

Halmstad University

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English 61-90

## Subjects Matter –

The Subject-Object Dichotomy in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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C-essay

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## Abstract

This essay examines the subject-object dichotomy between men and women in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and the thesis of the essay is that this dichotomy develops into subject-object harmony.

Through Simone de Beauvoir's theory regarding the subject-object dichotomy and a close reading of the novel, this essay concludes that *Jazz* shows the possibility of reciprocal relationships built on friendship. In other words, the dichotomy changes into harmony, which makes it possible for both men and women to reach freedom and fulfilment in transcendence.

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## 1. Introduction

This essay focuses on the depiction of the subject-object dichotomy in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. The notion of a subject-object dichotomy, within feminist theory, was coined by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, which was originally published in 1949. In short, it deals with the relationship between men and women, where men, historically, have been depicted as subjects, while women have been depicted as passive objects. In other words, the subject represents the active, the one who takes action, whereas the object is the passive, the one who receives the action (Ring 14). The thesis of this essay is that, in *Jazz*, the subject-object dichotomy develops into subject-object harmony, in the sense that the male and female characters in the novel alternate between the two positions.

Throughout history many female authors have described women in a stereotypical way as objects, instead of autonomous beings (Pandey XVI). However, considering the influence that feminist literary theory has had on the study of literature during the past thirty years (Warhol-Down and Price Herndl 4), authors in general and female authors in particular are more likely to avoid this patriarchal norm and instead depict men and women in a more equal manner in their novels. *Jazz* is such a novel.

The main plotline in *Jazz* revolves around the married middle-aged couple Violet and Joe Trace, who live in "the City," which according to Roberta Rubenstein should be read as Harlem (113). Joe has had a brief love affair with an 18 year-old girl by the name Dorcas Manfred, a relationship ended abruptly when he shot Dorcas to death, because she wished to leave him in order to pursue happiness with a younger man called Acton. The omniscient, but unreliable, narrator of the story indicates that history is to repeat itself when Dorcas' best friend, Felice, comes into Violet's and Joe's life. Nevertheless, history does not repeat itself and instead the novel ends in a harmoniously way, in the sense that Violet and Joe take up their relationship again.

One of the central themes of the novel is how being abandoned, sometimes repeatedly, affects the different characters. Violet's father was seldom at home during her childhood and her mother committed suicide when Violet was a young child. Furthermore she felt abandoned by her husband when she found out about his extra-marital affair. As for Joe, he never knew his mother, Wild, and he also felt abandoned by Dorcas. When it comes to Dorcas, she had lost both her parents in a riot at a young age and was consequently raised by her aunt, Alice Manfred. Alice herself felt abandoned as well, due to the fact that her husband left her for another woman. In addition, the characters Felice and Golden Gray had also felt rejected in their past. Felice's parents worked a long way from home during her childhood and she only saw them "thirty-four days a year" (Morrison 198). Golden Gray was the child of a white woman called Miss Vera Louise Gray and a black slave and it was not until Golden was eighteen years old that he found out about his father's identity. In my reading, the feelings of abandonment the different characters experience can in various ways both help and prevent the achievement of subject-object harmony.

## 2. Theory and Method

As mentioned earlier, the subject-object dichotomy focuses on how men and women are represented and was first explored by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. According to Fiona Tolan, the central part of de Beauvoir's thesis was her "exposition of the fundamental inequality between the sex roles in society" (11). De Beauvoir claimed that man is perceived as the Subject, whereas woman is the Other. In other words, man is always the point of reference to which woman is defined. The female position as the Other makes it in turn difficult for women to reach the level of the subject, because the subject's ego – "the consciousness of the subject" (Tolan 11) – is demarcated antagonistically vis-à-vis the Other. Due to the fact that woman holds the position as the Other, she would have to "define herself

in opposition to herself” (Tolan 11), which cannot be done. As a result, instead of claiming the position of the subject, women form alliances with men, which resemble the unequal relationships between masters and their slaves. Through these alliances women may get protection and may consider themselves happy, but according to de Beauvoir, happiness is not equal to liberty, because a woman’s “freedom” within a patriarchal structure is “limited and defined, and granted her by someone else, and as such, is no liberty at all” (Tolan 12). Instead, real freedom is only reached through transcendence, which historically has been the destiny of the male. He sets his mark on the world through his work and inventions, whereas woman has been confined to the roles of wife or mother; in other words she is a female mammal rather than a transcendent human being. Still, generally speaking, women are too often content with these traditional roles granted them by society (Tidd, “Simone de Beauvoir” 100) and consequently they “do not dispute their otherness” (Andrew 139).

