

Toni Morrison:  
Defamiliarization and Metaphor  
in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### *Introduction*

When I started reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and began to understand the meaning of music and song in that novel, an idea gradually emerged in my mind. Eight or ten months earlier I had come across the Russian Formalist concept of *defamiliarization* developed by Viktor Shklovsky and by degrees I saw how well suited this notion was for understanding Morrison's novel. The concept represents different ways in which the real world is made strange or unfamiliar in literary fiction by the use of *metaphor* and many other devices. Toni Morrison's writing is full of metaphor and symbolism and while much criticism on Morrison focusses on issues such as blackness, race, gender, feminism, and history, I will focus on the formal literary qualities of her prose and I will use theory on defamiliarization and metaphor as my approach. I will, however, attempt to tie the formal observations to thematic concerns.

In this introduction I will explain the concept of *defamiliarization* and place it in the context of Russian Formalist thinking where it belongs. Then, in the second chapter, I will introduce a large number of thinkers and what they say about form and the use of the song in *Song of Solomon*. These writers also discuss other significant aspects of symbolism in the novel and the main character Milkman's investigation into his past. I will concentrate on what these scholars have to say about Milkman's search for his history, the roots of his family, and how this quest for self and identity shapes him. This survey of articles will be given not inconsiderable space in this thesis as I see it as valuable research in itself. These two chapters will then form the basis for chapter three where I will demonstrate the function of defamiliarization in *Song of Solomon* as I trace in detail the *song* that permeates this novel. It is one of my propositions in this thesis

that this song is Morrison's metaphor for, or rather defamiliarization of, Milkman's search for identity. I will also discuss motifs such as *naming*, the imagery of *flight*, and certain other metaphors and symbols which relate thematically to the song.

In chapter four I will briefly present general metaphor theory in order to be able to discuss in detail another metaphor from yet another novel by Morrison. One of the characters in *Beloved*, Sethe, has a scar on her back from being whipped as a slave and this cicatrice significantly takes the form of a *tree*. Combining the arguments of scholars who have discussed this specific metaphor with a theoretical explanation of the function of metaphor in literature, I hope to demonstrate that this tree-shaped scar is a *text* which is being inscribed by an external, violent, and authoritarian force, the slave master, and I will show how this text is read by people Sethe encounters. Moreover, the tree and its shades, metaphorically speaking, are part of a more complex *motif* as trees occur in other circumstances in the narrative, often as rejuvenating life-givers.

In my discussion I will rather examine the development of these two instances of figurative language than try to span the whole register of metaphors in Morrison. Such a project would become too extensive and I would rather wish that my ideas could incite an eager reader of Morrison to search for other metaphors and be inspired to study the novels more attentively and consider the significance and implications of other tropes in Morrison's prose. Besides, the two chosen metaphors command a felt presence in the respective novels; they both channel central themes and merit a thorough examination. They have also been extensively discussed by other writers, if not in the way I aim to do in this thesis.

Defamiliarization is an old concept, stemming from Russian Formalism which can be placed in the period between 1915 and 1930 approximately. The Opojaz group, "The Society for the Study of Poetic Language" (Pomorska: 13), formed in 1916 was

central and member Viktor Shklovsky will be referred to below. It is not my ambition to give an exhaustive presentation of Russian Formalism. I will merely refer to some main principles to give some substance to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization which is the aspect of Formalism to be explicated in this thesis.

There is some controversy around the translation of the term *defamiliarization*. The original Russian noun used by Shklovsky is "ostraniene" (1990: xviii) or, in another translation, "ostraneniye" (1965: 4). Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* was originally published in 1925 and in the 1990 edition translator Benjamin Sher writes in his introduction that "ostraniene" was in fact a neologism and that "[t]here is no such word in Russian dictionaries" (xviii). Shklovsky has added the *o* prefix to either the stem *stran* (strange) or to the stem *storon* (side, which has *stran* as one of its forms) or to both simultaneously. Sher says this is an example Shklovsky's "wit and punning" (xviii) and goes on to say that "[i]t is a pretty fair assumption, then, that Shklovsky speaks of *ostraniene* as a process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness' by 'removing' it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions" (xix). Sher opts for the terms to "enstrange" and "enstrangement" (xix); he discards Lemon and Reis' 1965 translation "defamiliarization" on the basis that

Shklovsky's process is in fact the reverse of that implied by this term. It is not a transition from the "familiar" to the "unknown" (implicitly). On the contrary, it proceeds from the cognitively known (the language of science), the rules and formulas that arise from a search for an economy of mental effort, to the familiarly known, that is, to real knowledge that expands and "complicates" our perceptual process in the rich use of metaphors, similes and a host of other figures of speech. "Defamiliarization" is dead wrong! (xix)

Lemon and Reis do not argue for their choice of translation for which they list the original Russian word as *ostraneniye*. They simply state that it means "making strange" (4). I will cite both translations although I find Sher's rejection of the term

“defamiliarization” unjustified. In some cases I will compare the two versions. I feel that Sher’s unwillingness to accept the term is based on an idiosyncratic reading of the adjective “familiar”. Seeing the *enstranging* of an object as making it “familiarily known” is not immediately convincing. Is the point not rather that language and words are too familiar to us (see discussion below about *habitualization* and *algebraic* method of thought) and that they have to be made strange or ‘unfamiliar’ to make the reader halt and perceive them anew? In my understanding Sher sees *defamiliarization* as wrong because he, on the contrary, sees the concept or the real world object as being made “familiarily known” and not *defamiliarized* in the process which both translations agree, however, is to complicate language and to prolong perception. What Sher does not see is that Lemon and Reis, and Shklovsky, talk about defamiliarizing *language* and *form*, too. In other words, language is made *unfamiliar* in order to make the object more *familiar* through elongating the perceptive process. However, I do not intend to imply that Sher’s translation as a whole necessarily suffers from misconceptions although he seems to put some things upside down. The meaning turns out the same in the end and the reader should keep in mind that the two translations generally express only subtle shades of difference in their interpretations of Shklovsky. In this thesis I will use the terms “defamiliarization”, “enstrangement”, to “enstrate” and to “make strange” alternately for the sake of variation without thereby implying any nuances in meaning.

In “Art as Technique” Shklovsky presents the idea that “in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed” because of an “‘algebraic’ method of thought” (1965: 11). The analogy with algebra is that “[c]omplete words are not expressed in rapid speech” (11). Shklovsky claims that people in their daily use of language tend to economize words; they seek “the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (12) and fail to pronounce a word in its entirety. He quotes Herbert Spencer who

said that “[t]o so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort, is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point” (9). Spencer used the metaphor “vehicle of thought” for language and stated that “the friction and inertia of the vehicle deduct from its efficiency” and that it was necessary “to reduce this friction and inertia to the smallest possible amount” (9). Shklovsky’s desideratum in the composition of literature is, obviously, the opposite of Spencer’s. Ejxenbaum says: “Concomitantly, the principle of artistic economy, a principle deeply embedded in the theory of art, had been refuted” (13). Shklovsky also cites Pogodin’s example of a boy who uses the mnemonic device of retaining the initial letter of each word in order to remember the phrase “Les montagnes de la Suisse sont belles”: “L, m, d, l, S, s, b” (1990: 5), hence algebra. Shklovsky says:

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. . . . [W]e apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. (1965: 11)

The important thing to observe here is, and I will return to this below, that Shklovsky draws a parallel between how we perceive objects in the world and how we use language. He says that “[t]he object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades” and that “[s]uch perception explains why we fail to hear the prose word in its entirety” (11-12). In Sher’s translation it runs as follows: “This is as true of our perception of the object in action as of mere perception itself. It is precisely this perceptual character of the prose word that explains why it often reaches our ears in fragmentary form” (5).

It is to haul language out of this sphere of somnambulant construction of meaning that Shklovsky proposes “defamiliarization” as a means to restore our

perception of the objects as depicted in prose and reinstate a forfeited perspective on life. “Habitualization devours works [Sher: “Automatization eats away at things” (1990: 5)] . . . [a]nd art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (1965: 12). To avoid *habitualization* or *automatization* “[t]he technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar” [cf. discussion above], to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12). Shklovsky says, quoted in Ejxenbaum, that “[w]e do not experience the familiar, we do not see it, we recognize it. . . . [W]e cannot force ourselves to see, to read, and not just ‘recognize’, a familiar word. If it is a definition of ‘poetic’ perception or of ‘artistic’ perception in general we are after, then we must surely hit upon this definition: ‘artistic’ perception is a perception that entails awareness of form (perhaps not only form, but invariably form)” (12). Ejxenbaum discusses “the principle of the palpableness of form” (13) and says that this “palpableness of form results from special artistic devices acting on perceivers so as to force them to experience form” (13). In an interview Toni Morrison herself comes uncannily close to discussing *habitualization* and *defamiliarization*:

I try to clean the language up and give words back their original meaning, not the one that’s *sabotaged by constant use*, so that “chaste” means what it meant originally. I try to do that by constructing sentences that *throw such words into relief*, but not *strange* words, not “large” words. Most large words are imprecise. They are useful because of their imprecision. If you work every [sic] carefully, you can clean up ordinary words and repolish them, make parabolic *language seem alive again*. (Taylor-Guthrie: 165, italics added)

There are other ways in which defamiliarization can be explained, even metaphorically. Ann Jefferson presents Shklovsky’s beautiful illustration of defamiliarization and dancing as she says, including a brief Shklovsky quote:



Walking, for example, is an activity which as we go about in everyday life we have ceased to be aware of; but when we dance the automatically performed gestures of walking are perceived anew. “A dance is a walk which is felt,” says Shklovsky; “even more accurately, it is a walk which is constructed to be felt”. (27)

This means that if only our perception of an object or activity or our reading of text could be impeded or slowed down in some way, then our chances of reaching a deeper understanding of the world and of language and its form would increase dramatically.

Susan Willis is one of the few scholars who mentions *defamiliarization* with reference to Toni Morrison and she quotes a perfect example in some lines from *The Bluest Eye* where “Morrison *defamiliarizes* the portrayal of sensual experience [the female orgasm]. Adjectives become substantives, giving taste to color and making it possible for colors to trickle and flow and, finally, be internalized like the semen of an orgasmic epiphany” (263, italics added):

My legs drop back onto the bed. I don't make no noise, because the chil'ren might hear. I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me – deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come, and afraid I won't. But I know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside. (131)

Shklovsky takes his example of defamiliarization from Tolstoy's “Kholstomer” where the narrator is a horse. This device “makes the content of the story seem *unfamiliar*” (14, my italics). The horse is baffled at “the institution of private property” (14):

I understood well what they said about whipping and Christianity. But then I was absolutely in the dark. What's the meaning of “his own”, “his colt”? From these phrases I saw that people thought there was some sort of connection between me and the stable. At the time I simply could not understand the connection. Only much later, when they separated me from the other horses, did I begin to understand. But even then I simply could not see what it meant when they called me “man's property”. The words “my horse” referred to me, a living horse, and seemed as strange to me as the words “my land”, “my air”, “my water”.

