

BA-DEN-YA AND FA-DEN-YA IN TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON: TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF THE BLACK MALE HERO¹

MARÍA JESÚS MARTÍNEZ
Universidad de Zaragoza

While *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) examine, from different perspectives, the experience of black women in their peculiar oppression, Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), focuses on a young black man in search of his identity. This change, which may cause some feminist readers to express disappointment with Morrison for making the novel's main character male rather than female, does at least invite reflection: why is it that Morrison chose a male protagonist?, does the hero's gender diminish the relevance of the role played by the female characters in the novel?, in what terms does Morrison revise the portrait of the black male hero?

The reconceptualization of myth in *Song of Solomon* explores, as *Sula* had done before, the complex dialectics between the contradictory impulses towards the assertion of individual identity in defiance of social rules of order, on the one hand, and the need to ground that identity in an integral sense of connection to and responsibility for the collective, on the other. According to

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Linda Krumholz, this opposition between individual identity and social order still shapes persisting gender mythologies to the point that it has become «an accepted tenet of American gender myths that men find their freedom and their individuality by escaping the constraints of society, which are represented by women and their ensnaring domestic demands» (Krumholz, 1993:355).

The hero's freedom is figured as flight in *Song of Solomon* and so, Milkman's success is measured by his ability to ride the air at the end of the novel. If Linda Krumholz's words relate such an enterprise to a male figure, the same kind of association is suggested, quite early, by the novel's epigraph: «The fathers may soar/ and the children may know their names» (emphasis added). Milkman's final achievement, however, is the outcome of a quest in which the change undergone by the hero and the discovery of his true identity result from a combination of both patriarchal and matriarchal sides of his heritage². This fact, in turn, questions any essentialist division between male and female values since they are presented, we could argue, as social constructs and not as inner traits belonging to one *or* the other gender. Morrison's work thus articulates a story of separations and reconnections which first posits and then provides an answer to the question of whether men can be taught into those principles traditionally defended by women and kept, in the fictional world of *Song of Solomon*, by the female members of Milkman's family.

As in many traditional male quests, Milkman seeks his origins through his paternal lineage. Milkman's father, Macon Dead, is a quintessential self-made man. Orphaned and disinherited in his adolescence, he wheeled and dealt his way into his position as the richest black man in town after he married the daughter of the only coloured doctor and «the most important Negro in the city» (p. 22). Yet Macon's financial success exacts its price from him in other ways. He loses his capacity for communication and emotion as he has come to believe that money, property, and keys are the only real thing in the world. Accordingly, he advises his son:

«Come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what's real. Let me tell you right now that one important thing you' ll ever

² This is the idea behind the two African terms in the title of the essay. Linda Krumholz (1993: 565-66) mentions them in relation to the Kambili epic, a textual analogue to *Song of Solomon* which reinforces non-Western interpretive frames for the novel and further informs reconsiderations of hero myths in relation to gender. *Ba-den-ya* translates as «mother-child-ness», and it refers to the forces of social cohesion —accommodation, conciliation, and expressions of respect— associated with village life. *Fa-den-ya*, or «father-child-ness», relates not to collective values but individual pursuits as it describes the forces oriented towards «the gaining of a name» to be sung for posterity; these forces are associated with the bush, the milieu of the hunters, and with the hero.

need to know: Own things and let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too» (p. 55)

Such a distortion in Macon's system of values also affects his relationship with those who are close to him: his own family. Thus his hatred of his wife «glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her» and the disappointment he felt in his daughters «sifted down on them like ash» (p. 10). As far as Milkman is concerned, Macon only speaks to him «if his words [hold] some command or criticism» (p. 28). And, significantly enough, even if his resentment with Pilate is apparently based on his belief that she stole the gold that the two of them should have shared, he refuses to acknowledge her as his sister because he fears that white bankers will cease to trust him if they associate him with a woman bootlegger.

Born and grown up in the bosom of such a family, Milkman appears to be doomed to a life of alienation from himself and from others, an alienation which he begins to experience as a hollow daily monotony and which would have pushed him deeper and deeper in the meaningless void of his life had it not been for the alternative offered to him by his aunt Pilate, the powerful culture mentor who awakes Milkman's desire to know his past.

