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TONI MORRISON'S RECLAMATION
OF HER PAST

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Timothy K. Nixon

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ABSTRACT

This study is a close reading of three of Toni Morrison's novels, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, and Beloved. The critical stance taken by the author, regarding these novels, is that they were written as an attempt by Morrison to reconnect herself with her African-American heritage.

Central to this paper is the idea that an individual, especially an African-American in the U.S., would feel separated from his or her heritage on account of the isolating effects of what is called the postmodern condition. Utilizing literary and cultural theorists' explications of postmodernism, an assertion is made that this postmodern condition clouds, if not completely deletes, one's sense of past.

Without a sense of past, Morrison could not have a sense of self. Therefore, life in the present is unacceptable. To regain her past, and thereby her self-knowledge, Morrison--drawing heavily upon African and African-American folklore, culture, and history--wrote the three novels.

**TONI MORRISON'S RECLAMATION
OF HER PAST**

Many critics of Toni Morrison's fiction have concentrated on her art's relevance to her community. Very few readers have written about the therapy of the writing for the writer. It seems that Morrison's impetus in writing is to counter the "dis-ease" in her own life, as well as in the lives of her readers, inherent in today's capitalistic society--a time theorists have dubbed the postmodern era. To counter this dis-ease, Toni Morrison utilizes her art as a praxis in reaching toward her cultural heritage, for in so doing she enables herself to confront the challenge of existence in a threatening and unacceptable present.

In asserting this analysis of Morrison's fiction, one begs the question whether the present is indeed "threatening and unacceptable" for her. In the treatise The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard describes postmodernism when he details the shift in Western society from narrative knowledge to scientific knowledge. Narrative knowledge takes with it as it disappears chronology (of the narrative) and tradition (of the narrator). Chronology and tradition, then, would be two ways of ordering thought, a sequential placement of the before and the now, as it were. Furthermore, narrative would authenticate a past; it would guarantee the validity of the experience for the group or people.

This transition from narrative to scientific knowledge is central to the present thesis, for Morrison has found herself

in the midst of this epoch where data and information have become capital. Through her novels, Morrison attempts to regain the era of narrative knowledge. In so doing, Morrison will reconnect with her heritage. This reconnection is possible, Lyotard points out, because "a culture that gives precedence to the narrative form...has to remember its past" (22). It is in this way (taking hold of the narratives of her African-American culture) that Morrison decides to rebel against the postmodern condition and struggle to regain her past.

Some critics of Morrison's writing might take issue with the classification of her work in a postmodern frame. To make a clean distinction of Morrison's work as modern or postmodern would be practically impossible. Aspects of the modern (e.g., the sublime) are found in her art, as well as characteristics of the postmodern (e.g., the presentation of the unrepresentable). The interesting argument, and the one at the core of this discussion, is that Morrison's status as a postmodern individual drives her art.

As an individual in this postmodern era, Morrison is detached from any social, cultural, or racial connectedness. Separation from culture and race is actually separation from the past, for society, culture, and race establish the precedent, the "what has gone before." By being without a past, an individual cannot possibly know him or herself, since all the variables of his or her uniqueness, and homoge-

neousness, are interwoven with that past. This disassociation of Morrison and her history is supported by the theories of Lyotard described above and also by numerous other theorists.

Madan Sarup, echoing the above assertions, says that individuals in the postmodern era are disconnected: "We have lost our ability to locate ourselves historically. As a society we have become incapable of dealing with time" (133). And later, Sarup goes on to say, "Our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past; it has begun to live in a perpetual present" (145). Sarup here reiterates the difficulties Morrison and all individuals in the postmodern era would face trying to maintain (or regain) a past. His position, however, also helps clarify why regaining narrative (i.e., past) is so important: self knowledge cannot be obtained without it.

Lyotard, Sarup, and others point to the problematic nature of time as a key aspect of postmodern life. Along this line, Fredric Jameson defines Lacanian schizophrenia by depicting an individual unable to unite past with present or future, thus unable to instill any meaning in any utterance. Jameson describes "the psyche of the schizophrenic" by claiming, "If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future or our own biographical experience or psychic life" (72). Time and its ability to provide order and meaning crumble, according to Jameson, into

a constant present where only the tangible is real. So in the ultimate display of circular reasoning, all individuals, by living in the present (the postmodern era), are damned to the present. Timelessness becomes at once symptom and malady of the postmodern condition.

Specific to Morrison's existence, and perhaps even more pertinent to the present supposition, is the idea that postmodern life is yet more problematic for ethnic minorities. William Boelhower makes a striking observation regarding ethnicity in his essay "Under the Sign of Hermes: Postmodern Strategies of the Ethnic Subject" when he describes writing by racial or cultural minorities as a "quest for lost identity" (339). Coupled with the schizophrenia and paranoia of existence in the present, ethnic minorities, Boelhower asserts, suffer a denied cultural/historical identity and are forced to bear the history of the dominant group. The implication of this for Morrison is that she would long for her past, for that is a symptom of postmodern life, but find that her past has been denied her by the oppressive white society. To have allowed the African slaves to keep their past and their culture, the white subjugators would have had to acknowledge the humanity of the Africans, which would have undermined the institution that made them wealthy and prosperous. So Morrison is searching for a past that was eliminated centuries before her birth.

Admittedly, such a dis-ease with life in these trying

times is not singular to African-Americans. All disenfranchised peoples feel the effects of the postmodern condition more acutely than do those in power. One suspects this phenomenon to be so because the status quo assembled the system that is responsible for the shift from narrative to scientific knowledge. The power structure, having built a machine that even it cannot control, is certain to keep the marginalized (African-Americans, women, etc.) further removed from its machinations.

Even if the extrapolation of theory regarding postmodern existence to include Morrison were not enough to justify a statement that life in the present is problematic, her own words display her negative opinion of the present. The idea that no one is blissful in this day and time can be seen in Morrison's Foreword to Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940. Morrison writes that rich women are in cages; the ethnic majority is inherently "destructive"; reproduction fills the factories of capitalists; and gender governs reward and recognition (ix). Furthermore, in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Morrison concerns herself primarily with the balance of the public and the private lives. Intrinsic in her argument, though, is the belief that the present is a trying time. Early in the essay, Morrison sets forth the claim that "the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a [balanced] life" (339). Society, Morrison says, no longer

allows the individual identity to coexist with the group identity. In both instances, Morrison makes clear her negative view of life in the present, that is in the postmodern era.

Numerous other readers of Morrison's work have found this same disdain for and despair over contemporary existence. Henry Louis Gates applies ideas very similar to Lyotard's to Morrison's work. "Morrison's figure of history," Gates writes, "allows her characters to step 'out of reified and fetishized relationships' [in the present], into...restored, integral relationships" (24). This appraisal of Morrison's writing could be read with the emphasis on the lack of "integral relationships" in postmodern existence, thus reiterating Hartwig Isernhagen's first symptom of postmodernism: the loss of "the frame of reference of personal interaction" ("Modernism/Postmodernism" 21).

Anne Bradford Warner concurs with the interpretation of Morrison's writing as a grasp for cultural identity. Even though she is specifically addressing the novel Beloved, much of what Warner says is applicable to most of Morrison's writing. Warner asserts in her article "New Myths and Ancient Properties: The Fiction of Toni Morrison" that Morrison's "work does not explain the issues of the Afro-American culture so much as it reconnects the culture to its origins, recalling and recreating the deep presence of ancient ritual and wisdom in contemporary life" (2). Warner does not see much optimism

in Morrison's view of the contemporary world; in fact, at one point in her essay Warner describes Morrison's fiction as art which depicts a world "turned upside down by the values of slavery, racism, capitalism, and colonialism" (3). According to Warner, it is in her writing that Morrison concerns herself "with the question 'whence?' rather than 'why?" (2), again seeking for heritage. African-Americans in this society find themselves having lost their cultural identity. Morrison tries to alleviate this loss of identity by reclaiming the past.

