

ANALYSIS

Song of Solomon (1977)



Toni Morrison

(1931-)

“So the agent’s flight, like that of the Solomon in the title, although toward asylum (Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming dead), and although it carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things-as-they-are. It should not be understood as a simple desperate act, the end of a fruitless life, a life without gesture, without examination, but as obedience to a deeper contact with his people. It is his commitment to them, regardless of whether, in all its details, they understand it.... It touches, turns and returns to Guitar at the end of the book—he who is least deserving of it—and moves him to make it his own final gift. It is what one wishes for Hagar; what is unavailable to and unsought by Macon Dead, senior; what his wife learns to demand from him, and what can never come from the white world as is signified by the inversion of the name of the hospital from Mercy to ‘no-Mercy.’ It is only available from within. The center of the narrative is flight; the springboard is mercy.”

Toni Morrison

“Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”

Michigan Quarterly Review 28 (1989): 3

“Pilate...has this long conversation with the two boys and every now and then she’ll say something, but she doesn’t have the dialogue the other people have. I had to do that, otherwise she was going to overwhelm everybody. She got terribly interesting; characters can do that for a little bit. I had to take it back. It’s *my* book; it’s not called ‘Pilate’.... In *Song of Solomon* it was the first time that I had written about a man who was the central, the driving engine of the narrative. I was a little unsure about my ability to feel comfortable inside him.... I was having some difficulty describing a scene in *Song of Solomon*...of a man running away from some obligations and himself. I used an Edvard Munch painting almost literally. He is walking and there is nobody on his side of the street. Everybody is on the other side.”

Morrison (1993)

The Paris Review Interviews II

“*Song of Solomon*...Toni Morrison’s third novel, composed and printed in the postliterate present, can be described as a domestic epic—a rhapsodic work, demonstrating the virtues of the spoken word and the abiding presence in certain corners of the world of a lively oral tradition. The spoken quality of the narration is plain on the first page of the book, where, instead of ‘two days earlier,’ of ‘two days beforehand,’ Morrison writes ‘two days before the event was to take place.’ And ‘the event’—an insurance agent’s attempt to fly across Lake Superior using ‘wide blue silk wings’—becomes, in Morrison’s leisurely pursuit of stray detail, the occasion for the casual introduction of all but one of the main characters, of their setting and relationship to the outside world, and of the chief clue to the genealogical mystery that gradually emerges as the story’s plot. An element in the winding digression away from the winged insurance man, whose real significance is temporarily buried, is an account of the street where the attempted flight takes place....

The eponymous doctor is the maternal grandfather of Milkman, the book’s eventual hero, but the focus of the story is on the paternal line, extending back from Milkman to his father, Macon Dead, and his aunt Pilate, to their father, a freed slave, and their Indian mother, and finally, to Milkman’s great-grandfather, name unknown, an ancestor comparable in mythical stature to the divine foremothers and fathers of ancient Greek and Roman heroes.

Song of Solomon differs from true oral composition in its relatively intricate structure, and in its inventiveness and variety of expression. Clearly, more of the story is drawn from the author’s imagination and private experience than from common tribal or racial knowledge. Still, with her constant appeal to the ear, her abounding similes and frequent catalogues, her emphasis on the ceremonial aspect of life; with her deliberate inattention to conventional notions of probability; with her reverence for the significance of names; with her artful garrulousness, Morrison counts as a genuine rhapsody, whose access to a typewriter and the presses of Knopf mainly amounts to a lucky break for readers otherwise out of earshot. As a storyteller, Morrison is worldly-wise rather than, in a technical sense, inspired. There is no summoning of the muse, just a recitation of the facts...of the Dead history. She moves easily in and out of the lives and thoughts of her characters, luxuriating in the diversity of circumstance and personality, and reveling in the sound of their voices and of her own, which echoes and elaborates theirs....

Morrison doesn’t always manage to avoid the natural hazards of her gift of tongues. There are patches of vacant rhetoric, at least one case of runaway imagining involving ‘anaconda love’ and ‘red corpuscle that neither knows nor understands why it is driven to spend its whole life in one pursuit,’ and a stretch of overweight irony featuring a white poetess. In her account of the Dead family’s Packard, Morrison uses the word ‘careen’ when she apparently means ‘career’ (‘He could see only the winged woman careening off the nose of the car’). And in the final, apocalyptic scene Milkman leaping is imagined to be ‘as fleet and bright as a lodestar’—an image whose vividness overwhelms the fact that ‘lodestar’ means ‘polestar’: bright enough to be a beacon, but not fleet.

And I have to admit having trouble figuring out the full purpose of the character named Guitar, who moves alongside the Dead family from the day Milkman is born to the end of the story. At the age of five or six, Guitar is singled out as a ‘cat-eyed boy,’ and as an adult he becomes a member of a small ascetic band of racial avengers, which systematically kills a white man, woman, or child for every unrequited murder of an equivalent black. Although he is evidently designed to carry a historical burden, and to embody an alternative to Milkman’s sheltered, inert, and aimless young manhood, his conversion from Milkman’s closest friend and mentor into his nemesis remains a puzzle to me. Unlike the other characters, who are firmly in Morrison’s narrative grasp, Guitar is set apart by his inhuman detachment. He acts, disruptively at times, as a kind of scholiast, assuming an authority that belongs to the storyteller—for example, in his lordly remarks on love and women.”

Susan Lardner
The New Yorker
(7 November 1977)

“Once you begin hearing aloud the clipped voices of these characters and feel their lingering presence long after you’ve closed the book, once you start suspecting even the simplest gestures of the hand or the eyes of people around you and then want to keep the light on to avoid sleep and night, you are already entangled in history, myth, nightmare, and magic. You learn about greed, pain, sexual abandonment, and terror in the lives of people you wouldn’t dare know nor even care about until now. Such is the effect of *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison’s third and most ambitious novel. The story weaves from the unspoken demands of hate and love in the lives of midwestern black men and women who, uprooted from the historical bond of the south and slavery, stutter to rename themselves in the uncertain struggles for land, family, posterity, and progress....

The son of a former slave, now a prosperous landowner, Macon and his sister Pilate witness the brutal murder of their father by local whites. Forced into flight, the two live off the wilderness with the help of Circe, a domestic of the very family that committed the murder. In the woods the children are both comforted and haunted by the specter of their father. The ghost appears to be guiding them to safety, but in actuality, it is searching for its dead wife and its own eternal rest. The children are accosted and threatened by a white miner whom they kill; they flee from the scene, leaving behind the miner’s gold. Their flight, the sack of gold, the father they half-buried along an eroding riverbank forever separate Pilate and Macon from each other.

Pilate, who was born without a navel minutes after her own mother expired in childbirth, becomes everything Macon is not. She seeks out distant relatives further south. Finding none, she turns her hand to helping others, even when they fear and ostracize her because of her ‘smooth stomach.’ Years later, with her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar, Pilate arrives in the town where her brother has become the chief landlord for poorer blacks. Except for Macon, her only reminder of the past is a single brass box earring with her name written on brown paper and folded inside and a sack of bones believed to be those of the unburied miner. The ghost of the father had told her ‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body.’ And she discovers that ‘the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it’s a better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way it frees up your mind.’

Macon has chosen to emulate his father by acquiring as much real estate and hard cash as he can. More out of ambition than love, he marries Ruth, the daughter of the most respected black doctor in their Michigan town, and sires two daughters, First Corinthians and Magdalene called Lena. The novel begins sixteen years later on the morning of an incredible suicide flight by a man rigged with wings. Ruth witnesses the horror of the flight and goes into labor. Milkman, Macon’s only son, is born in the emergency ward of nearby No Mercy Hospital where blacks were previously refused treatment.

The novel centers on Milkman who, growing up to despise his father and his wealth, prefers the company of Guitar, a member of the violent vigilante group Seven Days, and Pilate, whose poor and much disarrayed household brings him love. When Milkman meets Hagar they share a passion that eventually consumes Hagar and sends Milkman off to search for the miner’s abandoned gold. Milkman’s search, which dominates the second part of the novel, is only one brief stop in the larger journey toward reconciliation with his family... What finally takes hold of the reader is the sustained metaphor of flight which unfolds in a taut pattern of images like the suspended strings of a parachute, holding the reader absolutely breathless....

It was Pilate who conjured an aphrodisiac to make Ruth once more attractive enough to Macon to have them conceive Milkman. And it was Pilate again who nourished his birth in spite of Macon’s efforts to have the pregnancy aborted. Milkman, born on the moment of suicidal flight, discovers that he comes from a family of flying Africans who sought freedom from slavery by escaping North or ‘flying’ back to Africa. When he finally hears his name in the song of Solomon, he frees himself from the emotional death of Macon Dead, the obsessive terrorism of Guitar, and the clinging guilt of Hagar’s love. Milkman and Pilate bury his grandfather’s bones. They silence the dead, and Milkman finds the strength to lift himself in one last leap of defiance from the mountaintop....

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison has captured our sometimes painful search to discover our names and articulate their meaning. And she has named the myths that linger after the nightmare to tell us we have

survived.... Like Milkman we can no longer passively rely on what we have merely inherited from the past; we must make it live for us and with us now, even if it attempts to stagger us in defeat. *Song of Solomon* is a brilliant, compelling achievement.”

Melvin Dixon
Callaloo 1.4 (1978) 170-73

“Toni Morrison is drawn to challenges and in her latest work has accepted a difficult one and met it. Her first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, established worlds filtered through the sensibilities of a number of memorable Black women. In *Song of Solomon* which, briefly put, defines the growth into manhood of a young Black man in a midwestern town, the focusing consciousness is male. In a story in which names carry a symbolic meaning, Milkman Dead is the perversely living son of Macon Dead, the richest man in the Black community, whose family acquired its intriguing surname following the Civil War through the clerical error of a drunken Yankee soldier.

Milkman’s transformation from an indulged and self-indulging child into a dangerously won maturity shapes the narrative line of event and of perception. Morrison achieves an unusually skillful transition from a precisely described Michigan town into a timeless mythological world of quest for meaning and identity. At the end of Milkman’s journey is not the gold which triggered it, but the dismantling of his personality and the acquisition of a difficult knowledge of himself and those closest to him.

Although Morrison’s characters live convincingly beyond the borders of the page, the dramatic tension of the story results largely from the fact that the fate of three pivotal figures is molded by three distinct sets of values. Macon Dead, the industrious, ambitious businessman, standard-bearer of bourgeois horrors, serves as foil for his sister, Pilate, deformed in the world’s view and derelict, but whose gift is forbearance and love and a surrendering to life to possess it. ‘If I’d a known more people, I’d a loved more.’ Pilate is an arresting figure who emerges as the focus of moral concern, a guardian for those lacking her strength, whose major significance becomes progressively evident. She has carried with her, unwittingly, the clue to her inheritance, a sack of bones and rocks from her childhood, with a spool of thread for each element of the Afro-American’s dual tradition. Through her death, rendered in place of her nephew’s, the invitation to soar, a central motif, is extended. The thrust of her function as a kind of moral lodestone suggests, finally, that although the protagonist is male, the ultimate concern of this latest of the author’s novels is, also, the Black woman. The compassionate response of Pilate to the tragedy of her granddaughter’s hopeless pursuit of Milkman appears particularly to reinforce such an assessment.

Against these two, brother and sister, is posed the chilling racial evangelism of Milkman’s friend, Guitar, who contributes another song to the story. His is another kind of love, a coin whose other side is a hatred which will make him capable, eventually, of killing his closest friend. Guitar is a committed member of the Seven Days, a group dedicated to a random retribution for each unprosecuted killing of an Emmett Till. Milkman clearly rejects their grim arithmetic, but the prominence assigned Guitar in Milkman’s search implies the measure of the author’s awareness of the sense of injustice out of which their strategy developed.

James Baldwin has remarked upon the complex condition which in the multiple forces influencing it, is the Afro-American experience. The stylistic means with which Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*, continues her exploration of that condition reflect this complexity. The extensive array includes inversion, paradox, the play of opposites, criss-crossing conversations and an appropriately masculine metaphorical language. There appears to be, also, a pattern similar to that of Black music which could probably aptly be described as an off-the-beat symbolic reference. The name approaches but misses, in varying degrees, the congruence suggested by the context in a manner analogous to the defeat of expectation, through the deferment of acceleration of stress, in syncopated music. Pilate, for example, takes on Christ-like attributes and, within the suggested meaning of the flying motif, may be viewed as a pilot; Magdalene observes while her sister strays from a life of propriety; the Weimaraner dogs, Horst and Helmut, in the decaying house of the grandfather’s murderers, suggest but fall short of the name of the Munich beer-drinking song.

The novel most notably excels, however, in its imaginative use of myth and folklore. There is an achieved fusion of fantasy and fact, of ancient myth and Virginia coon hunt. Morrison first establishes a

cast of plausible characters fixed in a specified year on the calendar in a well-detailed midwestern town. Time, however, at a certain point is suspended altogether and, in a movement reminiscent of the world of Jack and the Beanstalk, the story slips beneath the bottom line of Macon Dead's property accounts into the mythological realm of the author's proper concern. In the launching of the search for gold, the novel which previously may have been labored is, as later is Milkman himself, made convincingly whole.

In Ellison's adroit use of Black folklore in *Invisible Man*, the journey proceeds prototypically from rural South to urban North. Morrison reverses the age-old escape route and here she is contemporary, to send her hero by stages back into a heritage common to practically all Black families in America, the rural South of fable and legend.... Morrison has recourse not only to Black folklore but avails herself equally of other accessible cultural resources, including a range of classical Western myths. Reaching out to embrace rather than to exclude is her characteristic gesture; the diversity of her references makes clear that she finds no need for herself or anyone else to forgo any element of the American composite. 'Medina, Yaraba, Hamlet too,' the children chant to the song of the title piece. The dominant motif of flying may appropriately derive from either the Western myth of Daedalus or the Black folk legend of flying back to Africa, or from both.

