

**FROM FEET TO WINGS: THE IMPORTANCE OF  
BEING BARE-FOOTED IN TONI MORRISON'S  
SONG OF SOLOMON**  
SALLY ABED\*

**ABSTRACT**

In her novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison uses the motif of shoes repetitively. Based on this, I argue in my article entitled “From Feet to Wings: The Importance of Being Bare-Footed in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” that in her use of the shoe motif, Morrison departs from many Western folktales where more often than not shoes entail power and transformation.

Morrison’s subversion of the shoe metaphor underlines the magical and transformative power her characters become endowed with once they step out of their shoes. This becomes significant since when feet become liberated from shoes, characters like Pilate and Milkman – who I focus on – learn how to sing and learn how to redraw the physical map of their ancestors. As a result, their bare feet transform into wings and they fly.

The theoretical frameworks I draw upon in my article are Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject and Freud’s analysis of the sexual significance of shoes and flight. These theoretical frameworks combined highlight the inseparable connection between shoes, maps, and flight. Space, time, and the self converge with the result of offering a new perspective. Shoes, I maintain, represent space and largely inform gender and identity throughout the novel.

Critics writing on Morrison’s novel focus separately on the metaphors of shoes, flight, and singing. What my article offers is a comprehensive view that connects these motifs together in conjunction to maps. My paper also traces the transformation from feet to wings and examines it against the background of the western tradition. Thus, my article brings a new reading to Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* in particular and to African American literature in general that synthesizes several motifs previously considered separately, and adds a new dimension to the gendering of space.

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In *Song of Solomon* Toni Morrison uses the motif of shoes repetitively. Based on the recurrent reference to shoes, I argue that unlike many Western folktales, which stress the magical and transformative power of shoes once a person steps into them, Morrison goes against this tradition to stress the magical and transformative power a person becomes endowed with once s/he steps out of his/her shoes.<sup>†</sup> In view of this, I examine the significance of shoes in the Western tradition generally and in the African American tradition particularly. In connection to Morrison's intentional subversion of the shoe motif, I argue that the footprints marked by unshod feet are one way characters like Milkman redraw the physical map of their ancient and their new land, not to mention the psychological map as well. To travel forward one has to travel backward first with his bare foot. As a reward, bare feet bring self-knowledge and reveal the true meaning of the Song of Solomon. The Song elevates Milkman and turns his feet into wings. Questions of identity, space, race, gender, and culture are inseparable from the motif of shoes. Taken together, they ultimately point to the multi-layered complexity, which characterizes Morrison's novel as a whole.

Many critics of Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* focus on her use of Western mythology and Western motifs, mainly flying and the Oedipal myth. For instance, Eleanor Branch in her article "Through the Maze of the Oedipal: Milkman's Search of Self in *Song of Solomon*" takes note of how Morrison resorts to "an appropriation and critique of both African and Western mythologies.... Morrison's task in the novel is reparation of the old mythological aesthetic and the production of a new one."<sup>1</sup> Among the more obvious motifs is the affinity between Milkman and Sophocles' Oedipus in the way limping characterizes both characters and their search for identity, as well as the affinity between Ruth's protracted breast-feeding of Milkman and the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin.<sup>2</sup> Morrison also brings to life the Homeric witch goddess Circe and the folktale of Hansel and Gretel, which inaugurates Milkman's journey to Circe's crumbling house.

Subverting the shoe metaphor is not as explicit as the above-mentioned metaphors and folktales that Morrison mentions in the course of the novel. Critics like Tommie Lee Jackson in his book *High-topped shoes* and Cathy Covell Waegner in her article "Ruthless Epic Footsteps" examine Morrison's shoes only in connection to class distinction and the history of slavery. I depart from both sets of critics as they both examine the metaphor

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<sup>†</sup> Morrison uses the shoe motif in other novels, such as *Beloved* where the shoes that Sethe wears to protect her swollen feet indicate her status as a slave. Also, Morrison emphasizes *Beloved's* possible identity as the child that Sethe murdered by virtue of her shod soft feet.

of flight separately from the metaphor of shoes. Like them, I intend to draw upon the significance of each metaphor, but unlike them, I intend to trace the link between flight, shoes, maps and singing.

In order to analyze Morrison's metaphor of shoes and feet effectively, however, I will turn briefly to the magical or supernatural power of shoes and feet that Morrison ultimately deconstructs and subverts in Western folktale. In the famous folktale "Cinderella," Cinderella's glass slippers transform her into a beautiful princess and put her on the path of living happily ever after. Her prince leaves no stone unturned for the woman with the small feet who captivated his heart. In the tale of "Snow White," Snow White's wicked stepmother dances to death in red-hot iron slippers to atone for her attempt to kill Snow White. More horrific is the tale of "The Red Dancing Shoes," also known as "The Dancing Shoes," by Hans Christian Anderson. The story goes that a vain girl asks her adoptive mother to buy her a pair of red shoes, and wears them to church where she pays little attention to the service. When her adoptive mother falls ill, the girl prefers going to a dancing party to staying with her mother. Once she begins dancing, she cannot stop. She dances all the time with the shoes bound to her feet. Her only way out is to have an executioner chop off her feet. Thinking that she finally got rid of the curse of the dancing shoes, the girl tries to go to church. However, on her way, the chopped feet in the red shoes dance before her and bar her way.<sup>‡</sup>