But the words made a strong impression on me. I thought about them constantly, and only after the most diverse experiences with people did I understand, finally, what they meant. They meant this: In life people are guided by words, not by deeds. It's not so much that they love the possibility of doing or not doing something as it is the possibility of speaking with words, agreed on among themselves, about various topics. Such are the words "my" and "mine", which they apply to different things, creatures, objects, and even to land, people, and horses. They agree that only one may say "mine" about this, that, or the other thing. And the one who says "mine" about the greatest number of things is, according to the game which they've agreed to among themselves, the one they consider the most happy. I don't know the point of all this, but it's true. For a long time I tried to explain it to myself in terms of some kind of real gain, but I had to reject that explanation because it was wrong. (1965: 14)

Thus Shklovsky illustrates how a defamiliarizing device such as an alteration of the narrative perspective can estrange the concept of ownership. Furthermore, language itself is being defamiliarized, made difficult, through the horse's meta-discussion of possessive pronouns. In chapter three of this thesis I will show other instances of defamiliarizing meta-language in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

*Song of Solomon* also contains, as I will demonstrate, the device of an estranging riddle. Shklovsky says, very much to the point, that "enstrangement is . . . the foundation of all riddles. Every riddle either defines and illustrates its subject in words which seem inappropriate [Lemon and Reis: "do not seem applicable" (1965: 20)] during the telling of it . . . or else it represents a peculiar audio form of enstrangement (i.e., a kind of mimicry: "*slon da kondrik*" instead of "*zaslon i konnik*")" (1990: 11). Shklovsky also says that "[t]he riddle makes it possible for the writer to manipulate the exposition, to estrange it, to capture the reader's attention" (1990: 140). Lemon and Reis say in a note that "Shklovsky is saying that we create words with no referents or with ambiguous referents in order to force attention to the objects represented by the similar-sounding words. By making the reader go through the extra step of interpreting the nonsense word, the writer prevents an automatic response" (20). The relevance of these quotes will be proven in chapter three where I will show how

Morrison in *Song of Solomon* uses this very device, a riddle which twists words in a most peculiar audio form indeed, to create a defamiliarizing effect.

After having illustrated the applicability of his theory in relation to different extracts from literature, Shklovsky concludes: “I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found” (18). Jefferson is critical of Shklovsky’s intention: “Shklovsky makes it clear that in the end the object itself is not important, but merely a pretext for art. It is literariness and not mimesis which interests the Formalists. Ultimately defamiliarization is a question of form and only of form” (34). My answer is that just as different narrative techniques may influence characterization, point of view and content, like in the extract from Tolstoy, so defamiliarization as another type of formal device, or, rather, it is a collective term for a set of devices, may further the reader’s perception of form but also of content and, thus, it is fundamental in literary fiction. Fundamental because nobody would deny the importance of, for example, metaphor in literary language and it is one of my propositions in this thesis that one of the main purposes of metaphor is exactly that, to defamiliarize. Metaphor and estrangement are by no means the same; metaphor is just one of the many ways of estrangement. I believe defamiliarization is fundamental because reading itself is a defamiliarizing activity. Perceiving events that take place, or might do so, in the real world via the printed word which exists in an abstract and artificial world requires a process of mental translation on the part of the reader and I believe this process is ineluctably estranging. Reading is concrete, we *see* or *hear* the text, but, more than that, it is abstract in that events and objects are imagined in the reader’s mind. I will not take this discussion further, as there is no space for such a philosophical debate in this thesis, but I would like to suggest that language perception is inherently a process of *defamiliarization*.

Ladislav Matejka discusses “the correlation of sound and meaning” (281) and goes back to Russian scholars who in the 1870’s “had already begun their search for the minimal significative components of utterance” (281). The idea is that at one point one cannot further subdivide language units and change the meaning. This proves that Russian scholarship took an early interest in the relationship between language sounds and their referential properties. The term “*phoneme*” (281) was already being used. This relationship could be suppressed in “[t]he futurists’s poetic games” which were “capable of releasing the formal means of utterance from subordination to the semantic load” (281). Gerald L. Bruns in his introduction to *Theory of Prose* refers to Shklovsky’s stone metaphor and says that

to make the stone stony is to chip away the inscription someone carved on it; it is to turn signs back into things. Formalist poetry (not to say a good deal of modern writing) does this by foregrounding the materiality of language, disrupting the signifying function in order to free words from the symbolic order that rational people say we construct from them. (*xiii*)

There may be a slight self-contradiction in Bruns’ argument if we understand by turning a sign back into a thing that the sign, which it is reasonable to regard as the word, is replaced in our perception by the actual thing, or, if one may so infer, the real world object. Then Bruns’ next phrase makes little sense speaking as it does of “the materiality of language” which may be understood as language as *pure form*. He talks about “disrupting the signifying function” and freeing “words from the symbolic order” which, arguably, is the exact opposite of seeing the *sign* as having reference, denoting a thing. If, however, turning the *sign* into a *thing* is intended to mean the objectification of the language sound, seeing it as pure form, the argument becomes more coherent. “[T]o chip away the inscription”, however, would seem to refer to the way in which enstrangement can let the reader perceive the object as it really is, unautomatized, by enabling him or her to transcend the familiarity of the word. Notwithstanding, this early

focus on sounds and signification is evidence of a Russian Formalist tradition and can be compared to the above discussion of *automatization*. Matejka says that

Baudouin de Courtenay's observation of the disregard of the nondistinctive properties of sound in casual discourse and of the supremacy of the semantic component of a verbal sign over its sound manifestation, enticed the Formalists to define the poetic usage of verbal signs conversely, as the supremacy of sound over meaning. In its early stage, the postulation of this converse role of sound and meaning in poetry prompted a series of attempts to isolate poetic language from practical language, rather than to consider their common properties and to seek the difference in distinct applications of the same inventory. (281-282)

It is clear that there were early efforts to *differentiate* between usages or levels of language and that “the nondistinctive properties of sound”, those extra qualities of which rhyme and rhythm are part, although on the surface they carry no semantic weight, were held in high regard by the Russians; in fact, they were what made poetry poetry. Matejka continues:

In Sklovskij's view, the poetic arrangement revitalizes sound by preventing its retreat into the area of unconsciousness; *by making forms unusual and difficult, art prolongs perception so that it is possible to experience artfulness*. Thus the aesthetic values of verbal art were revealed by Sklovskij as a process triggered by the manipulation of formal properties of the verbal sign: the poetic language was assumed to impose special constraints on the verbal means, in order to obstruct their causal usage and to provoke intensified participation which ultimately would give aesthetic joy as a reward for overcoming difficulties. Paraphrasing Aristotle, Sklovskij proclaimed that “poetic language must appear as strange and wonderful.”

In Sklovskij's view, however, *the defamiliarizing of the familiar and deautomatization of the automatized does not apply solely to the domain of sound*. It applies also to the lexical selection, to the distribution of words, and even to the referential aspect of the total utterance. *Accordingly, verbal art is expected to deautomatize and “make strange” not only language but also the objects referred to, the semantic buildup, the very perception of things and life*. (285, my italics)

It is this extended understanding of defamiliarization which will form the basis for chapter three of this thesis where I hope to illustrate how Morrison makes strange Milkman's quest for self through her gradual, defamiliarizing construction of the song in *Song of Solomon*. It is Matejka's opinion that “rather than to clarify the delicate

relationship between sound and meaning, Sklovskij's generalization tended to obscure it" (285), but I choose to disregard this criticism.

I will now sketch the theoretical framework within which enstrangement plays a part. Formalism was not static and where early Formalism saw practical or non-literary language as automatized form and poetic or literary language as the only scene for the superior "defamiliarization", there was a gradual shift in emphasis from a position where "formal devices were taken to be the means whereby defamiliarization was realized" (Jefferson: 29) – device was seen as "sole hero" (29), an agent which makes strange – to a more nuanced view where "[l]iterariness is a feature not just of form as *impeded speech*, but more importantly, of *impeded form*" (29). A device in this context is a comprehensive term for all the techniques an author may use; it can be metaphor, wordplay, poetic rhythm, different narrative techniques, etc. Impeded speech is practical language defamiliarized and has thereby become poetic language, it has been made strange, and while early Formalism sees device or form as something which inevitably defamiliarizes, later developments include impeded form as a feature of "the subject of literary science [which] is not literature, but literariness, i.e. that which makes a given work a literary work" (28). Establishing the notion of literariness was made possible through differentiation which opposes literary and non-literary language. The point is that as Formalism developed its proponents came to understand that the devices themselves can be automatizing factors. This means that *device* no longer necessarily equals *defamiliarizer* and thus the opposition literature/non-literature becomes less significant as all "procedures" can be observed in literary language itself.

The connection between the impeding of form and the above discussion on automatization and prolonging perception can be illustrated by Lemon and Reis's foreword to "Art as Technique" where they claim that "[t]he purpose of art, according

to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice. Since perception is usually too automatic, art develops a variety of techniques to impede perception or, at least, to call attention to themselves” (4). Furthermore, they present their understanding of how defamiliarization functions:

To the extent that a work of art can be experienced, to the extent that it is, it is like any other object. It may “mean” in the same way that any object means; it has, however, one advantage – it is designed especially for perception, for attracting and holding attention. Thus it not only bears meaning, it forces an awareness of its meaning upon the reader. . . .

According to Shklovsky, the chief technique for promoting such perception is “defamiliarization”. It is not so much a device as a result obtainable by any number of devices. A novel point of view, as Shklovsky points out, can make a reader perceive by making the familiar seem strange. Wordplay, deliberately roughened rhythm, or figures of speech can all have the same effect. No single device, then, is essential to poetry. Poetry is recognized not by the presence of a certain kind of content or of images, ambiguities, symbols, or whatever, but by its ability to make man look with an exceptionally high level of awareness. (5)

To impede form is to see even devices as automatizing factors, a departure from the earlier position where devices were seen exclusively as defamiliarizing elements. Shklovsky talks about a work being created “‘artistically’ so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. . . . The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded language” (1965: 22). Jefferson states that “[t]he literariness of poetic rhythm, for example, cannot necessarily be ascribed to mere rhythm, but will more likely derive from disruption of the rhythm.” (29-30). She quotes Shklovsky: “there is ‘order’ in art, yet not a single column of a Greek temple stands exactly in its proper order; poetic rhythm is similarly disordered rhythm” (30), or *impeded* form. Transferred to the notion of device this would mean, by analogy, that the structure of devices in a given text can be broken in that the different devices have the capacity to automatize and to defamiliarize (see quote below). Interestingly, what has happened here is a placing of “the opposition between defamiliarization and automatization within the work itself”

(30), allowing the presence of both in the same work, whereas early Formalism would have automatization being confined to non-literary text, something to be avoided in a text carrying the stamp of literariness. This is taking the notion of defamiliarization further, making it more flexible as a tool for understanding literature. Jefferson, in quoting Eichenbaum, adds that even “the disordering of rhythm [may] become a convention” (30); one might say that the unfamiliar gradually becomes familiar again since any particular use of any particular device will become automatized over time, but there is no space for extending this argument here.

Another clarifying distinction introduced by the Formalists in this discussion is that between *device* and *function*. This distinction increases the precision of Formalist theory underlining the fact that devices may lose their defamiliarizing properties. “The defamiliarizing effect of a device does not depend on its existence as a device, but on its function in the work in which it appears. The same device may be used for a variety of potential functions, just as different devices may share a single function” (30). Jefferson goes on to say that “[a] given work will include passive or automatized elements which are subservient to the defamiliarizing or ‘foregrounded’ elements” (30). A “foregrounded” element is that which is *dominant*, the defamiliarizing element, and Tynyanov says that “a work becomes literature and acquires its literary function through just this dominant” (Quoted in Jefferson: 30). Consequently, the differentiation not only exists between literary and non-literary text, but between foregrounded and subservient elements within one single text.