Morrison's capacity to install herself in the consciousness of another is persuasively evident in her portrayal of the male of the species. Although there is probably, on occasion, an excess of macho, the central relationship between Milkman and 'my man' Guitar, is psychologically true and extraordinarily well drawn. The idiom of much of Black male speech is rendered with unusual accuracy: the irony and the laconic wit, the unbridged shifts in rhythm and context, the veiled and unveiled violence, as well as the warmth and the braggadocio. The dialogue of confrontation is particularly convincing, reminiscent of that of Richard Wright. With a sensitive ear, Morrison has reproduced the cadences distilled from a long history of interaction on American soil of European and African speech patterns.

A sure sense of parody and a Nabokovian talent for the macabre only intimated in her previous work emerge in *Song of Solomon*. One does not readily forget the suggestive fate of Guitar's father, his body sliced in half for packing, an eye upon a staring eye as he begins his sojourn in eternity; or the horror comedy of the grandfather's doomed pursuit of another 'bluest eye.' The novel is a product of a skilled artisan who has grounded her work in the lore of two traditions, both gospel and barcarole, to achieve a surprisingly eloquent synthesis. It moves at its own pace, ultimately to invade the consciousness in force."

Samuel Allen
Boston University Journal 26.1 (1978) 67-69

"Milkman's life follows the pattern of the classic her, from miraculous birth (he is the first black baby born in Mercy Hospital, on a day marked by song, rose petals in the snow, and human 'flight') through quest-journey to final reunion with his double.... He finds that his quest is his culture's; he can only discover what he is by discovering what his family is....at the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman has restored the names of his family, recovered their song, and he can 'fly.' But he does not fly away; he flies toward Guitar, his wounded 'brother'.... Only in the recognition of his condition can he act in it, only in commitment is he free....

In the Icarus tale, freedom is available to the characters—they can fly. If they fail, it is because they want an impossible kind of freedom. To transfer that pattern to the black situation would be to suggest that blacks must accept an inferior social position. Morrison's version of the tale shifts the emphasis to divided loyalties. Shalimar is free to return to Africa—totally free. But that kind of freedom is problematic, not because in itself it is wrong, but because in the particular context he is in—family and children—it involves denial of social and personal bonds. He does not destroy himself by soaring, but he wounds others because not everyone can take that way. The conflict is not between *hubris* and common sense, but between 'absolute' freedom and social responsibility. Milkman resolves that conflict when he leaps, flying toward his 'brother,' finding freedom in 'surrender' to the air—not in acceptance of his situation as right or as eternal, but acceptance of it as real. Morrison rewrites myth so that it carries the power of natural ties and psychic meaning but also speaks to a 'necessity' in the social order....

Morrison distinguishes between false 'myths' that simply reduce, misinterpret, and distort reality—from Shirley Temple to the view of Sula as 'evil,' from Smith's failed attempt at flight to Macon Dead's obsession with Pilate's hoard—and true myths that spring from and illuminate reality.... The multiple perspectives not only qualify the myth by showing that any specific situation may be a different myth for each of the characters involved, since each sees himself at the center of it; they also make the myth's relevance clear by showing the same problems manifested in many cases, so that Milkman's solution is for all.... She is quite able to show black women as victims, as understanding narrators, or even as 'free' in the sense of disconnection. But when the time comes to fulfill the myth, to show a hero who goes beyond the independence to engagement, she creates a male hero....

The use of a male hero does not, of course, necessarily imply the subjugation of women, and...her early alternation between male and female versions of the 'free' character shows that she does not exclude women from subjective life or choice. She even offers explicit commentaries on Milkman's sexism—from his sister Lena, for example—and parallels to women characters that make his quest a surrogate for theirs.... From first to last, women exist for Milkman, and in the plot development, as functions: mother, wife, lover, sister. That narrative concentration in itself weakens Morrison's careful multiple perspectives: we see her point of view, but ultimately her story is subsumed in Milkman's search for male models. Indeed, all the models available to Milkman are male—all the characters, however flawed, who assert independence and become inspirations to the community.... There are no women who so focus individual and social awareness in Morrison.... Milkman does have a female guide figure, his aunt Pilate...she forces Milkman to face his responsibility for Hagar's death. Her own dying words are, '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.' That free commitment to others is just what Milkman learns; it is not wonder that he answers by wishing for a mate like Pilate, saying, 'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'....

What the novel shows is that the 'universal' myth of Western culture is just such a male story; and the parallels and discrepancies between Milkman and Pilate further show the difficulty of the heroic mode for a woman.... Morrison's almost total exclusion of white characters from the books allows her to treat white culture as 'necessity' without either mythicizing specific acts of oppression or positing present necessity as eternal.... This allows Morrison to focus attention not on the white characters' forcing of mythic rites—as if they were gods—but on the black characters' choices within the context of oppression.”

Cynthia A. Davis
“Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction”
Contemporary Literature 23.3
(Summer 1982) 323-42

“What is certain about the scene is that a man like Milkman's father could never ride the air. But will Milkman? Have his new love for his aunt and his reaffirmation of love for Guitar so fortified his soul that he can magically ride the air? Will he discover, in a startled moment as he falls, that his faith could not sustain him? Is he consciously relinquishing his life because he wants to rid himself of the materialism of his mortality? At the beginning of the novel, a Day jumped to his death because he believed that he could fly. Does the ending pessimistically affirm that flight is mere delusion, or does it affirm the theme that one may learn to fly?”

Darwin Turner
“Theme, Characterization, and Style in the Works of Toni Morrison”
Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation
ed. Mari Evans (Doubleday/Anchor 1984)

“In *Song of Solomon* (1977) the quest is explicitly rather than implicitly for a name. Milkman Dead, a central character with very conventional values, comes to a point at which he feels the need to find out his family's true name. The discovery of this name carries with it a sense of his own humanity and also certain magical qualities connected with black folklore. Naming here has associations with African cultures in which the name is the expression of the soul; because of this, the choosing and keeping of the name is a major ritual. To lose the name or, in Afro-American terms, to be 'called out of one's name' is an offense against the spirit.

Consistent with these folk beliefs, the Dead family, whose name was given to them accidentally after the Civil War by a drunken white soldier, act out the designation. The father, Macon Dead, has perverted his own father's efforts to acquire and work the land by becoming an exploitative landlord and real estate speculator. He defines himself and others by accumulation of alienated property. Milkman's mother, Ruth, rejects the present by literally embracing only the past and the future. Macon tells the story of seeing her lying naked on the bed with her father's corpse. And Milkman acquired his nickname by being discovered still nursing at his mother's breast when he was four years old. Ruth, as the daughter of the town's first black doctor, displays the values of the old black bourgeoisie by assuming an attitude of hauteur toward her nouveau riche husband. Their daughters, Magdalene and First Corinthians (whose names were selected by the family tradition of choosing names at random from the Bible), despite their names, are adult virgins who have never been permitted to experience love, either because all men in the community were socially beneath them or because these men lacked sufficient property.

Milkman's friend Guitar becomes associated with the Seven Days, a secret society of black men dedicated to exacting retribution for the deaths of blacks killed by whites. The murder of a black child must be avenged by the similar death of a white one on the same day of the week. Milkman, then, is born and reared in a family that is life-denying. As a sign of this, his birth is simultaneous with the suicide of a man who leaps from the roof of the hospital. As he grows up, he acquires the attitudes of his family and friends. He becomes narcissistic and selfish and treats the members of his family with disdain.

The dialectical movement necessary to move him away from this death house with his discovery of the home of his Aunt Pilate, a woman his father hates for some yet-to-be-determined reason. Pilate has a history and a true name, which she literally carries with her in a small brass box fashioned into an earring. Inside is the piece of paper on which her illiterate father painstakingly copied the word Pilate, the name he insisted she have despite the objections of relatives. Her mother died while giving her birth, and she and her brother later saw their father killed by whites who wanted his land. Having given birth to herself, Pilate creates a family of women much like that of Eva Peace. She herself makes money by selling illegal liquor, and the attendant disrepute is accompanied by a certain folk status since she has no navel and thus is thought to be a child of the devil. Her daughter Reba (whose proper name is the biblical Rebekkah) is marked by her luck; she wins every contest she enters and even those she accidentally happens into. Hagar is the spoiled child of her mother and grandmother, who spend their money to satisfy all of her whims.

Milkman is initially fascinated with this matriarchal household because of its difference from his patriarchal one. Here stories are told, food is tasty and plentiful, and none of the rigidity of his own home is present. Moreover, here he has his sexual initiation with Hagar. But fascination breeds not understanding but exploitation, which takes two forms. The first is the treatment of Hagar, whom he considers a sexual object to be used at his convenience, but never to be part of his life with his family's and his own respectable friends. Finally, he decides at Christmas to break off the affair, but he chooses to do so in a letter that is the emotional equivalent of his father's eviction notices....

This male domination through words has the effect of driving Hagar crazy. She sets out to kill him but repeatedly cannot do so. While this insane quest goes on, Morrison introduces other stories of the suppressed humanity and creativity of women. The effect is to provide a sense of a folkloric and historical tradition of oppression. In the barber shop a recent killing is said to be the work of Winnie Ruth Judd, a white woman who kills and dismembers her victims and periodically escapes from the state hospital. For these black men, she serves as a sign of the lunacy of whites who can kill for no good reason; her private torment and motivation is irrelevant to her symbolic usefulness. More pertinent to Milkman is his dream about his mother, which he is not at all certain is in fact a dream. In it, Ruth plants tulip bulbs which immediately emerge as plants and flowers; Milkman expects her to be frightened, but her response is very different... The chaos of creation, which the male fears, is embraced by the female. His mother, who is passive and serious, has a secret garden where she generates and plays with life.

It is in this context that Milkman receives a revisionist version of family history, one that reveals the importance of female creativity to his own life. He follows his mother one night on a long journey to the cemetery where her father was buried. Upon her exit, he confronts her with her monumentalizing tendency,

including the incident of necrophilia told him by his father. She responds by expressing the feeling that the doctor was the only one who ever loved her and that she had reacted to his death by kneeling to kiss his hand, not by any perverse sexual gesture. More important, she explains to her son that she was the one who saved his own life. Her husband desired no more children, and insisted that she abort him. She appealed to Pilate, who helped her to defeat Macon's attempts. Thus, Milkman owes his existence to the life-affirming efforts of the two women.

He responds to her story by seeking a way to escape the entire family. In this second act of exploitation, he conspires with his father to steal a green sack from Pilate, a sack which they believe contains gold. Macon tells his son about hiding out with his sister after their father's murder, in a cave where they find buried treasure. They are discovered by a white man whom Macon kills. They flee, but the brother believes that Pilate later returned and took the gold, which is now in the green sack. Milkman and Guitar, who needs money to carry out an assassination, steal the sack, only to discover that it contains human bones.

Still obsessed with the idea of getting money and thereby power, Milkman sets out to find the cave near the old family property. He is at this point also evading both the knowledge that the women have offered and the responsibility that accompanies that knowledge. Just as his father distorted the values of the first Macon Dead by emphasizing possession over creation, so Milkman distorts his father's values by taking on his greed without any sense of responsibility and seriousness. And when he arrives in the family hometown, the folk recollections reinforce this idea. His grandfather and father are remembered, but he hears in the memories a respect for material possession and manipulative energy that validates his self-image.

Only when he encounters the incredibly old woman Circe does he begin to question the object of his quest. Circe was the servant of a white family, the head of which was responsible for the murder of Milkman's grandfather. She recalls the relationship of his ancestors and the real name of his grandfather. She is also the voice of a larger history, for she tells him of the injustices committed by whites throughout the past and implicitly questions his identification with white middle-class values. She also shows him one way to act: she lives in the house of the white family with an ever-increasing pack of dogs, which she intentionally keeps inside so that they will destroy all of the objects that were purchased through the exploitation of black labor. She has willfully outlasted the whites so as to destroy everything they found precious. But she knows the price of revenge; she fully expects the dogs to eat her when she is no longer strong enough to feed them. She has reached the time envisioned by the Invisible Man's grandfather in his admonition to 'agree 'em to death and destruction,' but she also accepts full responsibility for her action. Her vengeance contrasts with that of Guitar in that hers is embedded in a concrete history and not an abstract, dehumanizing concept of justice.

Milkman leaves in search of the original home of his grandfather, but his quest is now ambivalent. On the one hand he wants the gold, which he still believes Pilate has hidden; on the other, he wants to know the story of his family. He has worked through concentric relational circles from himself to his parents to his grandparents. At each level the more he has probed the more he has found difference rather than the expected identity. In Shalimar he will move through one more circle, but in the process he will find a new definition of himself.

In the village he for the first time is the alien, for here his city clothes, city talk, and city values are not privileged. He is taken not as one returning to his roots, but as a threatening 'white-hearted' presence. To succeed in his quest, he must undergo rituals that will strip him of his false culture and prepare him for authentic knowledge. He hears the children reciting ancient rhymes that are vaguely meaningful to him. But in order to decode them, he must become a member of the community. This happens first with a fight that demonstrates his alien status but also tests his courage, then through the opportunity to participate in a hunt. This serves as the male initiation rite that Milkman has never had and thus his possibility of moving out of his perversely extended, narcissistic childhood. He is stripped of all the symbols of the dominant culture, much as Ike McCaslin is in Faulkner's *The Bear*. Though inept, he survives the test, including an unexpected murder attempt by Guitar, who feels he has been betrayed in the pursuit of the gold. Milkman discovers that he wants to live and thus is not truly Dead. He endures and thereby receives the symbols of

his success: the throbbing heart of the bobcat killed in the hunt and a woman he can truly enjoy without dominating.

