

MYTH AS STRUCTURE IN TONI MORRISON'S
SONG OF SOLOMON
BY A. LESLIE HARRIS

In *Song of Solomon* Toni Morrison has faced the tale-spinner's recurring problem—making contemporary, localized events and characters speak to those who cannot share her characters' background or experiences.¹ Morrison's solution in this dilemma is not new. She turns to myth to underpin her narrative, but does so without transforming her novel into pure fantasy or overloading her story with literary allusions. Morrison's success in making one black man's struggle for identity universal is partly explained by her structural use of myth to show man's constant search for reassurance in myths.

According to Mircea Eliade, myth is sacred history, the breakthrough of the supernatural or divine into the human to explain the origins, destiny, and cultural concerns of a people.² Man, then, has always turned to myth to explain the inexplicable and to tie narratives into a larger cultural and perceptual framework. We would expect our modern predilection for scientific fact, psychological speculation, and historical verification to have supplanted the role of myth in explaining reality. In fact, genuine myth, living myth, has traditionally been associated with primitive societies in which the myth presupposes not "a tale told but a reality lived."³ Even our sophistication, however, does not preclude our depending on myth for more than entertainment. If we no longer look to myth for reality, we are still drawn to mythopoesis, where gods, heroes, and supernatural conflicts exist on a purely symbolic level, tying us to our past and showing us our origins. Myths become "agents of stability,"⁴ not restricting us to a specific place or even to a specific culture but using the specific to ponder the enduring questions of all men. Perhaps mythic absolutes reassure us because, as Kerenyi proposes, the constant themes of myth involve not the "why?" (the causes) but the "whence?" (the groundwork of human nature, belief, and endeavor), which remains as timely as it is timeless.⁵

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, we have genuine mythopoesis, the mythic impulse shaped and translated into symbolic art. Morrison fuses Afro-American myth with the cultural, moral, and religious beliefs of both

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the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman heritages to fashion her own myth. She does not simply rework archetypes but blends the natural with the supernatural and the historically factual with the fantastic. More particularly, she selects one of the oldest and most pervasive mythic themes, the hero and his quest, to inform and control her narrative structure.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison creates a world both realistic and dreamlike, peopled with amusing, endearing, quirky, and frightening characters. Her deft handling of high drama, low comedy, and dialogue have all been commended. Her structure, however, has not been as widely appreciated. *Song of Solomon* is undeniably episodic, but whether the plot is “meandering and confused,” lacks linear development, or is enhanced by its very discontinuity is open to question.⁶ If we follow Morrison’s lead and concentrate on the growth of Macon Dead, known as Milkman because his mother nursed him too long, we find that her novel is cohesive, following the clear pattern of birth and youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration common to mythic heroes as disparate as Moses, Achilles, and Beowulf. Such a mythic chronology emphasizes the hero’s rejection of and eventual assimilation into his society. Slochower has argued that the hero’s victory lies in curbing his early rebelliousness without submitting completely.⁷ An Oedipus or a Hamlet attains both tragic and mythic stature by remaining true to himself even as he becomes an agent of the social consciousness. As we watch Milkman grow up and reject the restrictions of his Southside life, we see him undergoing not only psychological and physical maturation but an approximation of the development of a true hero, so that by the end of the novel he knows himself and his obligations to both present and past, to himself and his world.

Western man has always looked to childhood as the mythic time, when the individual is closest to his origins. In the novel’s opening Morrison toys with this idea by describing Milkman’s birth in terms of signs, omens, and portents, and by presenting Milkman’s childhood in a rapidly-passed-over series of narrative events resonating with symbolic and archetypal significance. The second stage in Morrison’s structure and Milkman’s maturation is the period of alienation. Milkman, thirtyish, resentful of yet dependent on his father, wants to leave home but lacks the resolution to do so. His home, Southside, is both reassuringly familiar and confining, like Milkman’s own comfortable but loitering and wasted life. His recognition that he is just drifting and lacks both internal and external coherence in his life directs him toward his third stage of development—a quest. Searching for the gold his father and his Aunt Pilate had found hidden in a Pennsylvania cave many years before becomes less important for Milkman than unraveling his family’s tangled and confusing genealogy, meeting those who remember his father and Pilate as children, and, finally, realizing that the song he had

