Biblical references in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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1. Toni Morrison and the *Song of Solomon*

TONI MORRISON CLAIMED HER place among the most prominent authors of world literature when her collected works won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Her intimate familiarity with both the western canon and a rich African American culture are evident in her fiction and create a complexity which has rendered her style of fiction almost unclassifiable, at least according to the extant categories of literary criticism. She intertwines themes of race and class with epic themes; she draws freely from both mythical and realistic elements; her tales are entrenched in details of the African American situation, yet articulate universal human experiences.

Song of Solomon, the third of her eight novels, is a stunning example of this lavish complexity. It is the coming of age story of Milkman Dead, a young man three generations removed from slavery who is so privileged and pampered at the hands of the women around him that he grows bored, complacent, and incapable of forming meaningful attachments to anyone outside of himself. When at age thirty-two his boredom finally gives way to restlessness, Milkman embarks on a journey by which he intends only to steal the gold he is sure his aunt has stashed away, but which ends up forcing him outside of his insular self to discover the ancestral roots that connect him to the very heart of the community to which his travels have lead him. As he begins, for the first time in his life, to understand himself as a part of a larger reality, his personal drama and the choices he must face come to epitomize those his people have faced for centuries.

2. *Song of Solomon* and the *Bible*

In spite of the fact that the novel shares its title with one of the Old Testament wisdom books, critics of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* have done relatively little to elucidate the nature of the connection between the two works. Much of the novel's scholarship has focused on an examination of Morrison's use of African and classical folklore, which is no doubt essential to a thorough study of the work, but to explore the novel's mythical overtones to the exclusion of its blatant biblical references is to content oneself with only a partial reading of Morrison's work. As A. Leslie Harris has aptly noted,

> In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,* we have genuine mythopoesis, the mythic impulse shaped and translated into symbolic art. Morrison fuses Afro-American myth with the cultural, moral, and religious beliefs of both the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman heritages to fashion her own myth. (Harris 1991: 69)

That myth Morrison fashions borrows freely from both the *Bible* and folklore and, though the resulting references may at first appear as haphazard as the Deads' traditional manner of naming their children by randomly pointing to capitalized words on the *Bible's* pages, none of the echoes, neither mythical nor biblical, is without significance in the novel. In fact, a careful examination of the various allusions not only reveals the individual significance of each allusion, but it is also capable of unveiling the central themes of love, community, and psychic wholeness that the novel expounds.

Discovering the precise significance of each allusion is a difficult business since the significance of each presents itself in a unique, often confounding manner. Many of the Deads' names, for instance, are loaded with biblical meanings that do not ring true, or ring only partially true, or appear entirely ironic when applied to Morrison's characters. A reader must not overestimate these allusions, then, and expect each character to correspond neatly to the biblical figure suggested by her name. Trudier Harris has rightly condemned the attempts made by some critics to oversimplify *Song*'s allusions:

> Such symbol mongers seek in vain for some pattern that will explain the whole of the novel, but they are left with the bits and pieces of

> the myths and mythological characters Morrison has alluded to in her work. They quickly discover puzzling loose ends. (Harris 1991: 86)

Although Harris is here concerned with the novel's classical overtones, the same warning can be applied to its biblical allusions. Any attempt to align too precisely Morrison's characters with biblical figures is bound to lead one to "puzzling loose ends." The characters are not types or caricatures; they are real, complex characters who constitute their own meanings, not by the names assigned them, but by their actions throughout the novel.