Moreover, de Beauvoir expressed a rather pessimistic view concerning the institution of marriage, and according to Debra B. Bergoffen, she tried to reveal “the relationships between patriarchal marriage arrangements and the exploitation of women” (65). For example, she stated that marriage is “the destiny that society traditionally offers women” (de Beauvoir 439). The key word in this quote is “destiny” because, as suggested by Bergoffen, central to de Beauvoir’s analysis regarding marriage is “the fact that for most women, marriage is not a choice but a destiny” (94). However, marriage is not the destiny for men, which, as mentioned above, is transcendence. Thus, throughout history, matrimony has not been “a contract between equals and not, therefore, a reciprocal relationship” (Bergoffen 94). Instead, through these contracts, women have been “duty-bound to be sexually available to their husbands” (Bergoffen 94).

Nevertheless, de Beauvoir believed that transcendence can be reached by women as well and that women can reach freedom “by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms” (16). In

order for this to happen, men and women must “achieve reciprocal recognition” (Simons 4), which is based on “friendship, generosity, and love rather than tyranny and conflict” (Tidd, “The Self-Other Relation” 234), or, to use de Beauvoir’s own words: “The conflict can be overcome by the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement” (159). Notably, when women have more access to the labour market, they also have more opportunities to change “into a self” (Vintges 215).

While de Beauvoir has been criticized in recent years by feminist theorists like Jennifer Ring, Diane Elam, and Luce Irigaray, who consider her theories to carry a male bias and consequently are out-of-date (Vintges 214), I find her perspective valid for my analysis, as the notion that men and women, in order to solve the subject-object dichotomy, must “recognize each other as peers” (de Beauvoir 755), neither entails a male predisposition nor is outdated. Ring claims that de Beauvoir was only critical of “male monopoly of subjectivity” (8) and hence, in her view, while she wanted women to be able to reach the position of the subject, she never questioned “the epistemology [subject-object] itself” (Ring 8). Moreover, Elam argues that women can only become subjects when they “conform to specified and calculable representations of themselves as subjects” (42) and this does not constitute real freedom because “moving from the back seat to the front is not the same thing as getting out of the car” (42). Furthermore, as Judith Butler points out, Irigaray considers the subject as well as the object to be “masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether” (16). However, according to Karen Vintges, de Beauvoir’s theories were not male-biased, because she wanted woman, as well as man, to become a “sensitive self” (218), and therefore *The Second Sex* is still both “relevant and powerful” (214).

The method that will be used in this essay is close reading. Close reading emerged during the mid-twentieth century at Harvard University and was primarily advocated by New Critics (Mikics 61). The New Critics did not focus that much on intertextuality or the background of the author; instead they asked themselves how the text works, which entails a very thorough reading of the literary work (Mikics 204). David Mikics defines this method as the “discipline of careful, intricate study of a text” (61). When using close reading, one examines the details of the text, in order to analyse the literary work in question. According to Mikics, close reading is “the necessary form of serious literary study” (61).

In my approach, I will use de Beauvoir’s theories primarily, though combined at times with certain perspectives by Irigaray, in order to analyse the subject-object dichotomy in the novel from three different perspectives, namely “paid work,” “family” (which in this context deals primarily with the relationship between parents and children), and finally “relationships” (which includes both marriages and other relationships based on love, or friendship). These two latter perspectives will at times overlap, due to the fact that throughout the plot the characters’ relationship with their parents also has impact on their other close relationships.