In one of the most insightful essays concerning Morrison and her works, "Eruptions of Funk: historicizing [sic] Toni Morrison," Susan Willis asserts that the aim of Morrison's art is to repair the damage inflicted on the African-American subject by white capitalist culture. Clearly talking about the "here and now," Willis sees in Morrison's writing a sense of lost identity similar to that put forth by Jameson and Isernhagen. Willis's interpretation of Morrison begins from the assertion that "consumer society," and by that she means white middle class society, is "capable of homogenizing society by recuperating cultural difference" (265). The loss of culture is equitable with the loss of self. Later in the essay, Willis utilizes even stronger language when she states, "The ultimate horror of bourgeois society against which Morrison writes...is reification" (267). "Reification" is a term akin in meaning to commodification that Willis adopts

from Lukács. More than just commodification or simple utilitarianism, though, "reification" designates the state of meaninglessness apart from that force (or party, or group) which ascribes meaning, or conversely, meaning only when bestowed by the status quo. Therefore, according to Willis, Morrison's fiction attempts to counter the forces in postmodern life that appear to give the African-American individual status and freedom but actually commodify him or her anew: from the slave block to the display window, as it were.

If indeed Morrison is trying to write for the preservation of her people and culture as Willis suggests (and she seems to be), she would be in keeping with the aesthetics of African-American art. Eugenia Collier, a theorist of African-American aestheticism, posits this rubric for successful art in her essay "The African Presence in Afro-American Literary Criticism": "African art, then, arises from the people and is inseparably inter-woven with the life of the people. It is not legislated by rules from the few but rather is tested against its meaning to the community" (33). Similarly, Karla Holloway discusses this aspect of African-American art in her essay "The Legacy of Voice: Toni Morrison's Reclamation of Things Past" when she writes, "In the novels of Black women writers, the voices of women characters claim an ownership to a creative word--a force like the West African concept of nommo, in which voicing becomes a

procreative act assuring civilizations a connection to generations past and future" (23). And pertaining to Willis's analysis of Morrison as writing to re-establish the lost identity in the reified African-American community, Collier asserts, "virtually every aspect of the culture must be measured against its contribution to alleviation of the racial agony and preservation of the Black psyche" (37). Morrison's art far exceeds this standard. Her novels are in keeping with an ethnic/creative morality.

Toni Morrison's fiction does indeed follow the guidelines of African-American creativity that are codified by Eugenia Collier and applauded by Susan Willis in addressing the artist's community. Nevertheless, there is another hallmark of African-American art upon which Willis does not focus and which is closer to the thesis here at hand--that is art is to help one's self. In her discussion of the nature of art by an African-American, Collier makes the assertion that just as art is tied to the community, "In the same way, it is profoundly important to the person himself, grows from his personal history and from his own emotions, for these are his contributions to the community" (Collier 33). As part of a tradition of African-American artists, then, Toni Morrison must write fictions for her community as well as for herself.

Morrison has acknowledged the importance of relating the present to the past more than a few times. In the essay "Rootedness," Morrison acknowledges her expectation for the

connection with heritage and cultural past in African-American literature. In unflinching terms, Morrison claims, "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor...we are, in fact, lost" (344 emphasis added). Morrison sees the value for herself in the cultural medicine she prescribes for her readers. Far more interesting is Morrison's admission that writing Beloved was her attempt to deal with the horrors of slavery. Though dealing with a problem in her past, she was using her art as a catharsis. In a Publisher's Weekly interview Morrison says,

I wanted to explore for myself the interior life of black people under those circumstances. Books about slavery have only one plot: You're in it, and you want to get out of it. I didn't think I had the emotional resources to stay in that world (PW 51).

This admission on Morrison's part shows that she utilizes her own creative processes for her own well-being while prescribing help to her African-American community of readers.

Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), and Beloved (1987) demonstrate Morrison's attempts to order her own present by reaching for her past.

Song of Solomon

One of Morrison's earlier works, Song of Solomon, employs the theme of quest for self as quest for past in order to

exist in the present. Though her two earlier novels, The Bluest Eye and Sula, deal with the search for self/past to a certain extent, neither addresses the issue as pointedly as Song of Solomon. In Song of Solomon, Morrison expands this theme into the purpose and driving force of the novel. The story of Macon Dead is the story of a failed figure, a man who dismisses an idyllic past and buys into white materialism and is, in turn, reified. The story of Pilate Dead is the story of a successful figure, a woman who carries her past as a skeleton in a bag and a song on her lips. And the story of Milkman, Macon Dead's son, is the story of the pursuit of one's past.

The life of Macon Dead is the life Morrison hopes to avoid and hopes to keep her readers from living. Macon, though a figure with a grand and mythic history, turns his back on the past and exists only in the present and only for materialistic gain. Macon is the prototype of what Willis would refer to as a reified figure. Very early in the novel Morrison reveals the character of Macon Dead. He is a money-loving, property-owning tyrant, a man detached from a past that can give him priceless spiritual, but no monetary, rewards. True to her artistry, however, Morrison does not create a static, easily surmised character. Even Macon is complex, and his complexity is exemplified among other ways by his occasional thoughts about his past and who it has made him. Sadly, though, the thoughts never lead to action.

In the first chapter of Song of Solomon Morrison displays a collage that is the entire novel seen but fleetingly, similar to a symphonic overture. Looking at the brief depiction of Macon Dead's character in this first chapter, one sees an individual out of touch with his past. Morrison presents the reader with Macon's thoughts:

Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name (Song 17-18).

Macon Dead convinces himself that his past cannot be known, yet his own son eventually proves him wrong. The ramifications of Macon's giving up and living in the present, however, are presented in the body of the novel. Morrison's epigraph, "The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names," damns Macon, for in deciding that his relation "could never be known....Nor his name," Macon clips his own wings. The mythic heritage, flight, is denied the greedy and materialistic Macon.

One sees soon enough what is really important to Macon Dead. Neither his heritage nor his immediate family compares

with ownership. Macon is condemned to the present, the immediate, by his making his family and history subalterns to monetary wealth. (Ruth Foster Dead, Macon's wife, for instance, only has value in his eyes because she is the daughter of a respectable, affluent doctor.) His ancestry is his discarded past, and one can see above his dismissal of that. His family could be his future--in the sense of, say, the Judaic tradition in which descendants are a form of immortality--but he feels nothing but hatred for them. Morrison depicts a man competing with his wife for ownership of his son and loving real estate more than his family:

Macon was delighted. His son belonged to him now and not to [his wife]....He knew as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of the pie. But there were properties nobody wanted yet, or little edges of property somebody didn't want Jews to have, or Catholics to have, or properties nobody knew were of any value yet....Everything had improved for Macon Dead during the war. Except [his wife]....he still wished he had strangled her back in 1921 (Song 63).

The violence depicted in this description of Macon Dead is, moreover, indicative of his character: Macon Dead is a slum lord who abuses his wife, terrorizes his daughters, and loves only possessions.

However, as stated above, Morrison cannot paint a picture

of a despicable character for the sake of having a nemesis or foil; Macon is far more complex. Morrison provides the reader with a psychic history of Macon Dead. Though neither pardoning nor excusing his actions, Morrison explains to the reader that Macon Dead's ownership is an ersatz for his murdered father. Macon has skewed his father's dream from an Edenistic farm life into a life of greed and control. Morrison writes that Macon Dead

paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring--that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at this father's death (Song 300).

Macon's father's seeming satisfaction with independence and self-sufficiency differentiates that type of possession from Macon's greed. The "bountifulness of life," an idea connoting agriculture and its labor, is absent from Macon's existence. Property and possessions have indeed become the demons possessing Macon. And in this way, Morrison provides the reader with some explanation of why Macon values the immediate (property) over the eternal (heritage and future).

Morrison allows her character Macon Dead to make the choice of buying into white materialism for what are seen as understandable reasons, yet he still must suffer the results of his choice. Macon is damned by his community. When Guitar Bains's grandmother cannot convince Macon to give her an extension in paying her rent, she acts as spokesperson for Morrison and the African-American community in diagnosing his reification. Macon has lost his soul to white capitalism. Guitar's grandmother says, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see." At which point the narrator comments, "The boys looked at each other and back at their grandmother. Their lips were parted as though they had heard something important" (Song 22 emphasis added). In effect, the boys do hear something vitally important: the sentencing of a man who sells his soul for the present and immediate.