Most important, he begins to decipher the children's song and finds in it the narrative of his family. It is the folktale of the flying African, Solomon, who one day discovers his magical power and uses it to fly from slavery back to his African home. He left behind a wife Ryna and twenty-one children, including Jake, Milkman's grandfather. Ryna, like Hagar, goes crazy over the loss of her man, and her children are cared for by Heddy, an Indian. The random elements of the past become a coherent family story. The men (Solomon, Jake, Macon, Milkman) seek power, either magical or material; the woman (Ryna, Sing, Ruth, Hagar) must suffer for this pursuit; the children are abandoned because of it, but they are saved by a surrogate mother (Heddy, Circe, Pilate) who keeps alive the history for whoever might later need it. It is also preserved as a functional part of the community, in children's songs. Thus the narrative of power and suffering and love dialectically becomes play....

Names have a concrete history; they keep alive the complex, painful, disorderly, creative reality of human experience that dominant, logocentric structures seek to suppress....They are liberating and magical. The free Milkman from his death-wish and thus make it possible for him to die if necessary. And he frees Pilate, knowing as he now does that the sack of bones belongs not to the white man Macon murdered but to her own father. Aunt and nephew return them to the cave for proper burial. As part of the ritual of purification, Pilate rips off the earring containing her name; it is unnecessary in the presence of the body of the man who gave it to her and who now himself has his right name. At this moment, she is killed by Guitar, who, like the white man who murdered her father, values possession over human life.

With the elimination of these two generations, Milkman can achieve identity with Solomon/Shalimar the flying African.... This act of identification is simultaneously an act of differentiation, for unlike Solomon, Milkman flies into history and responsibility rather than out of it. And in the process he creates the meaning for his own name. From being the one who sucks nourishment and life from others, he becomes the provider, giving Jake his name and home, Pilate freedom from guilt, and Guitar the life he needs to take. His riding the air implies both play and control, or perhaps control through play, and is thus life-affirming even in the moment of death. The magic word, the true name, conquers for a moment of history, the Word' *Song of Solomon* reveals the power that can be achieved through the embrace of folk history."

Keith E. Byerman
"Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison"
*Fingering the Jagged Grain:
Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*
(U Georgia 1985) 184-216

"Whereas the framing images in *Sula* are terrestrial enclosures, those in *Song of Solomon* are celestial flights. The novel opens with Robert Smith's aborted takeoff that brings about his planned suicide, and it ends with the violent reunion between Milkman and Guitar as one of them leaps from the mountain and into the 'killing' arms of the other. The difference between the flights, how their angles of ascent exceed or grasp the long-sought-for family treasure, the home and name initially giving these characters wings, is the novel's main concern.

The novel encompasses three principal organizing structures...the relationship between Milkman and Guitar as the problematic moral center of the novel, the conflict between family and property ties that fuels tension between Pilate and her brother Macon Dead, and finally Milkman's initiatory 'errand' into and out of the wilderness. By discovering his name and performing the song that redeems him and helps him to fly, Milkman completes the unrealized gestures and dreams of Morrison's earlier characters: Pecola, Cholly, Sula, and Ajax. *Song of Solomon* is Morrison's carefully drawn map of ancestral landscape that reclaims and resurrects moribund (the family name is Dead) or hibernating personalities....

Smith loses his balance... Robert Smith's 'leap' is an undignified, clumsy fall.... Milkman, the 'little bird'...becomes the first black child to be born in No Mercy. Milkman now has a more legitimate claim to the space Robert Smith had usurped. As a real 'bird,' a descendant of the Byrds in Shalimar, Virginia,

revealed in the ending, Milkman will not need the artifice of Robert Smith's 'blue silk,' Ajax's cobalt blue bottles, or Pecola's 'blue' eyes. Milkman's maturation in his midwestern hometown and his departure South to discover the land of his ancestors and to sing the song of Solomon—the core subject of the novel—teach him to use his own wings. Milkman's *leap* at the novel's close is a redeeming *flight*.... Before Pilate takes over as Milkman's veritable pilot, his first navigator through a difficult childhood and adolescence is Guitar, who as a child had also witnessed Robert Smith's fall....

'Now, the water and the egg,' Pilate instructs the boys, 'have to meet each other on a kind of equal standing. One can't get the upper hand over the other. So the temperature has to be the same for both.' In the folk logic of this equation, Milkman is the egg. What about the water? Guitar's last name is Bains, which in French means 'bath' or 'watering place' or both. Pilate's foolproof recipe thus becomes a formula for reconciliation; Guitar and Milkman need equal matching for either of them to assume the 'perfect' control of the leap, which is the only way, as shown in *Sula*, the free fall becomes flight.... Guitar teaches Milkman the novel's core lesson: 'Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.' Until Guitar's participation in the Seven Days weakens him morally and psychologically (as had happened to mild-mannered Robert Smith) to the point where he assumes the 'greed for gold' that Milkman has outgrown, Guitar, as his name suggests, is...instrumental in Milkman's development of character....

Macon and Pilate are brother and sister, separated after their father's murder; each inherits something different from him. Macon turns his father's love of the land and talent for farming into an obsessive ownership of property, reducing land and people to mere commodities. He advises his son Milkman: 'Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too.' Pilate, just the opposite, already owns herself—the physical evidence of her self-possession and self-creation is her stomach without a navel. She interprets the one word uttered by her father's ghost, a regular visitor, as an admonition for performance: 'Sing.' Instead of acquiring property, Pilate creates song, transmitting the family lore unconsciously. The history and culture voiced here first draws Macon, then Milkman and Guitar into the charged orbit of Pilate's single-story house on Darling Street, 'whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground.' Pilate's home thus moves us up out of the underground and to the mountaintop. The wings of her song first attract, then encourage full surrender to that upward motion, even for Macon, who listens surreptitiously....

Macon is the kind of invisible man Milkman refuses to be. Without ever learning all that his nickname means (the prolonged 'sexual' nursing from his mother and the demands of nurture he places on other women), Milkman will develop any trait, any *device*, to differentiate himself from his father, even to the point of affecting a limp.... Macon and Pilate vie for a controlling influence over Milkman... While Macon is an owner of land and of people (his assistant Sonny, his tenant Porter), or so he thinks. Pilate, like Cholly Breedlove, is a 'renting' black. Their different relation to the land inversely determines how they function in the novel to help or hinder Milkman. Macon remains dead to the past, which is celebrated and *possessed* unself-consciously by Pilate. Macon, defeated by his father's murder, has leased his identity to fluctuations in the real estate market and in the whims of bank lenders out of desperation to prove his worth. Pilate, on the other hand, is a restless wanderer, owns only those objects that implicitly direct her search for place (and for refuge from pariah status)... By identifying the invisible ancestor in Pilate's song...Milkman lifts the burden of those bones from Pilate's shoulders and allows her to experience a surrender to the air that prefigures his more complete flight....

She can now let go of the burden of bones. She buries them and her earring locket, containing her name written by her father, in a mountaintop grave. The internment of the bones also signals Pilate's end, for she is killed by a bullet intended for Milkman. Once again, she gives him life, if only for the time it takes Guitar to exchange his gun for his fists. When a bird, attracted by the glittering earring near her crumpled body, swoops down and soars away with the locket, Pilate achieves symbolic flight. She experiences the full meaning of her ancestry among the Flying Africans and of her name, no longer Pilate but *pilot*... In addition to wholeness of identity, Pilate achieves at last her rightful, celestial place.

[Morrison] has explored Ellison's terrain [in *Invisible Man*] and found it lacking in the kind of cultural mobility her characters and their experiences demand....enlarging the structure to encompass multiple lives and points of view as her characters aim for motion, not stasis... When Milkman learns through his journey

to the South that names bear witness, indeed 'had meaning,' he can give up his old self more easily (he loses his fine clothes and jewelry and car while on his journey) and reciprocate in lovemaking with Sweet more than he had done with any other woman ('He washed her hair...') Milkman's increased awareness of the mutual responsibilities in love and self-discovery brings about his visibility.... Although Ellison's protagonist's writing of *Invisible Man* in his underground retreat can be seen as an active deed (since it creates the space and action of the novel), Morrison offers an effective contrast: She replaces the cellar-basement environment for the invisible man's *written* performance with the mountaintop height of Milkman's *oral* performance....

Morrison counteracts with the myth of the Flying Africans to show Milkman the reach and promise of the air, *if* he can ride it. Milkman becomes a true descendant of Jake, the only son of Solomon, whereas Ellison's protagonist fails to become a true blood following Trueblood's example of storytelling and rhetorical flourish. When Milkman actually sings the song of Solomon, he assumes the name that had been denied the invisible man, without which Milkman would be colorless and the land of his culture invisible to all. Milkman can now nurture others: Pilate, Ruth, Sweet, Jake, and himself. From the exchange of emotional commitment, Milkman gains the strength he needs to meet his adversary Guitar and gain an equal if not *upper* hand. Above and beyond these various points of comparison between *Song of Solomon* and *Invisible Man* lies Morrison's most significant achievement. She extends the geographical imagery and enriches the acts of deliverance established so far in Afro-American letters. Her novel encompasses the three principal landscapes of retreat and regeneration already present in black American culture: the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop....

It is not enough...for Milkman simply to arrive in Shalimar, or to lose his material possession while there (the vanities that weigh him down). He has to walk that lonesome valley, as the slave songs required, by himself.... Milkman has to earn kinship by enduring the woods, the wilderness. Like the fugitive in slave narratives, he has to renew his covenant with nature to secure passage out of the wilderness... Ryna's Gulch (as well as the bodies of the women Milkman has exploited through sexual conquest) points him to Solomon's Leap, but only after Milkman has bent his ear to the ground to hear the land's sermon or 'anything the earth had to say.' Milkman's discovery of these new spaces and new territories, makes him the pilot to guide Pilate to the resting place for her father's bones. In this wilderness, Milkman earns friendship with the men of Shalimar, with himself, and with the earth. Milkman discovers that he can be his own man, based on his proven skills of survival.... Here Milkman becomes rooted.... This belonging enables him to decode the children's rhyme that gives meaning to the landscape and to [his] ancestry...

Now Milkman can ride the air. His leap of surrender is his ultimate performance, a flight he has earned by doffing his vanities and passing the test of wilderness. His leap transcends the rootedness and the freedom he has gained. Milkman and Morrison's flight, their ride out of the wilderness, demonstrates self-mastery and perfect control."

Melvin Dixon

"Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison"

Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature

(U Illinois 1987) 141-69

"Around Milkman, the hero of her much-admired *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison wraps various collective fictions: a riddling nursery rhyme that presages his birth and, later chanted by children, leads him to discover his heritage; fables, like the one his father, Macon Dad, tells of the man who rescues a baby snake only to be poisoned to death by its bite; fairy tales, like 'Rumpelstiltskin,' 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' and 'Hansel and Gretel'; a common black folktale, like 'People Who Could Fly' (as collected by Julius Lester); and family legends, like that of Milkman's great-grandfather's ability to fly....

Underlying these commoner fictions, however, is Otto Rank's powerful monomyth, the myth of the birth of the hero. Its features—with only minor glossing—attach to Milkman and categorically lay claim to his place among the heroes from whose stories Rank extrapolates his monomyth: Moses, Oedipus, Perseus, Gilgamesh, Tristan, Romulus, Jesus, and Lohengrin—to name but half. Despite Morrison's shrewd use of the monomyth on Milkman's behalf, she skillfully mocks him and the novel's other men. Offsetting his and their deflation is a subtle spectrum of praiseworthy women, prime among whom is the novel's only

character of a heroic stature, Pilate. 'Marvelous' details circle her with a mythic nimbus that—combined with the humane values by which she conducts her life—rejects the sexism of Rank's monomyth and the expectations of feminists. The nine parts of Rank's monomyth map the standard saga of the hero:

[1] *The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king.* Milkman's father, the city's most affluent black property owner, stands as virtual king.... [2] *During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative).* Milkman's birth is heralded by the suicidal leap from the top of Mercy Hospital by an insurance salesman wearing blue wings.... His 'flight' is accompanied by Pilate's song of Sugarman... [3] *As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box.* Modernizing the monomyth, Morrison changes the element from water to air, thereby sustaining both the folktale's belief in a group of blacks who could fly and her hero's lineage... The suicide's oracular leap from Mercy... signals the birth of Milkman, as though he, like his grandfather, drops from the sky. Because of the hero's potential threat, the father traditionally maims the infant before abandoning him; the result, the limping hero, is mirrored in the uneven length of Milkman's legs....

[4] *He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds)...* Milkman is repeatedly saved by lowly women: Pilate, Ruth, Circe, Sweet, and Susan Byrd... [5] *And is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman.* Macon's rejection of Ruth's affection demotes her from 'queen' to humble woman, for which loss she compensates by suckling her son into his fourth year, the discovery of which yields his nickname of Milkman. [6] *After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion.* Milkman's quest to Danville, Pennsylvania, and to Shalimar... Virginia, results not in the gold his father led him to expect he'd find, but in the treasure of discovering his lineage, of having to unravel the knotted mysteries... 'Versatile fashion' generously allows for Milkman's episodes with Sweet, Circe, and Susan Byrd, as well as his nocturnal hunt with the four elders of Shalimar.

[7] *He takes revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged on the other.* Milkman's journey and discoveries further free him from his father's grasping anality and fixation on respectability; this implies his revenge in the forms of his total repudiation of Macon Dead's obsessive capitalism, his esteem of Pilate's regard and values (eschewed by his father), and his scorn for the hate-steeped, vindictive racism of a surrogate father, Guitar. [8] *Acknowledgement* comes with the special favors of Circe, Sweet, and Susan Byrd; with Hagar's death, symbolically lamenting the permanent loss of her lover; with Guitar's fanatic resolve to slay him as a scapegoat; and with Pilate's journeying with him to bury the bones of her father atop Solomon's Leap. [9] *Finally he achieves rank and honors.* Milkman accepts the heritage of his ancestors and lays claim to rank among them with his novel-ending plunge from Solomon's Leap, having earned such rank by solving the mystery of the bones Pilate long carried with her...

