LEITMOTIFS IN T. MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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Song of Solomon (1977) is one of the five novels written by Toni Morrison which, according to Dorothy H. Lee, form a continuum in which each is part of a whole "returning repeatedly to the theory of the Quest as a motivating device." [1] The author can be considered a sort of a catalyst who revitalizes the old myths of Africa; a person who enhances the importance of one's ancestors and the need to go back to one's roots in a search that involves the whole person, in a quest in which the main character evolves towards maturity on finding true identity while others end in death or madness.

In *Song of Solomon* this quest is perhaps most explicit. The main protagonist sets out on a journey to recover a lost treasure that belonged to his family and, failing in this, discovers who his ancestors were through a number of situations that fit together in his mind like pieces in a puzzle. This knowledge reassures him to the extent of helping him to mature and come to terms with himself, his background and his community. Hence what started as a greedy search turns out to be a quest for selfhood in a journey where death and music play an important role.

Language is also worth considering since the author pays special attention to it. According to Morrison, language reflects the way one perceives reality. When asked about this particular aspect in her novels she is very precise in her answer,

> I try to clean language up and give words back their original meaning... (their) original power. [2]

On the other hand, there is also a subversion of names conveyed by the contradiction of their meaning. Nevertheless, names are crucial, the one possession that should never be discarded, the loss of which is equated with the loss of identity, the tragedy that pervades the entire novel. Just as the language is distorted in order to convey a tragic loss, so love is distorted and exploited as such by several of the

main characters. All these leitmotifs are woven together in order to form a complex analysis of the Black experience.

The main character is called Macon Dead III or "Milkman", a nickname that his father ignores since he finds it embarrasing, a nickname given to him as a result of a situation that is clearly outlined in his memory:

> My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, to stand up, and wear knickers and somebody saw it and laughed —and that is why they call me Milkman and that is why my father never does and that is why my mother never does but everybody else does. (p. 81)

Milkman's life is in danger even before birth; he is doomed from the start; it is like a spell pervading his entire being. Death is with him from the beginning materializing in his own name: Macon Dead III.

Eventually he will embark on a journey in search of his own selfhood, his identity; something he had been deprived of even before he was born as he had been threatened by his father:

> His own father had tried (to kill him) while he was still in his mother's stomach. (p. 270)

Milkman grows up in an environment where he perceives an unusual atmosphere in which he is the subject of an odd situation that he does not understand. He feels that a sense of belonging is lacking:

> He'd always considered himself the outsider in his family... (p. 293)

Hence, he grows up suffering from a lack of identity, having even been deprived of his real name and feeling very much outcast from the world of other children:

> ...his velvet suit separated him from the other children.
> ...he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything. (p. 265)

Even as an adult Milkman remains convinced that he has missed his childhood, especially when he is confronted with children in the midst of their games:

> Again their sweet voices remind him of the gap in his own childhood. (p. 299)

Growing up in a repressive household, Milkman only glimpses authentic life when he meets his aunt Pilate, being highly impressed by her. On meeting her totally different environment, Milkman is confronted with two different worlds:

that of his father very much influenced by the capitalist society as is evident in his advice—

> 'Own things. And let things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too.' (p. 59)

—and that of Pilate's, where he feels absolutely free; a world that symbolizes all too well her personality: warm, approachable and very much alive. She owns a house that

> achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it ... But peace was there, energy, singing. (p. 301)

Immersed in these contradictory worlds, Milkman clings to people outside his family, Pilate and his friend Guitar, for survival and both awaken and stimulate his desire to learn more about himself. As is appropriate to the quest, he leaves home and meets all kinds of difficulties, going through dangerous situations, and in this process he gradually frees himself of all that which was not essential; he loses all that was hampering him and is aware of it when he says, "I'm losing everything" (p. 295). This evolution causes him to grow out of selfishness. Milkman had to experience a painful process removing from his personality all those petty attitudes that had been concealing his real self. His journey was as much outwards as inwards. This process of becoming "naked" is summarized in these lines in the book:

> When he went home that evening, he walked into his house on Not Doctor Street with almost none of the things he'd taken with him. (p. 332)

In the novel there are two female characters who are very significant and who continue to develop the leitmotif of death. Pilate is a powerful figure, "who looked as though she might move the world if she wanted to" (p. 12), and that of Circe, who is highly symbolic.