In contrast with the barren life of Macon's family, Pilate's bursts with energy and sensuality. Like Pilate, Macon presides over a household which is predominantly female, but while Macon's love of property and money determines the nature of his relationships, Pilate's sheer disregard for status, wealth, hygiene and manners enables her to affirm such values as compassion, respect, loyalty and generosity. The circumstances of her birth make her a character of larger-than-life dimensions: Pilate delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society, since those who know of her condition shun her. But, above all, her physical «flaw» symbolizes her thorough independence of others: even as a fetus, she did not need to rely on another person for sustenance. Her isolation and self-sufficiency enabled her to «throw away every assumption she had learned and [begin] at zero» (p. 149). As Valerie Smith (1993:280) points out, she is self-made, like Macon, but her self creation departs from, instead of coinciding with the American myth. She is neither trapped nor destroyed by decaying values as her brother's family is, and so, she is able to decide for herself what is important to her, instead of appropriating collective assumptions. After cutting her hair,

[Pilate] tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad

and what is the difference? What do I need to stay alive? What is true in the world? (p. 149)

After going through the text, the reader should not find it difficult to answer these questions. It is important to point out that which is «real in the world» for Pilate since those same values are the ones Milkman has to assimilate (thus changing or qualifying his previous attitude to life and others) in order to find the key to his own personal liberation. In fact, the novel devotes more space to portraying the world in which the protagonist has always felt as trapped, and contrasting it to that of his aunt Pilate, than to what can be seen as Milkman's quest in the strict sense of the term. From this perspective, Linda W. Wagner (1985:200) has defined *Song of Solomon* as a «strangely disproportionate *Bildungsroman*.» In the conventional *Bildungsroman*, the young man to be educated leaves home and parents to seek learning and fortune in a city. Most of the book charts his adventures away from home. In *Song of Solomon*, however, Morrison devotes much of her attention to Milkman's home-life, to his existence before his journey to the South begins. When he travels out on his own, he acquires a knowledge that enables him to heal the rifts which have caused the degeneration of his own family. Yet the «disproportion» in the rendering of Milkman's evolution can be accounted for by the fact that Milkman's process of learning does not start after he leaves Michigan. In more than one sense, Milkman's experiences in part two open his eyes to things that he already knew by the end of part one, even if, at this stage, he is not yet prepared to assimilate them. It is later on, as a consequence of his journey first to Danville and then to Shalimar, that he succeeds in appreciating the truths he had learned earlier from his own family, chiefly from the Dead women. Morrison herself explains that she chose a man to make the journey because she thought he had more to learn than a woman would have (McKay, 1993:410). Women-teachers are only common in a traditional, patriarchal family. Yet the fact that the one to be taught should be a man, who is, in addition, the novel's main character, must be seen as the basis of Morrison's integrative project. Knowledge, as it eventually appears in *Song of Solomon*, is not a male or female prerogative but, rather, the result of a process of learning.

Milkman's quest, and much of Morrison's writing in general, constitutes a return to origins. This return, far from being rooted in a nostalgia for the past, represents a process for coming to grips with historical transition. From this perspective, Susan Willis (1984:264) argues that the problem at the centre of Morrison's work is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been weakened by distance and generations. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison decries the loss of spontaneity

and sensuality of the young black women newly arrived from deep-south cities like "Meridian, Mobile, Aiken, and Baton Rouge." Once in the North, they have learnt

how to behave. The careful development of the thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (p. 77)

This is also the kind of drastic change undergone by Macon Dead. In contrast with him, Pilate keeps all the funkiness his brother has lost, a funkiness which accounts for the few fundamental values that lead Pilate's life and, eventually, her nephew's. Risking some degree of oversimplification, these values can be said to derive from her sense of place (and love of nature), her sense of the past (and her cyclical view of time), and her respect for others and for herself, ultimately linked to the importance she confers to people's names. I will deal with these points at length in what follows.

From her first appearance, Pilate is associated with both tradition and the world of nature. When Milkman first sees her she is sitting on the front steps of her house, one foot pointing east the other west (birth-death), while she peels an orange whose bright colour contrasts with Pilate's utter blackness (of skin, hair and dress). Her voice has the sound of pebbles and she looks like «a tall black tree» (p. 39). Her house hardly has any furniture, but the sunshine fills it and gets mixed with the odour of pine and fermenting fruit. She cooks eggs for Milkman and Guitar on their first visit to her and, when Reba and Hagar arrive from collecting fruit, the three women separate the twigs from the purple berries in order to make wine out of them while they sing together in perfect harmony. Their laughs and the music, which evokes the South, replace the cold silence in Milkman's home, a home without tradition.