### 3. The Subject-Object Dichotomy in *Jazz*

#### 3.1. Paid Work

De Beauvoir thought that women through access to paid work would have a greater chance to become subjects rather than remain objects and they would thereby free themselves from male domination (Vintges 215). If that is the case, then several of the female characters of *Jazz* seem to have a chance to achieve this. For example, both Violet and Alice work, the former as a hairdresser while the latter “did fine work off and on in the garment district” (Morrison 6). Moreover, the narrator mentions coloured nurses, “dedicated and superb in their

profession” (Morrison 8), and the reader is also told about the Dumfrey sisters who had “nice paper-handling jobs” (Morrison 18-19). In addition, there is a female student from a vocational school who had sent an application to a correspondence law school, in order to become a lawyer (Morrison 42). Furthermore, Dorcas’ best friend, Felice, explains that she wants to have a job and make her own money before she gets married (Morrison 204). All these women then either have or seek work and the opportunity to make their own money. Consequently, they do not need to rely on men for financial support and are not necessarily tied to the domestic sphere. Instead they can enter the social sphere and set themselves up as subjects.

When it comes to Violet in particular, even though the money she earns is described as “pocket change” (Morrison 13), she is nevertheless the breadwinner of the family, since Joe’s passivity following the death of Dorcas makes him neglect his job. Thus, Violet’s earnings keep them both afloat. In my view, this represents a reversed subject-object dichotomy in the sense that Joe, the male, needs to rely on Violet, the female, for financial support. From this perspective Violet has claimed the position of the independent subject, whereas Joe has become the object.

However, it is also evident that this reversed dichotomy is not largely approved of, because when Violet is discussed as “someone needing assistance” by the Salem Women’s Club, she is turned down due to the fact that she has a husband “who needed to stop feeling sorry for himself” (Morrison 4). This corresponds to de Beauvoir’s notion that a man “is regarded above all as a producer, and his existence is justified by the work he provides” (440). Hence, men who are passive objects are frowned upon and viewed as odd.

### 3.2. Family

The subject-object dichotomy within the family structure is most evident in Miss Vera Louise's relationship with her father. She is the white mother of Golden Gray, and she was renounced by her parents when they found out that she was pregnant and that the father-to-be was a black man. Her father, Colonel Gray, slapped her when he realized the "terrible thing that had happened to his daughter" (Morrison 141) and linked his daughter's pregnancy to the fact that "there were seven mulatto children on his land" (Morrison 141). As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber points out, this indicates that Colonel Gray was the father of these slave children and would have realized that the father-to-be could very well have been his daughter's half-brother (109). Regarding this incident, John N. Duvall highlights the intertextuality vis-à-vis William Faulkner's *Absalom*, in which the absolute fear for a racist white community was that a black man would have sex with a white woman (138). Notably, this fear did not include sexual encounters between white men and black women, because during slavery it was not uncommon that the male slave owner also was the actual father of the slave woman's children (Madsen 225). Thus, the subject-object dichotomy works on two levels here, gender and race; by seducing a black slave Miss Vera Louise acts similarly to the way white men like her father have found fit to act, in other words, she acts like a subject. This is in turn unsettling and cannot be tolerated by her family, because within a patriarchal structure an unwed woman is her father's property. Consequently, Miss Vera Louise is rejected by her patriarch father and is given a large amount of money to move away, the message from her parents being: "die, or live if you like, elsewhere" (Morrison 141).

Through Miss Vera Louise's decision to live elsewhere and, together with True Belle, bring up Golden without the support of a man, she positions herself as a Self rather than a female Other. Of course, it can be argued that she still stays within the boundaries of the Other, because she keeps her motherhood secret from society, telling her neighbours that

Golden is “an orphaned baby” (Morrison 139), and given that, as Adrienne Rich points out, maternity is “‘sacred’ so long as its offspring are ‘legitimate’ – that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother” (qtd. in Eckard 11). Moreover, she is an unwed mother and de Beauvoir argues that “Motherhood ... is respected only in the married woman; the unwed woman remains an object of scandal, and a child is a severe handicap for her” (444). Yet, Miss Vera Louise’s lie regarding her motherhood notwithstanding, she still gives Golden the last name Gray, thus indicating that no man legally controls her. Furthermore, by taking care of the “orphaned baby” without the help of her family or a husband, she moves beyond the passive role of an object and, as the narrator puts it, this is “a renegade, almost suffragette thing to do” (Morrison 139).