Pilate is a generous character surrounded by a mysterious halo due to the fact that she had been born with no navel, something that generates as much rejection as attraction. Having no navel might seem irrelevant, but at the same time it can be seen as a symbolic characteristic of her own condition: her lack of attachment, her freedom. Nature has denied her the only visible trace of her connection with her own mother. She had been close to death early in life as her mother had died of childbirth. While small her father, Macon Dead, had been shot dead and she fled on a journey in which she learned about life and people the hard way. She is a wanderer, "she wanted to keep moving" (p. 146). She seems to have lost connection with the past and feels isolated because of her condition. She is quite aware of how she was "cut off" from people early on.

Nevertheless, in spite of having been on her own very soon in life, she seems to have a determination that sets her in a special position. This unpredictable woman, who had been "cut off" from life, but very much alive herself, represents for Milkman the connection with his past, the guide in his search and what is even more, the one to save his life on several occasions.

She symbolizes freedom and the only thing she clings to is her name which she decided to house in a gold earring that she hung from her ear, a symbol of her only heritage, the link with her ancestors. She rejects any type of attachment, despising possessions and yet —in spite of being uprooted herself—, we, the readers, perceive her as a very solid figure, deeply rooted in the ground, like a lighthouse in a land where most people have lost a sense of direction.

Pilate embodies life, strength, music and, nevertheless, throughout her existence, she seems destined to be connected with death, to the point of being able to communicate with her dead father. But in spite of these strong contradictions Morrison manages to give life to this very improbable woman with great skill. She mixes the magical elements with a very realistic stance in life in just the right dose, resulting in a well-balanced character who is perceived as a very down-to-earth person.

The other female character closely connected with the idea of death is Circe, who somehow symbolizes life but is presented in an almost lifeless body:

> ... although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead— as a matter of fact, she had to be dead... (p. 241)

As is true for many of Morrison's characters, her name is meaningful: in Greek mythology Circe was an enchantress who transformed men into animals. She inhabited a magnificent palace and turned Ulysses' men into pigs. Circe, in the novel, had been linked to life, bringing children into the world. She, who is so proud of her performance as a midwife, who

> Birthed just about everybody in the county, (and) never lost one either. Never lost nobody but your mother (p. 244),

is now surrounded by death. She lives in what at one time was a magnificent house now abandoned to decay. She is almost a ghost of her old self in a waning body:

> She *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (p. 241)

In this passage there is certain reminiscence of the "Magic Realism" of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. We are faced with death mingled with life, dreams, unreal beings, strange features such as a twenty-year-old voice in an ageless almost dead

woman, placed in a context where time lacks chronological stability. In that deteriorated body is housed a lucid mind whose most important aim is to die. Once again the ever-omnipresence of death. Circe is the only survivor in that impressive house left alone with the dogs, and once she has been relieved of her old duties as a midwife she states with a touch of irony refering to her present situation, "Now I birth dogs" (p. 244). The big house appears as a symbol of the white decadent society while at the same time it is a symbol of death, (could it resemble a rich magnificent coffin?); it embodies and houses the killers.

As related to Circe, it is also worth pointing out that the stinking smell in the house and the "humming of the dogs" are premonitory symbols of something inevitable. It seems that the process of rotting had begun before death itself took place. And there she is, Circe, in that stuffy atmosphere, thick with heaviness, where she almost feels pleasure witnessing decay and desintegration. Against this hideous background there is still room for some sensibility, which is evident in the way Milkman proceeds; he acts as if it does not matter to him in the least when the place and the smell must in fact have been unbearable. Indeed, Milkman's feelings are well expressed when the narrator says,

> (he) wanted his gratitude to cut through the stink (p. 249)

an image that eloquently displays the strong opposition between elements —gratitude and stink, feelings and putrefaction, in other words, life and death.