Unveiling the connections that exist between Morrison's characters and their biblical counterparts, then, requires careful and discriminating examination. The name *Pilate*, for instance, is chosen quite randomly by the first Macon Dead for his daughter. The biblical figure corresponding to the chosen name, Pontius Pilate, the infamous Christ-killer, does not appear to correspond in character (much less in gender) to Macon's daughter in the slightest; in fact, the two could not be more unlike. Morrison's Pilate, though never portrayed as a Christian *per se*, proves to be the most Christ-like character in the novel. She comes to the aid of the oppressed by supplying Ruth with aphrodisiacs when she suffers the painful neglect of her husband; she defends the down-trodden when she saves her unborn nephew, Milkman, from his father's ire; she protects the weak yet shows mercy to the powerful and malicious when she defends Reba from a greedy and hostile lover; she humbles herself before—and for the sake of—those who have wronged her when she plays the part of a simpleton in order to exonerate Milkman and Guitar from their crime against her; and finally, she sacrifices her own life in order to save Milkman's and to further teach him what it means to love someone. Clearly, this Pilate bears no resemblance to her biblical namesake, Pontius Pilate. This strong, gentle, love- and life-giving Pilate is the antithesis of the spineless, biblical Pilate who, while secretly compelled by fear and pity to drop the charges brought against Christ, is swayed by the threatening mob and eventually allows them to execute him despite their lack of evidence against him. The irony of Morrison's heroine's

name is subtle but unmistakable. Unlike Pontius Pilate, Morrison's Pilate occupies no position of political power, yet she does possess a power that her namesake lacks; she is looked to by many for protection and leadership, and her influence over those around her is profound.

Irony, however, is not a formula that Morrison's allusive names follow with any consistency. Pilate's sister-in-law, Ruth, does bear some real resemblance to the Ruth of the Old Testament, but only a very limited and confused resemblance. The biblical Ruth is one of two daughters-in-law of Naomi. Of the two daughters, Ruth alone remains with the aged and widowed Naomi though she is under no obligation to do so. By remaining with her mother-in-law, Ruth willingly denies herself what then appears to be her only opportunity to find a new life and a new love for herself. Instead, she selflessly accompanies Naomi to Bethlehem, the land of her (Naomi's) origin, pledging loyalty with the famous words:

> Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! for wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you! (*New American Bible* 1992: *Ruth* 1. 16-17)

Morrison's Ruth embodies the same sense of selfless loyalty, but hers is pledged to her father rather than to her mother-in-law. Ruth Dead's loyalty is selfless in that, like Ruth the Moabite, she perseveres in it even though it costs her the only opportunity to be loved that she is ever likely to have. However, unlike the unimpeachable loyalty of Ruth the Moabite, Ruth Dead's loyalty to her father extends not just *to* but *beyond* the grave, and, though her husband's accusations of necrophilia are never fully substantiated within the novel, her love is perpetually marked by secrecy and almost certain perversion. Furthermore, while the biblical Ruth meets her reward in the loving marriage she contracts with Boaz, Ruth finds only punishment and neglect in her marriage to Macon.

Reba and *Hagar*, the names given to the descendents of Pilate, represent two further points of intersection, both limited and confused,

between Morrison's novel and the *Bible*. Pilate's daughter, *Reba*, a name form abbreviated from the biblical *Rebekah*, has throughout her life been the beneficiary of an inexplicable, unsought, and unmerited luck. Proudly she explains to Milkman, "I win everything I try to win and lots of things I don't even try to win" (Morrison 1977: 45). Reba's fortuitous knack for winning things echoes, though remotely, the good fortune by which the Old Testament Rebekah secures a marriage to Isaac. Like Reba's timely entrance at Sears Roebuck, Rebekah's trip to the well to fill her jug brings her unawares to just the right place at just the right time. Abraham's servant stands near the well where he seeks a wife for his master's son, Isaac. According to the biblical story, the servant petitions God saying,

> "While I stand here at the spring and the daughters of the townsmen are coming out to draw water, if I say to a girl, 'Please lower your jug, that I may drink,' and she answers, 'Take a drink, and let me give water to your camels, too,' let her be the one whom you have decided upon for your servant Isaac. In this way I shall know that you have dealt graciously with my master."
>
> He had scarcely finished these words when Rebekah [. . .] came out with a jug on her shoulder. The girl was very beautiful, a virgin, untouched by man. She went down to the spring and filled her jug. As she came up, the servant ran toward her and said, "Please give me a sip of water from your jug." "Take a drink, sir," she replied, and quickly lowering the jug onto her hand, she gave him a drink. When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have drunk their fill." (*New American Bible* 1992: *Gen*. 24. 12-19)