In Formalism there is undeniably a preoccupation with the text on the page – the subject of literary science being literariness – so to find out whether the text is placed in a vacuum it is interesting to see what the Formalists’ position is towards a possible relationship between the author and the text, and thus biographical criticism, and



towards historically, sociologically or politically oriented theories which focus on the relationship between text and reality. And, what do the Formalists say about the text having meaning and content? Much is already said about the status of the author with Jakobson's statement that literariness and not literature is the subject of literary science, or by the claim of Osip Brik, a member of the Russian Formalist group Opojazz, "that *there are no poets or literary figures, there is poetry and literature*" (31). "For the Formalists . . . literature has nothing to do with vision or authorial meaning. A given work of literature is related for them to literature in general, and not to the personality of its author" (32). Shklovsky says: "There is no point in becoming enamored of the biography of an artist. . . . And least of all should one be enamored of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis studies the psychological traumas of *one* person, while in truth, an author never writes *alone*. A school of writers writes through him. A whole age" (1990: 175-176). The author is "a craftsman", "a skilled worker who arranges, or rather, rearranges the material that he happens to find at his disposal. The author's job is to know about literature; what he might or might not know about life is irrelevant to that job" (Jefferson: 32). For the Formalists originality and changes in literature are the results of "defamiliarizing over-familiar techniques . . . or else by foregrounding a previously non-functional device" (32) and do not "depend . . . on the personal circumstances or the psychological make-up of an author" (32). In Formalist thought there is a relationship between a word and "the referent, the reality referred to", in "practical language" which does not exist "in poetic language [where] referentiality is irrelevant and the emphasis is on the means of expression itself. Because of this, a poetic utterance has no functional ties with the real context in which it is produced and cannot be assumed to refer to any aspect of its producer's existence. . . . [T]he object of literary science is an authorless literariness." (32-33). A corollary of this argument is

that biographical information about an author can have no bearing on a reader's understanding of a given text. The biography of an author must not be "mistaken for literary science" (33). This downgrading of the role of the author was seen as necessary by the Formalists and the later New Critics in order to make literary science more scientific and independent and to "save them from being merely a second-rate form of history or psychology" (15).

Reality does not fare better than the author in the hands of Formalist thinkers. As quoted above a work of literature relates to other literature only and according to Jefferson the Formalist view is that "a change in literary form is not determined by a changed reality, but by the need to refresh automatized forms of literature" (34). She states that "the criterion of *verisimilitude is irrelevant* to the Formalist project" (34, italics added) and that reality plays a "secondary and subservient" (34) role. Any reference "to some external reality . . . [is] a mere side-effect of the aesthetic function" (35).

The common distinction between form and content is normally a hierarchical one which places content first. This means that the purpose of form was to express some significant sort of message. The Formalists, not surprisingly, reversed this relationship. Form is no longer mere decoration and can in fact itself become the content "when a work is constructed in order to lay bare all its devices" (37). One way of achieving this is through the use of explicit authorial commentary on the text. Jefferson states that "[m]eaning is not an issue that arises for the Russian Formalists" (35), this because historical and biographical context may draw attention away from aesthetics and form. "[M]eaning and ideas are neither here nor there; like reality, they enter into literature as part of the available material which is then put to literary use by the functional devices of the work" (35).

Another interesting distinction the Formalists make is that between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. An awareness of the difference between poetry and prose led them to introduce these terms which are better suited for the study of prose than the differentiation between practical and poetic language which is used in the analysis of poetry. It is interesting to draw attention, if parenthetically, to the fact that it is always a matter of *differentiation* for the Formalists. They define poetic language and defamiliarization in terms of what it is not: namely, practical language and automatization, respectively. This new opposition, *fabula* being the “story” or “the chronological sequence of events, and *syuzhet* (the ‘plot’) . . . the order and manner in which they are actually presented in the narrative” (39), has similarities with the relationship between content and form and that between practical and poetic language. “The *syuzhet* creates a defamiliarizing effect on the *fabula* [like poetic language does on practical language]; the devices of the *syuzhet* are not designed as instruments for conveying the *fabula*, but are foregrounded at the expense of the *fabula*” (39).

This means that *syuzhet*, the “order and manner” or form, is what prose study should have as its prime object. As indicated a work of literature can lay bare its devices through its form and this is what *syuzhet* does when it defamiliarizes the *fabula* through devices which may be puns, verbal sound effects, “self-conscious authorial commentary”, “transposition of material”, “temporal displacements”, “secondary anecdotes” (39-40), etc. Sometimes “constructional devices are laid bare and not motivated by the events or situations in the story” (39). In a sense the *syuzhet* and the *fabula* are terms introduced to deal with the narrative aspect of novels and thus larger units of text, whereas the opposition between practical and poetic language is more useful in a sentence or paragraph level analysis of text.

Some comments are necessary on the Formalists' understanding of how literature develops over time. This will also help to clarify, but perhaps not justify, the privileged position of *syuzhet*, defamiliarization and form and the logic in Formalist thinking. To the Formalists innovations in literature arise because "the perceptibility of given literary conventions or devices tends to decrease over time" (32) and then subsequently these conventions are defamiliarized. Shklovsky contends that "a work of art is perceived against a background of and by association with other works of art. The form of a work of art is determined by its relationship with other pre-existing forms. . . . *The new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness*" (1990: 20). The logic is still based on a differentiation which distinguishes the literary, or literariness, from the non-literary and form from non-literary content or reality. In literary history the Formalists envision "a distinction between automatized and perceptible form within literature itself" (Jefferson: 40). This means that there is no causality or reciprocity between literature and the outside world, or, more precisely, such a relationship is of no interest for the Formalists. Literariness and its development through history is what concerns Formalism. This development is achieved partly by what Tynyanov calls "*colossal displacements of traditions*" (Quoted in Jefferson: 41) as automatized form is replaced by perceptible form in a "deformation of the canonized or automatized elements, in other words of precisely those factors which constitute a tradition" (41). Tradition can be displaced either by the use of parody: "[T]he dominant devices in a particular genre and/or period . . . become familiar and cease to be perceptible. . . . [A] new work will pick them up and, usually by parodic means, make them perceptible again as devices" (41), or by "the introduction of devices from marginal or popular genres into the mainline of literary development to replace outworn ones" (42). These

are the two main strategies and Jefferson claims that “[t]he principle of defamiliarization . . . undoes the idea of tradition. . . Discontinuity replaces continuity as the basis of historical progression” (41). A possible paradox lost here is the fact that an author may be regarded as particularly traditionbound in a Formalist system since he or she cannot help but consider existing form and hardly anything else and how to defamiliarize this material.

Jefferson lists Formalist shortcomings such as the failure to sufficiently theorize “[t]he non-literary elements against which the literary is differentially defined” and the absence of a “theory of culture and society” (42). Marxist theory would like to see an awareness of the social dimension and the fact “that all use of language, including a literary use, is both social and ideological” (43). The Formalists would have been able to explain how “literary history as a discontinuous series . . . relate[s] to other historical series . . . [h]ad they had a more sophisticated social and cultural theory” (43). The Anglo-American New Criticism “treated the literary text as an object essentially independent of its author and its historical context” (73) much like Formalism, but unlike Formalism it was also “empiricist and humanistic” (74) in that some of its proponents also focused on “the experience of reading” (74) and the “*emotive* function” which “evoke[s] subjective feelings” (75); it is empiricist because it opposes the idea that signifiers, or, to simplify, the written words, do not have referents, meaning that they do not refer to physical objects in the real world. In Formalist thought poetic language is non-referential.

We should not, however, rush to denounce Formalism because of its apparently formal bias. Mark Jakobson’s words: “Neither Tynyanov, nor Shklovsky, nor Mukarovsky, nor I have declared that art is a closed sphere . . . What we emphasize is not the separation of art, but the autonomy of the aesthetic function” (Quoted in

Jefferson: 31). The hallmark of any analytical thinking is the ability to examine isolated aspects of complexity and then later to relate the part to the whole. Whether the Formalists succeed in this is too complex a question to answer here. Today Formalism may seem to exclude possibly fruitful approaches to literature, but this should not detract from the concept of defamiliarization which may still be a productive term in literary analysis.

For specific analytical purposes defamiliarization is useful, notwithstanding the seeming vagueness of the term. It denotes a wide array of literary techniques, but this need not necessarily be a flaw. The advantage of this term is that it is not a mathematical instrument which serves to gauge one precisely defined narratological, semantical or syntactical value; it rather creates an important awareness of fundamental aspects of literature and other art forms. Since our object of study is the multifarious and subjective art of literature, its analysis must be just that, multifarious and subjective. Therefore, the concept of defamiliarization illustrates how and why a text can fascinate by providing new and deeper insights through its implicitly oblique depiction of human experience. However, and the following argument is one which has to be stressed, owing to its relative analytical imprecision as a collective term, defamiliarization theory should be employed in conjunction with other theoretical approaches to demonstrate how it is textually concretized, such as in this thesis where I discuss metaphor, symbolism and some aspects of language and form. My ambition is to show how primarily the song in *Song of Solomon* is constructed as a narrative tool in order to highlight obliquely and ceremoniously, hence defamiliarizingly, how significant it is for the protagonist to acknowledge his past, and to help him in doing this. The estrangement manifests itself in other forms in the novel and I will have to attend to

aspects such as the symbolism of bones and the motif of naming and also flight imagery and a few other metaphors as these are inextricably linked to the song.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### *Previous Scholarship on Song of Solomon*

*Song of Solomon* has fascinated scholars since it was first published in 1977 and many have focussed on aspects of the novel similar to those I will discuss in this thesis.

Writers are interested in the protagonist Milkman's search for identity through rejecting his father's "white", property based value system and through finding his family's roots on his journey south, a reversion of the traditionally enfranchising movement north undertaken by former slaves. Milkman's enslavement, however, is not physical or political, but spiritual and private. Writers discuss his ruthlessness towards women, but also how women, particularly his aunt Pilate, influence and guide him. Some scholars claim that Milkman is being gradually feminized as he gains awareness of and respect for his community and his family. In the final scene Milkman sings to his dying aunt, something he would never have dreamt of doing before his educational voyage south into the past, traversing the memory of his, mostly, female teachers. Singing, some scholars say, together with a focus on domesticity and one's community are inherently feminine, whereas hunting, which is represented at several stages in the novel, and the acquisition of property are masculine. If this is true, then Milkman is indeed being feminized.

Other symbols, metaphors, motifs and themes have been examined. *Naming* is a recurring topic among scholars. The idea is that because of the institution of slavery, African Americans have been particularly concerned with knowing the correct name of people, places and things since these play an important role as links to a person's history. Having had new names forced upon them by their masters, they knew the importance of a name for one's identity.



Moreover, *Song of Solomon* is aswarm with symbols of flight. Writers study the suicidal flight of Robert Smith, the mythical flight of Solomon back to Africa, the significance of airplanes, an eagle and a white peacock, and, of course, Milkman's childhood preoccupation with flying which manifests itself in the final scene. Flying is central as a metaphor for the rising above materialistic values and for the concentration on family, history and personal identity, but it can also be a negative and egotistical activity.

The symbolic value of bones as a connection to history is referred to by some scholars, if not extensively. Minakawa, however, traces the motif of *sweetness* and considers this an important antithesis to the acrid materialism of especially Milkman's father Macon who "loses his touch with sweetness and humanity" (48). Guitar, Milkman's friend and member of a violent group of avenging murderers, has hated candy all his life, whereas Pilate, Milkman's aunt and spiritual tutor, "loves natural fruit . . . [and] sings or hums of sugar man all the time" (48). On the brink of attaining a new identity Milkman has for the first time in his life a loving relationship, albeit brief, characterized by reciprocity with a woman called Sweet. Thus, sweetness equals empathy and caring for family and community; "the sweetness of the character is a measure of his or her capability for loving" (47).

Critics also mention Milkman's dream of smothering tulips – Milkman presents it to Guitar as a dream, but is convinced "that he had really seen it" (*Song of Solomon*: 104) – in which the flowers "were smothering her [Milkman's mother], taking away her breath with their soft jagged lips" (105). Milkman thinks it symbolizes his mother's excessive "seriousness" (105) ("[s]erious is just another word for miserable" [104], he says), but, as the critics point out, Guitar is correct in replying: "'Why didn't you go help her?'" (105) since what this (waking?) dream really symbolizes is Milkman's lack

of consideration, or sweetness, for other people. The confusion of whether events really happen in the novel, or if they are merely myth can be seen in Milkman's recounting of this episode where flowers grow to shoulder height before his very eyes. The presence of ghosts in *Song of Solomon* and elements of African folktale are in the same vein and will be referred to briefly in the next chapter.