While giving his son, Milkman, fatherly advice, Macon Dead tries to instill in him the same materialism and lust for possession that drives him. Milkman, however, as the protagonist of the novel, disregards Macon's teaching and eventually pursues his past and finds his history. Macon tries to dissuade Milkman from this, however. Macon discredits his sister's way of life and its usefulness for Milkman; he says, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to

know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Song 55). The great irony of this advice is first that Macon, the owner of much property, does not own himself--he is ignorant of his true heritage--and second, Pilate is the one person who can help Milkman gain the greatest knowledge, self knowledge.

There can be no mistaking the disfavor showered on the character of Macon by Morrison. She speaks through Guitar's grandmother to accuse him of forfeiting his own self for property. And one can be certain she is laughing at his claim of self possession through material ownership. As Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems say, "Although he [Macon] had been shown, through his apprenticeship with his father, a meaningful approach to a more ethereal life, he aborts it for one that, though materialistically fulfilling, requires the prostitution of his spirit" ("Liminality" 60). Macon Dead, therefore, is a failed subject, a reified individual, because through his greed and materialism he has lost his past which is his own identity.

A helpful function of Macon Dead, regardless of his own reification, is his pointing Milkman in the direction of the mentor who can actually help him find his past and, thereby, his wings. In one of the few exchanges of familial conversation between Macon and Milkman in the novel, Macon gives his son the little bit of his history he knows. And more importantly, he gives him the key to finding the rest of

the history. Macon says, "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans" (Song 54). An interesting suggestion from this quotation is that father and daughter are connected to Africa--they look like Africans--while Macon looks different. Perhaps Macon's father, though a land owner, still knew his past. Nevertheless, according to Macon, to look to the furthestmost past, Africa, his son must first look to his aunt, Pilate. And that is just what Milkman does.

There is little doubt that Pilate is the most self-actualized character in Song of Solomon. Morrison paints the most affirming portrait of her at the novel's end. Milkman has grown to value those things which his aunt Pilate represents, and his appreciation of her and her longing for family eventually enable Milkman to fly. Morrison speaks through Milkman's character when she lauds Pilate's life. Pilate is shot by Guitar Bains. When she dies, Milkman (Morrison) celebrates the beauty of her life: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (Song 336). Pilate is a true descendent of Solomon, the flying African.

Pilate is able to "fly without ever leaving the ground" because of her unencumbered state. Unlike her brother Macon, Pilate is free of material possessions. She keeps a geography book and a collection of stones. The significance of these objects is self-evident. The geography book showed her where

to go to find her history, and the stones are a long-lasting reminder of where she has been. Other than these tangible items which are tools for self knowledge, Pilate has few other possessions. At the beginning of the novel, Pilate is outside wrapped in an old quilt implying she does not even own a coat. It seems, then, that Pilate can fly while Macon cannot because she is not weighed down by property and possessions.

Vanity is another thing Pilate sacrifices for flight. In one episode Guitar Bains speculates that a peacock is unable to fly because of vanity. Guitar answers Milkman's query as to why the bird cannot fly, "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit" (Song 179). This explanation says much of Pilate's character, too. One envisions a character of power, not elegance, when reading Morrison's descriptions of Pilate. Pilate is described through Macon's eyes as being "odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt" and "raggedy" (Song 20). But her lack of affectation enables her to soar to spiritual heights unimagined by her materialistic brother.

Flight is but one of Pilate's powers. From the introduction of her character one is led to believe that she is anything but ordinary. Pilate has no navel, communes with the ghost of her father, and knows how to make Macon Dead have intercourse with his wife, and then she protects the offspring of their coupling from Macon's attempts at abortion. She can alter her appearance from a tall, commanding Black woman to a

frail Granny, which she does to get Milkman out of jail. And finally, Pilate's greatest strength is her understanding of human nature. Pilate consoles her granddaughter Hagar, who is rejected by Milkman. Spurned for a woman with silky, copper-colored hair, Pilate tells Hagar that Milkman has to love her hair because "It's all over his head....It's his hair too" (Song 315). The truly interesting point is that Milkman does not know who he is and cannot, therefore, love himself or Hagar. So one sees that Pilate is wise and powerful in her knowledge of life, of herself, and of humanity. As Joanne Braxton says in her essay "Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing," Pilate is part of a tradition of awesome, powerful female figures. "Pilate," Braxton writes, "embodies the heroism, self-sacrifice, and the supernatural attributes of her historical and mythical counterparts" (Whirlwind 307). The one character in touch with her past, Pilate is an individual possessed of phenomenal strengths.

The strengths that Pilate possesses, moreover, are aids, assistances, to her family. As alluded to above, her occult knowledge helps Macon Dead's wife conceive and keep her child. Pilate's anger and courage frighten off one of her daughter's abusive lovers. And her connectedness--the secret to all her power--gives Milkman the key to discovering flight. It seems, then, that Morrison is setting up a contrast, not so much between characters as between philosophies of life, between

Macon Dead and his sister Pilate. The former is an out of touch tyrant damned by his community, and the latter is a shaman of greatest power somewhat feared by her community but aware of special truths. Milkman, the novel's protagonist, must choose between the two philosophies.

Milkman eventually comes to see the value in his aunt's philosophy. One feels Milkman is destined for flight. The reader is made aware of instances in his early life that suggest he will break away from the life Macon Dead leads and embrace the way of life, the connectedness with the past, espoused by his aunt Pilate, thereby taking flight. One example of this predetermined fate, as it were, is the description of Milkman as a young boy kneeling on the front seat of his father's automobile looking out the back window. Milkman is dissatisfied by these car trips because "riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going--just where he had been--troubled him" (Song 32 emphasis added). The implications here are numerous. The allusion to flying is central to Milkman's psyche. He longs for the freedom of flight so that he will not be encumbered by the slight defect in the shortness of one of his legs. Similarly, the closer Milkman gets to his cultural heritage, the more explicit the interest in flight becomes. In Shalimar, the place where he can find out who he really is, Milkman dreams of flying: "But not with arms stretched out like airplane wings, nor shot forward like

Superman in a horizontal dive, but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper" (Song 298). And Milkman's interest in flying culminates in his learning how to surrender "to the air...[and] ride it" (Song 337) on the novel's final page. Just as Milkman is to fly to escape the crippling effect of his mismatched legs, he longs for flight to escape the present which cripples him.

Milkman finds his life on Not Doctor Street unacceptable. His parents are warring for his loyalties. His sisters are mere shadows of women--and when Corinthians tries to find love and respect away from the Dead home, Macon stops her. His friend Guitar has lost all human compassion in his attempt to get retribution for white violence. To escape this unacceptable life, embodied in Macon Dead's possessiveness, and find freedom, represented by Pilate's unencumbered lifestyle, Milkman reaches back for his past. Morrison puts forth an explanation for Milkman's desire to escape when she writes, "he felt off center. He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well" (Song 180). One should notice in Morrison's explanation the conceptualization of Lacanian schizophrenia discussed earlier: time, for the individual, has ceased being sequential; there is no past or future, only present. Milkman wants to escape a life where time has no meaning, and to do this, he reaches

for his past.

The recent past is just as unfulfilling as the present, as seen in the previous description of the young Milkman kneeling on the car seat looking out the back window ("not knowing where he was going--just where he had been--troubled him"). The distant past, his origin, on the other hand, is liberating. Struggling to exist in the confusion and dis-ease of his life, Milkman is introduced to his aunt Pilate, a "woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past" (Song 36), at a time when he begins to feel "as though there were no future to be had" (Song 35). Pilate rearranges the chronology of Milkman's life by sending him back to his earliest origins, Shalimar.

Even though Milkman sets off on a treasure hunt for gold that Pilate may have buried in a cave, the spiritual liberation, the ability of flight, and the connectedness with his past overshadow the value of any gold. There is a slight comfort, a subtle relaxation that occurs when he feels himself getting closer to the past, the origin of his family. He is recognized in Danville, Pennsylvania. And there is a suggestion that this is the first time Milkman drops his defensive, self-protecting stance. "Milkman smiled and let his shoulders slump a little," Morrison writes. "It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people" (Song 259). Furthermore, Morrison describes Milkman as beaming.

The remainder of Milkman's quest is even more trying. He loses his luggage. He spends his money. His clothing wears out, and his watch breaks. All those accoutrements, which previously weighed him down the way the white peacock was weighed down by its tail, are shed. Milkman is baptized while crossing the creek to find the cave that Circe has told him about. As in the Christian rite of baptism, Milkman is dying to the life of materialism embraced by his father and is being reborn to the new life of spiritual connectedness of his aunt. The baptism even washes away the preconceptions of his former way of thinking.

