. With this social-constructionist viewpoint in mind, other scholars have also explored *Jazz* as a novel “about the process African-Americans used to mend themselves, to survive the disillusionment that followed the high expectations of the 1920s” (Mobley 7). Mobley argues that *Jazz* includes “the story of slavery, Reconstruction, the hypnotic lure of cities like New York and communities like Harlem, the Great Migration, the frustration of dreams deferred in the North, race riots, race music, the blues, jazz nightclubs, dances, hard times, high

rents, lovemaking, and ecstasy” (8) which gives a context to the grieving process of the characters. The order in which the grieving process takes place for the characters in the novel is thrown out of order, skips certain stages or is completely stopped. Exploring the stages of grief exhibited by the characters in the novel, Morrison seems to argue that an alternative model of grief which includes self-expression, close listening and shared suffering must be used for understanding the grieving process in African Americans.

Joe’s grieving process goes through the stages of grief in disorder throughout the novel. His trauma is started when he is attracted by the sweetness he sees in Dorcas, “the girl buying candy” (Morrison 31), and “the peppermint girl” (Morrison 69). The sweetness is then connected to his mother, Wild, who hid in the cane field (Morrison 174). Joe’s longing for his mother’s acknowledgement is placed upon Dorcas, as he looks for a sign and finally is able to tell someone about the “inside nothing he traveled with [since searching for his mother],” (Morrison 37) and his hope that “maybe those were [Wild’s] fingers moving like that in the bush, not twigs, but in the light so small he could not see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers, maybe he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure” (Morrison 37). However, once Dorcas leaves him, he relives the trauma of abandonment and acts out due to a mixture of shock and denial about their break up, repeating to himself that “I know you didn’t mean those things you said to me [...] what you said I know you didn’t mean” (Morrison 132). Joe deals with this denial and shock by lashing out, “I had the gun but it was not the gun—it was my hand I wanted to touch you with” (Morrison 131) as he hunts for Dorcas in a daze that ends up with her killed by him. What he seeks out of the affair was the ability to express himself about his trauma and past that still affects him in the present, but Dorcas separation from him prevents him from having that peace through her.

An interesting link can be traced between the minor character of Golden Gray and Joe. Golden Gray is immersed in the shock and denial stage of the grieving process and like Joe, his trauma stems from the lack of acknowledgement of a paternal bond. He seeks to confront this in his search for Hunter’s Hunter, his father, since he is denying his biracial origin. The confrontation between Hunter and Golden Gray reveals that for Golden Gray to heal he has to accept the burden of being biracial and the legacy of slavery in disrupting their father-son relationship. Hunter accuses him to coming to “see how black I was. You though you was white,

didn't you? She probably let you think it. Hoped you'd think it." (Morrison 172) and then Golden Gray denies this by expressing his fear about his origin, "If [Vera Louise] announce I was a nigger, I could have been a slave!" (Morrison 173). Golden Gray ultimately must overcome his internalized racism to accept himself and be able to have fulfilling, healthy relationships.

Golden Gray's grieving stage is denial and shock that shifts into bargaining when he dialogues with Hunter. The pain that Golden Gray experiences beneath his struggle to accept his biracial origin, is a "long[ing] for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture." (Morrison 160). Similarly, Joe Trace cannot be acknowledged by his father since he is presumably white from the items found on Wild's hiding spot, "a set of silver brushes and a silver cigar case, [...] a pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone, [...] a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy—except at the seams." (Morrison 184) and is left to wonder where he truly belongs. Hunter's words are accurate when he says to Golden Gray, "Look. Be what you want—white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you go to act black, meaning draw your manhood up—quicklike, and don't bring me no whiteboy sass." (Morrison 173), since by accepting his blackness he must renounce his white privilege and become vulnerable. The ironic duality of interracial couples was that the product of those relationships always suffered at the breaking of paternal bonds turning it into grief and perpetuating a pattern of disavowal under the context of Jim Crow. Parental relationships are the foundations with which romantic partnerships are built on so that reconnection is sought by the victims of abandonment even more strongly due to the destruction of primary bonds.