The symbolical eggs represent Milkman's rebirth and flower metaphors such as the artificial velvet roses his sisters make show the atmosphere of death – their family name is "Dead" – in Milkman's home. Also of interest to scholars is the watermark left as a stain on a table; this mark is a solace and an emotional mooring for Ruth and at the same time a trace of absence representing her sexual deprivation due to her husband's suspecting she was incestuous with her own father. This and other symbols illustrate the bourgeois stasis in the Dead household.

The hunting scene where Milkman is gradually stripped of his "whiteness" and pretension is seen by some critics as a process of initiation, a rite of passage as described in anthropology. Krumholz sees the process as a "tripartite structure" (559) where Milkman's knife fight immediately upon arriving in Shalimar, the home of his ancestors, represents his "rite of separation, the rites meant to divest the initiate of status and to separate him from the usual social order" (559). "[T]he liminal phase" (559), the hunt in the night, comes second where the pledge who is to join the new order is kept isolated from his kin because he is particularly vulnerable and dangerous to be around in this threshold situation ('liminal' from Latin, *limen* = threshold). Finally there is the "rites of integration, when he moves back from the disorder of liminality to the social order, transformed both internally and in status. Symbolically, the ritual as a whole depicts a death and rebirth, and it conveys Milkman's lessons in the meaning of blackness as a form of existence and knowledge" (559). Interestingly, Krumholz

contends that the reader, too, undergoes an initiation process in being “called upon to apply her or his reading skills to interpret the signs and unriddle the mysteries. In *Song of Solomon*, the reader’s initiation process parallels Milkman’s initiation ritual, except instead of a hunt the reader’s is composed of the fictional work itself” (567). Hall says that “[t]he task of reading and understanding *Song of Solomon*, then, is directly parallel to Milkman’s struggle. We are attempting to *unravel* the meaning of the tale” (71, italics mine). The hunt will be examined in more detail and from a slightly different angle in the next chapter.

One should notice the use of the verbs to “unravel” and to “unriddle”. This leads me to the song and the manner in which it is presented in the novel as a musical *riddle* which defamiliarizes Milkman’s search for self, or rite of passage, as a means by which he is assisted in his coming of age as a man aware and empathizing. Very few of the scholars regard the song and musical metaphors as crucial in the novel. Many mention it in passing as an instance of black oral tradition or they observe that it presents Milkman’s genealogy, but they do not study the complexity or significance of music as it permeates the novel. Linden Peach, for instance, says little more about music in *Song of Solomon* than that “[t]he song proves to be a significant clue in Milkman’s identification of his forefather” (64). This observation is, of course, valid, but completely inadequate. This lax treatment by scholars is partly a disappointment, but it also leaves a field of study open to new readers.

I have so far given an introduction to the themes which engage scholars on *Song of Solomon*. I will now select a few of these and give a more detailed presentation of the ideas of some of the writers. Firstly, I would like to indicate that little conspicuous opposition crystallizes from the abundance of criticism. Writers employ various avenues of access to the same thematic truths about Morrison’s novel, and, admittedly, I will

have to adhere to many of the same established ideas. Before I turn to scholarly criticism on *naming* and *song*, two of the motifs selected, I will, however, demonstrate some critical dissension and examine some different opinions on whether Milkman actually reaches a new understanding at the end of the story. Does he grow spiritually and find a new identity? If I discuss this, it is not merely for the pleasure of presenting critical contention, but also because all other elements of the novel ultimately lead up to this question.

Gerry Brenner stands out from the rest of the scholars in that he is much more critical of Milkman's supposed attainment of a new perspective on life. He opens by stating that the song as "a riddling *nursery rhyme* that presages his [Milkman's] birth and, later chanted by children, leads him to discover his heritage" (13) (It is striking how most of the scholars who mention the song use the noun "riddle" or lexically related terms – nouns or verbs – like "puzzle", "enigma", to "unriddle", to "unravel", to "unscramble", to "decode", to "decipher", etc. It is only natural, then, to see the song as a riddling, *defamiliarizing* device). This discovery is, however, of little use to Milkman in Brenner's view. In flourishing language he describes how Morrison "skillfully mocks him and the novel's other men" (13). Danville, Pennsylvania, on the way south to the ancestral home of Shalimar is the locus for a "cloacal interlude [which] restores little dignity to Milkman" as he "gets a complete dunking" in a river and shortly after "he soils himself on the bat-shit on its [the cave's] walls and the dirt of its floor" (17). Milkman is not a brilliant decipherer of the riddle of the song and "the school-children's nursery rhyme find[s] him slow at feats of intellectual penetration" (17). "Milkman's journey and discovery of his parentage end in attempts at self-glorification" and serve merely as "an intoxicant to gratify his wish for some grandiose illusion, that in his gene pool lies the bird-like ability to soar" (17). "So when Milkman leaps at the novel's end

into Guitar's arms and certain death, his act is but one more gesture of irresponsibility" (18). Other male characters in the novel are "goal-dominated" (17) and concerned with "self-aggrandizement" (17) and Milkman's father Macon Dead is according to Brenner "Freud's classic anal-retentive personality: parsimonious, obstinate, and compulsively orderly" (16). Although Morrison writes "with rich invention" (16) and the story includes "the epiphanies and knowledge expected of such a hero – its subtext is satiric" (17).

It is not clear whether Brenner sees all the satiric elements as Morrison's deliberate choices; in a note he says that "her intention to convey her idea of Milkman's motives either failed to be achieved by her prose or came aground upon the counter-intention of her possibly unconscious hostility toward him" (24). At one point in his essay Brenner definitely suspends his intellectual perspicacity, confusing author with narrator, claiming that Milkman's sister's harangue ("Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you" [*Song*: 215], etc.) is "certainly signaling some personal anger in Morrison's own life" (19).

Such vehement criticism has not passed unopposed. In an endnote Duvall points at another obvious weakness in Brenner's essay. Learning about Hagar's death (the cousin girlfriend Milkman cruelly abandoned), Milkman asks himself: "What difference did it make? He had hurt her. . ." (*Song*: 332). To Brenner this means that "Milkman assigns himself no culpability" (18), but Duvall correctly states that "Brenner's claim . . . depends on a perversely decontextualized interpolation of the word 'it'" (115). The "it" refers to the *how* or the *where* of Hagar's death and not to the dying as such: "How? In Guitar's room, did she . . . ?" (*Song*: 332) are Milkman's preceding words and his loss is apparent. Duvall's note acutely concludes that "Brenner's negative view of Milkman results from a *strained argument* that Toni Morrison intended an ironic use of

Otto Rank's monomyth to dupe unsuspecting readers into accepting Milkman as the novel's hero" (115, italics added). If Brenner were correct, many scholars would have to revise their assessment of Milkman's progressive maturation and "[i]f all he learned were that this great-grandfather reputedly could fly, then Milkman's joy at the novel's end would be silly" (110).

Susan Farrell also criticizes aspects of Brenner's essay. She insists that "Brenner misreads the end of the novel when he overlooks the significant change and growth that Milkman has experienced in the course of his journey" (132-133) and says that "Brenner dismisses feminist anger and social analysis as the author's 'personal' problems" (132). She nevertheless thinks that "Brenner perceptively and convincingly shows how Morrison sets Milkman up as a hero, only to undermine and reject the sexism of traditional Western notions of the heroic" (132). Farrell later presents her own perception of Milkman's development. In the intermediate steps of his evolution "there is always the danger that the past will be romanticized" (145) and when Milkman "discover[s] more about his ancestor Solomon, Morrison [author and narrator confused] criticizes him for idealizing this ancestor" (146). And, although Milkman's relationship with Sweet is somewhat reciprocal, she still has to remind him: "'Who'd he [Solomon] leave behind?'" (*Song*: 328) when he "jubilantly relates Solomon's story" (Farrell: 146). Farrell, then, most interestingly, observes that "[n]ot until he turns to Pilate's house, *gets hit over the head with a bottle* [a scene possibly provoking a satirical reading?], and finds himself lying in Pilate's cellar does Milkman 'wake up' to the issues. . ." (146, my italics). After this blackout Milkman finally perceives the ignominy of Solomon's flying away from his family and "[i]n this moment of epiphany, Milkman takes the final step toward maturity – he consciously recognizes those females who get left behind by individualistic male dreams of freedom, of escape" (146-147).

Royster sees Milkman as a rather helpless character; he is “a caricature of a typical unconscious scapegoat-victim” (420). “Without control and direction over his life Milkman is caught in the situation of the unconscious scapegoat, one who is unwillingly used by others. He is a victim of his burdensome past, blind to his future, and unable to assert himself in his here and now” (431). Only after he has learned about his family’s history through his own reading of the song and through the informant Susan Byrd, is there “a spiritual rebirth or transcendence in Milkman” (440). “The central metaphor of the novel that suggests transcendence and control over one’s life is the act of flying” (436), and it is by learning from Pilate that it is possible to fly “[w]ithout ever leaving the ground” (*Song*: 336) that Milkman is able to transcend the “scapegoat-victim role” (Royster: 419) which is “[t]he primary problem that Milkman’s progress is designed to relieve” (419).

Although some critics see Milkman as partly caricatured, Brenner is the only one who claims that he does not gain significant understanding after his journey. Barbara E. Cooper is more in tune with most scholars, saying that “he ends it in complete awareness” (156). Milkman will finally “comprehend the meaning of responsibility and the value of family ties” (155), or “domestic values” (145), when he “confront[s] his own cruelty” (155) in leaving Hagar and the similar treatment by Solomon of his family. Milkman’s obstinacy and rootedness in his father’s misanthropic value system is illustrated when Cooper, Like Farrell, another woman scholar, claims that his awareness is not achieved “until Pilate hits him on the back of his head and throws him into her cellar” (155). It is reasonable, then, to accept that Milkman is on some level a caricature, but this does not necessarily preclude his status as a willing-to-learn hero; he can be both. Rushdy keenly notices another duality in Milkman: “He has a desire to

know his origins, both of his name and of his family. But he has a conflicting desire to remain ignorant, to rest secure in unknowingness” (312).

Except for Brenner, all scholars consent that Milkman learns and grows. The epiphany, though, is placed in different parts of the narrative. Those who emphasize Milkman’s active participation tend to situate the revelatory moment in scenes where Milkman hunts, fights, flies or interprets song, whereas scholars who see the protagonist as more passive, or receiving, highlight episodes where he is berated by his sisters, his mother or his aunt Pilate or episodes where people tell him stories, be it Reverend Cooper, Susan Byrd or others – or even the hitting-over-the-head episode. An example of this is Scruggs, a male scholar, who contends that “[w]hen Milkman solves the riddle of the children’s song – that Solomon was his great-grandfather – his moral education is complete” (332). Scruggs also notices a “moment of . . . epiphany” (331) when “having gotten himself lost in the forest, Milkman sits down and *begins a series of reflections in which he finds himself*” (331, italics added). In such a reading Milkman actively molds a new self. In fact, all scholars further interesting arguments, save, perhaps, some of Brenner’s ideas. Milkman has lots of learning experiences and the pinpointing of one specific scene where the decisive change allegedly takes place says more about the scholar and is not necessary in order to understand the character.

I have indicated above that *naming* is considered by critics as especially significant for African Americans. Kimberly W. Benston sums it up thus: “For the Afro-American, then, self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven: naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism. All of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America” (152). Although perhaps in part true, this does seem a drastic generalization.