Pilate, Reba, and Hagar constitute a true, even if atypical, family (similar to that of Eva Peace in *Sula*), a family in which each member has her own distinct personality. Pilate's daughter, Reba, loves men but does not keep any of them for a long time. She is marked by her luck, to the point that she wins every contest she happens to enter. Hagar, in her turn, is the spoiled child of her mother and grandmother, who spend their money to satisfy all her whims.

By contrast, the members of Milkman's family are unable to define their own selves. Thus, Milkman himself declares that he has never managed to distinguish between his two sisters, Lena and First Corinthians, and even between them (or their roles) and his mother ('s) (p. 68). More significantly, this lack of identity in the members of the main character's family leads to

the distortion of the bonds of affection between them, a feature which Roberta Rubenstein (1993:144) regards as a vehicle for the representation of emotional injury as well as violation of the boundaries of selfhood. In Morrison's novels, Rubenstein adds, that perversion of the affections is dramatized through the family crime of incest. In *The Bluest Eye*, we have Cholly Breedlove's unpremeditated rape of his daughter, Pecola. In *Sula* Eva kills his son, Plum, because of his desire to get back to her womb and, above all, because of her fear that one night she would have let him do so. In *Tar Baby*, the incest wish is implied in the relationship between Margaret Stree and her son, and in *Song of Solomon*, the same theme is expressed through the lonely Ruth Dead, whose attachments to both her father and her son reflect an exaggerated intensity. According to Macon Dead, Ruth lay naked next to her father's body when he had already expired. Even after her father's death, she expresses feelings towards him more characteristic of a lover than a daughter and she herself acknowledges to worship at his tomb several times a year, furtively and at night. As far as her son is concerned, she breastfed him until he was unusually old and, as the narrator explains, Milkman «had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion» (p. 131).

As a consequence, all the members of Milkman's family limp through life, each in some crucial way incomplete (or «dead», as their surname hints). Milkman himself has an actual limp caused by a slightly shorter leg, even if, according to the narrator, «the deformity was mostly in his mind» (p. 62).

The Macon Deads' inability to perceive the others as distinct selves, as well as their own inner boundary confusions and their feeling of psychological, and sometimes physical, enclosure, is related to their geographical location as described by the narrator in chapter 7. Milkman's family shares the experience of people living in the Great Lakes region, who are «confused by their place on the country's edge—an edge that is border but not coast» (p. 162).

Only Pilate Dead seems to have a strong sense of her self in relation to place. She has traveled a lot and is deeply interested in geography, so much so that when she decides to settle down her main belongings are a fourth-grade geography book, which she keeps on reading now and then, and a collection of rocks, since, as she says, «Everyplace I went I got me a rock» (p. 142). This orientation to the earth and its geography constitutes an important stimulus for Milkman's quest for a place in the world and for a true identity, an identity which he finds out as a result of the journey that ultimately leads him back to the South—the land from which Pilate's rocks originate and where he learns his true name.

That names are important is something which Milkman also becomes aware of on meeting Pilate. As far the reader is concerned, the fact is apparent

from the very first pages of the novel. Names, in this sense, can be said to be relevant not only as comments on the characters who bear them, but as emblems of the black community's resistance to the white culture's negation of its world. Locations like Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital (where, until Ruth Dead's son was born, black people were denied admittance) are forms of counternegation of the white world that delimits the black one (Rubenstein, 1993:150). Also significant is the way in which the name of Milkman's father, and his own name, is nothing but the result of an error in filling in a form. The incident begins in 1869, with the registering of negroes with Freedmen's Bureaus—an established historical event:

«He [the Yankee soldier at the desk] asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, 'He's dead'. Asked him who owned him, Papa said, 'I'm free'. Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces.... In the space for his name, the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon'». (p. 53)

As genealogy, the story does not reach back very far, nor does it lead to an authentication of origins, yet it represents in concentrated form an act of effacement, a dehistoricizing of a people which became part of their own history. In the same way, the fact that Milkman's illiterate grandfather chose names for his children by blindly pointing to a passage in the Bible (like his son does afterwards with Lena [Magdalene] and First Corinthians, or Pilate, with Reba [Rebekkah] and Hagar [the Egyptian slave, Abraham's lover and mother of Ishmael]) also encapsulates a complex collective experience: the felt but officially unrecorded replacement of a lost American heritage with Bible Christianity.

However, while Milkman's father regards his name as a joke, a disguise, a name «scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee» and which his own parents, «in some mood of perverseness or resignation» had agreed to pass on to all their issue (p. 18), Pilate wears the scrap of paper where her father painstakingly managed to copy the name he had chosen for her in a small box hanging from her ear. Shining there, it becomes a mark of pride and difference, as well as a way of «carrying» the past with her (like the rocks and the sack of bones), the past, and all that Milkman gets anxious to know.