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heard Pilate sing, the “*Song of Solomon*” of the title, is a children’s retelling, a mythologizing, of his own heritage. In his journey through Pennsylvania and Virginia, Milkman rediscovers himself. However, he cannot complete the final stage of his growth into heroic stature, the return and reintegration into a world whose values he can champion, until he defeats the enemy. This enemy is his boyhood friend and adult nemesis, Guitar, who objectifies Milkman’s own denial and despair. The confrontation with Guitar in the Pennsylvania woods represents Milkman’s complete reintegration and triumph, so that the Lady-or-the-Tiger quality of an ending that stops as the two combatants meet for a fight to the death is less ambivalent than it appears. The novel does not end with a cliff-hanger; the final battle is both a confrontation and a confirmation, marking Milkman’s emergence as a champion who understands and will defend his world.

By examining key passages and symbolic turning points in each of these major stages, we will see how Morrison adopted—but adapted—mythic themes and images in her narrative structure. If the brief summary above indicates that the structure of the novel is chronological, it is a chronology imposed through reordering the events of the novel. The textural richness of the novel derives from a present which spans three generations, with each narrative tied back into the development of the novel’s hero. The digressions, explanations, and expansions which interrupt Milkman’s own story suggest not a serial or chronological unfolding but an interlace, in which the dominant narrative is embellished and enhanced through meticulously articulated subplots and images threading their way through Milkman’s life. It is these embellishments which carry much of the burden of the myth.

The opening pages give us the mandrel on which Morrison forms her own myth. Although many of his observations on living myth in primitive societies do not touch directly on mythopoesis, Otto Rank’s discussion of the birth and childhood of the mythic hero illustrates the clear connection of Morrison’s hero with a mythic heritage. The young hero is traditionally born after a long period of barrenness, and subterfuge is frequently involved in both his conception and his delivery. Milkman’s mother seduces her husband, who had not touched her in thirteen years, with a love potion given her by Pilate and later saves her unborn child’s life only through Pilate’s intervention. Pilate, a moonshiner and a social outcast, certainly qualifies as a member of the humbler orders, whom Rank identifies as significant attendants at the hero’s birth.⁸ This interference and trickery make the baby the focus of the father’s hostility against his wife.

These mythic parallels are, however, only the basis for Morrison’s highly allusive narrative. Milkman is born, the first black baby admitted to Southside’s Mercy Hospital, on the day after Mr. Smith, the North Carolina

Mutual Life Insurance agent, leaps from the roof of Mercy. As we learn later, Mr. Smith is also one of the Seven Days, a black secret society pledged to avenge any black's murder by the random slaying of a white. Smith tumbles headlong from the roof, vainly flapping homemade blue silk wings as he falls, Icarus-like, to his death. His death signals Milkman's birth. Henceforth, the motifs of Icarus and flight are inextricably connected to the vengeance of the Seven Days. The hero's birth is accompanied by ritualized celebration—his Aunt Pilate singing in the street, and virgins (Milkman's elder sisters) strewing rose petals as a black Icarus dies. But also in attendance is Guitar, the boyhood friend who becomes the Sunday man of the Seven Days and avenges any black slain on a Sunday—until he turns from killing whites to ambushing Milkman. Morrison offsets the Fury-like society of the Seven Days by pairing her Icarus motif of failure and death with references to Lindbergh, drawing together two famous soarers but suggesting that an Icarus' doomed escape must always be balanced by a Daedalus' success. As a child, Milkman yearned to fly and “lost all interest in himself” when he discovered “the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly” (p. 9). The novel follows his attempt to overcome this disaffection and learn to fly again, figuratively, if not literally.

Through the use of the Icarus motif, the opening of the book draws together the thematic concerns of a novel, but the second stage of Milkman's growth, the period of both explanation and alienation, illustrates one of the enduring concerns of myth, the need to create order and bring understanding out of apparent chaos. Milkman's heritage is explained in family histories which he tries, resentfully, to shrug aside. His family's past is dead for Milkman, and he feels increasingly stifled by the greed, anger, and frustration of his home. He remains isolated, alienated from his family, his culture, even from Hagar, his cousin who has been his lover since he was seventeen. One morning,

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed. (pp. 69–70)

Milkman's decisions during this period are indeed haphazard and uninformed. He strikes his father for slapping his mother, tries to break up the one love affair of his forty-year-old, unmarried sister, and determines to

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send Hagar a Christmas present and farewell letter at once. Rather than acting from any belief or commitment to another, Milkman only reacts. Each event is a rejection—of parental authority, of family ties, of love. He realizes that his “life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn’t concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconveniencing himself for” (p. 207). Moreover, he thinks constantly of escape, of slamming the door of his father’s house and never returning, of flying away. He tells Guitar that he feels increasingly off-center, disaffected by his family and society, and detached from the racial tensions which increasingly control Guitar, who is moving more completely into the circumscribed world of the Seven Days. Milkman accuses Guitar, “You mad at every Negro who ain’t scrubbing floors and picking cotton. This ain’t Montgomery, Alabama.”