The loss of encumbrances of the old life and ways of thinking is demonstrated in the men tracking the bobcat. Out on the hunt with the men of Shalimar, Milkman is reconnected with a primordial way of life, a life not too dissimilar from what one might expect of an African hunter. Milkman's Northern, urban, bourgeois upbringing cannot help him in the woods. Morrison demonstrates how he develops into a hunter true to his heritage: "Milkman watched the lamp until he realized that focusing on it kept him from seeing anything else. If he was to grow accustomed to the dark, he would have to look at what it was possible to see" (Song 273). Later on this skill in focusing on what one is able to see enables Milkman to piece together the clues to his heritage. The calibre of knowledge Milkman gains on the hunt is formidable. Paying attention to the exchange of the men and hounds and the

hunters' empathy with nature, Milkman glimpses perhaps the remotest past of all. Morrison describes Milkman as envisioning a past

when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran with wolves, not from or after them....And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter (Song 278).

This Edenistic vision of humans in tune with nature is what Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon, was flying back to regain. Enslavement was unacceptable for Solomon, so he gave himself up to the wind and escaped the place where people did not understand one another, not to mention nature. Milkman, therefore, has conceived the idyll, the goal of the flight; he must only learn the process.

The ambiguity of the novel's ending could suggest that Milkman does not learn the process, that he does not fly. Whether or not Milkman actually does take flight at the end of Song of Solomon, it is clear that Morrison's purpose in the novel is the quest. Similar to the legend of the Holy Grail, the search and not the attaining is all. What is truly important in the story of Milkman Dead is that he realizes

what he needs is his past, his origin, and he strives to reclaim it. By looking to his great-grandfather Solomon, Milkman finds order to better deal with a troublesome present. Though some would dismiss it as unsubstantial, Milkman's new knowledge provides him with solace and encouragement. If he flies, Milkman, like Solomon and the flying Africans, will leave behind the dangerously disorienting present, a time which separates one from "the true and ancient properties." If, on the other hand, he dies, Milkman, like Pilate, will rest with the confidence that he is descended from a grand, mythic tribe. Milkman, therefore, serves as an example of what one must do to counter a life that is unacceptable: gather strength from one's history to endure the trial and to go beyond it.

The significance of the quest is perhaps most telling when one sees Morrison herself paralleled with Milkman. It has been established that life in the present poses difficulties for Morrison, an ethnic figure in the postmodern era, just as life in the present was troublesome for the character Milkman. Morrison's response to her dis-ease with the present was to create, to write. In effect, she went on the same quest as Milkman Dead when she wrote his story. Milkman searches for his name and finds ancestors who could fly. Morrison, feeling threatened as an ethnic minority, began researching and writing a novel and found she could claim relationship to a race of people who can boast the

mythic ability of flight. Morrison and Milkman, then, discover the same treasure. By writing Song of Solomon, Morrison grasped firmly to the past, as represented in the verbal history of the people who could fly, and said, "This. This is mine. This is me."

Moreover, Morrison exhumed the past so many African-Americans share with her. The story, for instance, of Milkman's great-grandmother, Sing, displays the connection between Native Americans and African-Americans. This connection is not uncommon among African-Americans, since many are descendants of Indians and Africans, in both cases peoples victimized by white society. Likewise, the story of the African-American community in Detroit exemplifies the plight of so many African-Americans struggling to survive in a cold, dehumanizing Northern city, while memories of an agrarian Southern life dance in their memory. In these instances, then, Morrison's fiction writing is also her self analysis, her reconstructed genealogy.

The didacticism of Song of Solomon cannot be denied. Morrison is without a doubt advocating her readers accept an approach to life similar to Pilate's, not like Macon's. But in keeping with African aesthetics, however, her art is just as much for her as for her readers. By writing Song of Solomon, Morrison is able to lament the great migration of her African-American ancestors from the agrarian South to the Northern cities, and its subsequent negative effects on them.

She acknowledges kinship with the noble yet exploited Native Americans. And she boasts of her relationship to a race of people who could fly. Knowing herself and her past, then, Morrison is better equipped to meet the challenges of life in the present. Realizing her relationship to such a past, Morrison can be proud of her uniqueness in a time Willis describes as prone to "recuperating cultural difference" (265). Furthermore, Morrison has regained, if only partially, her "lost identity," for which, Boelhower claims, ethnic figures search. Self-knowledge, then, is one safeguard against reification; Morrison's "significance," her "meaning," which had for so long been denied her by suppressors, is restored. Unfortunately, however, the suppression does not end with self realization.

Tar Baby

Milkman eventually rejects the philosophy of life espoused by his father to embrace that which is espoused by his aunt. During the course of the novel, Pilate and Macon have already decided what priorities they will hold close; Milkman, on the other hand, must make a choice. In this respect, Song of Solomon and Tar Baby are similar. In Song of Solomon Morrison depicts an individual caught between an authentic, culture-centered existence and a reified, present-minded life. Likewise, in Tar Baby both Jadine and

Son must decide between life in the present, life that is material-centered, and connectedness with the past, life that is value-centered. Once again Morrison depends upon the tension created by the difference in the two characters' choices to move her novel forward. Jadine is well on her way to being totally reified by white culture when she encounters Son. She can be redeemed by Son, but he must be wary all the while of Jadine's ability to lure him away from his past and its liberating power.

As the action of Tar Baby begins, one witnesses Jadine suffering from a troublesome present. Jadine, a character who leads a seemingly enviable life of fame and glamour, is so troubled by a brief but cataclysmic insult that her life comes to a halt. An African woman scorns Jadine in a Parisian grocery. This rejection flattens Jadine's recent victories. The striking image of the African woman--a regal, busty woman with "skin like tar" wearing a "canary yellow dress" and headwrap, who had ornamental scars on each cheek and "eyes so powerful [they] had burnt away the eyelashes"--enchants Jadine (Tar Baby 45). She does not find the African woman necessarily pretty. Jadine knows that she and not the African woman embodies western beauty. Whereas Jadine is a covergirl, the African woman could not be. "The agency would laugh her out of the lobby," Jadine thinks (Tar Baby 45). Yet there is something in the African that enchants Jadine, causing her, along with everyone else in the store, to stare at the

"woman's woman ...that unphotographable beauty" (Tar Baby 46). However, the African woman is unflattered by Jadine's transfixedness. Upon leaving the store, she makes known her disdain for the reified Jadine:

the woman turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below (Tar Baby 46).

The scorn of the African woman is enough to bring Jadine's cosmopolitan life to a stop. She is so troubled by the insult she leaves Paris to stay for a while with the only family she has.

Eventually, the reader comes to realize that the power of the African woman's insult is the same power as Macon's damning from Guitar Bains's grandmother in Song of Solomon, when she says, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see" (Song 22). In effect, Mrs. Bains's and the African's statements echo the sentiments of millions of African-Americans; they convey the disdain of the race for those who disregard its ethics. Morrison writes that Jadine "couldn't figure out why the woman's insulting gesture had derailed her--shaken her out of proportion to incident. Why she had wanted that woman to like and respect her" (Tar Baby 47). Quite simply, the African woman acts as spokesperson for the

culture and heritage Jadine has denied when she shows her distaste for the reified African-American. The reader understands soon enough the impact of the woman's action on Jadine. A sort of dramatic irony is created where the reader understands Jadine's dis-ease when she does not.

Without being able to understand the full power of the African woman's action, Jadine naively assumes she can escape its perplexity by leaving Paris. She soon realizes that the insult cut far too deeply for her to escape its pain. Furthermore, the bruise on her existence that was left by the African should make her more sensitive to other aspects of her denied culture (for example, the blind horsemen). But Jadine is herself too blind to see them. There is on Isle des Chevaliers a tale of blind horsemen, slaves who lost their eyesight when the isle appeared on the horizon. The spirits of these blind slaves should be the seat of comfort and home for Jadine, not the house of the white, aristocratic Valerian Street. She has, though, become too reified to discern the slaves and clings instead to the slave master. Valerian is equated with the slave owners when Morrison reveals his thoughts:

Somewhere in the back of Valerian's mind one hundred French chevaliers were roaming the hills on horses. Their swords were in their scabbards and their epaulets glittered in the sun. Backs straight, shoulders high--alert but restful in the

security of the Napoleonic Code (Tar Baby 206).