As defined by Kimberly W. Benston (1984:152), naming is the means by which the self is distinguished from everything else and represented in crystallized isolation from all conditions of externality. For the Afro-American, then, self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are interwoven in such a way that naming becomes one with genealogical revisionism.

It is through the women of his family that the protagonist receives a revisionist version of family history, one that reveals the importance of female creativity to his own life. Thus Milkman learns that it was Ruth the one who wanted to have another child and the one who saved his life when her husband, who desired no more children, tried to make her lose the baby. On top of that, it was Pilate who helped Ruth to appear desirable to Macon again (he had not had sexual intercourse with his wife for a long time until the day in which Macon was conceived). Later on, when Macon insisted that she aborted the child (and put «the means» for it), Pilate helped her to defeat his attempts. Thus, Milkman owes his existence to the life-affirming efforts of the two women.

Though different in almost every other respect, both Ruth and Pilate maintain a special relationship with the past, while Macon seems to have barred it from his life altogether. It is mainly through these characters that Morrison explores the consequences of alternative attitudes to the past and, on the whole, alternative conceptions of time. Thus the distinction established by Mircea Eliade (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1951) between the two basic human interpretations of life, the historical and the mythic, is represented in the novel's diegesis by Macon and Pilate, respectively. Ruth's view is only a distorted version of the latter's since, for her, the presence of the past is not liberating (as for Pilate) but, rather, suffocating, a kind of nightmare from which she is trying to awake.

According to this scheme, then, Macon can be said to predicate his behaviour on a linear conception of time. He encourages Milkman and Guitar to steal what he thinks is Pilate's gold, but he denies the importance of his relationship with his sister and, consequently, of their shared experiences and common past. As he remarks while telling Milkman about his days in Lincoln's Heaven, he "had not said any of this for years. He had not even reminisced much about it recently.... For years he hadn't had that kind of time, or interest." (p. 51-52).

In contrast to Macon's, and Ruth's, Pilate's view of time—indeed of the world—is cyclical and expansive. While Macon represses it and Ruth remains drastically anchored to it, Pilate thinks of the past as something out of which she can grow and develop. In fact, she has always carried it with her in the form of her songs, her stories and her bag of bones, as she believes that one's sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present.

Before Milkman leaves Michigan, he perceives the world in much the same way as his father does. He is only interested in his own profit and, avoiding any kind of commitment (personal, political or whatever), he «uses» people but cannot establish any fulfilling relationship with those around him. His

attitude to Hagar, for instance, reveals his inability to understand her feelings (he does not even try to) in spite of their years of intimacy. On the contrary, he can only write little more than a letter in a business-like manner, suggesting that he leaves her for her own good. Things are not different in as far as the women of his family are concerned. As Lena tells him, and she actually says very few things throughout the novel, he has «urinated» on both his sisters and his mother: they have practically devoted their lives to him and he has never asked them how they felt, not even once in all this time. Like Macon, Milkman has only contributed to making their lives all the more miserable.

Milkman's search for gold further indicates the similarity between his father's view of the world and his own. At this stage, he is like the peacock which he and Guitar see one afternoon. Relating it to Milkman and to the central metaphor of the novel, Guitar explains to the protagonist that, for all its beauty, the peacock cannot fly because it has too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down, like vanity (p. 179). Unable to understand the implications of his friend's words, he keeps on thinking of the gold and believing that when he manages to leave his hometown, his past and his responsibilities, both money and distance will provide him with a sense of his own identity.

Song of Solomon constitutes a re-enactment of the hero's quest as described by Joseph Campbell in his 1948 work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Like the mythical hero's, Milkman's adventure follows a threefold pattern: the first section of the book shows the main character still in his homeland, Michigan; the second section includes the protagonist's passing from the world of common day into Shalimar, «a region of supernatural wonder» (Campbell, 1973:30), and, eventually, the hero's journey back home after his crucial experience in the South. According to Campbell, the mythical quest involves both the hero's acquisition of riches and his moral and psychological maturation. In this sense, Morrison's can be said to be a parodic version of Campbell's scheme, since Milkman does not find the knowledge he seeks *and* the gold. The protagonist's progressive reconstruction of his familial past replaces the original search for gold in such a way that the absence of the initially desired object becomes a prerequisite for the hero's success. This success, then, is to be measured only in moral and psychological terms, as it is precisely by forgetting about the gold that Milkman proves his integrity.