For Violet, the grieving process gets started by Joe's affair with Dorcas. She has been in a depression stage, through which silence and stillness have become the way for her to cope and repress the trauma from her mother's suicide, "Maybe everyone has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until "uh" or "have mercy" carry almost all of her part of a conversation." (Morrison 24). Violet is also constantly thinking about death, "Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way," (Morrison 24) where her slips of the tongue threaten to disrupt her suppression of the past, making her think that if she instead remains silent, she would not have to confront it. However, once Joe's affair is brought to light, she immerses

into the anger stage and acts out when she goes to Dorcas' funeral and she sees "[her] hands [...] reaching toward the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl's haughty, secret face" (Morrison 90), and "the sound that came from her mouth belonged to something wearing a pelt instead of a coat" (Morrison 91). At this point, Violet seems to experience denial and shock, developing a distinction inside herself between her violent side and herself as two distinct beings living inside her body, "*that* Violet was strong and had hips, why was she proud of trying to kill a dead girl, and she was proud. Whenever she thought about *that* Violet, and what *that* Violet saw through her own eyes, she knew there was no shame there, no disgust" (Morrison 94).

Alice acts a vehicle through which Violet's grieving process continues by providing the means for the stages of bargaining to take place and acceptance to start. When Violet and Alice initiate their interactions, Violet tells her that "I'm not the one you need to be scared of," (Morrison 80) which helps her draw a distinction between who she is and the actions she did out of anger as part of her grief. Furthermore, when she is entering Alice's home, she is forced to relive Rose Dear's trauma related to being evicted with the images of "just want to sit down on your chair" (Morrison 80) and "find a place where I can just sit down" (Morrison 81) since Rose Dear had just "sat there alone, and all by herself like, cup in hand, they came back and tipped the chair she sat in" (Morrison 98) while she was being kicked out of her place. Similarly, Violet's father came, "[he] arrived loaded with ingots of gold for the children, two-dollar pieces for the women and snake oil for the men" (Morrison 99) but is ultimately absent, "twenty-one days later he was gone again" (Morrison 99) which emphasizes the loss of parental bonds for Violet and the bitterness that clouds the sweetness her father brought. Reliving what her mother's trauma was helps Violet to connect how she sees the affair as an eviction because it threatens the loss of home and security. When the affair is taking place Violet muses that, "wherever [I] was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears because it got that cold sometimes it did and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the earlobe" (Morrison 95) emphasizing that when she acted in anger, there was a reason behind the spot she defiled in Dorcas' corpse. Even more, the act of violence she committed connects the threat to her security as her lack of warmth and intimacy in her home when the affair took place.

Alice's words are significant in triggering the acceptance stage of Violet's grieving process and allow her to heal. As they are talking, it is Alice who tells Violet that "You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it" (Morrison 112) and "Nobody's asking you to take it. I'm sayin make it, make it!" (Morrison 113) and through these words convey to Violet that healing is possible, and that the affair does not have to mean the end of her relationship with Joe. It is only because Alice has also grown through the similar pain of a cheating husband that the healing process is able to take place because she truly related to Violet's trauma with the affair. In other words, it is thanks to the outside help brought on by Alice that Violet seems to be able to accept her loss and move past it. By moving from the individual grieving process to a communal context, Alice can play a role in healing Violet, shown through figurative language through her "mend[ing] the sleeve with the tiniest stitches" (Morrison 82) at the start of their meetings and resolved through laughter, "in no time laughter was rocking them both [...] and suddenly the world was right side up. Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears." (Morrison 113) to enter the acceptance stage. It is "the friendship and sharing between these two women [that] heals Violet of her grief" (Moblely 6).

Dorcas is the only character whose grieving process is left unresolved due to her death. She was the girl who Joe had an affair with and a victim of the aftermath of the East St. Louis riots which makes the historical crime of racist white mob violence evident in her trauma. During her childhood, her mother and father were both killed during this commotion, one in a fire, "her house was torched, and she burned crispy in its flame" (Morrison 57) and one by being attacked by the mob, "he was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death" (Morrison 57). The aftermath this trauma causes to her is evident in the text through the symbol of the ember, "[it] traveled down her throat because it smoked and glowed there still. Dorcas never let it out and never put it out" (Morrison 61). Dorcas never speaks of her loss by swallowing down the pain and shutting down the feelings the loss brought up in her, placing her into the denial stage of the grieving process. This trauma is shared by her aunt, Alice Manfred, which makes her become overprotective of Dorcas and incite a rebel-like streak in her, as "Dorcas thought of the life-below-the-sash as all the life there was" (Morrison 60). Dorcas' active curiosity to pursue sexual connections is her way to keep the feelings bottled up while pursuing her freedom. Going out