It is noteworthy that in the previous folktales women transform through stepping into and out of shoes, not men. Rather, men in folktales tend to be shoemakers, such as the Leprechaun in Irish folktales, who spends his time making and mending shoes and hides the gold coins away.<sup>§</sup> In the novel, Morrison overcomes this binary of men as shoemakers and women as shoe wearers. She subverts this tradition of dividing roles through having

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<sup>‡</sup> There is also Grimm's "The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes" about the twelve princesses who trick their father every night and manage to leave the house stealthily. They danced so much all night with princes that they constantly wore out their shoes. Their shoes here offer them a moment of independence from the patriarchal society exemplified by the father.

<sup>§</sup> A leprechaun is a type of fairy in Irish folklore. It usually takes the form of an old man, dressed in a red or green coat, known for partaking in mischief. The Leprechauns spend all their time making shoes, and store away their coins in a hidden pot of gold. If captured by man, the Leprechaun has the magical power to grant three wishes in exchange for their liberty. The frequent portrayal of the leprechaun shows him with a beard and a hat working on a single shoe. "The Shoemaker and the Elves" in Grimm's fairy tales is another example of men figuring as shoemakers in folklore. The fairy tale involves a poor shoemaker and his wife who receive help from elves.

both men and women, such as Milkman and Pilate, transform through the shoe motif.

Contrary to the fairy tales, stepping out of shoes rather than into them has a magical effect on Morrison's characters and endows them with supernatural powers, and so shoes become "a key structural device in her novel."<sup>3</sup> To fully understand the link between shoes, feet, songs, maps and wings, I would like now to turn to the relation, or rather the tension, between shoes and feet. In their book *Footnotes on Shoes*, Benstock and Ferriss focus on "the tension between the foot and shoe" as the former symbolizes freedom while the latter symbolizes confinement and restraint. At the same time "the naked foot" was often linked with "bestiality and moral degeneration."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, shoes become a chronotope—a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin that literally translates to timespace—as they sum up "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships."<sup>5</sup> The temporal element, I maintain, finds extension in the history of slavery, while the spatial element finds extension in redrawing physical maps.

In the African American context, the "tension between foot and shoe" is in fact a tension over the establishment of one's identity and the assertion of a certain style of life. This tension is deeply ingrained in the discourse of slavery that I will turn to shortly. The novel opens with the implicit reference to shoes and feet and the explicit reference to flying as the crowd watches the insurance agent's suicidal jump from the roof of the Mercy hospital: "Mr. Smith smiled through it all ... managing to keep his eyes focused almost the whole time on his customers' feet."<sup>6</sup> The juxtaposition of shoes and flight at the beginning of the novel enforces the link between both and alludes to the transformation of feet into wings once a person steps out of his shoes. In addition to this, the reference to the "customers' feet" is a gesture to the significance of feet in the history of slavery since almost all of Mr. Smith's customers are descendants of African slaves.

Morrison skillfully manages to encode the entire transatlantic slave trade through the recurrent reference to shoes. More often than not, the white masters deprived slaves of wearing shoes. Morrison alludes to this historical detail in her novel *A Mercy*, where Sorrow is given no shoes by the white family for whom she works. In *Song of Solomon*, it is ex-slaves, such as Jake, and their free children like Pilate, who intentionally deprive themselves of shoes. In the history of slavery, slaves were either deprived of wearing shoes altogether or they had to wear the "cheap, rough, unlined boots that suggested poverty and barbarism" known as brogans.<sup>7</sup> The origin of the word brogan signifies the nexus between shoes and speech. In Irish and

Gaelic, the words “brogan” and “brog” mean shoes, the latter being the diminutive form. At the same time, *The Oxford English Dictionary* “speculates that the term ‘brogue,’ which is still used to identify the speech of the Irish [as second class, is] actually derived from the word “brog” rather than vice versa.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the shoe here comes to signify “the spoken word,” or rather, the master’s language. \*\* The African Americans who gained citizenship with the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment rejected the long-standing metaphor of servitude.<sup>9</sup> Well aware of the significance of shoes in the African American history, Morrison portrays both Jake and his daughter Pilate as shoeless. They both take off their shoes consciously and willingly as a statement against slavery and against confinement. In this way, they become more connected to nature and to their African ancestry.