Even though he is wrong about the thing that will free him, Milkman's belief that the key to his personal liberation may be found in Danville and Shalimar is correct: as has been pointed out, his journey there brings with it an unpremeditated change of goals which takes place gradually, as Milkman begins to re-engage and put together all the principles he had learnt from Pilate («what is real in the world») and partially, also, from the other women in his family.

Summing up what has been said to this point, the assumption of such principles involves a special relationship with nature and place, history and the past, names and people. The distorted and incomplete view of the world which his father has passed on to him is to be mended by reconciling it with those values which Macon Dead seems to have left behind when he moved to the North, values according to which the communal and the mythical prevail over the individual and the material.

When he arrives in Danville, he is still, and so is he regarded, a city man, with his beige suit, his tie and his clean shoes. Reverend Cooper is the first to put him in touch with his familial past, which, though made up of the stories that he partially knows («caves, woods, earrings, wild turkey...», p. 231), is for the first time felt as *real* by Milkman. Even if he cannot recognize his own father in the boy Reverend Cooper and his friends talk about, he «loved the boy they described and loved that boy' s father» (p. 235), the hard-working man who had become one with his land and who was even able to listen to it when it spoke to him. Yet the gold still looms large in his mind and his desire for it takes him out of the glow he increasingly feels during his conversation with those old men, who «knew his people».

It is on the way to his grandfather' s farm that he comes across Circe, another woman-guide in his quest. If Pilate had kept the past alive for him, his visit to Circe (also a midwife) puts him directly in touch with the past. Before meeting her, Milkman has to walk through a narrow lane, a kind of tunnel that leads him to another (magical and symbolic) world and to a different temporal dimension. In an old house full of dogs (a reminder of the wolfs and lions which surrounded the Homeric Circe), and at the top of a long spiral staircase, stands the oldest woman Milkman has ever seen. Eventually, Circe tells him the names of his grandparents: Jake and Sing, as well as the name of the place they came from: Shalimar, in Virginia.

The crossing of the river, which baptizes Milkman at the beginning of what he does not yet perceive as a new life, and his going into the cave, the most suggestive of female symbols, turn the protagonist into a different man, inside and outside (he literally ruins his clothes, loses his watch and her suitcase and ends up vomiting).

After such an initiation, Milkman' s quest continues in Shalimar, a small rural village in the South where there is no place for the principles that had led his life in Michigan. The women carry nothing in their hands, «no pocketbook, no change, no purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, no handkerchief» (p. 259) and the men take offence at the fact that he «hadn ' t bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them 'them'» (p. 266). It is there, in the place he can call his home, in the forest and in the middle of a night

hunt, that Milkman's epiphanic moment occurs, thus making good Barbara E. Bowen's (1984:190-91) assertion that while the white messiah descends from heaven, the black one rises from the earth, reminding what it means to stand on the soil of one's ancestors and turning roots into blood-lines, tangible lines of sustenance and connection with the sources of regeneration and rebirth.

Feeling those roots with his own hands, «his self —the cocoon that was 'personality'— gave way» (p. 277). He realizes that the other hunters were «talking» to the earth and the trees and the dogs; he, too, gets mixed with nature, finds his own self and understands what the true dimension of his relationship with other people is:

Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others. He'd told Guitar that he didn't 'deserve' his family's dependence, hatred or whatever. That he didn't even 'deserve' Hagar's vengeance. But why shouldn't his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who?... Maybe all he was saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness. (p. 276-77)

Having re-discovered self, world, and others, Milkman is prepared to decipher history through song and genealogy. Echoing Ishmael Reed's definition of time as «a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes round comes around» (in Snead, 1984:72), Solomon's story as told in the children's song has been re-enacted once and again by his descendants, thus weaving the pattern of a coherent family history: the men (Solomon, Jake, Macon, Milkman) seek power, either magical or material; the women (Ryna, Sing, Ruth, Hagar) must suffer for this pursuit; the children are abandoned because of it, but they are saved by a surrogate mother (Heddy, Circe, Pilate) who keeps alive the (hi)story for whoever might later need it, a (hi)story that is also preserved as a functional part of the community, in children's songs (Byerman, 1993:117).