Although Morrison follows each of the road signs along the map of Rank's monomyth, she obscures that map by blurring the dates of the novel's events and, more important, undercuts its conventional celebration of the role of the hero in our culture. For shrewdly she mocks the novel's men, especially its alleged hero. She finds little value in Ruth's father Dr. Foster, the image-proud black professional. Despite his stature as 'the most important Negro in the city,' and his reputation among some whites as a 'miracle-doctor,' he does little to better the plight of his fellow blacks, regarding himself as having risen above them.... Morrison more savagely mocks Macon Dead, the acquisitive black. Property-owner and land-developer, his ruthlessness with delinquent tenants, his fixation on caste and respectability...

Guitar, the vindictive racist whose membership in the brotherhood of the Seven Days feeds racial hatred, gets Morrison's scorn, too. Self-denying though he is, ready to sacrifice personal pleasure for the cause of the secret society, Morrison aligns him with Macon and Dr. Foster as one more pathetic—if not neurotically hollow—man, no model of manhood for white or black. Nor is Milkman. Titular hero though his fit with Rank's criteria makes him, he too is an intolerable egotist. True, he strikes out at his father, presumably in defense of his mother. But more typically he 'almost never thought about her.' And after a 14-year relationship with Hagar, he naively believes—at 31 years of age!—that he can decently end it by sending her money in a thank-you note. Indeed, as Guitar tells him, he's not a 'serious person,' and Pilate tells both Ruth and Hagar, Milkman 'wouldn't give a pile of swan shit for either of you'....

It is with rich invention that Morrison unfolds the ordeals of Milkman's journeys. He withstands the stench of the dog-befouled, decaying Butler home where the supposed dead, supra-100-year-old Circe embraces him and plays gothic cicerone to his ancestry. He overcomes the mortifyingly minor mishaps of his trek to the cave where he expects to find gold. He survives the knife-and-broken-bottle fight in Shalimar. He aborts Guitar's homicidal attempt on his life during the coon-become-bobcat hunt with King Walker's elders. And he wrestles with the nursery rhyme, whose meaning his visits with Susan Byrd help him finally decipher. Material though this all is for a hero's adventures—and for the epiphanies and knowledge expected of such a hero—its subtext is satiric. Beneath all of these episodes resonates a malice-tinged chuckle, delight in humbling the hero....

For he returns to Danville like some vaudeville character, his flopping sole tie-tied to his shoe. Milkman survives the knife-and-broken bottle skirmish in Shalimar; but the episode documents less his combative prowess than his stupidity, insensitive to the blacks whose culture he has intruded. And his nocturnal hunt with the elders who gather at King Walker's finds him as unfit for a test of physical endurance as Susan Byrd's crosstalk and the school-children's nursery rhyme find him slow at feats of intellectual penetration. Should the satiric subtext slip past her readers, Morrison repeatedly invites a fundamental question of her hero: does he do anything to warrant that honorific label? Alas, little. Like Dr. Foster, Macon Dead, and Guitar, Milkman has the potential to become a hero—though perhaps not a Rankian one. But just as their self-centered, goal-dominated ambitions reflect warped forms of self-aggrandizement, so, too, do Milkman's journey and discovery of his parentage end in attempts at self-glorification.

Milkman's discovery of his lineage is little more than an intoxicant to gratify his wish for some grandiose illusion—that in his gene pool lies the birdlike ability to soar. Upon that illusion he acts in his novel-ending leap into the arms of his assailant, the psychopathic Guitar. Morrison's prose seems to celebrate that illusion, enough so that most readers mistake her irony for endorsement. But beneath the positive thrust of her imaginative prose and the seemingly upbeat ending of her novel lies Morrison's disdain for Milkman because of what he fails to learn on his journey—that in his gene pool also swims the congenital habit of desertion. The nursery rhyme changed by the Shalimar schoolchildren indicts Solomon as feckless for abandoning the woman from whose womb he fathered 21 sons, Ryna... Likewise did Jake Solomon desert his adoptive mother, Heddy Byrd, whom he left to go north with Sing, as did Macon Dead desert both his sister in the cave and his wife to her own bed; Milkman's desertion of Hagar, then, honors the tradition of the man's prerogative—to escape domestication, to fly from responsibilities, in the name of self-fulfillment or self-discovery or self-indulgence.

Waking to find himself tied up on Pilate's cellar floor, Milkman realizes that Hagar's death must account for Pilate's act of knocking him senseless with a wet bottle when he returned from Shalimar.... But Milkman assigns himself no culpability: 'What difference did [Hagar's death] make? He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead...' So when Milkman leaps at the novel's end into Guitar's arms and certain death, his act is but one more gesture of irresponsibility; he flies, indeed, from the burden of doing something meaningful in life, preferring the sumptuous illusion that he will ride the air. By appropriating Rank's monomyth, tailoring her hero to fit its criteria, and then bringing us close to see the incongruity of her 32-year-old wearing a suit leagues larger than he, Morrison continues the ambiguous and ambivalent analysis of myths on which all of her novels pivot. But if she holds her hero up to a set of criteria only to ridicule him—albeit subtly—she also resists the temptation to use her novel as a feminist platform for celebrating wholesale its women. Rather she alternates the current of her attitude towards them, portraying a spectrum from pathetic to praiseworthy. Most pathetic is Hagar....

Forceful and partially gratuitous (certainly signaling some personal anger in Morrison's own life), Lena's speech gathers women's deepest domestic resentments against men, heroes or not, berating Milkman for his pampered arrogance, his notions of domestic noblesse oblige, his obtuse chauvinism, and his utter insensitivity to his sisters' suppressed lives.... Like Hagar's overreaction to the loss of Milkman, Lena's deep-seated resentment against men underscores Morrison's disdain of heroes and hero-worship.... For feminists expecting Morrison to fashion some outsized heroine of Wagnerian stature, Pilate is as much a disappointment as Milkman should be for critics who find heroic lineaments in him. As one feminist articulates the case against Pilate, she 'originates' nothing, lacks 'conscious knowledge,' and has an 'oddly garbled 'sense of mission.' Yet Pilate is a 'culture bearer,' someone whose primary function is to sustain

the durable human values of the past, not to be a trend-setter who innovates newfangled values or models or standards.

No rural throwback who lives on the margins of modern society, Pilate inherits our celebrated American tradition of individualism, and she challenges and rejects her society's values by living in its very midst, refusing to retreat from it. Indeed, her actions repeatedly show that she chooses to reject the idea of 'originating' something, a masculine goal that leads to such dehumanizing gods as exploitive capitalism (Macon Dead), racist vindictiveness (The Seven Days), commercial enslavement (Hagar), and escapist fantasy (Milkman). Abandoned by brother and lovers, shunned by neighbors, she overcomes adversity and rejection without recrimination or self-pity.... Her mission is exemplary, because it is nothing less than to live her life in manifest repudiation of the grasping ambitiousness and obsessive desires of those around her who end up as grotesques, fanatics, neurotics, or fantasists.... Her heroism resides in her self-acceptance and self-content, the heroism of performing routine responsibilities without fretting... And while for some it may not be enough to model oneself after Pilate, better that than after someone silly enough to thrill to the notion that the capacity to fly is important."

Gerry Brenner

"*Song of Solomon: Rejecting Rank's Monomyth and Feminism*"
Studies in American Fiction 15 (1987) 13-24

"*Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, changed Toni Morrison's public reputation from aspiring novelist to outstanding American writer. It was the most extensively reviewed of her books but the one black women are most critical of. This was also her first novel with a male hero, and a questing one at that, a theme readily recognizable in Anglo-American literature. The power of the novel, however, is in Morrison's use of black mythology and the strength of its elements of black culture. *The New York Times Book Review* gave the book front page space; it was named a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, the first by a black writer to receive such attention since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. In 1978 Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for this novel. A year later, *Song of Solomon* was a paperback best-seller with 570,000 copies in print.... She was featured on a PBS series, 'Writers in America,' appointed to President Carter's National Council of the Arts, and elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed.

Critical Essays on Toni Morrison
(G. K. Hall 1988) 4

"[Students] are often perplexed at Toni Morrison's use of the flying motif in *Song of Solomon*. This is especially true when they encounter Milkman's final leap toward Guitar, freedom, and possibly death, a willful decision that many readers—not only undergraduates—find a disruption of the novel's realistic or naturalistic narrative.... In addition to the important scenes that open and close the book—Robert Smith's failed flight with homemade wings and Milkman's surrender to the air—students note the descriptive and symbolic language of flight (or overcoming), the copious ornithological imagery (peacocks, eagles, buzzards, etc. in the text, the presence of actual flyers (the 332nd fighter group), and even the punning in Pilate's name.... Her presentation of the fantastic works to disrupt the usual interpretive process, causing readerly discomfort. Again this difficulty is greatest at Milkman's surrender, paradoxically at the instant we are most convinced of a victory. As Milkman attempts to ride the air toward Guitar, undergraduate readers often feel abandoned, left behind like the children of Solomon....

Morrison's source for the tale was *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (United States), which contains just five variations on the story of African slaves (occasionally a single slave) who, determined to get home, simply up and fly away. Popular collections of African American folklore also offer differing versions of this compelling tale.... At the other end of the cultural spectrum, one might draw...attention to popular cultural phenomena like the groundbreaking television series about the civil rights era, *I'll Fly Away*; the prevalence of the image of flight in spirituals and gospel music; the African American children's book by Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*; the cultural currency of the Tuskegee Airmen; or, finally, the ubiquity of Air Jordans.... This intertextual web cannot

assuage students' understandable discomfort or disbelief over the actions of Robert Smith or Milkman Dead."

James C. Hall
"Flying Home: Folklore, Intertextuality, and *Song of Solomon*"
Critical Essays (1988) 68-71

"Over the past decade, black women writers have clearly dominated the literary scene in Afro-American letters.... By entrusting her own narrative to many voices (and basing its structure on many stories) Morrison acknowledges the debt that any black writer has to the oral tradition, the true legacy of black people. With her reverence for the legacy, her secrecy and defiance, she [Pilate] becomes Milkman's pilot, the guiding force... Her many gifts as natural healer, skilled wine maker, singer, conjure woman and soothsayer, truth giver, bear witness to the extent of the legacy of black womankind. She initiates Milkman into the wisdom and beliefs and souls of his people, and challenges his indifference and ignorance. Thanks to Pilate, the uncomfortable boy foresees a future, is given a sense of purpose. His first visit to Pilate's house initiates his journey into the legacy....

'Black women can fly.' This statement is emphatically made by black women in their writings. Pilate is the embodiment of that image. But the flying is in Morrison's text not just a metaphorical expression of black women's spirituality, it is rooted in ancient belief and folklore. Pilate has inherited the gift to fly—which, according to certain legends, was only given to those who knew the secret word....

In the end, in his final leap, Milkman wheels into his friend's arms, surrendering to or freeing himself from Guitar's obsessive pursuit. *Song of Solomon* thus unfolds between two leaps. Characters are left on the edges from which they can either lose their balance and fall, or 'surrender to the air and ride it.' Between Mr. Smith's fateful leap and Milkman's flight in the air, the protagonist's awkward yet persistent exploration of the legacy is in many ways archetypal. The journey, as in many other quests in American literature, must be redemptive of past flaws and weaknesses, and retributive. It must do justice to the dead and to the living. Milkman's journey is a succession of leaps and falls, of attempted deaths and incomplete rebirths, of blunders and triumphs, of moments of vulnerability or exhilaration. The real goal of his journey is disguised even to himself....

He travels back in space and time to the woodlife of Pennsylvania and the wilder backwoods of Virginia, to the days of slavery when blacks moved in wagons toward the promised land. He gets closer to home, to the South, and to Africa wherefrom the Flying Ancestor, the one with the real name, came. The journey, however, is full of pitfalls and trials. It takes him, the city bred, further away from civilization, into close connection with the asocial powers of life and death, with the cosmos or chaos. Milkman's errand into the wilderness becomes a mock story of survival, a joke. Through the last stages of the quest, he feels alternately aloof, unconcerned, off center or, on the contrary, involved and caring. During moments of vacuity the very question 'is it important for you to find your own people?' becomes itself aimless, and Guitar's vengefulness and suspicion deprive him of the only person he could trust. But when, on the other hand, moments of revelation occur, they are like new baptisms: as when in the heart of nature he 'walks the earth,' or when he watches the skinning of a bobcat, or again when he falls into the arms of the only person who does not threaten his life, a woman called Sweet.

In the deceptive creeks and woods or among country people where his presence—a black man with a white heart—is first an offense, the tests and trials become necessary rites of passage. They further purify him and initiate him back into the tribe. The spatial distance that he has to cover gives a measure of his original estrangement and disconnectedness.... Deciphering the song that the children are singing, thus keeping the story alive, Milkman finds new meanings for old words. The Byrd house with its appropriate name delivers the last clue to the riddle, and this revelation must be shared with Pilate to whom it had initially been entrusted. She must be told about her mother's name, her father's wish to be buried where he belongs at Solomon's Leap where his own father 'sailed off into the sky like an eagle.' The wish, if fulfilled, will create history and complete the myth. In the last swift scene each gesture and act, unreal and they are, assume perfection and finality. They are the reenactment of familiar rites and rituals, and Milkman's leap, the fulfillment of a dream, is an act of faith in the legacy, an act of communion with Pilate, and with his flying ancestor."

“The community as a formal chorus is an important element in Toni Morrison’s fiction. Her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, combines the ritual elements of traditional African dance and song with a commentary on the characters’ actions... Morrison states her goal is ‘To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader *feel* the narrator without identifying the narrator....’ Her method, she says, is ‘To use, even formally, a chorus. The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead.’

Morrison’s rationale for this method is that black music, the traditional medium of black art, no longer performs its ‘healing’ functions for the black community because it has been assimilated into the music of white society.... She said the novel was a way ‘...to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do for each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization’.... By using the chorus as ritual dance, song, and commentary, Morrison accentuates that archetypal quality and extends her audience beyond the actual communities through which Milkman journeys to include a larger community of readers....