The most interesting contribution by far in scholarship on naming in Toni Morrison is Christian Moraru's essay in which he discusses *Song of Solomon* as an "onomastic" (190) text (onomastics is the study of the origin and history of proper names). He commences by stressing, like Benston, the historical perspective; "names lie at the crossroads of the past and the present" (189) and "constitute in Morrison 'legacies' to be reconstituted" (189), being "vivid testimonies to a burdensome southern history" (189-190):

[T]hey epitomize an extensive logic of symbolic expropriation. Quite ironically, the "*proper* name" used to be a sign of an onomastic *impropriety*: African-Americans were given names by the *proprietor* (the slaveholder) without any concern for their identities. They were treated as objects, as mere pieces of "property." Morrison's novel shows how the descendants of slaves become their own masters by re-appropriating their "unsuited," initially "improper" names. This re-appropriation entails an enthralling fabulation around the semantic and phonic body of names, an epic search that constitutes the major source of fictionality in *Song of Solomon*. (190)

Later he quotes Lucinda H. Mackethan who claims that Black American literature "enact[s] quest for identity within a culture which systematically denies the black person's right to both name and identity as a means of denying his or her humanity" (190). Names, apparently, identify people in two dimensions: the historical and the present social. Moraru says: "Onomastic hermeneutics and cultural investigation take place within a particular sociopolitical framework" (190).

Moraru proposes that "[t]he characters' modes of dealing with their forenames and surnames is one of the novel's key aspects" (191) and is interested in the "denominative act" (191) which some scholars call *naming*. This naming becomes problematic when it is "arbitrary" and "an external will . . . has ignored the individuality of the person (or place) to be named" (191). This is what happened to Milkman who got his nickname from a janitor named Freddie for having been nursed too long, and to his

grandfather Macon Dead whose real name was Jay or Jake Solomon. These incidents of naming will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis.

An appropriate name has the power to “socially put forth” a person’s “personality or ‘essence’” and, continues Moraru, to point “to that person’s *authority on* his or her essence, on his or her self, finally” (191, italics added). “Self-denomination, that is, the capacity to name your place and your being, is a marker of self-determination” (192). This is also valid for “placenames”, or “[t]opological metaphors” (192). An address in Milkman’s home town has been altered to “Not Doctor Street” (192) and this act of “denominative autonomy” (192) by the townspeople “affects submission to the city legislators” (193).

This incident, which will be commented on in chapter three, exemplifies the first of “two possible attitudes toward names in *Song of Solomon*” (193): namely, the approach where a name “preexists, as a sort of *datum*” (193). This name can be subject to change if it is “not accepted by its bearer” (193) and in “[t]he renaming . . . they redefine both the word and themselves” (193) and “it is only now that the placename becomes a *proper* placename” (193).

“The second attitude involves reexplaining and even recreating the meaning of proper names, of *names that cannot or should not be changed*” (193, my italics). Moraru states that “odd family names, given names, or nicknames . . . assigned at random to African-Americans by different individuals and institutions” (193) “can be eventually reappropriated, relegitimated” (194) when “the named” undertakes “an ‘appropriative’ interpretation of the arbitrarily given name” (194) and fills it “with the unmistakable, human content of a proud, responsible life” (194).

Names are a “key aspect” of the novel as Moraru claims and I will in the next chapter discuss amongst others a scene where Milkman’s perceptiveness with regard to

names evidently is something he has learned during his initiation (“He read the road signs with interest now” [*Song*: 329], etc.), and I will thus illustrate the thematical significance of names as links to the past and clues to a person’s present identity. The motif of naming merits comment as people and names are the main constituents in the song which it is the ultimate purpose of this thesis to examine.

Two other writers present ideas which may supplement Moraru. Jan Stryz discusses the name Pilate which was once bestowed rather arbitrarily by her illiterate father Macon Dead. The name was chosen at random from the Bible for the reason that it consisted “of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome [which] . . . looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees” (*Song*: 18). This name, for the “denominator” “a physical entity and not just either sign or symbol” (Stryz: 33), is subsequently reappropriated by its holder after her father had been shot dead. She had herself “taken the scrap of brown paper with her name on it from the bible” (*Song*: 167) and put it in a little brass box earring to be able to carry her identity with her wherever she went. Stryz goes on to say that “[t]he tactile quality” (33) of the name is retained and that

“Pilate” becomes in a more immediate sense the name her father gave her at the same time that it is physically distanced from its literary source. Its literal and figurative associations converge in Pilate herself, now that she wears the name in both a figurative and literal sense. (33)

Note also how Pilate early in the novel by virtue of her “strong and handsome” name is presented as some “princely” protector, a role this “natural healer, skilled wine maker, singer, conjure woman and soothsayer, truth giver” (Fabre: 110) will later embrace in relation to Milkman.

Gay Wilentz traces “African [h]eritage” (61) in *Song of Solomon*. He gives an interesting quote from Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*:

Names are of great importance in West Africa. . . . That is why, among Africans, a person's name may in so many instances change with time, a new designation being assumed on the occasion of some striking occurrence in his life, or when he goes through one of the rites marking a new stage in his development. (68)

According to Wilentz

a constant process of oppositional naming and renaming occurs in the novel. . . . Moreover, this process demonstrates the pattern of passing on the unique cultural traits of Africa within the context of the African-American community. . . . I would further suggest that . . . it may not be necessary to learn one's original African name; it is the *process* of naming which must survive. (68)

The *song* itself has also attracted some interest from scholars. Wilentz may serve as a basis for a discussion of this aspect of the novel as well since he repeatedly refers to a "dilemma" in *Song of Solomon*. The existence of a dilemma, not in Wilentz' definition though, is congruent with the idea of defamiliarization as I present it in this thesis: the slow, indirect fictionalization of phenomena. Wilentz says that Morrison is "closing her novel in the form of an African dilemma tale's participatory ending" (73) and that "[c]ertain genres of African orature, particularly the dilemma tales, have unresolved endings which call for community response; moreover, the participation of the community / audience is often insured by a 'chorus' designed to engage them" (65). This harmonizes with the above discussion of the reader's initiation as he or she applies reading skills on the text. Another consequence of "Morrison's use of African modes of storytelling" (61) is that she "compels us to question Western concepts of reality and uncover perceptions of reality and ways of interpretation other than those imposed by the dominant culture" (61).

The openendedness, or dilemma, in the finale of the novel is not an obligatory conclusion to the carefully constructed musical riddle in *Song of Solomon*. On the contrary, the novel-spanning puzzle which is the defamiliarizing one runs its own

course, so the dilemma at the novel's end is of another kind and comes rather as a surprise. The riddle in the novel is gradually being solved; the reader finds out who Sugarman, or Solomon, is, who Ryna and the other people mentioned in the song are and that the bones Pilate has carried all her life are her father's, etc. The dilemma of the last scene is that the fates of Milkman and Guitar are not revealed. Does either of them kill the other, or do they become friends again and does Milkman really fly? These questions can never be answered and need not be in order to satisfy the reader.

The novel has an "oral quality" (63) in part due to "the use of African-American folktales, folk songs, and legends" (63). Wilentz continues: "The song is the key to Milkman's quest and illustrates the function of the African-American woman in passing on stories to future generations. The novel, structured in the manner of a surreal detective story, has a multi-faceted plot" (63) (Weixlmann is another critic who sees elements of detective fiction: in *Song of Solomon* Morrison has "tricked one of the most traditional and realistic of Western fictional vehicles, the detective novel, into bearing the weight of [her] untraditional, black messages" [23] by using "literary devices" such as "irony and parody" [23]. The suspense novel form corresponds well to the construction of a riddle and it is not unreasonable to see Milkman as a detective. Thus, this form contributes to the estrangement). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this folk tale, folk song oral quality and how it can be seen as conferring "blackness" on the text with the result that the song not only estranges Milkman's quest, but also echoes fundamental communicative forms in the history of African Americans. Wilentz reminds us that "[j]ust as the spirituals transformed the slaves' misery into music, Pilate and the other women storytellers turn their 'plea into a note' [*Song*: 317] and pass on the memory of the names that were stolen and the stories suppressed" (73).

Unlike Wilentz, whose focus is on the final dilemma, Genevieve Fabre underscores the gradual, defamiliarizing effect of the novel's continuously evolving and expanding puzzle, although she neither uses such terms nor investigates in detail the manifestations of this riddle. She contends that the quest in *Song of Solomon*

presents itself as *a succession of riddles*; each recorded incident, act, or word is a new adventure that further complicates the overall puzzle. And the legacy – an ever elusive reality – takes on many serious or trivial forms: a name, a birthmark, a bag of bones, or *a song*. Each is presented as a possible clue or a new mystery. The *deciphering of the enigma* is seen as a game [i. e. the song's "rhythmic, rhyming action game" (*Song*: 303)] in which the character *and reader* are jostled from one puzzle to the next. (107-108, italics added)

Fabre goes on to say that "[e]ach story re-creates a particular patch of the past, but also reveals a new mystery. . . . It is as though there is a crucial deficiency in each telling, so each generates the other. . . ." (108). It is Milkman who

is entrusted with the task of putting bits and pieces together, of *de / re /* constructing chronology and genealogy. The use of Milkman is ironic: this male hero is unimaginative and uncommitted, a reluctant confidant, a poor listener who does not pay attention to words, asks the wrong questions, and offers erroneous interpretations. He is ill equipped for the quest: an imperfect inquirer into a heritage that is cumbersome to him. (108)

Where, then, does the song fit into this picture? As "each [story] generates the other", so "deeds generate songs, songs generate deeds in an uninterrupted act of creation" (113). When Pilate and possibly Milkman die at the end it opens

for a new story to be written, *a new song invented*, that will record the story and secrecy of their lives and deaths. . . . *Song of Solomon* is a beautiful statement on the survival of the legacy and on the legacy of survival; on the power of memory, collective memories kept alive through names, stories, words, and *songs*; *on the power of music that accompanies all the rituals of life*. . . *The song that weaves its way through the book is the sacred text*: a proclamation available to all, and the repository of secrets. In its way of *encoding messages* as spirituals did [informing slaves about escape plots], of yielding and keeping its secrecy, it becomes also *the epitome of all narrative*. (113, italics added)

Admittedly, not only the “children’s song” (113), but also “[s]ounds, words . . . a moan like a woman’s voice [Solomon’s wife Ryna’s cries lamenting his flying away] . . . names of people, his people, names of places named after his people, offer him the final clues he needs to reconstruct the whole message. . .” (113). To a certain extent it is the choice of the critic what he or she focusses on. I believe the song is the most striking constituent in Milkman’s quest as it is one of the most prominent features of Morrison’s text, and since it is language, a narrative tool, it creates fascinating meta-levels in the novel in the way it comments on the action.

Like Wilentz, Kathleen O’Shaughnessy points out that in *Song of Solomon* there is a “community as a formal chorus . . . composed of individuals and groups . . . who act as both observers and participants” (125) and that the novel “combines the ritual elements of traditional African dance and song with a *commentary* on the characters’ actions. As in ancient Greek drama, the effect is one of heightened audience or reader participation” (125, italics added). Reader participation has been discussed above, but O’Shaughnessy takes it further, saying that Morrison’s “aim is to reach a community of readers and involve her audience as participants” (125) and “[t]o make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken [with the] . . . real presence of a chorus” (126), and that her “rationale for this method is that black music, the traditional medium of black art, no longer performs its ‘healing’ functions for the black community because it has been assimilated into the music of white society” (126).