The «Song of Solomon» that Milkman reconstructs commemorates his ancestors' refusal to be owned. However, the true measure of Milkman's own liberation lies in his recognition that such passion for freedom must be tempered with concern for its effect on others. Having learnt that, the protagonist is ready to return to Michigan. Like the mythical hero, Milkman goes back home to share his «prize» and, in the same way, he proves to be worthy of it by being ready to renounce to it: he partially renounces to his freedom by recognizing the responsibility for his actions (as is the case with Hagar's death)

and, moreover, he is not even afraid of losing his own life later on³. His individualism and selfishness had led him to abuse Hagar, by throwing her away; Pilate, by robbing her of her green sack; and his own mother, who had fought so hard for his life. But now he knows that one «just can't fly on off and leave a body.»

Though in the monomyth the quest ends with the hero going back home, Campbell also mentions the possibility that, on certain occasions, the quester may be unwilling to return to the point of departure. Thus in Morrison's version, Milkman travels back to Michigan only to make a second and final journey to the South, this time accompanied by his aunt Pilate. Just as Pilate carries with her her father's bones to be buried in Shalimar, so does Milkman lead Pilate to the place where she belongs («she blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn», p. 335). It is then that Milkman achieves full maturity and brings the change he has undergone to its ultimate consequences.

Milkman's identification with Solomon, when the protagonist manages to ride the air as his ancestor did, becomes simultaneously an act of differentiation for, unlike Solomon, Milkman flies into history and responsibility rather than out of it (cf. Byerman, 1993:116-17). In this sense, Milkman's flight, which definitely marks the success of the hero in his quest, can be said to reproduce not so much Solomon's enterprise but, rather, Pilate's. At the moment of her death, Milkman acknowledges that his aunt «could fly without leaving the ground» (p. 336). Moreover, Milkman is subtly made to change places with Pilate in the novel's final scene: if Milkman's birth is connected, in the opening chapter, with both Mr. Smith's (unsuccessful) flight and Pilate's tune (Sugarman's song), at the end of the book it is Milkman that sings the song while Pilate dies. On this occasion, real birds, which take Pilate's earring with them, replace Mr. Smith's homemade wings and, following them, Milkman flies «as fleet and bright as a lodestar» (p. 337).

Bringing his personal odyssey to an end, Milkman gives Jake his name and home, Pilate freedom from guilt and Guitar the life he needs to take (it is a different matter whether he actually takes it or not). Thus the protagonist invests his name with a new meaning: «Milkman» does no longer refer to someone who sucks nourishment and life from others, but to someone who *delivers* milk, understood as support, energy, vital strength. Accordingly,

³ Whether Guitar actually takes the chance or not remains for the reader to decide. Morrison does not often provide clear solutions to the complex problems posited by her works. In this way, she makes the reader participate (s/he has to think what s/he wants it to be) and also connects her stories to those in the oral tradition, which do not really «end» but become an ongoing thing between teller and listener. (Wagner, 1985: 203).

those features which, as we saw at the beginning, are felt to be male-bound in African-American culture (individuality, freedom, ambition, mobility..., the *Fa-den-ya* strand of human nature) can be seen to mingle in the mature Milkman with a (female) sense of responsibility in front of others (the *Ba-den-ya* strand). We could conclude, then, that the kind of hero Morrison reconstructs in her third novel keeps the love of freedom of previous heroes but lacks the latter's self-centred conceit and callous disconnection from others, represented by Solomon leaving all his people behind. Milkman, on the contrary, learns to respect and seek relations of mutuality with those around him. Women are his teachers. This fact enhances the role played by the female characters in the novel (some have seen in Pilate the real protagonist of the story), while simultaneously attacking essentialist divisions between men and women. Contrary to what some critics (Krumholz, 1993; Rubenstein, 1993) have suggested, Milkman's evolution does not constitute a process of «feminization» on the part of the hero. This would eventually amount to seeing values as inextricably linked to gender: if a man acquires «female» values, he thereby becomes «feminized». Morrison's solution, however, aims at integration rather than division. In describing the way in which a man, Milkman, manages to make his a worldview traditionally defended by or associated with women, Morrison is proposing to replace the classical conception of values as «essential» characteristics with a view which regards them as basically social constructs, something which can be acquired or dropped throughout one's life. In line with this, a liberating though complex *both/and* comes to substitute the earlier and more rigid *either/or*, as the author boldly affirms the necessity of *both* a collective basis for a sense of one's agency *and* a rebelliousness that continually challenges the limits and status quo. By writing a novel like *Song of Solomon*, Morrison does indeed show that a balance can be reached between *fa-den-ya* and *ba-den-ya*, and so that, in spite of all difficulties, it is still possible to create heroes.

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