Rebekah's arrival at the well immediately after the servant has made his prayer is not, according to the biblical account, as purely accidental as the fluke by which Reba becomes the "half a millionth person to walk into Sears and Roebuck" (Morrison 1977: 46). Rather, her arrival appears as the God-sent response to the servant's prayer; she has not come by chance but by providence. Indeed, she unwittingly corroborates the providential nature of her arrival when

she, unbidden, gives water to the servant's camels, thereby enacting the very sign the servant has requested. Reba's luck in *Song*, then, is something of a degraded form of the eudaimonism of Rebekah. It has no apparent cause and no apparent purpose, and the things she wins do not instigate any significant changes in her life. Furthermore, the difference between the two women's good fortune reflects the difference between the women themselves. Rebekah's description as "a virgin, untouched by man" clearly does not apply to Reba, to whom the narrator attributes a "vacuousness" (Morrison 1977: 46) that displays itself in her cavalier manner of moving from one meaningless relationship to the next.

3. Feminine Sacrifices: Masculine Advancements

Morrison's allusion to Rebekah accomplishes more than just a demonstration of the relative emptiness of Reba's existence. The presence of Rebekah's story in *Song* also serves to underscore one of the novel's major themes. After Rebekah is chosen to be Isaac's bride, she bears twin sons, Esau, the firstborn, and Jacob, the younger. When the time comes for the aged Isaac to bestow his blessing upon his elder son, Rebekah devises a plan whereby she enables her favorite son, Jacob, the younger of the two, to receive the blessing in Esau's stead. Along with his father's blessing, the plot secures for Jacob an "abundance of grain and wine" as well as dominion over all his kinsmen, including Esau (*New American Bible* 1992: *Gen*. 27. 28-29). In *Song*, it is not Reba but Ruth and Pilate whose actions echo Rebekah's maternal nepotism. Both of these women possess such fervent love for and devotion to Milkman Dead that they commit themselves to preserving his well-being and success in life even at the expense of their other family member's happiness. While Milkman is still *in utero*, the two women conspire on the unborn child's behalf in order to foil his father's attempts to abort him. From that point forward the two women appear bonded to Milkman by indestructible cords of devotion. Ruth's dedication, which is no doubt bolstered by the neglect she suffers at the hands of her husband, manifests itself in her self-indulgent nursing of the boy long after he has passed the age of

needing or even enjoying the feedings—as suggested, ironically by his name.

Pilate's devotion, on the other hand, bears no discernable sexual connotations, but, like her sister-in-law, she too favors Milkman over the other members of her family. For much of the novel, which many have called Milkman's *Bildungsroman*, Pilate figures as "Milkman's pilot, the guiding force, the pedagogue who introduces him to the mysteries of life and death" (Fabre 1988: 110). She both goads him along and leads him through his coming of age story. She turns his quest for gold into a quest for his heritage and a discovery of the meaning of love. Yet for all her concern over her nephew's education, she never attempts to impart to her daughter, Reba, who appears to need the lesson just as badly as Milkman, what she has long taken to be her father's doctrine on love: "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (Morrison 1977: 147). Pilate's concern for Milkman also exceeds the love she bears her granddaughter, Hagar. Attesting to Pilate's partiality toward Milkman, "Macon Dead remembered when his son was born, how she seemed to be more interested in this first nephew of hers than she was in her own daughter, and even that daughter's daughter" (Morrison 1977: 19). Granted, she does smash a bottle over Milkman's head to punish him for his abandonment of Hagar (Morrison 1977: 331), but she does it not so much for Hagar's sake as for Milkman's; everything she does is intended as a further lesson in the education of the hero. Pilate has become "the witchlike godmother, [who] watches over Milkman's advent into the world with all the care of one of the wise men anticipating the birth of Christ" (Harris 1991: 85).