At the beginning of the novel when Jake used to visit Pilate in her dreams, he wore “the heavy shoes he was shot in.”<sup>10</sup> Later, he appears to her wearing “no shoes.” Instead, “they were tied together and slung over his shoulder, probably because his feet hurt...”<sup>11</sup> Following her father’s example, Pilate rejects wearing shoes and insists on keeping her feet unshod. After their father’s murder, the old maid Circe hides Pilate and her brother Macon. Unaccustomed to confinement, they decide to escape from Circe’s care, and the first thing Pilate and Macon do to celebrate their freedom is to take off their shoes “and let the dewy grass sun-warmed dirt soothe their feet.”<sup>12</sup> When both siblings separate due to their fight over the gold that belonged to the white man Macon kills in the cave, Pilate faces the choice of either getting to Virginia or settling in a town “where she would probably have to wear shoes.”<sup>13</sup> Pilate did both or rather, “the latter to make the former possible.”<sup>14</sup> Years later, when Milkman goes back to Virginia the old men remember Pilate as “a pretty woods-wild girl ‘that couldn’t nobody put shoes on.’”<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, when Milkman “first sees [Pilate she is] posed like some ancient mother goddess, one foot pointing east and one west,<sup>16</sup> suggesting in the directions [of her feet] her connection to both life and death.”<sup>17</sup> Pilate’s unshod feet and geography book mark her as a travelling figure. In her childhood days, her one book had been on geography. “It was as if her geography book had marked her to roam the country, planting her feet on each pink, yellow, blue, or green state.”<sup>18</sup> Her wandering life makes

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\*\* The Irish and the African Americans share a common history of slavery. The British often depicted the Irish in caricature as Africans and as apes. For more on this issue see Lewis Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels; the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971).

her aptly called pilot, as well and paves the way for Milkman's future journey to the South.

Apart from Jake and Pilate, the other characters are slaves—in varying degrees—to their modern shoes. In other words, modern shoes become fetters. They are the modern equivalent to brogans. As a social marker, shoes denote tension among social classes and confine the poor to their unprivileged status. This is not a recent phenomenon as “Shoes have, historically, delineated clear class distinctions.” Moreover, “heels have, from the time they first appeared in Italy, signaled that the wearer ... belongs to the leisure class.”<sup>19</sup> In *Song of Solomon* as elsewhere, Morrison aims her criticism at African Americans, who Hovet and Lounsberry suggest “adapt themselves to middle-class standards of behavior, rather than to venture out on their own wings.”<sup>20</sup> This category includes the bourgeois property holders like Macon Dead, his wife Ruth and her father Dr. Foster as well as their two daughters. Morrison uses shoes to counterbalance the excessive glorification of the African Americans who managed to become rich and to secure material gains like Dr. Foster and Macon Dead. Macon's daughter First Corinthians recalls how her father used to parade his wealth by driving his expensive car around the city where poor African Americans and their “barefoot, naked” children would be playing. Standing near their car, the children amusingly stared at Dead's “white stockings, ribbons, and gloves.”<sup>21</sup> First Corinthians is reborn only when she rejects her father's value system, steps out of her high-heeled shoes and starts working as a house cleaner in secret for Miss Graham. Every morning First Corinthians abandons her expensive clothes and shoes and puts on “her uniform” and “a pair of loafers before she [drops] to her knees with the pail of soapy water.”<sup>22</sup> At this point, her passive character acquires an added dimension when she starts to make decisions for herself. Later on, when she begins a relationship with Porter, Morrison tells us, “In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new.”<sup>23</sup> First Corinthians' derives her sense of selfhood now from her ability to act and react rather than from her expensive clothes and her elegant shoes. It is a sense of selfhood that comes from within rather than from without.

Another character who steps into an(other)'s shoes and performs a role different from the one she ought to have performed is Pilate's granddaughter Hagar. Hagar is not a typical African American young woman. Her difference is especially accentuated through the way Morrison contrasts her with Pilate and Reba who enjoy deeper communion with nature, and are not weighed down by the materiality of life. Unlike these two, Hagar is spoiled and enjoys rolling in the lap of luxury. Instead of bringing her down to earth, both grandmother and mother spoil her more by buying her fancy

things. The desire to possess objects gradually shifts to the desire to possess Milkman. This possessiveness weighs Hagar down and ultimately leads to her downfall. Her wings are as false and artificial as Robert Smith's wings at the beginning of the novel. Instead of flying, she "[spins] into a bright blue place where the air [is] thin."<sup>24</sup> Her attempts at flight are witchlike for she flies "like every witch that ever rode a broom straight through the night to ceremonial infanticide as thrilled by the black wind as by the rod between her legs" in search of Milkman to kill him.<sup>25</sup> Hagar's lack of selfhood coupled with her attachment to material objects like clothes and shoes lead to her death. Significantly, after her death, as a punishment, Pilate gives Milkman Hagar's hair in "a green-and-white shoe box."<sup>26</sup> The shoebox here acts a reminder of Hagar's entrapment in her shoes and acts as a reminder to Milkman of the necessity of giving up material objects that might lead to his downfall.

The partial transformation of First Corinthians becomes a total one in Milkman's case. The importance of feet and their connection to identity becomes unraveled with the subsequent reference to his feet and his limp. The Oedipal-like Milkman notices at the age of fourteen that one of his legs is "shorter than the other."<sup>27</sup> Throughout the first half of the novel Milkman's limp draws attention to "his halting progress in that direction. One leg is shorter than the other is. It is as if he were trying to take flight, half-hovering, unable either to walk or to fly."<sup>28</sup> His limp reveals his unstable identity and his position as an abject, half-in half out, or an in-between as Julia Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*.<sup>††</sup> Milkman's composite nature and lack of coherence are further accentuated after he defends his mother from his father. On looking at his image in the mirror, he becomes cognizant that his face lacks "coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back."<sup>29</sup> This reveals his divided self and speaks to his position as an abject.