One of O’Shaughnessy’s main propositions follows from the statement that “music is rarely found not associated with dance or drama in traditional African society” (132, note 12). Hence, “[t]here is a direct connection between song and dance” (130). She observes a development in the novel of these motifs: Morrison is “using the chorus as a ritual dance, song, and commentary. . . . The role of the chorus as a dance

motif is not so clearly seen in Part 1 of the novel as it is in Part 2. This lack results primarily from *thematic uses of dance and song, which appear with increasing frequency* as Milkman gains a greater knowledge of his past and of himself as he travels south” (126, italics added). “[I]n Michigan where Milkman spends his first thirty-one years, he is ultimately alienated from every group and individual with whom he comes in contact, particularly from his family” (126). This is why “[t]hroughout much of the first part of the novel we see *ritual movement without song*” (127, my italics) such as “the Dead family’s Sunday afternoon rides” (127). The scene of Mr. Smith’s suicidal flight is an exception as this ritual movement, “a choral dance” (126), is *accompanied by song* although it takes place at the very beginning. Pilate sings “*Sugarman done gone*” (*Song*: 6), etc., but “[t]he lines foreshadow the children’s dance and song of Solomon in Shalimar, as well as Pilate’s and Milkman’s deaths” (127). Also, the music and dance in this scene “helps Morrison extend her audience at Smith’s suicide to encompass the community of readers” (127), and it introduces the motif which will accompany and estrange Milkman’s quest.

O’Shaughnessy observes that “[b]y the time Milkman reaches Shalimar the images of dance and song are much more apparent” (129). There are “the children with their song and dance of Milkman’s genealogy” (129); there is the hunt where “the animals’ sounds are not only a form of language, but also *a kind of music*” (129, italics added) and Guitar, “the player who is named for a stringed instrument, but who makes not music but death” (129), who tries to kill Milkman “with a wire” (129). These examples and others show the enstranging complexity of musical metaphors, which are foregrounded or *dominant* elements, in *Song of Solomon* and will be examined in chapter three. Finally, O’Shaughnessy says implicitly that there is a riddle in the novel by stating that “[t]he children’s dance of the song of Solomon is *a key* to Milkman’s



discovery of his link with Jay or Jake, his grandfather, son of Solomon” (130, my italics).

But, undoubtedly, the most interesting scholar on music and song in *Song of Solomon* is Deborah Guth. Note in the extract below how she focusses on a *slow* process of reconstructing the past, on the role of language – words, a *song* – and on the importance of metaphorical reading skills. Reading *words* would be the literal skill, literally speaking, whereas reading a wider range of human behavior in society, like the hunting scene or familial interaction in the Dead family would be the metaphorical. The latter skill is important if Milkman is to be able to complete a “re-actualization of an originary past” (584), “a past that appears sometimes as nurturing cultural foundation” (576):

*Song of Solomon* explores the reclamation of the past as a **slow process** of dismantling imposed cultural constructions and reconstructing from obscured remains a uniquely different world-picture. Significantly, the vehicle Morrison uses for this exploration is language itself – names, words, fragmented phrases, **a song** – which, decoded from semantically distortive contexts and interpreted anew within their context of origin, cohere into a fully signifying narrative. . . . The discovery of Milkman’s family past is thus not simply a retrieval of obliterated facts; rather, **the actual process of reconstruction becomes a metaphor for his initiation into a different way of ‘reading’ the world and constructing meaning** which together constitute his cultural heritage. Peter Brooks’ analysis of plot is here particularly relevant; insofar as plot, or the plotting of narrative, may be defined as a “dynamic of . . . interpretive ordering” – the “active process of *sjuzet* working on *fabula*” . . . of which the model is the detective working back through obscure clues to reconstruct a hidden sequence of events – what we see in this novel is precisely Milkman’s slowly emergent new reading as *sjuzet* challenging the dominant reading in order to reveal the story of his past as *fabula*. The plot of this novel of restoration is thus the transformative act of reading itself. (579-580, bold type added)

Before I comment further on this extract, I have to interpose that if in this thesis I underscore the *slowness* of the unraveling of history in *Song of Solomon*, and if I associate this aspect with *defamiliarization*, I do not wish to imply that slowness equals defamiliarization, or vice versa. The latter signifies to make strange, but not necessarily

slow. However, in *Song of Solomon* the *gradualness* of the unfolding of the *fabula* is an enstranging feature.

Guth deftly observes the levels of meta-language, saying that Morrison's "vehicle . . . is language itself". Immediately this may seem redundant as a novel could hardly be produced by anything but language, but Morrison has her language signify not merely actions or objects, but actual words. Words signify words, as it were, exemplified in the deconstruction of names, and this is in itself enstranging as it increases abstractness and slows down the reader's perception. In the extract quoted above Guth states that "the actual process of reconstruction becomes a metaphor for his initiation into a different way of 'reading' the world", and this is just another way of verbalizing precisely what I suggest in this thesis, no more, no less; the process of deciphering the song enstranges Milkman's spiritual growth and the significance of achieving a connectedness with family and history by developing a sensitivity to other "languages" and ways of communicating.

Guth, then, convincingly enlarges the definitions of *sjuzet* (or *syuzhet*) and *fabula*. *Syuzhet* is the order and manner in which a literary craftsman presents the sequence of events, the *fabula*, in a narrative, but in Guth's widened perception the terms serve as metaphors for the interpretative endeavors of a character active in the novel's *fabula*. Now Milkman is the author; it is he who decides his *syuzhet*, the order and manner in which he, consciously or haphazardly, (re)constructs his *fabula* which is not the same as the novel's, but a story within the story, the obscure southern past which resides in *Song of Solomon* as an intra-story. In a slightly different context Campbell contends that in *Song of Solomon* there are

repetitions, refrains, and tag lines of songs and *narratives within narratives*. The result . . . is story-telling made up of *multi-textual layers* told or *sung* by different voices. By following the stories through these various narrating voices, one discovers that story-telling, history-reporting, myth-making, and life-living *are all*

*metaphors for one another* and that they all mutually generate one another. (408, italics added)

What Milkman has learned as a “detective working back through obscure clues” (Guth: 580) in “a slow process” (579) where “[t]he past thus emerges as a secret code obscured by language” (582) is to move “from the actual words of the song to their hidden meaning, and from a passive to an active form of knowledge” (588). He has acquired a “new capacity to move from literal to broader metaphoric levels of meaning and to counterpoint personal and historical readings” (583). In the following chapter I will present my own analysis of *Song of Solomon* and demonstrate how all elements converge to *defamiliarize* Milkman’s quest.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### *Defamiliarization and Solomon's Song*

“Come booba yalle, come booba tambee” goes the mantra in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. This apparent puerile gibberish is the resounding poetical adhesive in the children’s “rhythmic, rhyming action game” that is the novel’s own song of Solomon, a song about “Jake the only son of Solomon” (303) – wordplay is obvious – which is gradually being decoded by Milkman as he discovers it is a genealogy explaining parts of his family’s history. The quest for a name and a past is a main theme in the novel, although it is being somewhat obliquely depicted.

What I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, is how this indirect representation is achieved through Morrison’s defamiliarization of one of the protagonists’ search for identity and family history. This defamiliarization is achieved through the interweaving in the narrative of fragments of a *song* and of musical metaphors until the whole song is presented towards the end with an almost complete interpretation. Other enstranging devices are *naming*, the symbolism of *bones*, metaphors such as the *eggs*, and the imagery of *flight*.

The character in question is Milkman, a young man on a quest to discover his past, who does not engage private investigators or contact the American Red Cross or the Salvation Army, as his aunt Pilate does in her search, now a grandmother, equally curious about her past and the whereabouts of her long lost brother Macon. Not going through normal channels to find answers, and, at first, not actively seeking knowledge, Milkman is thrown into a series of events. Frustrated with his life, he decides to go

south with the materialistic hope of finding a sack of gold his father Macon and his aunt Pilate may have left behind, or at least he wants to know what has become of this gold.

The cause of Milkman's frustration is that he does not wish to take over his father's real estate business: "If he had to spend the rest of his life thinking about rents and property, he'd lose his mind. But he was going to spend the rest of his life doing just that, wasn't he? That's what his father assumed and he supposed that was what he had assumed as well" (*Song of Solomon*: 107). There is also a certain vagueness to his disenchantment:

His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for. . . . There had to be something better to look forward to. He couldn't get interested in money. No one had ever denied him any, so it had no exotic attraction. Politics – at least barbershop politics and Guitar's brand – put him to sleep. He was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all. (107)

And, later in the narrative:

Deep down in that pocket where his heart hid, he felt used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something. Working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom. Everything they did seemed to be about him, yet nothing he wanted was part of it. (165)

One day at the age of twenty-two Milkman knocks his father down for hitting his mother. He is in a thoughtful mood when afterwards he watches his own face in the mirror:

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. *But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self.* It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision

he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed. (69-70, my emphasis)

His face metaphorically represents his rudimentary personality, but it will not remain so for ever. The three final adjectives perfectly describe at least the first half of his journey south.

After Milkman's quest is in progress his magnetic pole shifts, as it were, and his focus is no longer on the gold. Instead he points his compass needle to the possible solution to the mystery of his family's ancestry and now a process of learning gradually begins. Byerman says that "[h]is journey south itself begins in a conspiracy with his father to exploit Pilate, then continues as he seeks both family treasure and family name" (138). Byerman observes what he calls "the emerging ambiguity of Milkman's quest. Milkman still seeks the gold, but the family story has itself begun to take on value as *a means of generating the sense of self he lacks*" (138, my italics). Thus, on his way south he has not yet given up the gold, but he has a sudden epiphany when he meets Reverend Cooper in Danville, Pennsylvania, a man who remembers "Old Macon Dead" (*Song*: 229), Milkman's grandfather, and who exclaims: "I know your people!" (229). This enlivens Milkman:

Milkman smiled and let his shoulders slump a little. It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: "I live here, but my *people* . . ." or: "She acts like she ain't got no *people*," or: "Do any of your *people* live there?" But he hadn't known what it meant: links. (229)

Hubbard claims that Milkman's arrival in Danville is "a 'sign' that points to a fulfillment" (292), and that "Rev. Cooper pulls Milkman away from his individual ethic toward the community – the people – that he has abandoned. Milkman gains his history, as it were, through the blending of voices in this homecoming scene as he listens to the old men . . . reconstruct and reconnect him to his past" (293).

So what purpose does the device of defamiliarization serve in literature? It depicts objects, actions, even abstractions such as emotions in ways such as to estrange and rejuvenate the perception of these. It is like portraying only the dark side of the moon, or conceiving of a football as the air that inflates it. Flying through the air of *Song of Solomon* is the song about Solomon, the defamiliarizer par excellence of Milkman's soul-searching dive into an obfuscated past. This song is luringly attractive to Milkman and the odyssey he sets out on develops into a penetrating analysis of self and of family history on his part, an investigation of which the song is the emblem and not the sole constituent. This, because the people Milkman encounters and the way they react to him and the chain of terrifying events he becomes entangled in also lead him to arrive at a new self-image. "His quest structures the book, his identity is shaped and changed by the events of the story, and his insight gives meaning to this family history" (Byerman: 137). This oblique depiction is the essence of estrangement. To simplify, one might say that to defamiliarize an object or an idea is to describe it in elaborate, roundabout, bizarre and sometimes novel and ingeniously creative ways in order to prolong and thereby sharpen the reader's perception.