The baby, later known as Milkman Dead, is born figuratively dead, cut off from knowledge of his past, which he will not learn until he is an adult.... At the moment of Smith’s fall a woman wrapped in an old quilt, whom we later learn is Pilate, sings ‘O Sugarman done fly / O Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home....’ The lines foreshadow the children’s dance and song of Solomon in Shalimar, as well as Pilate’s and Milkman’s deaths. This ‘structural interdependence of music and dance’ is basic to traditional African culture; its use helps Morrison extend her audience at Smith’s suicide to encompass the community of readers....

The locals’ name of ‘Macon Dead’s hearse’ is appropriate, for the slow-moving Packard takes the Dead family nowhere in particular.... One of the most powerful uses of song and ritual dance in Part 1 centers around Hagar’s stalking of Milkman and the keening of Pilate and her ‘Mercy’ song at Hagar’s funeral. Although the funeral scene occurs in Part 2, Hagar never travels South, and her death and the accompanying pain that Reba and Pilate suffer are closely related to the themes of alienation, loss, and death in the Northern section.... At Hagar’s funeral we see one of the most poignant uses of song in the novel, a ritual combined with dancelike movement, orchestrated by Pilate.... She repeats the phrase ‘My baby girl’ over and over until like an angry elephant ‘Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear. ‘And she was loved!’ Pilate and Reba’s slow movement about the chapel and their songs, although intensely personal, emphasize the universal grief of a mother mourning her dead ‘baby girl’....

Milkman realizes his father’s desire to own land, perverted as it has become, had its literal roots in the nobleness of his grandfather. As a counterpoint to the female voices of the community who could not protect Hagar, we hear a chorus of male voices on the tradition of working the land... By the time Milkman reaches Shalimar the images of dance and song are much more apparent. The entire community of the rural Virginia town takes part in Milkman’s discovery of his identity through the untangling of his past. The young men do this with the fight, the old men with the hunt, the women with the provision of the reward in the person of Sweet, and the children with their song and dance of Milkman’s genealogy....

After Milkman survives Guitar’s attempt on his life (made with a wire, befitting the player who is named for a stringed instrument, but who makes not music but death), we hear Milkman’s thoughts, memories of Guitar’s statements about life, interwoven with the description of the men, skinning and gutting the cat. The effect is to emphasize the brutality of Guitar’s ideas through the choral phrasing.... Morrison uses the ritual skinning and the choral quality of the language to show us that the eventual victor will be the one with the heart. The reward of Milkman’s new understanding is sweet, personified by the woman of the same name. The language with its harmony describing their actions following lovemaking, shows the responsibility Milkman now gladly undertakes....

Ironically, it is on top of Solomon's Leap that Milkman is confronted with the closest circle of the community as represented by Pilate and Guitar, the diametrically opposed leaders of the two fringe groups from his native Michigan. The circles of social groups around Milkman and his interaction with them have, in dancelike fashion, become increasingly smaller throughout the novel. He has moved from an alienation from the community in the North through the slow awareness of self and his place in the smaller group of his people in Pennsylvania, to the final direct involvement with the men, women, and children of Shalimar. What keeps the ever-enclosing circles from suffocating Milkman is his ability to transcend the community, to follow the lead of Pilate, who is ultimately his pilot, in her affirmation of life and love. Pilate's only regret at death is that she didn't know more people, for if she had, she would have loved more. Her philosophy is directly opposite that of Guitar, who would kill the innocent out of a perverted sense of love for an abstract concept.

Milkman's last action is an echo, literally of Robert Smith's act in the opening scene. Milkman's jump, however, unlike Smith's of desperation, is reminiscent of the boy in the middle of the circle dance of Solomon's song. Milkman calls to Guitar: 'You want my life?... You need it? Here.' As he leaps, Milkman transcends the literal community and flies away like Solomon, though perhaps not as heroically. Milkman's problems are not all solved, and he is still responsible for Hagar's death.... In Milkman's leap there is the pure motion of flight, a dance to the heavens, witnessed by the rocks and hills...."

Kathleen O'Shaughnessy
"Life life life life': The Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*"
Critical Essays (1988) 126-32

"Black life in this universe is characterized by an inversion of some of the conditions of white life. To survive, one must apparently play by the rules established by white economic and political power yet invert their meaning to subvert their strength and dominance.... More generally, life in Southside is characterized by a precarious kind of anarchy.... This anarchy occasions an especial need for Southsiders to create fictions by which to run their lives, for they are caught between the destructive rigidity of the city fathers and the equally destructive fluidity of their neighborhood.

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison depicts her characters' efforts to mediate the opposites of fluidity and rigidity by means of the story in order to explore the central conflict informing all of her works—the fate of more or less rigid ways of understanding and of creating meaning in a 'universe' characterized by extreme fluidity. Three major types of 'stories' dominate the novel: those that enhance reality, those that seek to control reality, and those that try to substitute for reality....

Ruth's psychopathological attraction to her father represents too great a need for parental support and guidance and illuminates her dependence on fairly fast and steady modes of being. Similarly her nursing of Milkman becomes a 'balm,' some form of protection against the outside world. But instead of being either the keeper of the lighthouse or the inmate of the prison, she becomes a figure out of a fairy tale—the miller's daughter in 'Rumpelstiltskin.'... Ruth plays the central and characteristically isolated role in all three versions of her plight, as the solitary figure on a seaside landscape, the prisoner in her cell, or the threatened heroine soon to be rescued....

Macon fetishizes his property holdings as well as their emblems—his ring of keys. The keys and the houses as well are symbols in a fiction which seeks to control the world—the narrative Macon has tried to build to avoid the fate of his father, whose story concerns a pastoral paradise stolen away by greedy white neighbors... Ownership is his mode of defense against the depredations of an intrinsically antagonistic white world... But the threat of the white world is still ubiquitous and extracts from Macon a surrender to the values of conspicuous consumption... Macon himself owns things and leases them—a relationship far more characteristic of advanced stages of capitalism than the economic relationships in the pastoral idyll of his father.... In the instances of Ruth and Macon, their desire for safety has...made them either... [pathologically] dependent or inhumanly cold and indifferent to the fates of others....

Morrison establishes Guitar as superficially opposite—his violent radicalism contrasting with Macon's capitulation to white middle-class values.... In response to the injuries caused by the white world, both

Guitar and Macon create fictive strategies designed to protect themselves.... Both characters remain infected by a nearly single-mindedly rigid pursuit of the informing goals of their fictions—property and revenge.... Ironically, each in his own way is controlled by the very white world he wishes to fight. The whims of consumer fashion and the marketplace control Macon, as do his internalized conceptions of propriety and appropriate social behavior.... The irony of the Days' mode of revenge, that the violence of whites against blacks is reversed to whites in kind, in fact turns back against the Days in an important reversal...in a perverse way the Days remain dependent on the action of whites.... The single-minded pursuit of this kind of revenge 'freezes' Guitar up, turning him against his former friend, making him unable to see beyond the story that controls his life....

The physical remoteness of the past is further an expression of the distance between Milkman and anything like a buttressing sense of self and place—a knowledge of history. The metaphor of the automobile is especially important since the car and the ride as well are elements in a story woven by Macon Dead that serves his purposes more than those of any other character. The pastoral tale of the family farm has transposed into the business novel of the twentieth century. But the car, the primary symbol in that tale—aside from the keys and the houses—becomes disabling for Milkman rather than enabling, turning into a symbol of imprisonment and limitation rather than their opposites....

The peacock serves as Morrison's central metaphor for the problematic of vanity. Of the peacock, Guitar says, 'Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.' The irony, of course, is that at this point in the novel the vainest of the characters are both Guitar and Milkman. They achieve this state by being so thoroughly wrapped up in their own stories that they fail to hear other stories and fail to acknowledge that they play roles in other fictions....the essential problem facing so many of the characters in the novel is working their way out of a blindness into something that resembles partial sight, if not insight.... Milkman's desire only for happiness...like his vanity, insulates him from the pain of others, and from his own pain, by letting him create in the fashion he chooses the only story which affects him. The novel, however, insists on the significance of shared history communicated by shared stories, shared traditions, and shared experience....

Once Milkman begins his trek back to the South, he becomes aware of the implications of shared experience.... Being grounded in the milieu of the story has the effect of circumventing Milkman's vanity and self-possession.... 'He was curious about these people. He didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared'.... The comfort Milkman feels and the restoration he experiences are a sign of his being grounded, metaphorically speaking, in a reality other than that which he himself has created. The tremendous emphasis on the oral, traditional aspects of language, where one speaks rather than writes, reemphasizes the communal nature of the history-creating act.... The story 'is' in some important sense the history we experience."

Theodore O. Mason, Jr.

"The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"
Contemporary Literature 29.4
(Winter 1988) 564-80

"If Milkman's present is a meaningless void of bourgeois alienation, the possibility of a past opens out to him like a great adventure.... Milkman comes to realize that only by knowing the past can he hope to have a future.... The fact that Milkman embarks on a quest for his past is itself symptomatic of the difference between the forties neighborhood and the sixties community. In contrast with Milkman, the black youth of the forties had no need to uncover and decipher the past simply because enough of it was still present, born on successive waves of Southern black immigrants....

In tracing his roots from the Detroit ghetto, where he was familiar with Pilate's version of the Solomon song; to Danville, Pennsylvania, where his father grew up; and then to Shalimar, Virginia, where his grandfather was born and children still sing of Solomon, Milkman deciphers the twin texts of history: song and genealogy. In so doing, he reconstructs a dialectic of historical transition, in which the individual genealogy evokes the history of black migration and the chain of economic expropriation from hinterland to village, and the village to metropolis. The end point of Milkman's journey is the starting point of his race's history in this country: slavery....

Milkman's journey into the past takes him out of consumer society...and thrusts him into the preindustrial world of Shalimar.... The vision of women walking empty-handed produces an estrangement of Milkman's normal view of women who, conditioned by a market economy, haul around purses like grotesque bodily appendages.... As all of his commodified possessions fall away—his watch, his Florsheim shoes, and his three-piece suit—he comes to realize a full range of sensual perceptions (along with some human social practices—like sharing) he had never before experienced....

Driven by the desire to own property, the basis of bourgeois class politics, Macon Dead uses property, like a true capitalist, for further accumulation through the collection of rents.... A phantom in search of some vision of human fulfillment, Macon wanders one evening into the southside ghetto, his sister's neighborhood. There, drawn by her singing, he pauses to peer in her window. In every way Pilate is her brother's emotional and social antithesis. What Macon sees when he looks into Pilate's house is a totally alternative life-style, whose dramatic opposition to the spiritual impoverishment of Macon's world gives rise to a utopian moment... In contrast to Macon's world, which is based on accumulation, Pilate's household is devoted in true potlatch fashion to nonaccumulation....

Throughout her writing Morrison defines and tests the limits of individual freedom. Unlike those characters who realize total freedom and, as a result, are incapable of living in society and maintaining human relationships, like Cholly Breedlove and Sula, Pilate lives an unencumbered life that is the basis for a social form of freedom, rich in human understanding and love, which is neither sexual nor familial.... Deprived of sex because of her unique body and the superstitious fear it creates, Pilate's lack becomes the basis for her liberation from narrowly defined human relationships based on sexuality and the expansion of her social world to one based on human sensitivity. This is very different from the way Pilate's sister-in-law, Ruth Foster, lives her sexual deprivation. Shunned by her husband, she turns inward to necrophilic fantasies of her father, a mildly obscene relationship with her son, and masturbation. Ruth, like many of Morrison's female characters, is dependent on a possessive and closed heterosexual relationship; she never comes to see human relationships as anything but sexual....

Hagar's hysteria and death mark the limits of her assimilation into bourgeois culture. Neither through withdrawal nor through commodity consumption can Hagar transform herself into an object. Her marginality, by reason of race and...background, is the basis for her inalienable human dimension. As Morrison might have put it, she is simply too black, too passionate, too human ever to become reified."

Susan Willis

"Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison"

Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present

eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah

(Amistad 1993) 312, 315-20

"*Song of Solomon* centers on Milkman Dead's unwitting search for identity. Milkman appears to be doomed to a life of alienation from himself and from others because, like his parents, he adheres to excessively rigid, materialistic, Western values and an attendant linear conception of time. During a trip to his ancestral home, however, Milkman discovers his own capacity for emotional expansiveness and learns to perceive the passage of time as a cyclical process. When he incorporates both his familial and his personal history into his sense of the present, he repairs his feelings of fragmentation and comprehends for the first time the coherence of his own life....

The degeneration of the Dead family, and the destructiveness of Macon's rugged individualism, symbolize the invalidity of American, indeed, Western values. Morrison's depiction of this family demonstrates the incompatibility of received assumptions and the texture and demands of life in black American communities.... Macon, Jr. believes that a successful businessman cannot afford to be compassionate.... And he encourages Milkman and Guitar to steal what he thinks is Pilate's gold, despite the kindness she has shown them all.... He sees his tenants as only so much property [ironic echo of slavery]. Moreover, he objectifies his family. He brutalizes his wife Ruth both subtly and overtly because he suspects her of incestuous relations with her father and son.... Weak and pathetic as she is, Ruth finds subtle methods of objectifying the members of her family as well. She retaliates against her husband's

cruelty by manipulating him... After she realizes that her husband will never again gratify her sexuality, she uses Milkman to fulfill her yearnings by breastfeeding him until he is old enough to talk, stand up and wear knickers....