Milkman's limp marks his journey to selfhood that he becomes aware of during his argument with his childhood friend Guitar over the latter's involvement in the group known as "The Seven Days," whose mission is to

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<sup>††</sup> In Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), Julia Kristeva defines what causes abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Milkman is an abject since he occupies an "in-between" identity on his journey of self-discovery.

kill a white man for the murder of every black man. The narrator explains, “When Milkman evaluates Guitar's argument as flawed, his short leg tellingly aches. He is now more thoughtful and seems to draw nearer to flight.”<sup>30</sup> He is also ready to start his journey to selfhood. In a way, Morrison traces his attempts at wholeness that start with limping and end with flight with the importance of ridding himself of shoes in the process. The interconnectedness between limping, flying, and shoes is evident in the novel if we take into consideration that Milkman suffers from a limp throughout most of the novel until he undertakes the journey to Shalimar, then soars through the air at the very end of the novel when his friend and enemy Guitar attacks him. In between, Milkman's journey to the South compels him to travel unshod for the most part. It is this shedding of his shoes that heals him from his limp and prepares him for flying, as I will explain later.

Milkman's position is complicated since, as his limp suggests, he is unstable and occupies a grey area. On a metaphorical level, shoes represent the material space sought by both father and son in the novel before being rejected by the latter. For many years Milkman remains under his father's feet, working under him and complying with his wishes, before he finally decides to step out and taste life with his bare feet rather than with his shoes. The need to rid himself of shoes—symbolic of restraints—becomes even more imperative if we take into consideration the European and Freudian view of shoes. Quoting Ashliman, Hayley Thomas maintains in her article about Grimm's “The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes” that, “the frequent use of shoe in European folk customs and literature” symbolizes “female genitalia.”<sup>31</sup> The Freudian theory complements this view as it equates the shoe with the female body.<sup>32</sup> In the context of the novel, breastfeeding represents the female genitalia/shoes. Milkman has to escape his mother's suffocating love that earned him the notorious nickname Milkman through the prolonged breastfeeding she subjected him to as a child, as well as Hagar's obsessive love that threatens his existence. The power imposed by the female body—whether that of Ruth or that of Hagar—sucks Milkman back into a state of infancy and renders him helpless. In order to actualize himself both as an individual and as a man, Milkman needs to step doubly out of his father's materialism and the female body, both of which are represented by the shoe metaphor coupled with breastfeeding.

It is clear that Milkman's search for self is a difficult one. He cannot fulfill his childhood dream of flying unless he first walks backwards through his ancestor's past in the South and frees himself from all material luxuries such as shoes. His bare feet act as a compass and retrace the forgotten map of the past in a way reminiscent of Kelly Link's short story “Travels with the



Snow Queen” where “Sometimes mirrors are maps, and sometimes maps are mirrors. ... The soles of your feet are stories – hidden in the black boots, they shine like mirrors.”<sup>33</sup> When Milkman takes off his shoes, he sees reflected in what Link calls “foot-mirrors” images of his past as well as his identity. When shoeless, Milkman succeeds in redrawing his physical and psychological map. However, in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* to revisit memory one has to humbly approach it and to be willing to learn from the old. On his journey to the South to retrieve the gold his father told him Pilate hid in the cave where they killed the white man, Milkman loses his watch, suitcase, and shoes. He is gradually divested of every material object that weighs him down and prevents him from soaring. This is unsurprising since the South Milkman journeys to resonates with “a past inseparable from violence and dispossession.”<sup>34</sup> Benstock and Ferris sum up the nexus between feet and history as follows: “Through our feet, we have come in closest contact with our history. ... Soon the body disappears as shoes take on a life of their own, apparently separate from and supplemental to the biophysical existence of man.”<sup>35</sup> The African body and Milkman’s body as an individual appear again when footprints replace shoeprints.

Before delving into both maps – the physical and the psychological – and before examining Milkman’s flight, I will turn to Milkman’s journey to the South. This is necessary to understand the symbolism of Milkman’s flight as well as its difference from the flight of other characters. Milkman’s trip to the South starts at Danville and ends at Virginia. Between these two, Milkman travels to Pennsylvania and Shalimar. Although Milkman travels by plane and car to these places, he ends up depending mostly on his feet. His feet become the only means to carry him to places otherwise unreachable. In Danville, the pastor refers him to Circe—the woman who hid Macon and Pilate as children after the murder of their father Jake—who lives in the Butler’s house located off the road among the bushes. Nephew, who gives Milkman a lift, stops his car and tells Milkman: “You got to walk...Car won’t make it.”<sup>36</sup> Milkman does not only have to walk to the house “over the stony road covered with second growth,” but he also has to “climb the stairs” in the Butler’s house as if in a dream to reach the witch-like Circe.<sup>37</sup>