The *song* and other musical metaphors are the main objects of my focus, but to fully understand the significance of these, I will have to demonstrate how *bones* which are often mentioned symbolize, among other things, the past and have a defamiliarizing function similar to that of the song to which they are in certain instances linked. *Naming* is another aspect which will have to be explained with quotes from the text as this too is related to the function of the song and to the thematics of the novel. Much scholarship on *Song of Solomon* evolves around the motif of flying and I concur with the judgment of this aspect as central in the novel. Images of birds and flying abound in the text and this motif is associated with the gaining of freedom and independence, with the

discovery of “a total self” (*Song*: 69), but also with, as will be shown, betrayal and abandonment. Therefore, I cannot entirely circumvent this issue, but I will attempt to do something different since there is not space in this thesis to examine all that which merits analysis. It is my purpose not merely to state that flying is a symbol of self-asserting behavior for some of the characters in the novel, but to demonstrate by which means the flying is *taught*, especially to Milkman; in other words, the *how* of his flying. He learns to fly, metaphorically speaking, through the teachings of his spirit-guides, mainly from Pilate, but also from Circe and Susan Byrd and even from his father and Guitar, if only by negative association. Also important are the strategies for self-discovery, such as fighting and hunting, and, last but not least, his own first passive, but later in the narrative more active reading of the song. Krumholz’ statement, quoted in chapter two of this thesis, that the reader is initiated by the participatory unriddling of Morrison’s text may be extended to Milkman as he almost steps out of the narrative, taking an intermediate position between reader and text when he deciphers the song. Milkman takes a meta-perspective and later in this thesis will be presented examples of meta-language in *Song of Solomon* which affirm these observations. A few other scenes which are important for a complete understanding of the text will also be discussed although they are not directly linked to the motifs mentioned above.

Singing and musical metaphors act as I indicated as a sort of *glue* which gives coherence to the narrative. Starting my analysis, I choose to see the song, quoted below, in relation to one particular scene. The reason is that this is the point in the narrative where Milkman starts learning how to see beyond words, to interpret text. The estrangement achieved by the device of the song begins earlier in the novel and I will return to this, but Morrison’s ultimate feat of meta-defamiliarization, estranging language and communication through her own prose, is found in her description of the



episode where Milkman is being sensitized to a broader spectrum of languages as he is left to his own devices – which are progressively fewer, in the end no more than his “watch and his two hundred dollars” – on a mind-expanding ramble through the nocturnal jungle of Shalimar, Virginia. On this bobcat hunt Milkman discovers that his worldly possessions are of no avail; he must rely on his five congenital senses and becomes a semi-animal, the irony, of course, being that he too is someone’s prey: Guitar’s. Morrison’s meta-achievement, the enstrangement of language through language, rests in how the narrator describes “some other sense that [Milkman] knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on” (277). This sixth sense is an all-important interpretative proficiency thus far a stranger to Milkman who is dumbfounded by the impenetrability of the communicatory symbiosis of dogs and men. The narrative immediately continues:

What did Calvin see on the bark? On the ground? What was he saying? What did he hear that made him know something unexpected had happened some two miles – perhaps more – away, and that that something was a different kind of prey, a bobcat? He could still hear them – the way they had sounded the last few hours. Signaling one another. What were they saying? “Wait up?” “Over here?” Little by little it fell into place. The dogs, the men – none was just hollering, just signaling location or pace. The men and the dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things. That long *yah* sound was followed by a specific kind of howl from one of the dogs. The low *howm howm* that sounded like a string bass imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood and executed. And the dogs spoke to the men: single-shot barks – evenly spaced and widely spaced – one every three or four minutes, that might go on for twenty minutes. A sort of radar that indicated to the men where they were and what they saw and what they wanted to do about it. And the men agreed or told them to change direction or to come back. All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeeeee*’s of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. . . . No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. (277-278)

Even the dogs are Milkman’s superiors at this point; they are able to comprehend a *sub-language*, or “prehistoric ur-language” (Clarke: 275), and thereby they succeed in

communicating experience and intentions. There are some similarities between this passage and the song which is finally rendered in full towards the end of the novel:

*Jake the only son of Solomon  
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
Whirled about and touched the sun  
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Left that baby in a white man's house  
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
Heddy took him to a red man's house  
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Black lady fell down on the ground  
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
Threw her body all around  
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut  
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.  
Nestor Kalina Sarake cake.  
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!*

*O Solomon don't leave me here  
Cotton balls to choke me  
O Solomon don't leave me here  
Buckra's arms to yoke me*

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone  
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303)*

“[B]obcat” becomes “booba” or vice versa since the nonsensical rhyme is also found earlier in the novel; the dogs’ “yells” compare with “yalle” in the song; the “yah sound” is not unlike “Jay” (302), the progenitor Solomon’s son whose real name is, of course, Jake, the name of Milkman’s own grandfather who was shot dead when Milkman’s father was sixteen years old. The “*howm howm*”, “*unh unh unh*” and “*eeee*’s” are mantric reverberations of the tone of the song with its “konka yalle”, “konka tambee”, in themselves reminiscent of some obscure chant from an African past with their un-English sounding resonance and the unorthodox initial letter “k”. Rhythmically these words mirror “the drumbeat sounds” in the bobcat hunt and the introduction of other

musical instruments as metaphors in this scene underlines the association of the hunt and the song.

Morrison's intertextual play is reserved for scholars. In an essay surveying legends of flying Africans (some slaves were supposed to have literally flown back to Africa) Wendy Walters points out that the sea island folklore collection *Drums and Shadows* represented by a tale related by a "Prince Sneed" (Walters: 10) includes "'magic' African words" (10) such as: "[A]n dey say, 'Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,' quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa" (10). So it seems this mantra could be the male slave's warning "Timber" call upon departure as he "[l]ifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home" (*Song*: 328), leaving family and responsibility behind. Walters quotes another section of *Drums and Shadows* which resembles Morrison's song: "Belali an all he fambly come on same boat frum Africa. Belali hab plenty daughtuhs, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima, Bentoo, Hestuh, Magret and Shaalut" (16). In this manner Morrison incorporates Black oral tradition in her novel and the tone of the language affects the reader although the intertextuality may escape him or her.

The hunting scene is Milkman at school. It is strategically placed between Milkman's feeble attempts at interpreting "rye balaly *shoo*" (*Song*: 264) and other words from the song, to which I will return below, and his later and more successful *graduate* attempts at the same which prove that the hunt was a learning experience. It is Milkman preparing for his role as decipherer of poetry, Milkman the literature critic, who gradually emerges as he encounters the children "playing their endless round games" (299). In the prelude to Milkman's interpretation of the song we learn that "in a few days, when the school in the next town opened, children at this hour would already

be walking, running over the roads and fields to class.” (299). Milkman’s school has already opened with Milkman as both teacher and student and the playing children as make-believe pupils as well as assistant teachers presenting the song to Milkman. Teacher because he will eventually educate his family back home: “He could hardly wait to get home. To tell his father, Pilate; and he would love to see Reverend Cooper and his friends” (329). And in Pilate’s cellar at the end he shouts out what he has learned:

“Pilate!” he called. “Pilate! That’s not what he meant. Pilate! He didn’t mean that. He wasn’t talking about the man in the cave. Pilate! He was talking about himself. His own father flew away. He was the ‘body.’ The body you shouldn’t fly off and leave. Pilate! Pilate! Come here. Let me tell you what your father said. Pilate, he didn’t even tell you to sing, Pilate. He was calling for his wife – your mother. Pilate! Get me out of here!” (333)

The one “calling for his wife” is Pilate’s father, Milkman’s grandfather, now a ghost who visits her. Milkman is in the role of student because he absorbs the text the children have chosen as his curriculum. The absence of a clear-cut distribution of roles is congruent with Milkman’s euphoria in his tentative and almost out of character ingeniousness in expounding the children’s verse. The soon-to-open school is symbolic of Milkman’s imminent awakening.

Later Milkman meets and speaks with *schoolteacher* Miss Grace Long:

“Hunting? Oh, Lord, don’t tell me you’re one of them. I can’t stand those hunting people. They make me sick, always prowling round other people’s property. Day and night they’re shooting up the world. I tell my students – I’m a schoolteacher, you know, I teach over at the normal school. Have you seen it yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, there’s nothing to see, really. Just a school, like any other. But you’re welcome to stop by. We’d be pleased to have you. Where you from again?”

“Michigan.” (288)

Miss Long has a penchant for gossip and that is why her friend Susan *Byrd* – the name is no coincidence as will be shown later – who is also present holds back information

she has about Milkman's history. She is the niece of *Sing*, another significant name, who was married to Milkman's grandfather Jake, mistakenly named Macon Dead, and she will later tell Milkman all he desires to know. Although Milkman is not yet qualified to graduate, he does definitely not need the "normal school" of Miss Long. In his very own special school he is in the process of acquiring this mysterious "some other sense" which "life itself might depend on" (277). Farrell says "Milkman must *learn* a new language. . . . When he finds himself in the forest, hunting with the men of Shalimar, Milkman begins his *lessons*" (145, italics added).

A very telling episode showing the levels in Milkman's progressive spiritual and instinctual learning is his perilous showdown with Guitar at night in the forest of Shalimar. Exhausted by hours of hunting the bobcat Milkman sits down "under a sweet gum tree" (*Song*: 278), his head full of "*howm*", "*unh*" and "*eeee*'s", quietly admiring one of the hunters whom he imagines "whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers" (278). Twelve lines below we find Milkman, now nature's symbiont, caressing in the blinding night *his* Braille, the oozing carpet underneath which now conveys meaning: "[H]e sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him" (279). The language Milkman gradually understands is a "prelanguage" (Clarke: 275) which compares to "the preverbal communication between mother and child" (275). Clarke also states that "[i]n the novel, prelanguage, the language of the earth itself, provides vital information" (275). Through defamiliarization Morrison presents this perceptive faculty, the ability to master the language "before language", as a metaphor for the need for humans in general and African-Americans in particular to know their own history. Their lives may not literally

depend on this one talent, but a fully rewarding existence can only be had if this decoding takes place. Outside the fictional sphere an appreciation of one's history rather than an elaborate intellectual exercise may be all that is necessary, but this extensive elaborateness is the hallmark of poetical defamiliarization; the slowing down of the reader's perception is a prophylactic measure against automatization which might otherwise impede a more profound reading of the world.

The someone who has snuck up on Milkman to kill him is Guitar, but Milkman miraculously gets one hand under the strangling wire, possibly a *guitar* string. This incident is foreshadowed by the narrator as Milkman shortly after his arrival in Shalimar, the once home of Solomon, is shocked to learn that Guitar has already been there asking for him. A man asks Milkman: ““What's a matter? Y'all get your *wires* crossed?”” (262, my italics). Milkman chokes under the pressure of the string and sees “a burst of many-colored lights dancing before his eyes. When the *music* followed the colored lights, he knew he had just drawn the last sweet air left for him in the world” (279, italics added). However, Milkman ultimately survives the assault, saved by the bell as guitar decamps at the sound of the baying dogs.

Music and dancing, the associations to songs, singing and the circle of children singing the song are there. This is Milkman the jazz musician; the forest floor, simultaneously his musical instrument and colleague – Milkman plays it and it replies – is responded to extempore as he elicits its hidden meaning. This musicality is highly significant as a part of the defamiliarization process. Rigney states that in *Song of Solomon* “both the motif of music and the musicality of language are so crucial. The solution to Milkman's quest is found in the words and the rhythms of a song” (8). This is true. Not only the words which Milkman will later decipher are important, but also

the rhythmicity of singing itself as singing is a cathartic activity and a talent Milkman himself needs to develop, which he eventually does.

It is also conspicuous how linguistic *malentendus* and the playful handling of language immediately escalate as Milkman arrives in Shalimar, or is it “Sharlemagne” (259)? We even learn that one “man pronounced it *Shallemon*” (261). As Milkman’s spiritual *catharsis* is about to begin, language becomes more *palpable*. The synchronousness of the two is by no means incidental. Defamiliarization and meta-language soar as the education of the hero commences. Shalimar, the cradle of enigma, apparently has many names. Milkman has come because Circe who once delivered Macon and Pilate had told him that his grandfather Jake, son of Solomon, and his wife Sing came from this place:

“Where were they coming from? Georgia?”