These unusual features —mysterious surroundings, unpredictable voices, loneliness, deteriorated places, "humming dogs"— are the ominous elements which are very common in Morrison's novels; the dreadful situations that foreshadow tragedy. In Morrison's words,

> If I'm talking about death you should know to expect it because the omens alert you. The strange things are all omens; you don't know what's going to happen at the time the omen occurs, and you don't always recognize an omen until after the fact, but when the bad thing does happen, you somehow expected it. [3]

It is clear from the analysis of these three characters that death is probably the most important of the leitmotifs in *Song of Solomon*.

From the beginning of the novel life and death are tightly intertwined. On the very first page there is a display of death so outstanding that it is almost exhibitionist. In fact it begins with a ritualistic episode with elements that make it exciting and breathtaking; there is an expectant audience, there is this feeling of being about to witness an event beyond human control and, in this crowd, there is also a pregnant woman whose child-to-be would eventually be involved with death, i.e. Milkman. All of them watch a Mr. Smith jumping to his death from the very place where people go to seek health and life: the roof of No Mercy Hospital.

All these contradictions and this constant dichotomy run throughout the novel, like a morbid tune that remains either at the background or stands amidst the action, but in any case, pervades the plot.

Towards the end of the novel there is an episode in which the slaughter of an animal, a bobcat proverbially known for its keen sight, is almost a ritual, again, with a sort of litany inserted in the description of the process as an alternating element in the whole procedure. It seems that Morrison indulges in the neat, precise depiction of the animal's dismemberment. And one is tempted to inquire: why?, why so much eagerness about morbidity? Is the author preparing the reader for an unpleasant outcome? Is there any premonition or presage in the fact that Milkman is offered the heart of the animal, "You want the heart?" (p. 283), the organ that controls life, induces death and symbolizes love? Why did it have to be precisely a bobcat the animal they hunt? Is it an attempt to shatter his inspiration when the protagonist is about to achieve the aim that has motivated his quest?

All these questions puzzle the reader and carry him along till the end only to find a rather ambiguous outcome. The "finale" of this long piece of music, more than making anyone happy or sad, makes the reader think over the deep meaning of the message.

As has been anticipated, music plays a vital role in the plot. Any time a difficult situation arises, the characters seem to find comfort or shelter in music. Music is present from the first pages of the novel when Mr. Smith is about to jump off the roof of the No Mercy Hospital:

> ... a woman suddenly burst into song ... She sang in a powerful contralto:
> *'O Sugarman done fly away*
> *Sugarman done gone*
> *Sugarman cut across the sky*
> *Sugarman gone home...' (p. 11)*

The singing of this woman, Pilate, is like a prelude to a long intricate symphony that will develop throughout the novel.

We are all very aware of how music in Black communities has been the equivalent of life, the only source of artistic expression left free, uncontrolled, while at the same time we have witnessed through history and especially literature how music and movement, for ages past, have consoled sorrow. Hence, this need to move in search of something deeply missed and the compulsion to sing. According to Morrison,

> For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. [4]

Thus, the author gives music a thaumaturgical quality; she goes beyond comfort or consolation, she believes in the healing power of music.

It is in a children's song where the key to the whole story is found: "it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive" (p. 331). Milkman, through a decodification of the children's song finds the source of his identity. He learns in the song that Solomon escaped through flight from slavery to freedom, and knowing this "hidden" secret Milkman discovers both his ancestors and his identity.

Music is present right up to the last page of the novel, when Pilate is wounded and about to die. There, in such a critical situation, she resorts to music; when she is lying in blood she turns where she is sure to find comfort and draws courage to say,

> 'Sing', she said. 'Sing a little something for me' (p. 335),

a request that Milkman lovingly fulfils.

Undoubtedly, music is vital in Morrison's narrative. It is like the thread that, through tortuous and obscure passages, keeps weaving the story together thus leading to a coherent conclusion. Through music Milkman finds the strands of his background which he will eventually weave into his own identity. Music and death, joy and sorrow; experiences of human life that appear tightly intertwined in this novel.