Morrison's allusion to the biblical Hagar adds a further dimension to the theme of maternal devotion to the favorite son. Hagar's story is not one of simple maternal interest in and sacrifice for the male progeny; it is the tale of a woman being exploited for patriarchal purposes and then cast carelessly away:

> Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no children. She had, however, an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from bearing children. Have intercourse, then, with my

> maid; perhaps I shall have sons through her." Abram heeded her request. (*New American Bible* 1992: *Gen*. 16. 1-2)

Hagar is thus used for the sole purpose of begetting an heir who will not, according to Sarai's plan, even be Hagar's own heir; instead he will belong to Sarai and Abram. Hagar stands as a clear prototype of the woman sacrificed for the gratification of masculine ambitions. The Hagar in *Song* finds herself in a similar predicament when she is loved, quite unexclusively, by the young and sexually curious Milkman for several years until, when he finds himself "getting tired of her" (Morrison 1977: 91), he casually abandons her. But Hagar Dead is not the only character in *Song* to whom this theme applies. After all, the Biblical Hagar is not simply taken and used by a man, Abram; she is given to him by his wife, Sarai. She represents not simply the woman sacrificed for man's advancement, but the woman sacrificed *by another woman* for man's advancement. This scenario is re-enacted time and again throughout Morrison's novel. Pilate, as has been noted, devotes more energy to her work of promoting Milkman's personal growth than she expends on either of her female descendants' behalf. Ruth Dead, as the grown Lena angrily declares to Milkman, has sacrificed nearly every aspect of her two daughters' young lives for his benefit:

> Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. (Morrison 1977: 215)

Nearly every female character in the novel is at some point and in some way, whether of her own or some other woman's accord, sacrificed for the advancement of a man. The pattern repeats itself in every development of the narrative plot and in every allusion the novel makes to African, Greco-Roman, and Judeo-Christian heritage. It is

this very theme, the theme of gynocide, for lack of a more accurate term, in the name of patriarchal progress, which binds the novel's multifarious allusions together into one coherent critique of the endeavor by the black community to better its collective situation. By repeatedly hammering out this same theme in every corner of her novel, Morrison is exposing a crippling lack of wholeness in the psyche of her contemporary African-American community. The black community's wrong-headed attempts to better itself by bettering its masculine sector alone cannot succeed. To use Rolland Murray's phraseology,

> Morrison's novel challenges the valorization of patriarchy as cast in the public discourse of the 1960s and offers critical purchase on the recent resurgence of patriarchal politics in our own time. From the "Million Man March" on Washington to the Promise Keepers there has been a contemporary surge in political strategies centered around black patriarchy. Morrison's novel mounts a formidable critical response to such a rehabilitation by suggesting that, historically, African-American investment in patriarchy has been the wobbly crutch of a disenfranchised, segregated polity and not a tool for liberation. (Murray 1999: 121)

According to this line of reasoning, the descendants of Solomon have erred in hailing their ancestor's flight from slavery a heroic act. The ability of this great man to rise above his situation, inspiring as it may have been to those who suffered under the same plight, has really done nothing to better the condition of his people. In fact, it has proved utterly devastating to the wife and family he has left behind. His flight is ultimately "an act of paternal irresponsibility and abandonment" (Hirsch 1994: 77), and the fact that his community has applauded such an action attests to its flawed insistence upon patriarchal advancements as the only road to collective recovery for the community.

The dominant role that patriarchy has played in the black community's road to liberation has rendered such liberation impossible, but the women of the community are not the helpless victims of that patriarchy. Ironically, as the women of *Song* illustrate,

they are as much to blame as black men for the phallocentric nature of the movement. They endlessly sacrifice themselves and each other for the gratification of the men they love, but their selflessness exceeds even the subservience of feminine love called for in the gospels: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (*New American Bible* 1992: *Eph.* 5. 22). The submission St. Paul demands, after all, comes with qualifications: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (*New American Bible* 1992: *Eph.* 5. 25). But the women of *Song* do not demand to be loved in return and, by submitting themselves so completely to the patriarchy, they are ensuring that the community cannot secure for itself the wholeness it requires in order to undertake a genuine healing for all its members.