Pilate Dead, Macon's younger sister, provides a marked contrast to her brother and his family. Like Macon, Pilate presides over a household which is predominantly female. But while Macon's love of property and money determines the nature of his relationships, Pilate's sheer disregard for status, occupation, hygiene and manners enables her to affirm spiritual values such as compassion, respect, loyalty and generosity. If the Macon Deads seem barren and lifeless, Pilate's family bursts with energy and sensuality.... As Pilate introduces vitality into her brother's life, so does she introduce a magical presence into the otherwise spiritually lifeless world of Part I of the novel. The circumstances of her birth make her a character of larger-than-life dimensions—one who has transcended the limitations of her historical moment and milieu. Pilate delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society, since those who know of her condition shun her. Moreover, her physical condition symbolizes her thorough independence of others; even as a fetus she did not need to rely on another person for sustenance.... She is therefore neither trapped nor destroyed by decaying values as her brother's family is. Like Macon she is self-made, but her self-creation departs from, instead of coinciding with, the American myth.... In contrast to Macon's, Pilate's vision of time—indeed, of the world—is cyclical and expansive. Instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories and her bag of bones. She believes that one's sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough simply to put it behind one and look forward....

Milkman's assumption that the key to his liberation may be found in Danville and Shalimar is correct, although it is not gold that will free him. In his ancestors' world, communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism; when he adopts their assumptions in place of his own, he arrives at a more complete understanding of what his experience means.... Just before his epiphanic moment in the forest, he has changed from his cosmopolitan attire to overalls and brogans. Similarly, the people he meets in Shalimar force him to throw off his pretenses before they offer him the help and information he needs. Only when he ceases to flaunt his wealth and refer to their women casually do they admit him into their community. Until he sheds the leaden trappings of materialism, Milkman is like the peacock he and Guitar see: too weighted down by his vanity to fly....

While previously he had dehumanized his friends and relations, he now empathizes with his parents and feels shame for having robbed Pilate.... Moreover, he knows without being told that [Hagar] has died and he is to blame. As Pilate has carried with her the bones of the man she believes she has murdered, so too does Milkman resolve to carry with him the box of Hagar's hair: a symbol of his newly acquired cyclical vision of a past he no longer needs to escape.... When Milkman knows the entire song...and can sing it to Pilate as she has sung it to others, he can assume his destiny. Flight is no longer a fantasy that haunts him, appearing unsummoned in his consciousness. He now understands it as a significant action from his ancestral past. Indeed, the ultimate sign of his achievement of identity is his ability to take flight in the way his grandfather did.... Milkman bursts the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity."

Valerie Smith
"Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community"
Critical Perspectives (1993) 278-83

"In *Song of Solomon*, most members of the central family are, as their surname hints, spiritually maimed if not dead. Macon Dead, whose entire name is a pun, is a merciless, materialistic slum landlord who reigns over his family as he does his tenants, as an unfeeling autocrat. The members of his family limp through life, each in some crucial way incomplete. The youngest Dead and only son, Milkman, has an actual limp caused by one slightly shorter leg. However, the narrator informs us, 'The deformity was mostly in his mind.' Macon's two daughters are pathetic, emotionally stunted women. Like fairy-tale sisters awaiting the prince who might free them from the prison of their father's house, they occupy themselves by making fake rose petals out of velvet. Late in her life, the daughter named Corinthians finally is rescued by a man whose affection allows her to replace her false vanity with authentic self-esteem.

In fact, nearly all the females in *Song of Solomon*, except for the indomitable Pilate Dead, are clinging, self-effacing women who are easily humiliated or exploited by men. Ruth Foster Dead, daughter of the town's most successful black doctor and wife of one of its most successful businessmen, lived as a child in 'a great big house that pressed [her] into a small package'.... Pilate Dead wears her name, in her father's handwriting, as tangible proof of 'where she came from': a literal possession connected to her flesh by an earring made out of a box. Milkman's eventual discovery of his grandparents' real names and their ancestry is central to his own self-discovery and achievement of manhood. In fact, his is the most problematic name in the novel.

'Dead' suggests the spiritual torpor Milkman must overcome in order to live as an independent man; it also connects him through his father's line to patriarchy itself, with its valuation not of affiliation but of 'owning, building, acquiring.' Additionally, it is a reminder of the white world's control over black people, for the first Macon Dead's (Milkman's grandfather's) name is the result of a white man's error. The nickname 'Milkman' encodes a relationship with his mother of both sustenance and suffocation. Neither is his 'true' name; one signifies surfeit and indulgence, the other nonbeing. Milkman's task is the reconciliation of his two names and the discovery of his true identity behind them.... As he restores the corrupted version of a rhythmic childhood chant around the mythical flight of Solomon, he also restores his link to his cultural community by recovering its history.

The collective memory Milkman eventually reconstructs concerns his great-grandfather Solomon/Shalimar, the fabled patriarch of the family, who 'flew' back to Africa, leaving his devastated wife and twenty-one children behind. Such stories are part of black American folklore, preserving the dream of rising above the brutal conditions of slavery by escape to Africa, of transcending the literal boundaries of servitude. Flight suggests liberation, whether literal or spiritual; thus, death is one kind of escape or flight and the Dead family name preserves this meaning...

Morrison's latter two novels both conclude with the equivocal image of flight. Through that image, both narratives explore the conflict between the need for personal autonomy and the temptation of escape from moral responsibility to others... In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's ancestor escaped from slavery by flying away. Yet for those left behind, his flight created further suffering. In a sense, his miraculous escape was irresponsible in the same way that Milkman's treatment of Hagar was; in the pursuit of his own desires, each left a legacy of misery. In recognizing this correspondence, Milkman realizes how his self-preoccupation and lack of empathy have caused other harm. As he learns through Pilate, acts have consequences for which one must take responsibility; her death is the price he must pay in return for that very knowledge. In fact, two women die in order for Milkman to overcome 'Deadness': to come alive as a free—and responsible—agent in his own destiny and to affirm the reciprocal values of the community....

Only as he synthesizes these stories of his family and his past can he construct his own version of the 'real.' The 'Song of Solomon' that he reconstructs commemorates his ancestor's refusal to be owned. However, the true measure of Milkman's own liberation is his recognition that such passion for freedom must be tempered with concern for its effect on others.... Though feminist readers have expressed disappointment with Morrison for making her hero male rather than female, it is equally noteworthy that the author portrays a hero who achieves manhood by assimilating a traditionally female moral perspective into his previously limited vision. Milkman Dead ultimately combines in himself the truths of both patriarchal and matriarchal sides of his heritage: the history of 'names' leads him to discover his own identity; the sacrifices on his behalf by Pilate and others generate his new sense of himself as part of a community to which he belongs by virtue of reciprocal responsibility. Owning his soul, Milkman frees himself... In accomplishing 'flight,' he surrenders his destructive need to be either infantilized or worshipped by women."

Roberta Rubenstein
"Pariahs and Community"
Critical Perspectives (1993) 143, 150-51

"*Song of Solomon* was enthusiastically received and widely reviewed. Its publication catapulted Morrison into the ranks of the most revered contemporary writers.... Throughout the early to mid-1980s, *Song of Solomon* was the subject of much critical attention and ranked among the most frequently taught of

Morrison's novels.... Although *Song of Solomon* may not be as popular as it was even a few years ago, it remains a key text in the corpus of Morrison's work and in the literary traditions of which it is a part....

Song of Solomon tells the story of Milkman Dead's unwitting search for identity. Milkman appears to be destined for a life of self-alienation and isolation because of his commitment to the materialism and the linear conception of time that are part of the legacy he receives from his father, Macon Dead. However, during a trip to his ancestral home, Milkman comes to understand his place in a cultural and familial community and to appreciate the value of conceiving of time as a cyclical process.

The Deads exemplify the patriarchal, nuclear family that has traditionally been a stable and critical feature not only of American society but of Western civilization in general. The primary institution for the reproduction and maintenance of children, ideally it provides individuals with the means for understanding their place in the world. The degeneration of the Dead family and the destructiveness of Macon's rugged individualism symbolize the invalidity of American, indeed Western, values. Morrison's depiction of this family demonstrates the incompatibility of received assumptions with the texture and demands of life in black American communities.

Pilate introduces a quality of 'enchantment' into the novel. The circumstances of her birth make her a character of supernatural proportions. She delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society. Moreover, her physical condition symbolizes her lack of dependence on others. Her self-sufficiency and isolation prevent her from being trapped or destroyed by the extremely decaying values that threaten her brother's life. Before Milkman leaves his home in Michigan, he perceives the world in materialistic, unyielding terms that recall his father's behavior. Indeed, the search for gold that sends him to Virginia reveals his perception that escaping from his past and his responsibilities and finding material treasure will guarantee him a sense of his own identity. Milkman's assumption that his trip south holds the key to his liberation is correct, although it is not gold that saves him. In his ancestors' world, communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism; when he adopts their assumptions in place of his own, he arrives at a more complete understanding of what his experience means.

Milkman's development rests partly on his comprehending the ways in which his life is bound up with the experiences of others and partly on his establishing an intimate connection with the land for which his grandfather died. These accomplishments attend his greater achievement: learning to complete, understand, and sing the song that contains the history of his family. Milkman comes to know fully who he is when he can supply the lyrics to the song Pilate has only partially known. The song, which draws on African and African American stories of blacks who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa, explains Milkman's lifelong fascination with flight. When Milkman learns the whole song and can sing it to Pilate as she has sung it to others, he assumes his destiny. He understands his yearning toward flight as a way in which his ancestral past makes itself known and felt to him. Milkman's sense of identity emerges when he allows himself to accept his personal and familial past. His quest critiques the faith in self-sufficiency for which his father stands. Through his story, Morrison questions Western conceptions of individualism and offers more fluid, destabilizing constructions of identity."

Valerie Smith, ed.
New Essays on Song of Solomon
(Cambridge U 1995) 10-13

"By 1977, with the publication of *Song of Solomon*...Morrison radically shifts the focus of her familial portraits to men.... *Song of Solomon* radically rethinks familial relations and the process of familial transmission. It participates in what Spillers has called the 'romance of African-American fiction [which] is a tale of origins that brings together once again children lost or stolen or estranged from their mothers.' Yet this novel adds fathers to mothers and explores the viability of a dual masculine-feminine legacy. Thus, it at once envisions an ideal of heterosexual understanding and co-implication and painfully and painstakingly demonstrates the difficulties of reaching that ideal within the circumstances of African American life in the 1960s. 'The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names'—the novel's epigraph raises the novel's central themes: family relations, flight, transmission, origin, knowledge, naming, transcendence, contingency....

Among the many family portraits in the space of the text, the Deads represent, in fact, the only nuclear arrangement. What 'deadens' the Deads, however, is Macon, the father: his single-minded ambition, his unscrupulous greed, his unabashed materialism, his lack of nurturance. Macon is the only father in the novel who is present, home with his family; he is the only father who has neither flown away nor been killed nor killed himself. Yet, ironically, his presence is so overpowering as to disable the other members of his family. The novel's images of paternity vacillate between this crushing presence and a devastating absence, between incestuous closeness and injurious distance. Macon himself admits that he can speak to his son 'only if his words held some command or criticism'....

Whereas Macon Sr. owned things that 'grew' other things, Macon II aspires to own things that 'own' other things and people too. Macon II's misapprehension, a misreading that clearly echoes the distortions of master-slave relations, is crucial, for his distance from the land and from his past, as well as his obsessive search for urban respectability and success, has changed him, unrecognizably, from a 'nice boy,' to a 'stern, greedy and unloving' man.... Unlike his own father, Solomon, Macon Sr. [Milkman's grandfather] does not fly off and leave his family; he sticks by them in daily and close nurturing protection and care. And his protection is neither too close nor too distant: he knows how to 'work right alongside' his son without smothering him or leaving him, offering for the novel a paradigm of successful paternal-filial relation. But it is precisely Macon Sr.'s distinctive relations to property which gets him killed. Since he can neither read nor write, since he does not possess the literacy that will legitimate the power of the logos as he has defined it, he cannot truly own the land he nurtures and cares for....

Solomon's own paternity receives contradictory interpretations in the space of the text. His flight, a heroic return to Africa, offers his descendants a mythic form of transcendence with which to identify, an admirable and legendary rejection of his slave condition, a revolutionary rebellion. But his flight can also be seen as an act of paternal irresponsibility and abandonment, especially as it echoes the mock-heroic flight of the insurance agent Robert Smith, with which the novel begins: 'But anyway, hot stuff or not, he [Solomon] disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children.... It like to killed the woman, the wife'.... Heroic soaring is also anti-heroic evasion.... Masculine flight, literalizing an important theme in the African American literary and cultural tradition, dominates the text's beginning, middle, and end.... Morrison disturbingly explains this in an interview: 'I guess I'm not supposed to say that. But the fact that they [men] would split in a minute just delights me.... [T]hat has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life.... That going from town to town or place to place or looking out and over and beyond and changing—that's what they do'....

The town's first black doctor, Dr. Foster...nurtures not only his only daughter, Ruth, but also the rest of the black population, for he cares for the sick and delivers all the babies. Yet, arrogant and disdainful of his patients, he 'flies off' in his own way through his self-destructive and escapist dependence on drugs.... The incestuous confusion of distance between Ruth and her father is perpetuated in her relationship with her son and is responsible for his name, 'Milkman.' It is here that the confusions between closeness and absence which define paternal relations extend to and shape a number of other familial interactions....

The transgressive and uncomfortable nature of Milkman and Hagar's relationship mirrors the marriage of their ancestors Macon Sr. and Sing and explains perhaps the mystery of their legendary history. If Macon/Jake and Sing grew up together in Shalimar, why did they tell everyone in Pennsylvania that they met on the wagon of ex-slaves going north? And if Macon/Jake was born in Shalimar, why did he say he was from Macon? And why was Sing so insistent that he keep his lugubrious attributed name Macon Dead; why was she so eager for a new start and a clean slate? Although Milkman raises these questions, his quest yields no satisfactory answers....