Even Golden himself ultimately manages to navigate through a state of subject-object harmony and in my view, this is due to the fact that Miss Vera Louise kept her motherhood secret from him as well and he grew up not knowing “whether she was his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor” (Morrison 143). Already as infants, boys recognise a sexual difference in relation to their mother, and this difference is experienced as a threat by boys due to their powerlessness vis-à-vis the mother; as a result, boys react against this threat by being hostile towards everything connected to the mother and try to separate themselves from her (Stone 15). According to Irigaray, this separation is problematic for a man due to his “maternal origin” (qtd. in Stone 129). Consequently, men place themselves above women and see them as objects that they “must transcend and control” (Stone 129). However, since Golden grew up thinking he was an orphan, he never had a mother to separate himself from during his childhood. Accordingly, he never considered the “feminine” to pose an imminent and insurmountable threat to his own subjectivity, which in turn means that he did not perceive woman as Other. Of course, he later found out the truth about his mother, but by then, as Rubenstein points out, he was already “androgynous” (120).

Golden may feel contempt for his mother due to her lies, but he also feels hatred towards his father, partly because of the abandonment and partly even because of his father's skin colour. The reader is told that Golden has a black horse when he travels to confront his father (Morrison 143). This horse could through its colour suggest the representation of a black man – a slave. Just like horses, black slaves were used and maltreated; their sole purpose being to serve their white masters. The narrator mentions that Golden intends to kill his father when he meets him (Morrison 143) and his motive may arguably be to kill the blackness in himself.

However, Golden's journey back to his father does not lead to patricide, but rather to reconciliation, in the sense that he overcomes the subject-object dichotomy on two levels, master-slave and male-female. First, when he reaches his father's cabin Golden realises that he does not hate his father. Instead, he hopes that their tête-à-tête will lead to both of them being "free ... and whole" (Morrison 159). Second, Golden eventually enters into a reciprocal relationship with a black, pregnant woman, Wild, who he met during the journey to his father, and according to Duvall, this relationship means that he "is able to ... move past his [remaining] fear of the feminine" (141). Thus, on both levels of the dichotomy, the young man reaches a state of harmony.

The strategies men use in order to claim superiority vis-à-vis women are called "the murder of the mother" by Irigaray (qtd. in Stone 134) and in Joe Trace's case this materialises into a literal attempted murder of the mother. Just as Golden, Joe does not have a mother to detach himself from, because immediately after birth Wild abandoned him. This rejection scars Joe throughout the novel and he goes looking for her three times, the second time bringing a gun along, though not loaded. Thus, no matter how anguished he might be due to his abandonment, he is nevertheless unable to kill his mother. Joe is thereby, arguably, also unable to claim a dominant position in relation to women.

According to Irigaray, men have, moreover, an unconscious desire to merge with the mother (Stone 135), which in Joe's case is manifested through his search for Wild and the discovery of her habitation. When the narrator describes his birth, a cave metaphor is used for the vagina, "This baby [Joe] ... clung to the walls of that foamy cave" (Morrison 170) and considering the fact that Wild actually lives in a cave, this imagery, possibly, shows Joe's wish of becoming one with his mother. This desire is further demonstrated when the narrator describes Joe's entry into the cave:

Finally he [Joe] stuck his head in. Pitch dark. ... Crawling, squirming through a space low enough to graze his hair. Just as he decided to back out of there, the dirt under his hands became stone and light hit him so hard he flinched. He had come through a few body-lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. ... Unable to turn around inside, he pulled himself all the way out to reenter head first. ... Then he saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun. (Morrison 183)

As Rubenstein points out, this depiction is an "archetypal fantasy of return to the womb followed by rebirth" (118).

In my view, Wild's rejection of Joe at birth turns out to be rather beneficiary for both of them. First, by refusing to be confined to the role of mother, Wild also refuses to play the role of the Other and remains a subject. Second, due to the fact that Joe grew up without his mother, he has no image of a caring mother to react against. Consequently, Joe neither has an antipathy towards women, nor does he perceive women as objects to be controlled. This can be seen when Dorcas' aunt Alice thinks of him as a man in whose presence, women felt "not only safe but kindly ... because he was the sort women ran to when they thought they were being followed" (Morrison 73).