The only women in the novel who do demand (or at least try to demand) to be loved in return, Hagar and Ryna, are expelled from normal society and left to haunt their communities with their mad and ineffectual ravings. The former, though not physically alone since her superficial needs are still looked after by her mother and grandmother, dies of a sickness induced by her abandonment, while the latter is metamorphosed by grief into the lonely mountain gorge that unceasingly wails in the wilderness outside Shalimar. Their love too proves excessive, though, in relation to the error of the other women in *Song*, the excess of Hagar and Ryna lies on the opposite side of St. Paul's directive on love. Rather than being overly submissive, these two women are overly needy. Their dependence on their lovers' return of devotion overwhelms their entire beings so that, when they realize that they do not have from their lovers the same limitless measure of love they have given to them, the women cannot carry on their lives in any normative fashion. They are shattered and rendered entirely dysfunctional.

4. Echoes of *Song of Solomon* in *Song of Solomon*

Morrison's assessment of the black community's psychic well-being, as shown here, may be summarized as a lack of wholeness or, more precisely, a fundamental inequality between the sexes. This is a community in which men's private ambitions continually take

precedence over feminine needs and feminine institutions, such as the family; Solomon's flight from his family is emblematic of this inequity. This gender imbalance within the dynamics of the African-American community is what the novel's most blatant biblical allusion, its title, plays upon.

The fifth book in the Old Testament collection of "wisdom books," entitled *Song of Solomon* (alternately though no more or less commonly called *Song of Songs* and *Canticle of Canticles*), is a lyric dialogue, a poem which presents in dramatic form the story of King Solomon's courtship of and marriage to a maiden from a rural part of his kingdom. According to Dyer and Merril, the poem's purpose is "to describe and extol human marital love" (Dyer and Merril 2001: 512); it represents the mutual love between a man and a woman as it should exist in its most ideal earthly manifestation. Although the work Dyer and Merril have done to divide the poem into six separate, two-scene acts is far too involved and, in places, questionable to be considered in full here, it does lay forth the basic progression of the book's plot in terms that are simple and reliable enough to aid in this analysis. The drama consists, to present the bare bones of it, of the two lovers' individual quests for love, their discovery of love in one another, the marriage of the lovers, the consummation of their marriage, two lovers' quarrels and their respective resolutions, and a brief testimonial on the nature of true love (Dyer and Merril 2001: 513). As is the case with all the texts and tales to which *Song* alludes, certain aspects of the biblical *Song of Solomon* resonate with certain aspects of Morrison's novel while, in various other aspects, the two works appear entirely divergent, even contradictory. Morrison's *Song* portrays a very flawed form of love between the sexes; it portrays a love which shares some of the features of the love presented in the biblical *Song* but which fails to emulate those features that make the latter love both ideal and mutual.

One notable feature of the biblical *Song* that is glaringly absent from Morrison's novel is the marriage of the lovers. Marriage, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, is an eternally binding contract of love between a man and a woman. By engaging in such a contract, a man and woman forge a mutual commitment to one another

and to the family they thereby initiate. Within the community Morrison treats, however, no such mutual commitment exists. Milkman feels himself at complete liberty to quit his relationship with Hagar; neither he nor Sweet appear hesitant to engage in what amounts to a two-night stand; Solomon's flight from Ryna wins him only exaltation from his entire community; Reba's lifestyle openly epitomizes casual sex; even Macon Dead II, though technically a married man throughout the novel, abandons his wife's physical and emotional needs for the majority of their married lives.

The emotions expressed by the maiden in the biblical poem also find echo in Morrison's novel. Twice in the poem she exclaims, "I am faint with love" (*Song Sol.* 2. 5, 5. 8). The first declaration emerges out of the prenuptial stage of the lovers' affair, the stage Erich Fromm has referred to as "the explosive experience of 'falling' in love" (48). Here the exclamation indicates that the speaker is overwhelmed by love and all the blissful emotions that accompany it. The second time these words appear they arises out of the maiden's despair when a quarrel has caused her lover to abandon her. Here they take on a new meaning, expressing not the bliss of being in love, but the pain of being deserted by one's lover. It is this latter meaning that resounds most frequently and most loudly in Morrison's novel. It resounds from Ryna's abandonment by Gulch, from the love-starved Ruth, and from the shunned Hagar, each of whom suffers the same abandonment the maiden in the poem experiences, with the difference that the maiden's abandonment is temporary; her lover returns to her, and they resolve their conflict.