with men like Acton and Joe was a way to silence herself, to seek recklessness, “it was like she wanted them to do something scary all the time. Steal things or go back in the store and slap the face of a white salesgirl who wouldn’t wait on her, [...] everything was like a picture show to her, and she was the one on the railroad track,” (Morrison 202) and through the constant secrecy and excitement she put up a façade in order to not acknowledge her trauma.

Ultimately, Dorcas dies, and her trauma is left at the denial stage never moving further into anger expressions or any of the other stages of grief suggested by the Kubler-Ross model. Dorcas realized that “with Joe she pleased [herself] because he encouraged [her] to. With Joe [she] worked the stick of the world, the power in [her] hand.” (Morrison 190) and that she had power over him since she had unconditional love from him, “He didn’t even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything—and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad. I don’t know.” (Morrison 190). Her realization of this power ties in with the acknowledgement of Dorcas as a mother figure for Joe, “I know his name but Mama won’t tell” (Morrison 193) in which she protects him and her last message to him, “there’s only one apple” (Morrison 213) to convey that Violet is his one true love and that Dorcas was simply a temporary substitute through which Joe was able to start his grieving process.

Joe Trace provides Dorcas with the perfect outlet for her pursuit of physical connection. Their relationship enables vulnerability to seep through partly. Dorcas is vulnerable, traumatized in her own way, but willing to listen to Joe's musings, to talk to him. For example, when they are laying in bed together, he would say "important things like how the hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream at dusk..." (Morrison 36) and she would share her past, "because the shots were not part of what she was dreaming..." so it was mutually beneficial. Morrison beautifully summarizes what they found on each other was a quiet comfort and understanding, since what Joe mused about her was "hooves tracing her cheekbones and who knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like and who filled it for him, just as he filled it for her, because she had it too." (37-38).

When exploring Joe and Violet’s relationship, their individual grieving process differ but allow them to eventually fix their relationship. In the beginning, when they first enter the city they are described as a “young country couple, laughing and tapping back at the tracks”

(Morrison 30) and “dancing all the way. [Violet’s] hip bones rubbed [Joe’s] thigh as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling” (Morrison 32) which shows a more joyous, fun feeling shared between them compared to their lack of intimacy when they went through their respective grieving process. The happiness and lightheartedness of the excitement Joe and Violet shared coming into the city together is the ideal spot that was lost in the individual grieving process they needed to go through for their relationship to be healthy. Old love offers a way to be listened and acknowledged, becoming more about comfort rather than thrill. Towards the end of the novel, Joe and Violet are dancing and happy again, “Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing [...] Something in it made me feel I shouldn’t be there. Shouldn’t be looking at them doing that.” (Morrison 214) reverting back to their initial love journey coming into the city. The act of dancing between them is significant as a renewal of the intimacy in their relationship with the narrator’s sense of intrusion of a personal moment.

In conclusion, in *Jazz*, the characters are all broken by their past, victims of traumas which have led them to require going through a grieving process to be able to truly love. At the height of Jim Crow, Morrison demonstrates that it is necessary to overcome one’s traumas by engaging in communal healing by those who have suffered similarly, to develop healthy, loving relationships with others and reach the acceptance stage of the grieving process. The Kübler-Ross model can then be interpreted as an euro-centric individualizing grieving process which fails to accommodate given the context of historical crime caused by the legacy of slavery which requires outside help to come to terms with the loss rather than just an individual acceptance of the loss. As Mobley has stated, it is “through powerful metaphors and motifs, [that] Toni Morrison reveals in *Jazz* the cultural unconscious of history, memory, and meaning that has sustained and that continues to sustain black people in good times and bad” (8) and in which a model that incorporates the nuances of jazz: individual solos, rifts and communal identity to be the base of a grieving model for African Americans.

Works Cited

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