Following this journey is Milkman’s more arduous one into the heart of the forest and up into the cave where he thought Pilate hid the gold. Again, Milkman has to travel on his feet, yet this time he has to do so without his shoes. He has to take his shoes and socks off to wade through the cold water.<sup>38</sup> When he puts on his shoes again, he realizes that they

render his climb more difficult.<sup>39</sup> Finally, when startled by a bat inside the cave, “the sole of his right shoe split away from the soft cordovan leather.”<sup>40</sup> As Branch suggests in her article “Through the Maze of the Oedipal,” Milkman’s walking journey marks his “first steps towards an autonomy of his own construction, by walking, however tenuously, on his own two feet.”<sup>41</sup> The first steps Milkman takes here with his bare feet along with the necessity of wading into the water recall a second rebirth. This time, Milkman gives birth to his new self in the way he seeks to construct his identity. One could therefore say that the “autonomy” he has is a self-achieved one.

In Shalimar, Milkman goes through more hardships. He is forced to step down from his elevated bourgeois pedestal and step into the cheap brogans the elderly African Americans give him. He excites their anger with his condescending behavior and his lack of feeling for their humanity. As a result, the men “[look] with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken.”<sup>42</sup> Worse still is their identification of Milkman with the white master: “They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers.”<sup>43</sup> They fight with him before they decide to embrace him into their community and give him the paternal care he never had. The cave trip together with the hunting trip they take him on mark his initiation into manhood and his rite of passage.

In “*High Topped Shoes*,” Tommie Lee Jackson quotes Trudier Harris’ argument in the latter’s book *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* about reversal, which presents Morrison’s “primary technique ... where outcomes consistently fall short of expectation.”<sup>44</sup> This is clearly evidenced by Milkman’s abandonment of his trendy shoes and the necessity to put on “borrowed brogans when he goes on a hunt with the men of Shalimar.”<sup>45</sup> Significantly, the brogans Milkman is given are “mud-caked brogans.”<sup>46</sup> The earthly quality that hangs about them stands in stark contrast with his thin-soled, fashionable shoes. Whereas the former bring him closer to earth, nature, and eventually flight, the latter had always chained him to material objects and weighed him down. Moreover, the “mud-caked brogans” reconnect Milkman to his Southern and African roots. “He is suitably reclothed and leaves his money behind to enter the “lessening light.”<sup>47</sup> Lost in the dark forest, he has to learn how to walk and see. As the men climb upward to the high ground, Milkman is unable “to keep pace-limping and hobbling as his short leg pains him.”<sup>48</sup> This is the last time in the novel when Milkman feels excruciating pain in his foot and complains of it. The pain dovetails with the hunting trip in the forest that initiates him into manhood.

Significantly, this moment of pain in the middle of an initiatory process emphasizes the pain of rebirth. It marks the death of Milkman's limping self and the birth of his flying self.

Consequently, Milkman gradually comes to the point where he considers Shalimar his "original home."<sup>49</sup> Again, the hunting journey paves the way for Milkman's sense of belonging. During the hunt he becomes able, for the first time, to commune with nature and the land of his ancestors: "Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather."<sup>50</sup> It is at this point in the novel that Milkman's "self – the cocoon that was 'personality' [gives] way" and he is fully ready to receive the magical rewards of stepping out of shoes.<sup>51</sup> Morrison's choice of the word "cocoon" coupled with the word "self" highlights Milkman's former isolation from his community, from nature, and most importantly from his "self" and lends more importance to his second rebirth.

The historical or physical map Milkman seeks to redraw is the one that traces his family genealogy and his ancestral roots. Oblivious to the genealogical map at the beginning of his journey, Milkman instead quests for gold to be financially independent of his father and to secure his future. Yet what does Milkman's journey signify and how is his flight different from other characters like Macon Dead and Mr. Smith? In his quest, Milkman seeks to escape the domineering figure of his father. At the same time, he also seeks to escape the death and blindness that have come to characterize his father and threaten to characterize him as well. His father's negative qualities are exemplified by the same material objects he prides himself on. His Packard car, nicknamed "Macon Dead's hearse" always gives Milkman the sense of "flying blind."<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, flying is also connected with Macon Dead. Yet in Macon Dead's case, he flies like a blind bat partly because he is metaphorically dead and blind to his family roots, and partly because he is a slave to material objects. Consequently, his wings are too frail to carry him anywhere beyond the material world of property.

Unlike his father's blind flight, Milkman's flight takes him beyond gold. True, he starts his journey with a material gain in mind – the gold Pilate allegedly hid in the cave – but he forsakes gold for family roots and self-actualization. His journey becomes, in fact, a search for "the 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.”<sup>53</sup> Morrison refers to the “lithe young man” only once at the beginning of the novel. The reader forgets about him completely until Milkman starts his journey. The significance of the young man then becomes apparent. He is representative of the African man before being enslaved. His “cane-stalk legs” are evidence of his rootedness as well as his connection to nature. They are a sign of his stable identity; an identity characterized by a real name, unlike the one given to Macon Dead first by a drunken officer.