As in Morrison's other novels, in *Song of Solomon* there is this repeated desire to go back to one's roots, to find where one's identity emerges from. Glimpses of this search can be anticipated early in the novel when Milkman had to go for family rides on Sunday afternoons in the beautiful Packard where he had to kneel backwards on the seat in order to see part of the landscape:

> But riding backwards made him uneasy. It was like flying blind and not knowing were he was going —just where he had been— troubled him. (p. 36)

But Milkman will eventually be committed to this quest although for the wrong reasons. He sets out in search of gold only to learn about the nonexistence of such a treasure; hence, when this proves to be a failure he focuses on something deeper, more authentic. He has been missing something all his life and he feels that there, in the South, he is more likely to find it. So, Milkman aims at a more important goal: his identity.

Although this search starts early it materializes when Milkman wonders about his ancestors verbalizing his feelings:

> Who were they, and what were they like? (p. 293)

In this quest he meets with all kind of harmful situations, to the point of being almost archetypical, in which Milkman leaves parts of himself. He progressively loses everything even his so-called "identity" which depended very much on his

physical appearance and his well-tailored look. Milkman feels alone in this process of losing all his possessions, the material things he is attached to; he also feels vulnerable.

> Under the moon, on the ground alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self —the cocoon that was 'personality'— gave way ... There was nothing here to help him —not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. (p. 277)

He even loses his watch, and here the symbolism is present; the watch tells the time, making people aware of its passing. It seems that he needs to get rid of all the things that connect him with his present reality.

Milkman feels vulnerable because he lacks his material possessions, the crutches he had walked with all his life. Actually,

> all he had started with on his journey was gone. (p. 278)

He is left with "what he was born with or had learned to use" (p. 278). In this journey, according to D.E. Lee, "he travels from innocence to awareness ... from spiritual death to rebirth" [5]. A journey that takes him back to stages of consciousness that preceded language, "before things were written down" (p. 278). He seems to recover his past time travelling back to his childhood through children's songs; a childhood he did not fully live, the one he had missed because "he was left out" by his family pretences of being close to the white society, because of the seclusion he suffered since he was a child, being even nursed far beyond the proper age.

Milkman finally arrives at the end of his quest when he meets the people who had been connected to his ancestors in the town where the children still sing old songs that apparently lack coherence, but he eventually manages to decode them only to realize that he had found the key to unlock unrevealed secrets.

Because of these findings, Milkman experiments a deep sense of happiness, something that overwhelmes him so much that he feels a strong urgency to dive into the sea.

> I need the sea! The whole goddam sea! I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea ... The sea! I have to swim in the sea. (p. 325)

He needs the sea to immerse himself into something bigger than he is, something that overpowers him. He needs the wide deep sea in which to spread his new found identity.

As it is known water is an element where man can defy certain natural laws like gravity; floating, diving, jumping, disappearing and coming back to the

surface. Does this urgency respond to the need to identify himself with his great-grandfather who could fly defying all possible laws? I think it is quite sound to admit this possibility; but most important of all was the destination of his flight: Africa, where his real roots were. Africa, which meant home. And here the children's song takes on full meaning.

> Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home! (p. 327)

Another element worth considering is the distortion of love which is seen in the character's attitude. Love is distorted between Ruth (Milkman's mother) and her father, to the point of being almost incestuous, as well as the strange attachment Ruth feels for her son, nursing him for such a long time, as if she were trying to replace her husband's lost love by keeping her son very close to her. This distortion reaches a high peak in Guitar who belongs to the Seven Days, a group committed to avenging the murders of Black people. He kills because of love and makes this clear to Milkman:

> 'No love? No love? Didn't you hear me? What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love.' (p. 161)

This conception of love sets Guitar and his lifelong friend far apart, becoming antagonists, placing Milkman in such danger as to jeopardize his life.

Another example of distorted love can be seen in Hagar —Pilate's grand-daughter. Her love for Milkman is destructive; rejected by him she feels that the only way to insure possession is by killing. She shows a total disregard for Guitar's advice when she is obsessed by this persistent idea of killing. Guitar is very sensible when he tries to persuade her to give up her purpose:

> 'You can't own a human being. You can't lose what you don't own.' (p. 307)

But she continues to be immersed in her thoughts and driven by her passion:

> Nothing could pull her mind away from the mouth Milkman was not kissing, the feet that were not running toward him, the eye that no longer beheld him, the hands that were not touching him. ... The calculated violence of a shark grew in her... (p. 129)
>
> (She) hadn't the least bit of control over the predator that lived inside her. Totally taken over by her anaconda love. (p. 138)

In Hagar's own words, "She could not get his love ... so she settles for his fear" (p. 130). So, she is possessed by these distorted feelings being driven from obsession to insanity and finally to death.

