

Postmodern Theory as a Frame for Contemporary American Literature

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The efforts made to classify and define contemporary American literature have been incomplete at best. These difficulties lie in part because of the literature's close proximity to modern readers; we are still in the process of reading and writing contemporary American works. Readers do not yet have the advantages of perspective that generally arise from time and distance and which help us to analyze past literature objectively. Expectation, how one anticipates a particular text will reveal itself and what will be found in that revelation, is an advantage that forms in a reader's mind over time. As contemporary American literature is just that, contemporary, readers often approach such a text with the expectations they have formed while reading works of previous eras. The American literature of today is written in the same form that readers are familiar reading; such as novels, poetry, short stories and drama. The form that a contemporary work uses will already have a preformed set of expectations established in the minds of readers on how to analyze and understand the work. For these readers of contemporary American literature, such expectations often fail to benefit their readings and even hinder the reader's ability to gain meaning from the work.

The problem for these readers is that they become trapped in the contradictions between what they expect from a text and what actually appears in the reading. For many, contemporary American literature is at once recognizable and incomprehensible because a reader feels the familiarity of a novel even if little present in the work conforms to the expectations that this familiarity evokes. It is in this setting of contradiction that the postmodern theory can become more than just a tool for literary analysis. When this theory is used as a framework to understand contemporary American literature, the inconsistencies and contradictions of what one expects literature to be and what contemporary American literature is can be sorted through and understood. Toni Morrison's book *Jazz* offers an excellent example of how a work can challenge a reader's expectations and how the reader can use postmodern theory to overcome those expectations and derive the true meaning from a particular text.

Even though postmodern theory is wrapped up in confusion, this confusion itself often leads to purpose and meaning. Chris Snipp-Walmsley's idea that "postmodernism offers a moment of tension: a temporary, provisional, and always precarious middle ground that we can occupy so as to see things differently" is a good way to explain the relationship between confusion and postmodern theory (425). Through postmodern theory, the confusion between what we expect and what is actually in the text is where the purpose of contemporary American literature can often be found.

With the postmodern theory as a framework to understand *Jazz*, the confusion that readers feel while reading the entire story in the first four pages is important because it is meant to direct the reader's attention to a different interpretation of the story. This confusion calls into question what the purpose of a novel is, if not for telling a story, and makes the reader start to examine other possible uses of the novel format. This idea is developed throughout the novel. How exactly can the form of the novel be used in addition to the telling of a story? What other purpose is there of reading literature in the form of a novel if the story is no longer the primary focus?

Toni Morrison actually explains this in the forward to her novel with her claim that "[she] had written novels in which structure was designed to enhance meaning; here the structure would equal meaning" (xix). Morrison uses a structure like jazz music for her novel, the meaning of the book can be found in how it mimics the free flow of jazz rather than in the book's plot. If the novel would have met the expectations of readers by allowing the story to develop over the course of the reading, then attention would naturally drift to the plot for purpose and it would be more difficult to consider the jazz structure the most important aspect of the book. By telling the story at the very beginning Morrison causes the reader to question where meaning will be found, and the novel eventually reveals her purpose in the structure itself. As Snipp-Walmsley summarizes, this is where "postmodernism functions best not as a

philosophy or an aesthetic movement, but as a principle of critical vigilance: a means of opening up the contradictions and aporias in the master narratives and power discourses” (425).

Jazz starts to challenge expectations from the very beginning. The work is indicated to be a novel on the front cover, *Jazz* “A novel by Toni Morrison,” but what follows does not read as one might expect from such a book. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines the idea of a novel as “an extended narrative . . . its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), ampler development of milieu, and more sustained exploration of character and motives” (Abrams 226). To put this definition into terms of reader expectation, a reader wants the novel to tell a story using characters, plot and situations so that by the end of the book, the story will have lead to some greater meaning that can be identified as the purpose for reading the novel to begin with.

Jazz challenges almost every expectation that a reader has in a novel, which includes the purpose of the novel itself. What normally takes an entire novel to develop, and what some would argue is the very purpose of the novel format, is learned before a reader even finishes chapter one of the book. We know the main characters are Joe, his wife Violet, and the eighteen-year-old girl. The conflict begins with Joe’s affair with the young girl and ends with him shooting her, while Violet’s attempts for revenge fail and she becomes more understanding. We even learn details that most novels place throughout the work to create suspense in the story, like how Violet learns of Joe’s affair and why Joe does not get arrested. Readers expect that they will learn the story gradually as they read the novel, yet the story in *Jazz* is told fully within the first four pages. The contradiction between what the reader expects in a novel and what is read in *Jazz* creates confusion and makes the reader question what purpose there is in reading the approximately two hundred pages that are left.

Applying the postmodern theory to *Jazz* can help readers find meaning in the novel as a guide of how to navigate through this confusion and gain understanding, especially since confusion is so closely tied to the theory of postmodernism that it could be argued as one of its main goals. Dingo Felluga’s “Introduction to Modernism and Postmodernism” lists “irony and parody, a breakdown between high and low cultural forms, a questioning of grand narratives, simulacrum versus temporality, disorientation, and secondary orality” as characteristics of postmodernism. Each of these terms not only holds some level of ambiguity in meaning, but also each works to create some confusion through their challenge to one’s expectation in their use or application.

Once it becomes clear how the postmodern theory can be applied as a framework for understanding contemporary American literature, its uses are endless. As readers continue *Jazz*, they will encounter many more contradictions between their expectations and what they will encounter in Morrison’s book. The novel confounds the expectation that setting is just where a novel takes place as the setting in *Jazz* actually becomes a character in itself. The expectation that the narrator is a singular person who is telling the story is also questioned since there are many narrators, which allows the voice to change at any time within the work. The expectation that history is used to supply factual background information or insight into the lives of the characters is also challenged throughout the novel in different ways by every character.

With each of these contradictions there is an element of confusion, a confusion that is cleared only when the postmodern theory is used to find the ultimate meaning of the work itself. Often this hidden meaning will leave readers to think as much about themselves as they are about the novel they have just read, the ultimate purpose of postmodern theory and much of contemporary American literature. As Morrison points out in *Jazz*, “[It’s] something else you have to figure in before you can figure it out” (228). By using the postmodern theory to figure in the confusion of contemporary American literature, in the work of Morrison and other authors, the possibilities of what may be found are endless.

Works Cited

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