This resolution of conflict is what renders the love depicted in the biblical poem ideal. The lovers in the poem remain such distinct individuals that their interests sometimes clash, yet the strength of their commitment to one another prevents those differences from severing them irreconcilably. For the lovers in Morrison's *Song,* however, no such resolution is possible. In fact, in most cases no resolution is possible simply because there is no conflict to be resolved in the first place. Solomon and Ryna do not suffer any clash of interests; Solomon simply changes his interests altogether and flies off in pursuit of them without regard for what Ryna's interest might entail.

The same can be said for Milkman and Hagar, as well as Macon and Ruth. The lovers never reunite after their quarrels because the men lose interest, or simply change their interests, and freely abandon the women to whom they should feel themselves committed.

Of course, Solomon does not intend his flight to be a flight from Ryna, but a flight from the insufferable condition of slavery. To attribute it to a simple, frivolous change of interests would be to trivialize the immense suffering of his situation, for, according to Therese Higgins's research into the legend of the flying African-Americans, a slave's flight is always a response to unbearable suffering:

> The common features of the story include an individual African slave or a group of African-born slaves who reach their limit in terms of the abuse they suffer at the hands of their owner or overseer. When the slave can take no more, he simply says a word or a phrase and putting his arms up, flies away, back to Africa. (Higgins 2001: 7)

Solomon's flight does certainly result from the heinousness of his enslavement, but the act nonetheless entails the abandonment of his wife and twenty-one children. Unfortunately, it is this abandonment that Solomon's descendents learn from his flight, and it is this abandonment that we witness time and again from the masculine characters throughout Morrison's novel; indeed, within this community, abandonment becomes almost the paradigmatic masculine response, not to immense suffering, but to any undesirable situation. The legacy Solomon has left to his descendants, or better, the legacy they have seized from their forefather, is not a message of hope, a valorous spirit of resistance to oppression, or even a righteous sense of self-worth. His flight does, in part, consist of all these realities, but as his male descendents reenact his flight in the context of their own lives—a context that no longer entails the horrors of slavery—the flight is stripped of its redeeming circumstances. In the hands of these younger generations of black men, Solomon's somewhat regal flight is

reduced to nothing more than the sheer abandonment of paternal responsibility.

5. The Scent of Ginger

As the quarrel between the biblical lovers nears its end, the young woman discovers that her lover has retreated to a garden of spices: "My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies" (*New American Bible* 1992: *Song Sol.* 6. 2). Images of garden spices and fruits recur throughout the poem, and Morrison makes use of similar imagery in her novel to signify a lingering memory of Africa. According to the narrator's description, "an odor like crystallized ginger" permeated certain areas of the city. He is at a loss to explain how the aroma has arrived there, but, he affirms, "there was this heavy sweet-spice smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets" (Morrison 1977: 184). Further, it is "air that could have come straight from the marketplace in Accra" (Morrison 1977: 185). Solomon's flight to this spice-scented Africa, then, is analogous to the biblical lover's retreat to the spice garden. The difference, of course, is that the former has absconded forever to enjoy the spices of his homeland alone, while the latter eventually invites his beloved into the garden and that "heavy sweet-spice smell" provides the backdrop for their reconciliation.

In both the poem and the novel, the lands of spice, the garden and Africa respectively, represent places of refuge that offer their immigrants security, tranquility, and happiness. However, when that same African air to which Solomon escaped decades before reaches the noses of Milkman and Guitar, it no longer holds the same meaning: "Each thought it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance." The refuge this generation seeks no longer entails simply an escape from suffering, nor even an escape from responsibility; the ambition for freedom has been further tainted by dreams of opulence and bloody retribution. What these young men smell in the spiced air of their ancestral homeland is the same thing they see just seconds later in the gold they believe they have discovered hanging from Pilate's rafters: "It hung heavy, hung green like the green of Easter

eggs left too long in the dye. And like Easter, it promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart's lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice" (Morrison 1977: 185).