In Morrison's narrative, language is very important; this is especially evident in the choice of names which are at least improbable and very peculiar indeed.

The book starts with a rather cryptic epigraph that one tends to disregard due to lack of understanding:

The father may soar,
And the children may know their names,

and as it turns out, it is amazing to learn how in these two lines what in the first place sounded very much like a riddle contains the information that the reader will only gather after reading the whole book.

It seems that language and the naming of people and places have the capacity to recover ancestral power —in the Biblical sense. To name someone or something implies to have a certain power over it, to possess it; this even extends to the fact of giving to others your own name, which is explicit in Milkman's thoughts on arriving at a new community:

> He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names and believed himself too good to tell them his. (p. 267)

In the first chapter we can see how much attention is paid to language and the contradiction of names, which is another feature that runs through Morrison's novels. ''Not Doctor Street'' and ''No Mercy Hospital'' are two good exponents of this incoherence. No matter how much the authorities insisted on the "appropriate names'', the usage of the Black population was prevalent. They allowed themselves the privilege of naming their places regardless of what the city legislators felt. This, undoubtedly, is a way to show some sort or power in an environment where any kind of control was beyond their reach.

Most of the names have a strong symbolism: Macon Dead, the protagonist's father, whose name was chosen arbitrarily by an official as a result of a mistake, leading him to a deprivation of identity as well as losing connection with his ancestors. As Anne Warner asserts, "The misnaming reveals the perversity of a culture that would deprive a race of its identity, history and continuity." [6] This deprivation sounds almost painful as Macon observes in a regretful tone in his thoughts

> He walked there now ... thinking of names. Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestors ... 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, not a disguise nor brand name. But who this little man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from and to, could never be known. (p. 23)

Likewise, the nickname given to Macon Dead III, Milkman, the meaning of which he could not fully understand as a child, somehow sets him apart from other children. Milkman thinks that the true name ''can never be known."

If Milkman's name is a sad joke, Pilate's —his loving and extraordinary aunt— is really striking; she is the outstanding female character of the novel whose name had been picked out blindly from the Bible. As it is known, Pilate is a male character in the Bible who did not want to condemn Jesus by getting personally involved in the trial —washing his hands— while the character in the novel tries to save other lives in a very active way, being very much involved in the whole situation, to the point of being herself the victim, which is certainly a striking contradiction.

Pilate resents not only the fact of not having known her mother but moreover, as she says:

> 'I don't even know what her name was.' (p. 142)

At the core of this novel there is a quest that expands throughout it in which we are confronted with two opposite worlds: the real world and the supernatural one. Two levels that jar on our own Western way of thinking. Our way of perceiving reality hardly accepts this merging of the realistic world together with a world of magic and superstition. Nevertheless, Morrison manages to make both of them credible, achieving coherence in the interlocking of these two worlds.

In some of Morrison's interviews she has suggested that the movement of her first two novels is circular while the rhythm in *Song of Solomon* is lineal. Nevertheless I would venture to say that, on a close analysis of the novel, there are many reasons to consider the movement circular as well. It can be said that the story has a circular structure. It begins with a flight leading to death and ends with death that enlightens the protagonist's mind, leading him to discover the meaning of the flight; flight to freedom and liberty; freedom that is born of recovering his own identity.

Notes

[1] Dorothy H. Lee, "The Quest for the Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison", Arguments and Interviews by Mari Evans, ed., *Black Woman Writers*, (London & Sidney: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 346.

[2] *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate, (England, Old Castle Books, 1985), p. 126.

[3] Claudia Tate, op. cit., pp. 124-125.

[4] Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", in Evans, p. 340.

[5] Dorothy H. Lee, op. cit., p. 353.

[6] Anne B. Warner, "New Myths and Ancient Properties: The Fiction of Toni Morrison" in *The Hollins Critic*, Vol. XXV, N° 3 (1988) p. 6.