In connection with flight, and how material objects or vanity could impede it, Morrison employs the image of the peacock to unify her narrative. The image characterizes Macon’s primary reaction when he sees the gold in the cave: “Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail spread of a peacock.”<sup>54</sup> The peacock emerges later on while Milkman and Guitar plot to steal the gold from Pilate’s house for they both see a white peacock flying down the roof. The sight of the peacock excites Milkman who always experiences “unrestrained joy at anything that could fly.”<sup>55</sup> As much as he admires the peacock’s strut, he also wonders why the latter cannot fly better than a chicken. Guitar’s significant answer emphasizes how material objects coupled with vanity could be a hindrance rather than a help to flying: “Too much tail ... All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.”<sup>56</sup> For this reason, the map Milkman strays from is one strewn with material objects accumulated by his father, whereas the one he attempts to redraw is strewn with traces of the past—his past as well the African American past.

At the same time, his map and his flight are different from someone like Guitar, his childhood friend as well as his enemy. As Dorothy Lee mentions in her article “*Song of Solomon: to Ride the Air:*”

Guitar is the avenging son of a mutilated father. All this reminds us of Horus, the falcon-headed Egyptian sky-god, avenger of the death of his father Osiris, associated with wings and the sun; or of Horus' Greek analogue Hermes, winged messenger of the gods, guide to the underworld, inventor of the lyre. There are even hints in this young master hunter of the archer Apollo, born on the seventh day of the month; also associated with the sun, the lyre, and birds; equally murderer and artist.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, Guitar’s wings carry him nowhere except to the world of revenge and blood. Instead of attaining any self-achievement, he sucks the life of white people in a vampiric way. Guitar’s manner of revenge does not

differ much from that of Macon Dead. The former lives off of blood and the latter lives off of property. As his name suggests, Guitar vibrates rather than flies. He oscillates between many ideas and worlds and fails to find his way.

Besides the physical map, Milkman has the ability to draw his psychological map as well. At the beginning of the novel Milkman acquires his name because his mother continues to breast-feed him until a late age. Ever since this moment, his name stigmatizes him and emphasizes his immaturity and dependence. Towards the end of the novel, Milkman's newly fashioned self and his independence from his father lend a different reading to his name. Now that he has matured and learned to care about other people Milkman's name could be indicative of nurturing. He becomes a provider as well as a recipient. This is evident through his relationship with Sweet, the woman from Shalimar. After Milkman returns from the hunting trip, the first proof of his changed character comes across in the way he deals with Sweet. Morrison tells us: "He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants."<sup>58</sup> Morrison's quick rhythmic lines delineate the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Milkman is now capable of requiting a woman's love instead of becoming engulfed by the threatening female body. His reciprocal relationship with Sweet sets the pattern for all his future relations with people in general.

Therefore, Milkman marches barefoot, but with new psychological armor, a sense of awareness that includes, but is not limited to, his color. He becomes more aware of his skin color as Susan Byrd—his mother's relative and the one who helps him reconstruct his family history—blushingly insists on the impossibility of Sing being Milkman's grandmother because of her passing as white. "[I]f she's his grandmother, she'd be too dark to ..." Susan Byrd hesitated. "Well, too dark to pass. Wouldn't she?"<sup>59</sup> At first Milkman does not pay heed to Susan's remark. He only does so after he leaves her place and he goes over her reaction to blackness. He feels "both angry and amused."<sup>60</sup> He interprets her embarrassment as though she had discovered "something shameful about him."<sup>61</sup> Susan's reaction affords Milkman the opportunity to reflect on his identity as a dark-skinned young man who cannot pass no matter how much wealth his father amasses.

Yet the real reward Milkman obtains is the metaphorical transformation of his feet into wings and the ability to fly like his great grandfather Solomon, and his ability to sing the Song of Solomon. Milkman resembles the travelling woman in Link's "Travels with the Snow Queen."

Like Milkman, she is surprised to find at the end of her journey that her “feet don’t hurt anymore, and although [she doesn’t] know where [she is] going, for the first time [she is] moving fast enough, she is almost flying, [her] feet are skimming over the night-black forest floor as if ... [her] feet were two white birds.”<sup>62</sup> Milkman does not limp anymore by the end of the novel. To fly properly and gain his freedom, Milkman takes off his shoes and attains self-knowledge. This self-knowledge enables him to decipher the Song of Solomon when he hears the little children singing it in Shalimar. Although Pilate sings the same song, Milkman is privileged with understanding the real meaning of the names in the Song and its connection to his family history. Thus, flying and singing are Milkman’s real rewards. They are both interdependent and inseparable in the way one leads to another.