The lust for power, license, and vengeance these young men demonstrate in this scene exemplifies the terrific degeneration that Morrison's black community's values have undergone through the generations of enslavement and oppression that that community has suffered. Clearly this community cannot heal its wounds when these are the virtues it extols. The new generation desperately needs to be reacquainted with the true, pre-enslavement spirit of its ancestry; it needs to relearn the love that its ancestors, because of the unbearable harshness of slave conditions, were forced to forget. Fortunately for Milkman—and for his entire community—the opportunity to learn those redemptive lessons arises unexpectedly out of the journey by which he means to recover only a sum of gold.

Since the novel's publication in 1977, many, perhaps even most of its critics have noted that the journey Milkman launches becomes for him a journey of self-discovery. Self, however, is really the last thing Milkman needs to discover, for self is all he has ever known. All his life Milkman has been "privileged and pampered" and "disconnected from his community" (Dougherty 2000: 230). The greatest lesson Milkman actually stands to learn from his quest is not his own identity, but that of his people. As Valerie Smith explains, Milkman urgently needs to learn that "identity is a collective rather than an individual construct" (Smith 1987: 136). The novel's conclusion offers no indisputable evidence as to whether or not Milkman walks away from his journey with that lesson learned, but it does offer the hope that he has found something to cherish that encompasses more than just himself.

When Milkman returns from his journey without the gold he had hoped to procure, he is in no way disappointed by what he has returned with. In fact, his excitement at having unearthed the stories of his ancestors compels him to find Pilate immediately upon his return so that he may share the stories with her. Further, the narrator testifies that "he wasn't a bit interested in the flying part, but he liked the story and the fact that places were named for his people" (Morrison 1977:

334). In other words, Solomon's descendants—this one at least—no longer extol his legendary flight for the act of patriarchal self-preservation it entails. And as Milkman and Pilate stoop to bury the remains of Pilate's father at the place called Solomon's Leap, the narrator says, "Ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them" (Morrison 1977: 335). Hope for Milkman and his community lies in that enveloping smell. If he can locate in that smell (and in the act of ancestral piety it shrouds) all the security, tranquility, and happiness that it signified to his great-grandfather (Solomon), then flight will no longer be the only apparent avenue for attaining those qualities. Because this generation no longer has the immense pain of slavery from which one must escape, the possibility of finding peace and joy is reborn for the community—not in some faraway place, but in love, where it resides in the biblical *Song of Solomon*. By finally opening the boundaries of his self to embrace his community, Milkman realizes for himself the significance of Pilate's dying directive: the more people one takes in, the more love one possesses: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (Morrison 1977: 336).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that the many allusions in Morrison's biblical names bear connotative meanings for the text of the novel at large rather than simply denoting something specific about the characters who wear them, though many of them do that too. Through the use of these blatantly allusive names, Morrison's novel becomes intertextually enriched; that is, the novel's scope and signification widens considerably by its inclusion of the wealth of themes and ideas that the names suggest. Themes such as love, sacrifice, loyalty, commitment, and sexual equality, to name a few, are complicated and augmented when we seek to understand them in the larger context Morrison's allusions afford. Furthermore, by forging these connections between the novel itself and the community's wider literary heritage (including the *Bible*, as is the focus of the present study, but also African folklore and classical mythology), Morrison is pointing toward a communal identity that must not be overlooked lest all its richness be

forfeited. With her many onomastic allusions to the community's literary heritage, ironic as well as symbolic, Morrison accomplishes stylistically what we at the end of the novel can only hope that Milkman has accomplished on his journey: a renewed acquaintanceship and connection with a shared, cultural identity that both eclipses and includes one's private self.