When Pilate 'birthed herself,' she broke her interconnection with the dead mother. Because it is a sign of lack, of an absent connection, her absent navel and the absent cord it implies are utterly threatening to everyone around her. No one can come into the world already cut loose. But Pilate has amply compensated for her lack: her father's and brother's nurturing closeness provided her with the intimate bond she missed. When her father is killed, however, she needs artificially to create a bodily connection to him and perhaps, by extension, to her mother. When she pierces her own flesh with the earring which, shaped like a womb and connected to her body like an umbilical cord, contains her name, she repairs the absence of relation that

has failed to mark her body. By placing her name in her ear, moreover, she can literally incorporate the father's word, make it flesh....

Macon's primal murder of the ghostlike old white and white-haired man guarding his sacks of gold indeed reads much like a 'parallel' story to that of Oedipus, as well as like a story of misplaced revenge.... The day after their father was murdered by the Butlers, the two children spend the night hiding out in a cave. Like Oedipus at the crossroads, Macon lashes out rather incomprehensibly at an old man he accidentally meets there and kills him unthinkingly. This Oedipus kills not his own father but the white patriarch. He murders the authorial father who killed the black father and who owns the gold and has to guard it against the black father and his children.... This paternal figure is the primary aggressor and has a primal guilt for which he must atone.

If, unlike Oedipus, Macon never gets the benefit of this murder, however, it is because of Pilate's intervention. This leads to Macon's split with Pilate, his resentment and misunderstanding of her, and his continued yearning for the white man's gold, a yearning he passes on to his son. The daughter/sister refuses to perpetuate father/son conflict even if that conflict has been displaced onto the white father. The daughter/sister understands that the two fathers are interchangeable: although her father was killed by whites, she carries what she thinks are a white man's bones as her 'inheritance.' But bones are indistinguishable: 'I've been carrying Papa?'

And how are we to read Guitar's final fraternal attack on Milkman? Milkman did not in fact cheat the Days; there was no gold. Yet Guitar still insists that he needs to kill him. First, he erroneously and arbitrarily, symbolically kills Pilate. If he then needs Milkman's life, is it to create a space of distance between them, separating himself from their fraternal closeness? Or is it to kill off that part of himself which is Milkman and the skeptic about the Days' project? Is Milkman's intended death as arbitrary and symbolic as the other Days' executions, or is it literally a punishment? Does he, in fact, die, or does he fly, bridging the valley that separates him from his alter ego? The novel does not determine the end for us but remains inconclusive, undecidable, unreadable." [Postmodernist]

Marianne Hirsch
"Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"
New Essays (1995) 72-83, 88, 90

"Since its publication in 1977, *Song of Solomon* has most often been read as an initiation novel of mythic quest in which the male protagonist, Milkman Dead, must come to terms with his personal and collective history to achieve a sense of identity. Traditionally, this perspective on the novel focuses on oppositional patterns of competition and resistance between Milkman and others, the self and community... The novel challenges received notions of manhood that are based on the subjugation of women's voices.... When it was published in 1977, *Song of Solomon* was a kind of literary intervention into what Morrison perceived to be a cultural crisis in the black community. For her, this crisis was the danger that black people might lose the rootedness the oral tradition had historically provided when the African American community was less geographically dispersed.... Women's texts deconstruct monolithic, individualistic notions of self and depict interdependent multivoiced communities at the same time that they stylistically shift from linear to cyclical, more process-oriented narrative strategies.... [like Modernism by white males: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and so on]

Song of Solomon is divided into two parts. In Part I, the protagonist, Macon Dead III, is, in 1931, the first black baby ever born in Mercy Hospital, a hospital the black community has appropriately renamed No Mercy Hospital.... He acquires the name Milkman when it is learned that his mother is still nursing him long past the time it is considered normal to do so. His father, Macon Dead II, is a cold, insensitive, materially defined man who uses his position and authority as a wealthy 'propertied' man, not only to intimidate his tenants, who regard him as a slum landlord, but to intimidate his wife, Ruth, his daughters, Lena and First Corinthians, and even Milkman. Macon forbids Milkman to visit his Aunt Pilate because he is embarrassed by her eccentric ways, her unkempt appearance, and her stubborn persistence in making bootleg wine.... Frustrated with his loveless, emotionally and spiritually 'dead' family, bored with his

unfulfilling sex life with Hagar, his cousin, and fundamentally dissatisfied with life in general, he gives up his middle-class comforts and heads south in search of the gold inheritance his father has told him about....

Part II traces Milkman's journey through the South, a journey transformed from a search for gold to a quest to learn the meaning of a song he had heard Pilate sing at home in Michigan. He learns that the song encodes his family history, including the story of Solomon, his paternal great-grandfather, who, according to the story in the song, flew away from slavery back to Africa. Milkman's quest also includes forays into communal storytelling; a visit to Circe, the midwife who delivered his father and aunt; and the male ritual of hunting. Upon discovering that the alleged bag of gold he sought is actually a sack containing the bones of his grandfather, he escorts Pilate to the South and helps her give her father a proper burial. As she dies in his arms, he sings the song he had once regarded as a nonsense nursery rhyme and discovers that like his flying ancestor, he too has the power of flight, which proved that '[I]f you surrendered to the air, you could ride it'.... Morrison suggests in *Song of Solomon* that male individuation involves more than the rejection of patriarchal domination; it also requires the recognition of one's inscription into patriarchal discourse as well as one's connection to the female voices that that discourse represses in our culture."

Marilyn Sanders Mobley

"Call and Response:

Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"

New Essays (1995) 41-42, 44, 47, 49-50

"Chapter 11 of *Song of Solomon* ends at an important moment of growth in the life of Milkman Dead, the central character. But instead of delivering a lengthy narration, the storyteller presents this significant episode in only three brief paragraphs. Away from his home Milkman is offered a place to rest and is invited to take a bath at the home of a young woman named Sweet, whose name is indeed allegorical. The bath, in the tradition of oral and bardic storytelling, is a ritual, and accordingly, the storyteller uses ritual language—'a fixed pattern of utterances'—to frame the occasion of this ritual that celebrates the beauty of life and loving. In this story the bathing ritual communicates rebirth: Milkman discovers giving and sharing, new meaning in a loving relationship with a woman. Milkman offers to give Sweet a cool bath, and the passage flows seductively....

This bath scene signifies Milkman's cultural immersion in a black, traditional oral culture. The ritual frame creates a pause in the time of the narrative flow in the novel. The verbal economy and rhythm in this passage are immediately noticeable, but the skillful presentation by this storyteller subtly, yet powerfully, persuades the audience to remember the meaning of this ritual frame. The rhythm that we feel in the physical motions of these two characters harmonizes with the rhythm of the storyteller's language.... Most memorable in Morrison's significant passage is its movement and its intimacy: a dialogic, shifting focus (he/she), bodily gestures, complementary movements (forward/backward), and lots of touching....

Morrison privileges orality so that her readers can hear and feel the unique oral character of African American language use and see how the survival of cultural consciousness, or *nomos*, is preserved in a highly literate culture. From both an oral and a literate perspective, then, the motif of naming has an explicit and a very powerful implicit meaning in this novel....

Song of Solomon tells, among many other tales, a story of family distance and loss of cultural knowledge through generational migration. Staging a series of rituals and illustrating powerful images of oral memory in the black community, the novel focuses on the significance of these losses. The story of Milkman represents the act of reconstituting the memory of the past with the experiences of the present. But he must learn how to listen.... During his search for his family's inheritance, Milkman finds Circe, 'the oldest Black woman in the world,' as Morrison fondly describes her. But Circe tells Milkman, with love and criticism in her voice: 'You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain.' With her own ancestral wisdom, Circe helps Morrison's readers understand that in 'the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures'....

Toni Morrison's strongest illustration of cultural oral memory in *Song of Solomon* takes place in the scene of the hunt when Milkman observes the finely tuned listening and communicating skills of his partner, Calvin, and the other men on the hunt. The pitch dark setting renders his body invisible, even to himself. In this environment, sound reigns over sight. Sitting underneath a sweet gum tree, Milkman discovers what his ancestors understood about language, before alphabetic, literate language. While listening to all the varying sounds in the woods, Milkman begins to remember his 'ancient properties' (the phrase Morrison uses for ancestral knowledge and black cultural tradition in *Tar Baby*.... Milkman's immersion in this auditory experience awakens his dormant listening skills to new language experiences and ways of knowing. Milkman's experiences—of the woods, hunters, killing—move him to use his preliterate imagination to reclaim his unlettered ancestors' skill for listening: an intuitive and sensual ability to converse with animals and with nature. The scene of the hunt represents a ritual reenactment of this ancient cultural knowledge. In fact, this new knowledge saves his life....

Merging Greek, biblical, and African American oral traditions in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison brings orality and literacy face to face and throws significant cultural conflicts into relief. *Song of Solomon* illustrates the oral tradition as a conveyor of cultural values, ideas, heroes, and accomplishments that are often in direct conflict with schooling and literate training... Her bardic voice, with its skillful control of episodic delivery and flashbacks, reveals the universal and unique energy of the black community. Through her playful intermingling of an ancient, oral storytelling genre with a modern literate one, Toni Morrison draws on the creative dimensions of both oral and literate language."

Joyce Irene Middleton

"From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"
New Essays (1995) 22-24, 33-37

"It is a critical commonplace to speak of unity, wholeness, and closure in *Song* and to focus on the mythic appropriateness of a search for group and self. Critics who have done so tend to agree that that closure is proven by the transcendence implied by Milkman's leap 'into the killing arms of his brother' in the final paragraph of the text. It seems to me, however, that to refer to that act as transcendent reduces the text to a chronicle of a journey to wholeness that is rewarded by transcendence. Such an interpretation does not do justice to the narrative complexities of the novel....

The idea of transcendence implied by flight and so beloved by many of the novel's critics, and which echoes throughout the story as a reward, as a hoped for skill, as an escape, and as proof of intrinsic worth, is by the end not so clear a proposition. The novel does end with it but in such a way that the act allows for multiple and troubling interpretations: suicide; 'real' flight and then a wheeling attack on his 'brother'; or 'real' flight and then some kind of encounter with the (possibly) 'killing arms of his brother.' That Guitar places his rifle on the ground does not make him any less deadly—his smile and the dropping of the gun both precede the language of 'killing arms'—and his 'my man...my main man' is an echo of the same irony that allowed Guitar to call Milkman his friend even after his prior attempt at killing him.

And Guitar's arms are killing, not just because they want to answer the challenge posed by Milkman's move toward him, but because they are the arms that have killed, that killed white people, that can kill anyone who isn't black, or anyone Guitar can convince himself isn't black: like Pilate. In other words, Guitar can make an 'other' of anyone who crosses the boundaries of the definitions he constructs for the group that he purports to love: black people. What Guitar has constructed in his life is a category of political ciphers that does not allow for the existence of the idiosyncratic Pilate or for the existence of the individualistically apolitical Milkman.

Milkman's journey forward to flight is a journey into his past: his future is behind him. The text's refutation of the idea of a whole untroubled self is thus crystallized in the final stop on that journey. His climactic leap is a move forward which must also be read as a journey back: back to the behavior of a slave ancestor, back to nothingness, back to death. That this leap occurs over Pilate's body, whose lack of navel has already established her as a myth or a different reality's possibility, further disrupts any optimistically simple reading of Milkman's action as one of untroubled transcendence. Milkman's response to Pilate's death is personal and somewhat selfish. His immediate concern is that there must 'be at least one more woman like her. For him, Pilate is subsumed by his desire for what she has meant in his life. So, although

he has learned history, in the end Milkman is unable to take that history past the level of personal need. Milkman remains very much the self-concerned individual whose realization of himself as a human collage of history cannot undo his desire to be shown one 'true' path to power and understanding.

Pilate, on the other hand, embodies mediating ground between the polarities of Guitar and Milkman and the political selves they represent. She has been, throughout the text, the locus for weaving together history, personal connection, and alternative relationships to time and concrete reality. She lived a political life and represented a funky pastiche of the modern and the folk. Pilate represents, in her knowledge of her world, the ability to manipulate that world, to alter, to make fluid, the real. The results of her ability leave communities and individuals better off than she finds them, more capable of acting in an oppressive set of circumstances. She remakes the world relentlessly in terms that mean something to her life whether she is equating the blue of the sky to that of her mother's ribbons or dividing the black of night into different shades according to wool or silk she's seen; she allows her life its own reality—and then manipulates it on her own terms. But Pilate dies too. I suggested earlier that the text does not leave us with an answer, a solution, or even a hope.

Song of Solomon resists the pressure to direct our attention to one answer to the questions what is the truth, what is the real story, and how does one act in the face of history? It relentlessly refuses a straightforward answer. It does not leave a strong suggestion that flight is not necessarily an untroubled and transcendent response to history regardless of what an ancestor has done. Nor can flight function as an indication of the political possibilities inherent in human interaction with history. The reader learns from Pilate what Milkman heard but did not remember: 'You just can't fly off and leave a body.' When successful as an escape, flight leaves people behind mourning. When unsuccessful, it leaves people behind dead. It facilitates a final and lethal showdown between barehanded (but not less inimical) friends; however, it is too simple an act to 'speak back' to history. It cannot define the extent of one's political being any more than murder can.

Finally, it is not around Milkman or Guitar that political possibilities cohere; it is Pilate who, by defying Macon Dead II and intervening in his marriage, is the political agent responsible for Milkman's life. It is Pilate who teaches Milkman to 'read' history. And it is Pilate who represents not only embodied history but the praxis that comes with recognizing history's effects, the willingness to theorize about possibilities in the face of history, and the ability to make concrete alternatives to personal and public inequities. Remaining on the ground of history, then, is a labor of love."

Wahneema Lubiano
"Postmodernist Rag: Political Identity and the Vernacular in *Song of Solomon*"
New Essays (1995) 97, 111-13

"I have found *Song of Solomon* the most difficult of Toni Morrison's novels to teach. Not only does it involve her usual sophisticated, often poetic, style and her own version of magical realism, but it also features her most complex and complicated plot and her most elaborate use of African American folklore. Students often simultaneously express frustration and a desire to simplify the text to interpret it within their realm of experience....