To which Guitar responds,

“You’re right, Milkman. You have never in your life said a truer word. This is definitely not Montgomery, Alabama. Tell me. What would you do if it was? If this turned out to be another Montgomery?”

“Buy a plane ticket.”

“Exactly. Now you know something about yourself you didn’t know before: who you are and what you are.”

“Yeah. A man that refuses to live in Montgomery, Alabama.”

“No. A man that can’t live there.” (p. 104)

But, of course, without knowing what is worth risking everything for, Milkman cannot live anywhere yet. He is like Joyce’s young Stephen Daedalus, wanting only to fly away.

The single moment during this period of Milkman’s life which best illustrates both his yearnings and his vacillation occurs when Milkman and Guitar see a white peacock perched on the roof of a defunct Buick in Southside. The bird, at once beautiful and ludicrous, cannot fly because, as Guitar says, it has “too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weights you down” (p. 179). For Guitar, this means abandoning family, friends, and society, and channeling himself completely into the vengeance of the Seven Days. Although Milkman laughingly accedes to Guitar’s jeering interpretation, he is fumbling toward a more positive significance for the peacock—escape into adventure. But he does not see that the incongruous juxtaposition of the peacock and used cars suggests how the exotic appears unexpectedly out of the prosaic, just as his quest rises out of Southside and his family. The way to escape Southside is to get money, the gold his Aunt Pilate and father stumbled across in a Pennsylvania cave.

His quest leads Milkman to Pennsylvania and then to Virginia, where he traces his father's and Pilate's youthful wanderings. He meets his father's boyhood friends, who remember the elder Macon Dead as an almost superhuman figure and who accept the success of the father in Southside real estate as an inevitable extension of his youthful exploits and talents. Milkman drinks in their tales of Lincoln's Heaven, the Edenic Pennsylvania farm which still represents to these old men an ideal world, a flourishing, rich farm hacked out of the woods by an ex-slave, Milkman's grandfather. Milkman finds himself continuing the myth, spinning out, to the wonder and delight of his audience, his own elaborate version of his father's efforts to buy the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad.

He next visits the old plantation where his father and aunt had been hidden by a house servant, Circe, after their father was murdered by whites jealous of a black man's success and greedy for Lincoln's Heaven. The narrative becomes progressively eerier when he finds the ancient servant still alive and presiding over the ruins of the estate, supervising its decay, a witch in the land of the dead. More a Sibyl than her siren namesake, Circe guards this entrance into the past. She initiates Milkman into his own past, showing both the power and the destructiveness of his heritage, and channels his rebelliousness into a quest for his own identity. He could not reach the dream-like core of his quest, his journey into Virginia, without direct contact with the world of the past and the dead. Lincoln's Heaven, Circe, and the decayed plantation all represent the past which still exerts its influence on Milkman. Like Aeneas, like Ulysses, Milkman needs to look into his, his family's, and his people's past before he can move into the future. Circe tells Milkman where the cave holding the gold was, how Pilate and Milkman's father argued and opened the rift which has lasted for decades, where Pilate wandered, and where Milkman's grandfather originally came from—Shalimar, Virginia.

Just as contact with the underworld has traditionally meant knowledge for the living, so Circe's revelations turn Milkman south to Virginia where he abandons the search for the missing gold to regain his self-esteem. Shalimar offers new skills to measure self-worth—hunting, fighting, and surviving, the only prowess these Virginians acknowledge. The city man adapts to their code and participates in a midnight cougar hunt where he suddenly realizes that *he* is being hunted by Guitar, who wants a part of the long-lost gold for the Seven Days and thinks Milkman has found the gold and refuses to share it.