Milkman’s flight is largely in keeping with the “Flying African” tale that tells of the ability of African slaves to fly back to Africa with the help of supernatural means. In the African American oral tradition, flight offered an escape for slaves from the shackles of slavery imposed on them by their white masters. In his article “The Possibilities of Flight,” Fred Metting quotes Caesar Grant of John Island’s saying in his collection *All God’s Children Could Fly* that “once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their transgressions, their wings were taken away.”<sup>63</sup> Milkman’s desire to fly is a childhood desire that fades away with the realization, at an early age, that “only birds and airplanes could fly.” At this moment, Milkman laments the fact that he has to “live without that single gift.”<sup>64</sup> It is his journey to the South that makes him regain his belief in flight. He dreams about flight again, “all about flying, about sailing high over the earth ... floating, cruising ...”<sup>65</sup> The verbs “flying,” “sailing,” “floating,” and “cruising” are indicative of wide space. They largely contrast with the limited space we have inside shoes. Furthermore, all these verbs, in connection to the word “earth,” point to journeys, explorations, and mapmaking. They emphasize the journeys Milkman will undertake and the maps he will redraw once he is in the South.

However, in the novel Solomon’s flight was an individual rather than a communal one. His abandonment of his wife Ryna and his many children is largely irresponsible. It was a sort of escapism rather than a mature flight. According to the story Susan Byrd tells Milkman, Solomon “just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air.”<sup>66</sup> Right after that, Susan Byrd tells Milkman about Ryna going mad and wailing all the time and Sweet emphasizes Ryna’s fate by asking Milkman who Solomon left behind.<sup>67</sup> In this way, “Morrison leaves little doubt that affirmative flight can be undertaken only by those who have a rich and compassionate sense of community.”<sup>68</sup> Conversely, Milkman’s

flight is a responsible one. As mentioned before, he does not leave behind anybody. This is clear from the shoebox that has Hagar's hair, which Milkman must keep. Milkman's ability to fly depends on his ability to assume responsibility of his actions and those of the people he associates with. Pilate carries the sack of bones, assuming it is the white man's bones because according to her belief system: "You shouldn't fly off and leave [a body]." <sup>69</sup> Similarly, Milkman has to carry Hagar's remains and assume responsibility for causing her death prior to flying. Flying entails a sense of freedom that cannot be earned at the cost of taking a human life.

Morrison's novel comes full circle at the end as Milkman's flight recalls Mr. Smith's flight at the beginning. In fact: "Milkman's birth is triggered by the excitement of the opening action, the failed attempt of Icarus-like Robert Smith to fly on artificial wings from the roof on an urban Mercy Hospital." <sup>70</sup> Robert Smith's failed attempt to soar at the beginning of the novel implies that he lacks something that Milkman achieves in the course of the novel, which ultimately facilitates his flight at the end. Unlike Milkman, Smith attempts to fly with the help of artificial blue cloth wings. The artificiality of the wings here is suggestive of Smith's disconnection from his heritage. He is removed from the secret knowledge or the magical word associated with flight: "Their flight seems always to have been accomplished by newly arrived Africans and facilitated not by artificial wings but by the knowledge of a secret, usually indicated by the enunciation of a secret word." <sup>71</sup> In Milkman's case, knowing the true meaning of the Song of Solomon is the "secret word." His full knowledge of the song and the names in the Song supersedes that of Pilate, who has been singing the Song of Solomon all her life without knowing that her mother's name is Sing. For this reason, Milkman's flight is the most successful in the novel.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Smith becomes the medium through which Milkman could ultimately fly. In Pennsylvania Milkman assumes the role of an insurance agent in a gesture that recalls the insurance agent Smith, who flies from the roof of the hospital at the beginning of the novel. To gain their confidence, Milkman approaches an old man in Pennsylvania saying: "I'm from out of town ... I have some business to take care of here, an insurance policy, and I need to check on some property out there. ... Can you help me?" <sup>72</sup> Assuming the role of Robert Smith indicates the importance of all the previous failed flights ranging from Solomon to Robert Smith. Milkman passes through all these attempts at flight to know what made them fail in

order to make his a successful one. He must avoid Solomon's individual flight as well as Smith's artificial one.

The ability to fly does not only indicate Milkman's newly fashioned self. It also points to his newly fashioned manhood. In Freudian terms, flying is symbolic of sexual excitement and erection. Proof for Milkman's flight as sexual is evidenced by Morrison's own words quoted by Eleanor Branch in her article "Through the Maze of the Oedipal: Milkman's Search for Self in *Song of Solomon*." According to her: "Finally Milkman is able to surrender to the air and ride it at the same time which to me is ... [a] sexual act" associated with "dominating [a] woman ... [but] also surrendering to her at the same time."<sup>73</sup> The simultaneous act of domination and surrender speaks to the notion of reciprocity previously mentioned in connection to Milkman's relation with Sweet. With Sweet, Milkman does both actions. He dominates her yet surrenders to her care and love. With his mother and with Hagar, he merely surrendered to their love before totally rejecting it. Milkman failed to arrive at a workable equation with these two women. It was an either-or situation. Conversely, with Hagar there is synthesis between domination and surrender that works out beautifully.

To conclude, "[Milkman] just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and was threatening to become his present as well."<sup>74</sup> Little does he know that to avoid his parents' past he has to travel backwards first and trace the same past he detests. Milkman comes full circle. He starts from a distorted past, goes through a futile present, and then comes back to the past—a meaningful past this time that allows him to embrace the best of the African tradition and the best of the Western one to beat his own path, find his new future and come to terms with himself.