Morrison offers an analysis of the American nuclear family, a version of the extended family in which several living generations interact, and a family history that reflects an African worldview in that ancestral spirits affect the destinies of the living. The author is also concerned with the ambiguities of family; she seeks to avoid sentimentality and animosity in her portrayals. The families in all her fiction are both loving and deeply troubled; the two characteristics are in fact often indistinguishable. Love destroys as often as it creates, and trouble often leads to the reconstruction of identity and relationships....

Macon's materialism is grounded in the childhood trauma of seeing his father murdered by whites envious of his father's success. His response is to secure the greatest possible economic power so as to put himself beyond white control.... Macon's exploitation of others arguably serves as a form of resistance to a deadly racist system.... The African American students I have taught are more likely than white students to come from single-parent, economically marginal families and thus are less likely to idealize Pilate's household or to criticize Macon's.... And both black and white students from single-parent families

understand the limitations of Pilate's family arrangements; their experiences teach them that love and emotional strength do not automatically overcome all the problems of such a household....

The story Milkman constructs is not only one of heroic magic, in which Solomon one day tires of slavery and so flies back to Africa, but also one in which such magic requires the abandonment of family. Solomon leaves behind his wife and many children to face alone an enslaved future. The very act that ensures a remarkable family history also begins a tradition of family disruption that persists into Milkman's generation.... Milkman still seeks the gold, but the family story has itself begun to take on value as a means of generating the sense of self he lacks. Students should now begin to see the search as a complex of spiraling movements deeper and deeper into the South, from the city to the town to the village to the cave, and back through the generations. This return to origins is essential to a discovery of the true self....

In a hunting ceremony that is a rewriting of similar narratives in Faulkner, Hemingway, and others, Milkman experiences the male initiation rite that he never had and thus is enabled to emerge from his extended, narcissistic childhood. Like Ike McCaslin of Faulkner's *The Bear*, he is stripped of all the emblems of the dominant culture and must use his instincts to survive. By learning what he is capable of as simply himself, he learns the value and necessity of family and community. Morrison's revision of this ritual tradition is seen in Milkman's new appreciation and respect for women. Having tested his manhood, he no longer has to prove it through sexual domination.

It is consistent with Milkman's return to basics that he finally realizes the family story he seeks is embedded in the song of the village children. They sing the story of Solomon, who one day discovered his magical power and flew from slavery back to Africa. He left behind a wife, Ryna, and twenty-one children, including Jake, Milkman's grandfather. Ryna, like Hagar, is driven crazy by the abandonment, and her children must be cared for by Heddy, an American Indian. The seemingly random elements of family history can now be presented to the class as a coherent narrative: The men (Solomon, Jake, Macon, Milkman) seek magical or material power; the women (Ryna, Sing, Ruth, Hagar) must suffer for this pursuit; and the children are abandoned because of it. Parts of the story also become community folklore, such as Milkman's name, the stories about his grandfather, and the children's song of Solomon....

Once a Dead man who escapes responsibility and emotional commitment, the protagonist becomes a Milkman who uses his power to nurture others. He brings Pilate to the cave to rebury the bones, which he now knows are those of his grandfather. He thus relieves her guilt and simultaneously gives his ancestor a proper interment. At this moment she is killed by Milkman's friend Guitar, who believes the quest is still for gold and who, like the white men who killed Pilate's father, values possessions over human life. Milkman responds by offering Guitar the life he needs to take....

Milkman revises the family history by flying into history and responsibility rather than out of it. He incorporates even Guitar the destroyer by naming him a brother and thus a part of the tradition. Destruction becomes a part of the creativity of history. And it does not matter which one of them dies, because the flying is life affirming even if it results in death, since it establishes the connection with the spirit of his ancestors, including now Pilate, who, in a play on her name, leads the way into the spirit world."

Keith E. Byerman
"Songs of the Ancestors: Family in *Song of Solomon*"
Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison
eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle
(MLA 1997) 135-40

"Milkman Dead's paternal aunt, Pilate, is both his teacher and his 'pilot' in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. She begins her lesson early in the novel when she tells Milkman and his best friend, Guitar, about her birth, her near-death experiences, her father's death, and her father's appearance after his death. The section culminates with Pilate's explanation of blackness.... It is connected to the spiritual or supernatural forces of life and death, to the womb and the grave, and to the natural forces and growth metaphorically associated with green. In redefining blackness Pilate describes a way of seeing; her lessons help Milkman learn to see in the dark and to accept his blackness....

Song of Solomon is an exciting and difficult novel to teach. Its density—its multiple stories and perspectives, its poetic richness, and its allusive threads—stimulates the reader’s imagination. But this density can also overwhelm teachers and students.... I discuss the chapter [11] as Milkman’s ritual of initiation into black manhood, analyzing the three main parts of his ritual—the ‘cock’ fight with Saul, the hunt with the older men, and the skinning of the cat—and Milkman’s new awareness. The ‘cock’ fight can be connected to the recurring symbol of the peacock and to Lena’s condemnation of Milkman’s ‘little hog’s gut,’ and [his] cockiness, his flaunting of masculine privilege, and his self-centeredness up to this point. The hunt section contains Milkman’s central revelations, which can also be read as a symbolic death and rebirth (at Guitar’s hands); Morrison’s presentation of Milkman’s transformation in the woods warrants detailed attention [to] Milkman’s new vision—his new ability to see in the dark....

The skinning of the cat also has numerous symbolic and thematic implications... Morrison’s description of the evisceration reverberates with the history of the lynchings and brutalization of black men. At the end of the scene Milkman’s initiation into black manhood is complete; he casts off ‘the heart of the white men’ and receives the heart of a lion.... Blackness, in Morrison’s novel, is also a way of knowing, a spiritual perception, a mode of survival, and a shift in values from Macon Dead’s quest for acquisition to Pilate Dead’s rainbow of possibilities.... In the end, when Milkman accepts the box of Hagar’s hair and sings to Pilate at her death, he has accepted Pilate’s interpretations of her father’s ghost words....

In part 1, the meaning of Milkman’s name seems evident—Milkman Dead is a pampered mama’s boy, suckled too long, and he is the inheritor of a dead culture, dispersed and useless, in which murder is the only solution. But in the spiritual and supernatural context of part 2, we can reinterpret his name with greater complexity. We discover that a connection to one’s dead, one’s ancestors, is the essence of a vital cultural heritage. We also learn that men must recognize their responsibility to nurture future generations. And (in a lighter vein) isn’t the milkman a deliverer for his people?...

The enigmatic concluding scene of Milkman Dead’s flight is open to many interpretations. The symbolism of flight elucidates Morrison’s treatment of the black male hero’s quest. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses flight in its most common association, to signify freedom, and at first *freedom* retains its most common definition in the United States usage, escape and individual independence. In part 2, Milkman’s airplane ride begins his quest. In his first opportunity to fly solo (as the soloman?) he feels freedom from the bonds of his family, friends, and past errors. But this flight seems mundane in comparison with the many wingless flights in the novel. Robert Smith’s ominous flight that opens the novel, Milkman’s great-grandfather’s flight from slavery, and the flights of Pilate, Milkman, and Guitar in the final pages. Just as Milkman’s quest shifts from one for gold to one for knowledge, his quest for freedom changes from the freedom obtained through the solitary power of money to the freedom gained through connections to others, imaginative engagement, and love. This type of flight is signified by Pilate, when Milkman realizes, ‘Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.’

Milkman’s great-grandfather Solomon’s flight strengthens the association of flight with freedom while highlighting the ambivalence of this connection. Solomon, as in many African American stories of flying Africans, becomes a powerful symbol of freedom by flying away from slavery home to Africa. But the power of his flight is diminished by Sweet’s question, ‘Who’d he leave behind?’, and by the echo in Rena’s Gulch, which recalls the grief of Solomon’s wife and of the twenty-one children left fatherless.... How can the fathers soar without leaving their lovers loveless? This central question in the novel is the basis of Morrison’s redefinition of freedom and of her reconsideration of the African American male quest. Milkman achieves his flight at Solomon’s Leap after he learns to embrace his connections with others; rather than a flight of escape, it can be seen as a flight of commitment....

Perhaps Milkman’s final flight is also meant to precipitate the reader’s flight of imagination beyond the ending of the book, when Milkman becomes our textual ‘Dead’ to carry with us, as Pilate carries her father’s bones.... The children’s song contains his family history, suggesting the children’s central role in cultural transmission. The women are, in many ways, the sustenance and ground from which Solomon and Milkman leap—like the promised land, they contain the milk of the mothers and the honey of the lovers (embodied by Ruth and Sweet). Pilate acts as Milkman’s pilot, a guide, a mentor, and a model of the desired balance of strength, wisdom, and love.”

Linda J. Krumholz
"Reading in the Dark: Knowledge and Vision in *Song of Solomon*"
Approaches (1997) 106-11

"In 1977 Morrison published her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, which immediately brought her into great acclaim. Unlike the two early novels, each set in a small Midwestern black community, *Song of Solomon* is panoramic in its geographical movement from North to South, the prominence of its African heritage, its complex cross-generational conflicts, and its cross-cultural mythological framework. Milkman Dead, the central character, is Morrison's first male hero. However, in spite of its differences from earlier novels, *Song of Solomon*, much like them, also focuses on identity, fragmentation, alienation, and the merits and demerits of Western values. When Milkman, after many personal trials, finally recognizes and accepts his familial history, he comes to understand himself within a communal structure and claims his complicated collective identity.

Song of Solomon was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, the first by an African-American since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. It also received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977. In 1978 the American Academy of Arts and Letters named Morrison Distinguished Writer of the Year, and in 1979 President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the National Council on the Arts. At this time, Morrison's fiction began to be compared to that of writers such as Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner."

Nellie Y. McKay, Introduction
Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook
eds. McKay and William L. Andrews
(Oxford 1999) 6-7

"If we revisit *Song of Solomon*, we observe her adventuring into radical political activities for Guitar, Macon 'Milkman' Dead's friend. By the time Guitar becomes significant, Milkman has taken over the center of the novel, part of the saga of the Dead family: Morrison's apt metaphor for the black condition and also for its revival. The Dead are frequently resurrected. Guitar's activities, however, seem to be leftovers from another novel—not because they are in themselves unreasonable, but because they do not mesh with anything else. Guitar belongs to a group of blacks called 'Seven Days,' whose plan is to murder whites whenever a white murders a black. There are seven members to 'Days,' and whenever a killing of a black occurs on a particular day, that designated day member must commit a comparable crime against a white.

One of the tests for the 'Days' comes when the four little black girls are killed in a Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing, and four little girls will be made to pay, according to Guitar. Yet such enterprises need money, and when Milkman tells him of his Aunt Pilate's gold bags, Guitar is very interested. But in time he forgets his mission and relishes all the good things he can buy with the gold, a fantasy Milkman also enters into. Morrison has positioned herself strangely. On one hand, she has introduced a radical political group, and then, on the other, subverted it by turning Guitar into a bumbling, money-hungry young man. Some of this is connected to her overall plan, which is to show black men as fools and bumblers, even while they remain sexually attractive and available. But the larger question is that her venture into extreme politics exists only so she can undermine it; or else it exists only so that she can demonstrate the desperation of young black men looking for some social/political foothold in a white society. Whatever the specific point, the venture takes the novel astray, and it marginalizes what is Morrison's strength, her grounding of black life in community and, by implication, her assault on white society as disorderly and anarchic.

Further, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison tries to blend the radical politics of Guitar with a Jason-like search for the golden fleece, bags of gold which Macon Dead Senior and his sister Pilate think they have stumbled upon in a cave. There is, here, an effort to create some of the complexities we associate with *Invisible Man*, but Ellison followed one individual, who came to be a larger-than-life metaphor: not only of the black man turned anonymous and invisible, but of the dehumanizing of all life, black and white alike. Not enough readers have noted Ellison's attack on what has destroyed the potential of America's Eden: racism, discrimination, and injustice, of course, but also the connivance of all parties to desecrate what was

once a paradise. Morrison moves on the edges of this, and while it is praiseworthy that she attempts so much, it must be admitted that not everything coheres. Her repeated insistence on community is, apparently, her view of an Eden which is in danger of disappearing. She attempts to catch the loss, and at the same time to capture some of the changes taking place.

The Seven Days assassination squad is one such change: blacks fighting against whites using the tactics of the latter—something Milkman refuses to accept. There is little question that standing behind Morrison's work is a deeply American theme, of the wilderness versus urbanization, in which wilderness bespoke both independence and community, and urbanization in which the individual loses his or her primary identity. The themes derive from both Whitman and Faulkner. Yet Morrison wants to take matters further. Hers is, in effect, a highwire act, and it has become a defining element in her work, from *The Bluest Eye* through *Jazz* in 1992.

She must make several levels of private and public cohere. Yet Milkman Dead, a third generation Dead, is insufficiently defined to handle the burden laid upon him. The subject is no less than his transformation from a young black man who takes his family privileges for granted, to a slightly older black man who recognizes his responsibilities, duties, and need for contrition in the face of female sacrifices. All of this, further, must fall into line with Morrison's ambiguous presentation of black males; refusing any politically correct or literary stereotyping, she pinpoints their insufficiencies when they are compared with their female contemporaries. While this perception gives her resonance and texture, it creates problematics in presentation not only in *Song* but also in several of her other novels. This is perhaps the pivotal area in her intellectual resources as a novelist....

The presentation of an individual [Shadrack in *Sula*] who while bringing together terrible matters transforms them into something sacred, and instead of dividing the community somehow manages to unify it.... Pilate Dead serves that function: hiding her madness under a socially accommodating style, but mad she is, in Morrison's best sense."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 139-41

Michael Hollister (2014)