Guitar, the hero's antagonist, threatens the particular virtues and values of the world and the past that Milkman is slowly coming to accept. He is not as much Milkman's opposite as his double, an extension of the very negations Milkman has practiced. Guitar has abandoned his family and his

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heritage in the South. More importantly, he has rejected love and ties just as Milkman has spured his family and Hagar. The only brotherhood Guitar acknowledges is the Seven Days, a brotherhood based on death. He is total sterility, wintry and steely in his dedication to vengeance.⁹ His name, Guitar, comes from a childhood love of creativity and music which he has denied; Milkman's name suggests the fertility and life which he has been running from. In the dark woods Milkman suddenly understands Guitar and himself. Guitar's total commitment to death is only the logical extension of Milkman's constant attempts to fly away.

Milkman is still not ready to challenge the enemy, and when Guitar's ambush in the Virginia woods fails, the protagonist runs. His return to his own world is thus ambivalent. Although Milkman's relationship to his family and his world improves, his trip brings about no reconciliation between his father and his aunt. The traditional pattern of reintegration and defense of the society cannot be effected, perhaps because he has recognized his own weakness and the values which he tried to deny, but he has not yet fought for them. He returns to Virginia with Pilate to bury his grandfather's bones at Lincoln's Heaven, and there Guitar shoots Pilate, the novel's clearest representative of personal and racial heritage and continuity with the past. The novel ends as Guitar steps from hiding to try, once again, to kill Milkman.

Although the final confrontation offers two possible resolutions, its thematic unity is not ambivalent. If Milkman kills Guitar, then he will return home the conqueror, the hero who has bested his and his society's opponent. If, however, he falls to Guitar, he remains a hero. Milkman himself tells us that he thinks he can beat Guitar in a straight fight but stands little chance if Guitar has a gun, which he has. But success is not the measure of the mythic hero's stature. More frequently than not, he dies in his last battle. The death is less important than its symbolic affirmation of his and his world's values. Hector and Achilles fall, and Beowulf dies to save his people from the dragon. Milkman, too, has to face, within himself, the dragons of despair, nihilism, and sterility. When Milkman leaps toward Guitar, he has already fought and won his battle.

One of Morrison's strengths is the subtlety with which she ties together the stages of her hero's development through imagery, specifically imagery of flight. If the opening consciously evokes the classical myth of Icarus, her subsequent use of this pattern makes it her own. On the one hand, we have Guitar, who says that only by shedding the burden of personal and past responsibilities can one fly. On the other hand is the "Song of Solomon" which weaves its way through the novel. Rather than a Judeo-Christian love song, Morrison creates an Afro-American history of a slave, Solomon, who flew away, quite literally, from Virginia to Africa. The song

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becomes a celebration of a family's and, by extension, a people's past. By the time Milkman realizes, at the novel's close, that he must face Guitar, accept and love him, even if he kills him or is killed by him, flight has become soaring:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (p. 337)

This is the control, the coherence, he has sought—acceptance of his past in both its historical and its supernatural aspects and acceptance of himself. When Solomon of the song flew back to Africa, he tried to carry away his favorite son, Milkman's grandfather, but dropped him. However, rather than picking up the Icarus motif of escape and doomed flight, Morrison creates her own myth of those who fumble in their efforts to fly and then soar higher—more Daedaluses than Icaruses. The structure of the novel is not then confusing, nor is it circular, simply moving from one black man's attempted flight to another's. Whether he kills Guitar or is killed by him, Milkman's joyful acceptance of the burden of his past transforms his leap toward Guitar into a triumphant flight.

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Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.
2. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. by Willard R. Trask. (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 13.
3. Bronislaw Malinowsky, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926, rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1971), p. 18.
4. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 39.
5. C. Kerényi, "Prolegomena," *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*. C. G. Jung and C. Keryi, trans. R. F. C. Hull. (1959, rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 6.
6. Mary Ellman, "Seven Recent Novels," *Yale Review*, 67 (Summer 1978), p. 598.
7. Harry Slochower, *Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 22.
8. Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, trans. F. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe (New York: Robert Brunner, 1959), p. 61.
9. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957, rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 127. Frye's discussion of the enemy-figure of romance (the mythos of summer) parallels Morrison's depiction of Guitar. The myth of romance itself, as explained by Frye, is closely connected to the structure of the last part of

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the *Song of Solomon*. In the wish-fulfillment world of romance, the adventures of the hero include a perilous journey, a crucial confrontation with the enemy, and the exaltation of the hero.

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