Jadine, then, embraces the subjugator and denies her connection to the subjugated, but she avoids seeing this painful truth. Jadine merely nurses her discomfort:

One hundred men on one hundred horses. She tried to visualize them, wave after wave of chevaliers, but somehow that made her think of the woman in yellow who had run her out of Paris. She crawled back into bed and tried to fix the feeling that had troubled her.

The woman had made her feel lonely in a way.

Lonely and inauthentic (Tar Baby 48).

Jadine admits to her discomfort, yet she does not--or will not--acknowledge either its cause or its cure.

Being untrue to herself--denying who she is--is the cause of Jadine's discomfort. There can be no doubt that Morrison intends for her readers to see in Jadine a character far from self-actualization, which is in this case far from one's cultural heritage or one's past. Even the issue of race is a cause for discomfort to Jadine. Morrison writes, Jadine

was uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalizing out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics. She ended by resisting both, but it kept her alert about things she did not wish to be alert about (Tar Baby 64).

Race and ethnicity, then, are subjects far too revealing for Jadine.

If Jadine were to consider the subject of race, Morrison suggests, she would have to deal with her own identity as a racial subject. Jadine avoids this self consideration at all costs, for she is afraid of the truth: she has denied her self, her people, her culture, her past. At one point in the novel, by showing the reader Jadine's thoughts, Morrison demonstrates her character's inability to express, even to herself, the similarities of the African-American experience. Jadine thinks, "Doesn't he [Valerian] know the difference between one Black and another or does he think we're all...Some mess this is" (Tar Baby 125). Even this suggestion of racial identity would acknowledge cultural precedence, that is, the aspects of her life dictated by her race. Jadine cannot place herself in any relation to ethnicity. She is even, Morrison implies, ill at ease looking at herself. Valerian frightens her in one instance when his eyes "were all reflection, like mirrors" (Tar Baby 73). There are two sides to the implication operating here: as a mirror casts reflections, Jadine will be forced to look at herself, which might end the charade of the cosmopolitan, refined westerner that she is playing. And secondly, Jadine might be afraid to see herself as Valerian--who, it was pointed out earlier, is paralleled with the European slave owners--sees her.

Arriving on Isle des Chevaliers, however, Jadine is once

again confronted with the necessity of looking at who she really is. This self consideration is due, for the most part, to Son's being on the island. He is the connection to her heritage when even her family is not. As Valerian is paralleled with the French imperialist slave owners, Son is aligned with the blind horsemen, the slaves. Morrison writes, "Somewhere in the back of Son's mind one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years" (Tar Baby 206). And even earlier in the novel, Jadine sees Africa in Son's face: "Spaces, mountains, savannas--all those were in his forehead and eyes" (Tar Baby 158). Since he is paralleled with the horsemen, the African heritage that is truly his, then, Son's indictment of Jadine is most telling.

Son's criticism of Jadine stems from her fear that he will rape her, the same fear that Valerian's blubbering wife feels. In telling Jadine she acts like a white girl, Son posits a stinging criticism. Coupled with the insult of the African beauty, Son's comment hits Jadine hard. Instead of finding the psychic peace she had anticipated from her return to Isle des Chevaliers, this encounter with Son proves even more disturbing. The reader is provided with a view of Jadine's troubled psyche when Morrison writes:

Jadine felt the fear again and another thing that wasn't fear. Something more like shame.... Other men had done worse to her and tried worse but

she was always able to talk about it and think about it with appropriate disgust and amusement. But not this. He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her (Tar Baby 123).

Despite this dis-ease, however, Jadine is still unaware of the cause of her problem, thus the dramatic irony continues. The reader is cognizant of her malady when she is not.

As a reader privy to Jadine's problem, though, one discerns proof after proof that her situation is all on account of her rejected heritage, for with it, Jadine turned away her own identity. While conversing with Valerian Street, Jadine laughingly recounts how his son Michael had frowned on her studying art history--which, by the way, would be the artistic heritage of white Europeans--instead of working for the advancement of African-Americans (Tar Baby 72). One discerns in the tone of the written conversation that that was, to Jadine, a ludicrous supposition. Again, she does not see the irony of her situation. Furthermore, Jadine denies the importance of her race/heritage/past to her personality when she says, "sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside--not American--not black--just me" (Tar Baby 48 emphasis added). Even though there would be defenders of both points of view in the psychological debate over "nature versus nurture," readers of Morrison's works would

certainly discredit Jadine's belief that her "blackness" has nothing to do with who she is on the inside. In these instances, then, Morrison highlights the cause of Jadine's dis-ease: her refusal to acknowledge her true self, a refusal encapsulated in her spurning her heritage (i.e., her past).

Probably the most poignant demonstration of Jadine's disregard for her cultural past would be her dismissal of its artistry and aesthetics. In an extremely naive comparison, Jadine states she likes "'Ave Maria' better than gospel music"; she finds "Picasso...better than an Itumba mask"; and she dismisses all artists of African descent for being juvenile, pitiful, and pretentious (Tar Baby 74). The ludicrous comparison of these two aesthetic points of view leads one to think of Eugenia Collier's discussion of African aestheticism discussed earlier, since two completely different philosophies are at work in African and European aesthetics. The juxtaposition of the two types of art demonstrates how lacking Jadine's understanding is, while pointing to her fear of being allied with anything African. In their discussion of this episode in Tar Baby, Samuels and Hudson-Weems write that "Jadine is completely oblivious...to her African-American roots. So divorced is she from black culture, from that which is her legacy as a black American, she thinks of it in strictly stereotypical ways" ("Folklore" 80). These two readers do not even credit Jadine with the ability to objectively, open-mindedly evaluate art of an African

perspective. In any case, Jadine, as is demonstrated in this instance, discredits her culture to embrace a white, bourgeois attitude, which damns her to a reified, sterile existence.

In an excellent demonstration of personification and pathetic fallacy, Morrison even has nature trying to redirect the wayward Jadine toward her history and away from her sterile existence. Walking into the jungle on Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine walks into the midst of trees inhabited by the spirits of women in tune with their cultural power. The pull of the tar, tugging harder on Jadine's legs, is the frantic grasps of the swamp women, fearful lest they lose a wayward child. Morrison presents the struggle in an animistic metaphor:

The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant--mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers,

their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were (Tar Baby 183 emphasis added).

Nevertheless, Jadine does pull free of the tar, and she shakes the grip of the women trying to bring her back to her heritage. It is interesting to note, though, that when Jadine frees herself from the tar, she rushes home and washes the muck from her feet and legs. Upon seeing her clean feet, Son thinks, "The little feet...were clean again, peachy soft again as though they had never been touched and never themselves had touched the ground" (Tar Baby 186). The significance of these feet that "never had touched the ground" is that all vestiges of the swamp women have been removed. Jadine has washed away all of her past and cultural identity. She has, to utilize Susan Willis's terminology, ridded herself of even more of her "funk."

Morrison depends upon her characters to vocalize Jadine's lost identity, her lost funk. Valerian and Margaret, the master and his mistress, are discussing Jadine when Margaret makes a most telling comment. Margaret points out how utterly askew Jadine's priorities are when she says, "look what she has to go back to....Europe. The future. The world" (Tar Baby 29). Margaret's sadly accurate summation of Jadine's goals demonstrates how opposite she is to Son, a man whose goals could be loosely categorized as Africa, the past, and

the spirit. Whereas Jadine admires western culture, Son respects his connection to his African-American community. Whereas Jadine thinks of what she will do next, Son tries to go back to where he started. And whereas Jadine relishes the fur coat, Son desires only freedom of spirit. In this case, then, the two white characters unknowingly highlight the source of Jadine's discomfort.

The Black characters in the book also diagnose Jadine's psychic malady. Thérèse, actually a Sybil or blind prophetess, denounces Jadine. Thérèse warns Son, "Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (Tar Baby 305). Well aware that Jadine is too far down the road of reification, Thérèse tries to keep Son from being dragged down with her. Another indictment of Jadine by an African-American character comes from her aunt, Ondine. Ondine, in effect, unsexes Jadine; she tells her niece that she cannot be a woman because of her lack of familial attachments:

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man--good enough even for the respect of other women....A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her

(Tar Baby 281).