Like Joe, Violet also had a motherless upbringing, because her mother, Rose Dear, committed suicide by drowning herself in a well when Violet was a young child. This experience makes her decide not to have children of her own, which consequently means that she is never limited to the role of the mother. According to de Beauvoir, motherhood can be experienced as a “total emancipation” (535) from a woman’s point of view, in the sense that she “takes the place of the one who gave birth to her” (535). This “emancipation,” though, is not equal to freedom through subjectivity, instead it can incarcerate a woman in the position of the female Other, because, as argued by Marianne Hirsch, a mother “is never fully a subject” (12). Due to the fact that Violet does not have a superior mother figure to emancipate herself from, she has no ambition of claiming Rose Dear’s place through childbirth. Hence, by remaining childless she also declines “her physiological destiny” of motherhood (de Beauvoir 524) and instead she has the possibility of reaching the position of the female Self.

Nevertheless, the loss of her mother, possibly, obstructs Violet’s subjectivity to a certain extent, because, as argued by Morrison in a 1977 interview, “what [black] women say to each other and what they say to their daughters is vital information” (qtd. in Peterson 78). Considering the fact that Violet was only twelve years old when her mother committed suicide, this “vital information” was never passed down and, as Hirsch points out, a mother’s discourse is important “in her child’s process of subject-formation” (12). Consequently, Violet longs for Rose Dear and her motherly wisdom: “mother-hunger ... hit her [Violet] like a hammer” (Morrison 108). Of course, mother-hunger may be interpreted as a hunger for a child of her own, because it occurs to Violet when she reaches menopause, at which time her choice of childlessness becomes irrevocable. However, as Rubenstein suggests, the term can also be interpreted as a “hunger for her lost mother” (116). In fact, while talking about Violet’s mother-hunger, the narrator says that she “was drowning in it” (Morrison 108) and this is emphasized also through continual references to a well: “Violet rests her hand on his

[Joe's] chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well" (Morrison 225). Even though, from this perspective, Violet's motherless upbringing initially may be obstructing her subject-formation, it, nevertheless, does not prevent it from happening, because she finds other female-female alliances through which essential information is shared.

As mentioned above, Violet does not have any children of her own, but at the end of the novel she becomes a mother-figure for Felice, to whom she passes down her wisdom, which is significant because, as argued by Hirsch, when a mother expresses her discourse, it "moves her from object to subject" (12). Through this female-female alliance then, Violet voices her discourse and consequently becomes a subject. Moreover, due to the fact that Felice is not her real daughter, Violet never runs the risk of remaining "the object in her child's process of subject-formation" (Hirsch 12). Hence, through this "childless maternity," she not only becomes a subject, but she protects this status as well.

Like Violet, Dorcas experienced parental loss in her childhood, but unlike Violet, she is never able to fully reach the position of the subject. As previously mentioned, at a young age Dorcas lost both her parents in a riot, when her father was killed in the street and her mother was burnt to death (Morrison 56). This fire also consumed Dorcas' beloved "clothespin dolls" (Morrison 38), which Schreiber argues were Dorcas' "symbolic babies" (116). According to de Beauvoir, a girl "sees in the doll ... an object to possess and dominate" (533) and this is one of the phases a woman experiences "in connection with motherhood" (533). Hence, Dorcas can be viewed in a maternal role, though its realisation is indirect. At the same time, she never talked about her loss and instead remained silent: "She never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word" (Morrison 57). Accordingly, Dorcas never voices her discourse and as a result never becomes a subject.

In short, maternal abandonment affects men and women differently in *Jazz*. On the one hand, Golden and Joe are able to move beyond the dichotomy because neither of them has a

caring mother to revolt against. On the other hand, due to the death of their mothers, Violet and Dorcas miss out on the bond with a mother and the vital information that mothers pass down to their daughters, which, in turn, disturbs the subject-formation process for both of them. Violet solves this by forming relationships with other women, in which wisdom is shared, but Dorcas stays silent and is thereby unable to reach a subject position.