Thus, Morrison's subversion of the shoe motif in Western fairy tales has its own cultural and historical significance when viewed in the context of the African-American history of slavery. She deconstructs the master's grand narrative to write her own through a gendering of space that includes men as well as women. Her recurrent use of the shoe motif is apt as the two trajectories of space/maps and time/history converge in the metaphor. The reversal of the power associated to Western shoes is a prerequisite to drawing maps, arriving at the knowledge of the song, and flying successfully. Milkman's ambiguous flight at the end of *Song of Solomon* is a flight that leaves him as well as the other characters with the choice of either flying back to Africa (total immersion in their past), or synthesizing their African past with their American present.



## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Branch, Eleanor. "Through the Maze of the Oedipal: Milkman's Search of Self in *Song of Solomon*." *Literature and Psychology* 41(1995): 52-84. 55.
- <sup>2</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Plume, 1987. 13-14.
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- <sup>4</sup> Benstock, Shari, and Suzanne Ferriss. *Footnotes: On Shoes*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2001. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, Michael. Ed. Holquist, Michael. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 84.
- <sup>6</sup> Morrison, 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 179.
- <sup>8</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 179.
- <sup>9</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 189.
- <sup>10</sup> Morrison, 150.
- <sup>11</sup> Morrison, 150.
- <sup>12</sup> Morrison, 167-8.
- <sup>13</sup> Morrison, 145.
- <sup>14</sup> Morrison, 145.
- <sup>15</sup> Morrison, 234.
- <sup>16</sup> Morrison, 36.
- <sup>17</sup> Lee, Dorothy H. "Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air." *Black American Literature Forum* 16 (1982): 64-70. 65.
- <sup>18</sup> Morrison, 184.
- <sup>19</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Hovet, Ann Grace, and Barbara Lounsberry. "Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*." *College Language Association Journal* 27 (1993): 119-140. 122.
- <sup>21</sup> Morrison, 215.
- <sup>22</sup> Morrison, 190.
- <sup>23</sup> Morrison, 201.
- <sup>24</sup> Morrison, 99.
- <sup>25</sup> Morrison, 128.
- <sup>26</sup> Morrison, 334.
- <sup>27</sup> Morrison, 63.
- <sup>28</sup> Lee, 66.
- <sup>29</sup> Morrison, 69-70.
- <sup>30</sup> Morrison, 67.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas, Hayley. "Undermining a Grim Tale: A Feminist Reading of 'The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes.'" *Marvels & Tales* 13(1999): 170-183. 176.
- <sup>32</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 11.
- <sup>33</sup> Link, Kelly. "Travels with the Snow Queen." *Stranger Things happen*. Brooklyn, NY: Small Beer Press, 2001. 119.

- <sup>34</sup> Jackson, Tommie Lee. "High-topped shoes" and Other Signifiers of Race, Class, Gender, and Ethnicity in Selected Fiction by William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2006. 17.
- <sup>35</sup> Benstock and Ferriss, 25.
- <sup>36</sup> Morrison, 237.
- <sup>37</sup> Morrison, 237-9.
- <sup>38</sup> Morrison, 249.
- <sup>39</sup> Morrison, 250.
- <sup>40</sup> Morrison, 252.
- <sup>41</sup> Branch, 79.
- <sup>42</sup> Morrison, 266.
- <sup>43</sup> Morrison, 266.
- <sup>44</sup> Jackson, 31.
- <sup>45</sup> Jackson, 31.
- <sup>46</sup> Morrison, 274.
- <sup>47</sup> Morrison, 273.
- <sup>48</sup> Lee, 69.
- <sup>49</sup> Morrison, 270.
- <sup>50</sup> Jackson, 3.
- <sup>51</sup> Morrison, 277.
- <sup>52</sup> Morrison, 32-3.
- <sup>53</sup> Morrison, 17-8.
- <sup>54</sup> Morrison, 170.
- <sup>55</sup> Morrison, 178.
- <sup>56</sup> Morrison, 179.
- <sup>57</sup> Lee, 66.
- <sup>58</sup> Morrison, 285.
- <sup>59</sup> Morrison, 290.
- <sup>60</sup> Morrison, 290.
- <sup>61</sup> Morrison, 290.
- <sup>62</sup> Link, 110.
- <sup>63</sup> Metting, Fred. "The Possibilities of Flight: The Celebration of Our Wings in in *Song of Solomon*, Praisesong for the Widow, and *Mama Day*." *Southern Folklore* 55 (1998): 145-188. 146.
- <sup>64</sup> Morrison, 9.
- <sup>65</sup> Morrison, 198.
- <sup>66</sup> Morrison, 323.
- <sup>67</sup> Morrison, 326; 328.
- <sup>68</sup> Hovet and Lounsberry, 135.
- <sup>69</sup> Morrison, 209.
- <sup>70</sup> Lees, 64.
- <sup>71</sup> Lee, 65.
- <sup>72</sup> Morrison, 227-8.
- <sup>73</sup> Branch, 52.
- <sup>74</sup> Morrison, 180.