Ondine and Thérèse, therefore, act as the spokespersons for the Black community by discrediting Jadine for her detachment from her past. In many ways, moreover, Ondine and Thérèse simply echo the African woman, Son, and the swamp women.

One sees the truth of these characters' dismissal of Jadine in her attitude toward her Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney. After the troubling encounter with the African woman in Paris, Jadine returns to Isle des Chevaliers to the only family she has. Morrison makes clear, however, that the reader is aware that what Ondine and Sydney think and believe in is insignificant to Jadine. Quite succinctly, Morrison states, "Nanadine and Sydney mattered a lot to her but what they thought did not" (Tar Baby 49). This disregard for family and its values is reminiscent of Macon Dead, a person who loves the prestige of having Ruth Foster as a wife but does not love the woman. It is with a resounding, unanimous appraisal, then, that Jadine is viewed as a failed character.

Ondine's criticism of her niece in her reproof is especially significant in light of the dream of the night women that frightens Jadine so. Ondine, Thérèse, the African woman, and the women of Eloë, the relatives and lovers of Son, come to Jadine one night in a dream. Just as Ondine had said Jadine could never be a real woman, thereby unsexing her, the night women deprive her of her sex, too. Morrison writes, "they were all there spoiling her love-making, taking away her

sex like succubi" (Tar Baby 258). As the dream continues, the truth of Ondine's words quoted above becomes even more apparent. The night women offer their breasts to Jadine to suckle. She is no woman (i.e., has no sex) because she never was a daughter, so the night women try to alter that in the quintessential act of nurturing; they want to breast-feed her, to remake her into the daughter she should be. Jadine even understands the dream, but she does not understand its import. Jadine realizes that the night women "seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits" (Tar Baby 262). The significance of this dream, like the insults of Son and the African woman, are lost on Jadine, a reified figure choosing to cut herself off from her past and her true identity.

Whereas Morrison presents in Macon Dead in Song of Solomon a character whose soul was lost before the action of the novel, Tar Baby presents for the reader the demise of the spirit of Jadine. Unmindful of Ondine's warnings and refusing to acknowledge the meaning of the African woman's insult, Jadine dies to her true self. Morrison utilizes the metaphors of the fur coat and the women of Eloë to express Jadine's total reification near the novel's end when she finally breaks off with Son: "There was sealskin in her eyes and the ladies minding the pie table vanished like shadows under a noon gold

sun" (Tar Baby 273). With any last bit of her true self vanished, Jadine returns to Paris to live as the model Jade. This detail's significance is self evident. Morrison emphasizes that her character is beautiful, like jade, but she is also a commodity created and possessed by white society.

As the novel ends, the reader sees Jadine commodified and Son regaining his "ancient properties." Unlike Jadine, Son does not give in; he does not sell his soul to white bourgeois values. Son's story in Tar Baby is the story, like Milkman's, of a figure reconnected with a grand, mythic past. Self-possession is the reward that Son claims at the end of Tar Baby when he runs off to join the blind horsemen riding through the woods on Isle des Chevaliers.

One notices from the opening pages of the novel that Son is at cross purposes with white, middle-class society. Escape from the military takes precedence over everything in Son's life. The description of Son's escape, moreover, brings to mind narratives of slaves' escapes. The reader senses the danger and urgency of his escape from the ship, the frustration of being caught in an unforgiving undertow, and the vulnerability of being a stow-away on a stranger's boat. This mixture of feelings develops the analogy of Son as an escaped slave. The comparison of Son to African slaves cannot be coincidental, for Morrison creates a parallelism at the end of the introduction when she writes, "There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with the moon, but he could see very

little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it" (Tar Baby 8). Son's position as the suppressed, the enslaved, establishes automatically the difference between him and Jadine. Jadine, as pointed out above, loses her whole self in embracing white values; Son, on the other hand, is forever at odds with white values, and he eventually rejoins his brothers, those slaves blinded by their first sight of Isle des Chevaliers.

Just as Son's escape from the military ship is a great challenge, his grappling with white, bourgeois society challenges his will to survive. One notices this in Son choosing the name he wants to be called. Names are important in Morrison's writing, and Tar Baby is no exception. Son thinks at one point how society (meaning white society) has tried to control him by knowing his name. Through his attempts to avoid the white society's manipulation, Son has practically forgotten his given name--but not his identity:

In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself. Actually the name most truly his wasn't on any of the Social Security cards, union dues cards, discharge papers, and everybody who knew it or remembered it in connection with him could very

well be dead. Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke--fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least (Tar Baby 139).

Only through his fortitude can Son keep his name from those who would use it to possess him.

This idea of the importance of naming can be seen earlier in the novel. Jadine tells Son that her name is Jade. Son knows better, and Jadine must admit that Jade is not her name. This episode is another of the many indications of the dissimilarity between Jadine and Son. She accepts and utilizes the name white society has given her; he guards his identity by guarding his name. One gathers from the long quotation above that Son changes his name frequently to remain aloof from the subjugators. Jadine, it seems, is renamed to be accepted by the subjugators.

Perhaps because of their dissimilarity, or perhaps because she is a beautiful woman and he is a lonely man, Son's goal of self-possession and reuniting with his past is temporarily obscured when he meets Jadine. Jadine confuses him. Before actually speaking with her, Son spends nights trying to force his values and desires into Jadine's dreams.

When Jadine is awake, though, she is actually able to impact his dreams. Morrison describes the fugitive Son trying hard to visit Jadine's sleep with almost pastoral images of African-American life in the South. Instead of his inspiring her with dreams of matronly women, cheerfully painted houses, and men playing guitars in the evening, Jadine can force upon Son "her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk" (Tar Baby 119-120). The desire for material comfort, therefore, is the danger of loving the beautiful Jadine. It is a danger, furthermore, for in the excerpt from which the above quotation was taken, Morrison makes it plain that there is no room for both sets of dreams: Son must long for life in Eloe or for gold and silk.

The confusion or uneasiness that Son feels because of Jadine continues when the couple moves to New York. African-Americans in New York, Morrison writes, are to Son like "a whole new race of people he was once familiar with" (Tar Baby 217). (This instance is a further indication of Morrison's interest in the motif of the change in African-Americans as they move from the agrarian South to the urban North.) Furthermore, Son feels violated, even commodified in this city which Jadine finds so comfortable. Morrison states that Son "saw the things he imagined to be his, including his own reflection, mocked. Appropriated, marketed and trivialized into decor" (Tar Baby 168). Morrison speaks of these "things" being commodified by the white values in New York in terms of

Son's distant cultural past. Lions, beasts of strength and terror indigenous to Africa, are utilized as architectural decoration in New York City. And similarly, the primordial hunt for game is reduced in New York to a quest for money. In these ways, therefore, New York City's values and Jadine's values run contrary to Son's goals. For whatever reason, Son is distracted, confounded by Jadine. To this extent, then, Son parallels Milkman. Whereas the latter leaves his home to search for a false treasure of gold, the former chases the beauty of Jade. Interestingly enough, two wise, maternal figures reorient Milkman and Son.

Pilate and Thérèse redirect Milkman and Son to their appropriate goals. These goals, furthermore, are in both cases reconnections with a cultural heritage, a mythic past. Thérèse is clearly responsible for reconnecting Son with his brothers, the blind horsemen. This action on her part is most benevolent and beneficial, for fraternity, Morrison writes, is Son's final hope once he realizes Jadine is corrupted and corrupting (Tar Baby 168). Son's heritage, if not also his fate, becomes clear to the reader when Morrison states that Thérèse "had seen him [Son] in a dream smiling at her as he rode away wet and naked on a stallion" (Tar Baby 105). Furthermore, the physically blind Thérèse can "see" things better than most others; she tells the doubting Gideon that Son is one of the blind horsemen come to abduct Jadine. At the novel's end, Thérèse ferries Son to Isle des Chevaliers.

Through Thérèse's coaching, Son rejects Jadine, a woman who has "forgotten her true and ancient properties" and embraced materialism, and joins the ranks of the blind horsemen galloping through the island's jungles. In effect, finally, Son rejects the materialism of the present for the fraternity of the past.