### 3.3. Relationships

The novel shows that it is possible for women and men to form relationships that are based on subject-object harmony primarily through the description of the relationship between Wild and Golden. While the reader is actually never outright told about the romance between the two, it is hinted several times throughout the narration. For example, after meeting his father for the first time, Golden thought about killing him the following day, but he never did, and, as the narrator speculates, “It must have been the girl [Wild] who changed his mind” (Morrison 173). Moreover, after Golden carried the injured Wild into his father’s cabin, he changed his clothes, putting on a yellow shirt and “trousers with buttons of bone” (Morrison 158), which are later spotted by Joe when he finds Wild’s cave: “a pair of man’s trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded, a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy – except at the seams. There, both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow” (Morrison 184). Their relationship is further hinted upon through Golden’s father observing them: “To see the two of them together was a regular jolt: the young man’s head of yellow hair long as a dog’s tail next to her skein of black wool” (Morrison 167). Preceding this thought, the narrator had noted that if Wild had stayed with Golden’s father “maybe she would have ... nursed her baby, learned how to dress and talk to folks” (Morrison 167). But if Wild had stayed with him and “nursed” her baby, she would also have stayed within the boundaries of the Other. Instead, Wild refuses to live in accordance with the normative patriarchal structure; she wants

to remain independent and keep her subjectivity. Morrison notes that female subjectivity scares most men and as a result they “sharpen their knives” in Wild’s presence (Morrison 178). Still, Golden is not afraid of her and considering that he and Wild live together in a cave, it is obvious that he has no intention of changing her. Unlike other men, he respects her subject status, and according to Schreiber, “bonds ... and finds peace” with her (111). Thus, their relationship can be regarded as reciprocal.

Lovalerie King and Lynn Orilla Scott argue that Wild is Joe’s “original object of love” (51) and it is the futile search for his lost mother that eventually leads Joe to Dorcas, a girl whom he perceives as a mother-substitute. The connection that Joe makes between his mother and Dorcas is obvious when he, after hearing about her relationship with Acton, describes her as wild as he searches for her during the night of the murder:

What would she want with a rooster? ... Nothing they have I don’t have better. Plus I know how to treat a woman. I never have, never would, mistreat one. ... When I find her, I know – I bet my life – she won’t be holed up with one of them. His clothes won’t be all mixed up with hers. Not her. Not Dorcas. She’ll be alone. Hardheaded. Wild, even. But alone. (Morrison 182)

Besides his reference to Dorcas as “wild,” the mentioning of clothes “all mixed up with hers” might also be interpreted as symptomatic of Joe’s perception of Dorcas as a mother-substitute: in Wild’s cave he had seen a man’s clothes and, one could claim that now he sees Acton not only as a rival regarding Dorcas, but as a man who won his mother’s love. The narrator makes then a connection between Wild and Dorcas during the cave episode, where, after Joe spots all of Wild’s belongings but not Wild herself, the storyteller wonders: “But where is *she* [Wild]?” (Morrison 184). This is at the end of the chapter, the following chapter of which opens with the sentence: “There she is” (Morrison 187). However, the “she” now is not a

reference to Wild but to Dorcas, who is dancing with Acton at “an adult party” (Morrison 187).

Considering his relationship with Violet, Joe is rather passive at first, while in his affair with Dorcas he plays a more active role. His passivity in the relationship with Violet can possibly be explained by his longing for his lost mother. Searching for his mother the second time, he had called out to her: “Give me a sign, then. You don’t have to say anything. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I’ll go; I promise. A sign” (Morrison 178). But as Wild did not reach out her hand, Joe came to settle with the first woman who did, which happened to be Violet and, notably, Joe himself makes the link to his mother: “Like me saying. ‘All right, Violet, I’ll marry you,’ just because I couldn’t see whether a wildwoman put out her hand or not” (Morrison 181). However, in his relationship with Dorcas, Joe acts more like a subject, at least according to him:

I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don’t ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn’t fall in love. I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind.  
(Morrison 135)

His perception of himself as a subject notwithstanding, Joe still does not act in a patriarchal manner, as is indicated by his going out “every night the girl demanded” (Morrison 49), which shows that Dorcas demanded and Joe obeyed, a state of things which is also evident in Dorcas’ own assertion: “With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand” (Morrison 191).