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Summary: Biblical References in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Song of Solomon, the third of Morrison's eight novels, is the story of Milkman Dead, a young African American man so pampered by the women around him that he grows up incapable of forming meaningful attachments or of assuming responsibility. His development reveals on the relationship of individual and communal identity. Although the Dead family's tradition prescribes an utterly haphazard manner of naming their children (specifically, opening the Bible and pointing blindly to a word to assign to the child in question), and though none of those biblical names proves wholly appropriate to the character who dons it, each of those names does bear a profound significance with regard to the novel at large. A careful comparison of Morrison's characters to their biblical counterparts, and of the narrative as a whole to the biblical book which shares its name, reveals the novel's central critiques of its contemporary black community. The community cannot embrace Pilate's message of love, the same love personified by the lovers in the biblical *Song of Solomon*, until its members replace their once salvific but now out-dated inclination to fly away from misery with a renewed commitment to their community and a determination to improve their shared living conditions.

Résumé: Des références bibliques dans le *Song of Solomon* de Toni Morrison

Le *Song of Solomon*, troisième des huit romans de Morrison, est l'histoire de Milkman Dead, un jeune Américain d'origine africaine, si dorloté par les femmes qui l'entourent qu'il grandit dans l'incapacité de former des liens significatifs ou d'assumer ses responsabilités. Son développement est révélateur des rapports de l'identité individuelle et communautaire. Bien que la tradition familiale au sujet de la mort prescrive une manière complètement fortuite de nommer leurs enfants (notamment en ouvrant la Bible et en pointant à l'aveuglette un nom à assigner à l'enfant), et bien qu'aucun de ces noms bibliques ne se montre parfaitement approprié au personnage qui le revêt, chaque nom porte une importance profonde en rapport avec le roman en général. Une comparaison attentive des personnages de Morrison avec leurs homologues bibliques, et du récit comme un ensemble avec le livre biblique qui partage ces noms, révèle les critiques centrales du roman sur la communauté noire contemporaine. La communauté ne peut adopter le message d'amour de Pilate, le même amour personnifié par les amants dans le *Song of Solomon* de la Bible, jusqu'à ce que ses membres substituent leur inclination à fuir la misère, autrefois salvatrice mais aujourd'hui démodée, par un engagement renouvelé dans leur communauté et une volonté d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie partagées.

Zusammenfassung: Biblische Bezüge in Toni Morrisons *Song of Solomon*

Song of Solomon, die dritte von Morrisons acht Novellen, erzählt die Geschichte des Milkman Dead, eines jungen Afro-Amerikaners, der von den

Frauen um ihn herum so verwöhnt wurde, dass er, unfähig, echte Beziehungen aufzubauen oder Verantwortung zu übernehmen, aufwuchs. Seine Entwicklun verdeutlicht die Interrelation von individueller und allgemeiner Identität. Obwohl die Tradition in Deads Familie eine völlig planlose Benennung der Kinder vorschrieb (um ein Kind zu bezeichnen, öffnete man besonders die Bibel und zeigte blindlings auf ein Wort) und obwohl keiner der biblischen Namen zur Figur, die ihn bekommt, passt, hat jeder dieser Namen eine tiefe Bedeutung für die gesamte Novelle. Ein vorsichtiger Vergleich von Morrisons Figuren mit ihren biblischen Entsprechungen und ein Vergleich der ganzen Erzählung mit dem Buch der Bibel, aus dem der Name stammt, verdeutlicht die zentrale Kritik an der zeitgenössischen Gemeinschaft der Schwarzen. Die Gemeinschaft kann die Botschaft der Liebe von Pilate (dieselbe Liebe ist personifiziert in den Liebenden des biblischen *Song of Solomon,* d.i. „das Hohe Lied") solange nicht annehmen, bis ihre Mitglieder ihre einst Heil bringende, jetzt aber veraltete Neigung zurückstellen und dem Elend durch ein erneuertes Engagement für ihre Gemeinschaft und durch die Entschlossenheit, ihre Lebensbedingungen zu verbessern, entfliehen.