Since the theme of Tar Baby is not too different from that of Song of Solomon, the former's relation to its author is not too very different either. In the earlier novel, Morrison is expressing the necessity of the connection with one's past, one's culture. Tar Baby is indeed a reiteration of that necessity, but it is more. Tar Baby is Morrison's explanation of how one reconnects with the past. And the answer is quite simply, through one's family or community.

The dedication of the novel provides the reader with the first suggestion of the importance of family to the theme of Tar Baby. Morrison dedicates the novel to her female relatives who all knew "their true and ancient properties." Since these women were connected with their history, they could then pass along to the young Morrison the knowledge she would need to deal with life in a reifying white world. Nursing is a crucial motif in Tar Baby, as is demonstrated in some of the quotations excerpted above, and one can extrapolate that just as these female relatives of Morrison nursed her with life-giving milk, they also instilled in her culture-strengthening values, properties as it were, to go

through her life sane and whole. Knowing one's self is knowing one's people. Being true to one's self is being at peace. Son (and Morrison) reject the value system of the chevaliers. Instead of greed, they embrace contentment. Instead of detachment, they appreciate and reciprocate the love and caring showed them by family and community. Instead of refined, Eurocentric culture, they celebrate mythic, African tradition.

Thérèse acts as a surrogate mother for Son. Her "magic breasts" have long-since dried up when Gideon introduces her to Son. She has, nevertheless, the spiritual milk (i.e., insight) to reconnect Son with his ancient properties. Thérèse takes the misdirected Son to the back of Isle des Chevaliers so that he can become one of the blind horsemen, once he is separated from Jadine. Likewise, the closeness, the fondness, Son feels for the matronly women who guard the pie table in his memories of Eloë illustrate his connection with family and community values. Son is just that, he is a son; whereas Jadine, as was pointed out above, is told by her own aunt that she is not a daughter.

For Morrison, then, writing Tar Baby must have been her admission of the central part family played for her in her own struggle to remain a culture-centered individual in a disorienting time and society. As a novelist, she was attaining recognition for her writing--Song of Solomon had won her awards--but to keep from giving in to the temptations

which finally rob Jadine of her last bit of funk, Morrison advocates closeness to family and community. Though there is no explicit statement that at this point in her life Morrison clung more tightly to her family than at any earlier point, one cannot deny that she has repeatedly expressed the necessity of such closeness in interview after interview. And how could she write so poignantly of the crucial importance of familial and communal relationships and not have been aware of them in her own life?

There is, nevertheless, a problem associated with African-Americans reuniting with their past. That problem is slavery. For each African-American who chooses to be true and tied to his or her heritage, there arises this specter that must be exorcised. It is in the novel Beloved that Morrison comes to terms with the issue of slavery. This specter of slavery, though, is the one problem which nearly shakes the steadiness of the "ancient properties."

Beloved

Susan Willis ends her essay "Eruptions of Funk: historicizing Toni Morrison" with speculation about Morrison's future writing: "Will it be mythic or social? Will it represent a wish-fulfillment or the challenging struggle for social change?" (Willis 280). Willis was writing before the publication of Beloved, Morrison's novel published in 1987,

which makes looking back now on her speculations about forthcoming fiction by Toni Morrison extremely interesting. Readers of Beloved must answer Willis's pondering by saying, "Yes, all of it." Morrison created in Beloved a ghost story with social implications, and tied up in this is also an attempt by Morrison to achieve her own sense of self identity. Beloved is at once mythic and social. In an attempt to revive narrative, which Lyotard eulogizes, she resuscitates myth and magic which are used to explain, delight and instruct the community that is her readers. The character Sethe in the novel is forced to grapple with her past, with her anger and her guilt. In the same way that Sethe must come to grips with her past in order to find some form of stability for her present and future, writing Beloved was for Toni Morrison a practice in asserting a racial identity in a culture and time that threaten such identification.

In Beloved the characters must look back to a past clouded with the memories of slavery and abuse. The narrative voice expresses the dichotomy of emotions which characterize Sethe's remembering the plantation where she was enslaved:

although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging

from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that (Beloved 6).

This passage suggests that nostalgia for the bygone days is ludicrous. Nevertheless, Sethe--and Morrison--must look back to gain a sense of self strong enough to counter the instability of the present. The anger they surely feel when remembering the slave days is just as much part of their characters as is their African heritage.

Even though Morrison's act of coming to grips with her past is analogous to Sethe's, the two women's experiences are different, as Anne Bradford Warner notes: "In [Beloved] the characters do not move from a contemporary black community to African traditions. This novel ponders the difficulties of a movement from conditions of slavery to what one might call self-possession" (11). The first situation, moving "from a contemporary black community to African traditions," is clearly Morrison's act, whereas Sethe and Baby Suggs and Paul D move toward "self-possession." All three of the characters have been made keenly aware of the difficulty of self-possession. At one point, Sethe thinks to herself, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (Beloved 95). The two situations,

Sethe's and Morrison's, however, are closely related, for Morrison, refusing to be obliterated by this postmodern, Reagan-era society, is, in effect, claiming ownership of herself, of who she was and is, when she reaches back to her African heritage.

Those powerful emotions (e.g., anger, guilt) which cripple the individual are deterrents to Sethe and Morrison in their quests for self actualization. Sethe, for instance, could spend her life wallowing in her anger at the Garners, the owners of the Sweet Home plantation. Similarly, she could be crippled by the guilt she feels for slitting her own daughter's throat to keep her from being returned to slavery. As Warner says, "The women of Beloved are isolated,...because their perceptions embrace those things beyond the visible, parts of the past which can ensnare the rememberers" (10). Morrison, however, has her protagonist struggling to deal with her past and move forward. The past cannot be ignored; this is expressed in Sethe's suggestion that the three women move from 124 and Baby Suggs response: "What'd be the point?...Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (Beloved 5). The women are unable to escape the past, yet if not careful, the past can catch them and not allow them to move forward.

This idea of Morrison's writing Beloved as an attempt to grapple with the past is expressed nowhere as concisely as in Terry Otten's book, The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of

Toni Morrison. In discussing the act of looking back in order to move ahead, Otten says,

Beloved's resurrection coerces Sethe and the others involved to return to and reenact the past, again like tragic figures doomed to reenact it in memory and deed. Looking back, they begin to understand themselves and to reassess where they have been. They now know the ironically named Sweet Home to be the most illusory of Edens. Before Mr. Garner's death and schoolteacher's arrival, it camouflaged the evil enterprise it represented. However kindly the Garners were, they still perpetuated the organized criminality of slavery (85).

As Otten points out, even the "good" days at Sweet Home were not that good, but he is slightly amiss in implying that the slaves were not aware of the insidiousness of Sweet Home. Baby Suggs, for instance, admits that she was not starved or raped at Sweet Home, but when Mr. Garner gloats about letting Halle buy his mother's freedom, Baby Suggs thinks, "But you got my boy and I'm all broke down. You be renting him out to pay for me way after I'm gone to Glory" (Beloved 146). Nevertheless, Otten's appraisal of Morrison's writing is insightful. Confronting the phantom of slavery is central to the African-American experience, and Toni Morrison's art is no exception to this rule. The treatment of the slavery issue in

Morrison's fiction might be what leads Susan Willis to say, "Morrison transforms the moment of coming to grips with slavery as an allegory of liberation" (272).

Part of the despicableness of slavery, one of the ultimate cruelties by the white society, is the control of the enslaved African-American's identity. One notices this manipulation of characters' identities in Baby Suggs being called Jenny by the Garners; they never even ask her her name. Warner writes, "The misnaming reveals the perversity of a culture that would deprive a race of its identity, history, and continuity" (6). Furthermore, white society has the ability to taint African-Americans, as well as the desire to separate them from their cultural identities. This corruption is, quite simply, once again the reification of the controlled by the controllers. Morrison expresses this distrust of white society when she describes Sethe's thoughts, "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (Beloved 251). In both instances, whites "mislaming" and "dirtying" African-Americans, the end is invariably alienation from the African culture and identity.