At the same time, Dorcas is not interested in working the stick of the world and being a subject. Joe might be looking for a mother figure, but Dorcas is not looking for a son. Instead, she wants to be an object in what would be a more traditional patriarchal relationship.

Consequently, she falls in love with a more masculine man, whose name, Acton, according to Rubenstein, suggests “action” (119). Dorcas considers herself happy with Acton and she even claims that she is about to develop a personality through this relationship: “I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I’m getting one” (Morrison 190). Dorcas might think she gets the chance to develop a personality, but hers is not an independent one; instead it is merely a passive extension of the man’s personality, or as Susan Neal Mayberry phrases it, “Dorcas declines the responsibility, and the messiness, of slowly making her own self and substitutes instead the fast personality that she acquires from Acton” (214). Moreover, it is evident that Dorcas perceives herself more as the property of a man than as an autonomous woman: “I’m Acton’s and it’s Acton I want to please. He expects it” (Morrison 191). Accordingly, she wishes to be an object within the patriarchal subject-object dichotomy in which women, as Lynda Zwinger points out, “aren’t supposed to tell what they want – they’re supposed to be what’s wanted” (186). It is actually rather obvious that Dorcas aspires to be the kind of woman, she thinks, Acton wants her to be:

Acton, now, he tells me when he doesn’t like the way I fix my hair. Then I do it how he likes it. I never wear glasses when he is with me and I changed my laugh for him to one he likes better. I think he does. I know he didn’t like it before. And I play with my food now. Joe liked for me to eat it all up and want more. Acton gives me a quiet look when I ask for seconds. He worries about me that way. Joe never did. Joe didn’t care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. (Morrison 190)

Joe does not care what kind of woman Dorcas is, because he is not looking for a lover but rather a mother figure and by killing Dorcas, his mother substitute, Joe replicates “the murder of the mother” strategy, which, as mentioned earlier, is a way for men to claim superiority vis-à-vis women. However, through this act, Joe does not reach the status of the

subject, but actually becomes passive, which is a conduct generally ascribed to the female Other. In addition, after the death of Dorcas, Joe is seen crying in public, which according to the narrator is unusual for men: “A strange sight you hardly ever see: men crying so openly. It’s not a thing they do” (Morrison 118).

It is only when Felice tells Joe about Dorcas’ last words that he is able to move on and reach both subjectivity and harmony. According to Felice, Dorcas’ final words were: “There’s only one apple. . . . Just one. Tell Joe” (Morrison 213). This relates to a previous conversation between Joe and Dorcas, in which he compared her with Eve:

I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart. (Morrison 133)

Through Dorcas’ words Joe is thus given absolution, in the sense that she both forgives him and, arguably, accepts the comparison with Eve, the first mother, which, in turn, indicates that she also accepts being a mother figure. Because of Dorcas’s forgiveness, Joe is able to leave the object position and instead place himself on equal footing with Violet, as a subject. In other words, the two can “recognize each other as peers” (de Beauvoir 755), which makes it possible for them to love one another in a reciprocal manner.

For Violet, the road to reciprocal subject-object harmony with Joe goes via conversations within women alliances. After being notified about her husband’s affair and the fact that he shot his mistress to death, Violet goes to see Alice, Dorcas’ aunt, and it soon becomes clear that Violet and Alice have many things in common. For example, they have both been cheated upon by their husbands, and as a result they both wanted to harm the other woman. Violet did so by cutting Dorcas’ body with a knife, whereas Alice only thought about

different ways of killing her husband's mistress (Morrison 86). But while talking they realise that the way to reach transcendence is not through outgoing violence, but rather through the sharing of wisdom. When Violet tells Alice about certain female customers who "share men, fight them and fight over them, too" (Morrison 84), they conclude that "no woman should live like that" (Morrison 84) and this suggests that they realise that a woman should never let her life revolve solely around a man. Moreover, when they talk about Violet's marriage, Alice says: "You want a real thing? ... I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it" (Morrison 112). Schreiber notes that through this exchange, "Alice shares her insight that love and self-love are the restorative agents that come with maturity" (115). Simply put, in order to love somebody else one must also love oneself, which in turn indicates that transcendence can be reached through love.