The alienation from the African-American culture comes about because of whites denying African-Americans their humanity, for as was previously discussed, one could not

enslave a fellow human being, so the subjugators, to ease their own consciences, treated and tried to convince the enslaved that they were anything but human. False science and theology, represented in Beloved by the episodes of Schoolteacher conducting experiments on the Sweet Home slaves, were whites' attempts to justify their claims. This dehumanization led African-Americans into "dirtying" themselves: Sethe kills her daughter. Baby Suggs tries to convince Sethe she must deal with her anger/grief/guilt and go forward, when she continually pleads with Sethe to "lay it all down." In the same way, Morrison is writing--for herself as well as for her readers--to say that African-Americans must deal with their anger and grief and go forward.

Throughout Beloved the reader is reminded of Sethe's past hanging over her like the sword of Damocles. For instance, when Denver feels jealous of the attention that her mother is paying to the newly arrived Paul D, she asks, "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (Beloved 13). Paul D's response is a light hearted admission of Denver's insight. Sethe's answer--more to herself than to Paul D or Denver--is less jovial; she says, "But it's where we were....All together. Comes back whether we want it to or not" (Beloved 14). This troublesome past is an overwhelming force in Sethe's life; it controls her every moment. At one point in the novel, Sethe thinks about "Working dough. Working,

working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (Beloved 73). Slavery is the bundle of the past bearing down on Sethe's back.

It was because of her anger towards the people who had enslaved her and out of love for her daughter that Sethe slit Beloved's throat. She wants to keep her daughter from the horrors of slavery and decides that a violent death enacted out of love is preferable. In justifying herself to Paul D, Sethe says that her killing Beloved kept her away from Sweet Home. Her only duty as protector of her children, Sethe says, is to keep "them away from what I know is terrible" (Beloved 165). The murder of her daughter, therefore, is a consequence of the institution of slavery. Faced with the horror of enslavement, Sethe decides that Beloved must die. Susan Willis keenly observes that "self-mutilation represents the individual's direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination" (277). By killing part of herself, Beloved, Sethe dissuades Schoolteacher from taking her or her remaining children back to Kentucky. Sethe's confrontation with the forces of slavery leads to Beloved's murder, for which the only recompense acceptable to Sethe's society--and also to white society--is immense guilt.

In the African-American society to which Sethe belongs, children are celebrated because in freedom they are not the property of the slave owner but offspring to be cherished and loved by the parents. Sethe's mother, Baby Suggs, and

probably millions of other enslaved African women refused to become too attached to their children for fear of losing them. The children were considered chattel to be sold at the slave owners' will. Freedom brought with it the freedom to love one's child. To kill something so cherished, then, is an insult to her society.¹ Otten's appraisal that Sethe is "not just brutalized by the savagery of an evil institution but [also] haunted by her own capacity for violence against the very object of her love" (82) is valid if one remembers that slavery is the precursor. Without slavery there would have been no killing.

The necessity for Sethe to deal with her past, that is her anger and guilt, is explicit in Beloved. Morrison, it seems, has created a figure who, like herself, must wade through slavery and the violence it breeds in order to look forward to a future life less problematic than the present. After hearing Paul D recount what became of Halle, Sethe feels she cannot take on any more burden:

It was time to lay it all down. Before Paul D came and sat on her porch steps, words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going. Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby

¹ I must credit Professor Collen Kennedy with providing this interpretation of Sethe's guilt. In a class discussion on Beloved Professor Kennedy stressed that while the death of Beloved was not easily acceptable for Sethe, the African-American community imposed its value system upon her, faulting her for the choice she made.

faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she saw only their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but there--somewhere. Now Halle's face between the butter press and the churn swelled larger and larger, crowding her eyes and making her head hurt. She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield." And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would. Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below (Beloved 86).

The African-American community echoes Baby Suggs's evocation of Sethe to "lay it all down." When the women of the community, tired of the haunting of 124, come to exorcise the spirit of Beloved, the narrator describes the psychology of a minor character, Ella. Morrison writes, "Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present....The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind" (Beloved 256). Morrison is clearly asserting a need for Sethe to confront her anger and guilt face-to-face, but then to move on and not be obsessed by the

past.

As the episode of the women coming to exorcise 124 suggests, community is the one tool for countering the paralyzing effects of a past-obsessed present. Denver is actually responsible for the women coming to Sethe's aid. By going outside of 124 and seeking help, Denver makes a plea for help which becomes metaphorically a grasp for one's cultural identification. The women of 124 had lived too long in isolation. The African-American community was kept at bay because of the ghost, which embodies Sethe's anger and thrives on her guilt. Even though Denver is the one to stretch out a needy hand, Sethe, nevertheless, has within her all along the stuff of her heritage, which had been suppressed by her predicament. Sethe remembers being cared for by Nan, a woman who used different language, when she was a child. And even though Sethe forgot the language that her mother and Nan spoke, she cannot forget "the message--that was and had been there all along" (Beloved 62). Similarly, when Sethe is about to give birth to Denver, she compares the kicking baby to an antelope. Morrison writes, "why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young" (Beloved 30). It is obvious to the reader that the antelope is no invention but most assuredly an animal, plentiful in Africa, recounted in stories told among the slaves. Sethe's remembering the

animal, therefore, exemplifies her ties to her cultural heritage, and this heritage is the tool she must use to counter the alienating influence of the white-dominated society--the society practicing enslavement--in which she lives.

Just as Sethe depends on her cultural heritage to counter the effects of her maddening present, Morrison looks back to that same heritage. Sethe found within her the memory of a language and images of animals that have no representative in America. Going deeper within herself to grasp her culture--while Denver goes outside 124 to enlist the help of the African-American community--Sethe's home is exorcised of its anger and guilt. In this same way Morrison goes deep within herself and reaches out to the African-American community. In Claudia Tate's collection of interviews with African-American female writers, Morrison claims that "Writing is discovery; it's talking deep within myself, 'deep talking' as you say" (Tate 130). This "deep talking," Morrison goes on to say, helps her to grapple with seemingly unresolvable things, one of which might be an African-American cultural identity which includes enslavement by a white-dominated society. The Publisher's Weekly quotation by Morrison in this paper's introduction comes to mind once again. To reiterate, Morrison says, "I didn't want my head and my life to be enslaved by slavery" (PW 51). She must come to terms with this aspect of her past in order to move beyond it, further back as it were.

One can see how in creating the world of *Sweet Home* and 124, Morrison is rediscovering her own past. Morrison herself implies such a significance in the act of writing when she says in her interview with Claudia Tate that those periods of time between novels make her feel that she has "lost touch, though momentarily, with some collective memory" (Tate 131). Only through writing, then, does Toni Morrison feel in tune with the "collective memory" of her African-American heritage, and only then can she assert her will in countering the isolating, alienating effect of white, bourgeois society on African-American individuals.

Toni Morrison's effort to find her cultural heritage and to maintain her "collective memory" is her attempt at sharing grief with her African-American brothers and sisters who have in common a history of enslavement by the white-dominated society. The African-American community in Morrison's novel Beloved comes to help Sethe at the end; they are sharing her suffering and buttressing her in her attack on those forces (anger and guilt) which threaten to obliterate her, to obsess her life. Life for Toni Morrison in the 1980s must surely have been threatening, threatening because of its inverted value system. To counter the growing sense of alienation that Morrison felt in the Reagan era, she forced portions of the past into the present. Parallel to Morrison's looking back in order to find stability for the present is Sethe's catching the elusive past in order to lay it all down and go on with

her life.

In Beloved Morrison is dealing with the problematic nature of African-Americans who grasp their past: a history of enslavement. Grappling with the negative emotions associated with this history is, to Morrison, a necessity for a sane, stable life. Refusing to look back, moreover, is unacceptable, because in Morrison's line of thinking, reconnection with the past is the only way of preparing oneself to deal with a troublesome present, an existence in the postmodern world. If one does indeed look back, further than the atrocities of slavery as described in Beloved, one finds a priceless heritage as depicted in Song of Solomon. Furthermore, Tar Baby and the role of Pilate in Song of Solomon emphasize that the only way to capture the past is through the help of the family and community. These themes are sound didacticism for any of Morrison's African-American readers, but they are also lessons for the artist herself. Just as Morrison wrote her novels Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, and Beloved to encourage and illustrate the process of grabbing the past to confront the present for her readers, the creation of that art was simultaneously equipping the artist to live in the white, bourgeois society in which she found herself.

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