Violet might be on her way of becoming a subject through her alliance with Alice, but it is not until Felice enters into her and Joe's life that she manages to reach subject-object harmony and, as a result, transcendence. The friendship with Felice makes it namely possible for Violet to verbalize her story and this in turn leads to an introspective reflection regarding her development as a subject. For example, when Violet tells Felice about her internal struggle to find herself, she explains that she used to desire to be something else – "White. Light. Young again" (Morrison 208) – but now she only wants to be a woman her mother "would have liked" (Morrison 208). Violet's way to transcendence might also be seen in a dialogue between her and Felice, where they talk about Violet's conflicting selves. When Felice asks what happened to the old Violet who wanted to be something else, Violet replies: "Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her" (Morrison 209) and to the young girl's follow-up question regarding "who's left," Violet says laconically, "me" (Morrison 209). Here the old Violet, who wants to be white, light and young, represents an object in a subject-object dichotomy, because these adjectives arguably symbolize a desirable woman from a

man's perspective. By eradicating this Other, Violet progresses and comes closer to a subject position within the same dichotomy. However, by removing that part of herself too, she also does away with the dichotomy itself and manages to reach transcendence through subject-object harmony.

In their analysis, King and Scott argue that the ending of *Jazz* "prove[s] that longing does not stop, desire cannot be satisfied" (52), and that the novel shows the "impossibility of a final fulfilment" (53), but my reading suggests otherwise. When Felice enters into their lives, Violet and Joe manage to form a relationship based on harmony and this makes Felice the key to the dismantling of the subject-object dichotomy. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Joe points out to Felice what her name means: "Felice. That means happy" (Morrison 212). Hence, along with Felice, happiness also enters into their lives. The reciprocal nature of their relationship is obvious in the final passages of *Jazz*: "Breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together" (Morrison 228). Thus, fulfilment does not seem to be impossible, as both Violet and Joe seek and find fulfilment in transcendence.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to de Beauvoir, women have a greater chance to reach a subject status through the availability to paid work, and in *Jazz* several of the female characters, among them Violet and Felice, either have already entered into the labour market or at least have the expressed desire to do so. Felice is inspired by Violet's discourse and, even though her absent mother urges her to find a man, she has decided to settle professionally before she gets married. Through this decision, the young woman also aspires for a subject position.

When it comes to male and female characters in *Jazz*, regarding their paths to subject-object harmony, they seem to be affected differently by their individual experiences of

maternal abandonment. On the one hand, the male characters, Golden and Joe, due to the fact that neither of them had a caring mother in relation to whom they could define their subjectivity, they do not perceive women as female Others; instead they are able to see women as peers. On the other hand, the main female character, Violet, reaches subject-object harmony, not because of maternal abandonment, but rather in spite of it. Because of Rose Dear's suicide, Violet misses out of her mother's discourse, but she covers this loss by entering into alliances with Alice and Felice, through which wisdom is shared and harmony is attained.

Then, despite the fact that de Beauvoir is critical of the institution of marriage, she nevertheless thinks that it is possible for men and women to unite in reciprocal relationships, which are based on friendship rather than conflict. This possibility is shown in *Jazz* through the description of the relationship between Wild and Golden, as well as the marriage between Violet and Joe. Golden and Wild are able to reach harmony because he, unlike other men, does not fear a female Self and instead embraces her subjectivity. When it comes to Violet and Joe, with the help of Felice they both manage to verbalize their family traumas and through introspective reflection they finally reunite. In other words, the subject-object dichotomy is no more, and instead the love between both couples leads to harmony.

To conclude, *Jazz* shows how the historical subject-object dichotomy between men and women can change into harmony, built on a foundation of reciprocal relationships in which both men and women have the chance to seek and find fulfilment in transcendence.

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