“No. Virginia. Both of them lived in Virginia, her people and his. Down around Culpeper somewhere. Charlemagne or something like that.” (244)

The name itself is the first of numerous *riddles* in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman finds the town in a very *Romanesque* way: “In Roanoke, Petersburg, Culpeper he’d asked for a town named Charlemagne. Nobody knew. The coast, some said. Tidewater. A valley town, said others. He ended up at an AAA office, and after a while they discovered it and its correct name: Shalimar. How do I get there? Well, you can’t walk it, that’s for sure. Buses go there? Trains? No. Well, not very near. There is one bus, but it just goes to . . . He ended up bying a fifty-dollar car for seventy-five dollars out of a young man’s yard” (259-260). Then, suddenly, he is there *deus ex machina*:

He’d had to pay close attention to signs and landmarks, because Shalimar was not on the Texaco map he had, and the AAA office couldn’t give a nonmember a charted course – just the map and some general information. Even at that, watching as carefully as he could, he wouldn’t have known he had arrived if the fan belt hadn’t broken again right in front of *Solomon’s General Store*, which turned out to be *the heart and soul of Shalimar, Virginia*. (260, my italics)

No wonder that a place owned by a man called Solomon still is the pivotal point in “this no-name hamlet” (259).

More interesting is the *palpableness* of language in the narrator’s meta-language commenting on the stanza from the song where, significantly, “Solomon” for the first time is substituted for the previous “Sugarman”. The stanza is slightly different from that in the song because Milkman’s *perception* is not yet perfect:

Behind him the children were singing a kind of ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker game. Milkman turned to watch. About eight or nine boys and girls were standing in a circle. A boy in the middle, his arms outstretched, turned around like an airplane, while the others sang some meaningless rhyme:

*Jay the only son of Solomon  
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
Whirl about and touch the sun  
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee . . .*

They went on with several verses, the boy in the middle doing his imitation of an airplane. The climax of the game was a rapid shouting of nonsense words accompanied by more rapid twirling: “Solomon rye balaly *shoo*; yaraba medina hamlet *too*” – until the last line. “Twenty-one children the last one *Jay!*” At which point the boy crashed to earth and the others screamed.

Milkman watched the children. He’d never played like that as a child. . . . [H]e was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games. (264)

When the boy crashes to earth, he evokes the fate of *Jay*, or *Jake*, whom Solomon dropped trying to carry him as he flew away to Africa leaving his family according to the legend. The airplane imitation refers, of course, to the flying and an interesting parallel is slowly being established between Solomon and Milkman. Later I will show how Milkman himself while in the womb was – and still is? – a *bird*, metaphorically speaking. “[R]ye” is a street in “the Blood Bank” (83), the rough part of Milkman’s home town. Milkman and Guitar once “walked a few blocks to the corner of Rye and Tenth streets” (83) and in a few moments after hearing the children sing, Milkman gets *bloody* indeed as he is assaulted with a knife inside Solomon’s store by a local man



called Saul who, together with everyone else, is offended by Milkman's conspicuous wealth and his arrogant flaunting of it.

Milkman later understands that some of the "nonsense words" refer to people, perhaps even some of them to Solomon's children: "Jay" is "Jake" (302), "[H]amlet" is "Muhammet" (303) and "[R]ye" is not merely a street, but may also refer to the name "Ryna" (302). The latter is the wife Solomon left behind when he flew to Africa. Now her ghost mourns in a gulch near the place where Solomon took off from, "Solomon's Leap" (284), and this gulch has been *named* after her:

He heard the sound of the sobbing woman again and asked Calvin, "What the hell is that?"

"Echo," he said. "Ryna's Gulch is up ahead. It makes that sound when the wind hits a certain way."

"Sounds like a woman crying," said Milkman.

"Ryna. Folks say a woman name Ryna is cryin in there. That's how it got the name." (274)

There is a parallel, serving as a basis for yet another parallel which will be discussed below, between Ryna and Pilate's granddaughter Hagar who used to be Milkman's girlfriend until he decided "he would give her a nice piece of money" (98) and wrote her

a nice letter which ended: "Also, I want to thank you. Thank you for all you have meant to me. For making me happy all these years. I am signing this letter with love, of course, but more than that, with gratitude."

And he did sign it with love, but it was the word "gratitude" and the flat-out coldness of "thank you" that sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time, and where people spoke in whispers or did not make sounds at all, and where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away until she ran out into the streets to find Milkman Dead. (99)

At this point in the *fabula* Hagar literally wishes to "find Milkman Dead"; she decides to kill him. Later she is disturbingly unbalanced, but her attitude has changed: "'Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible'" (308). And

then: “I’m going to have to go to the beauty shop. Today. Oh, and I need something to wear” (309). She tests perfume: “Myrurgia for primeval woman *who creates for him a world of tender privacy* where the only occupant is you, mixed with Nina Ricci’s L’Air du Temps” (311, my italics). The privacy had become too tender and suffocating for Milkman. Waiting to get her hair done in “Lilly’s Beauty Parlor” (312), Hagar is caught in the rain and it is a pathetic scene when “[r]ain soaked her hair” (313) and she comes home in a mess. There is poetry in how she “rubbed mango tango on her cheeks. Then she patted sunny glow all over her face. . . . She pushed out her lips and spread jungle red over them. She put baby clear sky light to outwit the day light on her eyelids” (314).

Guitar had tried to comfort her:

“You think because he doesn’t love you that you are worthless. You think because he doesn’t want you anymore that he is right – that his judgment and opinion of you are correct. If he throws you out, then you are garbage. You think he belongs to you because you want to belong to him. Hagar, don’t. It’s a bad word, ‘belong.’ Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn’t be like that. Did you ever see the way the clouds love a mountain? They circle all around it; sometimes you can’t even see the mountain for the clouds. But you know what? You go up top and what do you see? His head. The clouds never cover the head. His head pokes through, because the clouds let him; they don’t wrap him up. They let him keep his head up high, free, with nothing to hide him or bind him. Hear me, Hagar?” (305-306)

Guitar’s loving consolation is useless as Hagar already spins in “a bright blue place where the air was thin” and later she dies of a fever as a result partly of her being exposed to “a thunderous sky” (313) and partly of her own despair. To Brenner she is “utterly resourceless in a crisis” and “obsessively jealous [and] impotently vindictive” (18). These scenes are important because they illustrate Milkman’s attitude to women, which will change.

When Solomon flew away, Ryna’s reaction to abandonment had been somewhat similar:

“Well, back to this Jake boy. He was supposed to be one of Solomon’s original twenty-one – all boys and all of them with the same mother. Jake was the baby. The baby and the wife were right next to him when he flew off.”

“When you say ‘flew off’ you mean he ran away, don’t you? Escaped?”

“No, I mean flew. Oh, it’s just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn’t running away. He was flying. *He flew. You know, like a bird.* 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. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There’s a big double-headed rock over the valley *named* for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife. I guess you could say ‘wife.’ Anyway she’s supposed to have screamed out loud for days. And there’s a ravine near here they call Ryna’s Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, *lost her mind completely.* You don’t hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more – *the kind of woman who couldn’t live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something.* Love, I guess.” (322-323, my emphasis)

The parallel I have indicated is relevant because it mirrors a striking parallel between Solomon and Milkman. Solomon *flies* and leaves a woman in an undignified manner; Milkman, the *bird* (this metaphorical representation of the character will be explained below), does the same. Also, Milkman flies from the “double-headed rock” in the final scene of the novel. Milkman’s treatment of Hagar is a tragic repetition of Solomon’s leaving. Too late Milkman realizes

[h]e had used her – her love, her craziness – and most of all he had used her skulking, bitter vengeance. It made him a star, a celebrity in the Blood Bank; it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind, to destroy her, and not because she hated him, or because he had done some unforgivable thing to her, but because he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint. (301)

Milkman sees the parallel and realizes his wrongdoing as he gets home and Hagar is dead:

So he lay on the cool damp floor of the cellar and tried to figure out what he was doing there. What did Pilate knock him out for? About the theft of her sack of bones? No. She’d come to his rescue immediately. What could it be, what else could he have done that would turn her against him? Then he knew. Hagar. Something had happened to Hagar. Where was she? Had she run off? Was she sick or . . . Hagar was dead. The cords of his neck tightened. How? In Guitar’s room, did she . . . ?

What difference did it make? *He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead* – he was certain of it. He had left her. *While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying.* Sweet’s silvery voice came back to him: “Who’d he leave behind?” He left Ryna behind and twenty children. Twenty-one, since he dropped the one he tried to take with him. And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. *Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children!* Guitar and the Days chose never to have children. Shalimar left his, but *it was the children who sang about it* and kept the story of his leaving alive. (332, my italics)

This lack of consideration for other people must run in the family. Byerman says “[i]t is important to point out the parallels” and that “[t]he very act [Solomon’s flight] that ensures a remarkable family history also begins a tradition of family disruption that persists into Milkman’s generation” (137). Brenner contends “that in his [Milkman’s] gene pool also swims the congenital habit of desertion” (18). Milkman’s father, “the propertied Negro” (*Song*: 20), threatens to evict a certain “Granny” (22), Mrs. Bains, who is Guitar’s grandmother and two boys, one of whom Guitar himself, for being “two months behind” (21) with the rent. Macon Dead also treats his wife and daughters as possessions and never escapes his egotistical flaw. Milkman would never have been able to identify intellectually with the sufferings of another person before his visit to Shalimar, but now he has metamorphosed into an empathizing man.

The name of Milkman’s childhood friend Guitar has certain musical implications and it is important to know something about this character who is a few years older than Milkman and who has some positive influence on him early in life. Later turning to a lost cause, a group of avenging murderers, he nonetheless serves to trigger significant identity-shaping reactions in Milkman. This former friend turned mortal enemy never becomes a paragon of male blackness, but he possesses a certain confidence; he denounces miscegenation and is very political in an interesting scene where he and Milkman have tea together. The tea becomes a trampoline for political argument since Milkman does not want to hear about the provenance of tea, India:

“Just the tea. No geography” (114). Guitar answers: “Okay, no geography. What about some history in your tea? Or some sociopolitico – No. That’s still geography” (114) (Milkman’s aunt Pilate who is very keen to connect to her past has always carried a geography book; she, too, is more politically aware than Milkman is at this point). Guitar, “a natural-born hunter” (85), “cat-eyed” (7) *de surcroît* – born with the interpretative ability, the sixth sense (see below) – encourages Milkman to sip some history with his tea, this imbibition being a defamiliarization of, a metaphor for, the quest for a past. Unfortunately, Guitar’s perceptive genius is warped and leads him down a militant path. His childhood hunting episode when he accidentally kills a doe instead of a deer, a female and not a male, and feels deep shame foreshadows his assassinate randomness in the group of avengers, the Seven Days which practices the killing of a white person, anyone, for each black person murdered in order “[t]o keep the ratio the same” (155). Guitar tells Milkman: “It doesn’t matter who did it. Each and every one of them could do it. So you just get any one of them. There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one” (155). Hunting, Guitar had made a wrong kill and the narrator tells us that the animals left manlike tracks as if “a two-legged creature was jumping” (85). Later in life he will feel no qualms at killing bipeds, but his mental health is deteriorating, which can be seen in his irrational attempt at Milkman’s life. He is possibly on the verge of becoming a new Mr. Smith who cannot deal with the psychological aftermath of having been a murderer. Milkman observes what is happening to Guitar: “And Guitar. The one sane and constant person he knew had flipped, had ripped open and was spilling blood and foolishness instead of conversation” (165).

Guitar crudely misuses his innate sense of communication, instinct and language. We can detect this burgeoning knack in his early childhood in the scene

outside Mercy Hospital, a scene which is another small square in Morrison's patchwork quilt of enstrangement, an enstrangement which is not only achieved by the song device. Guitar is asked to find a guard to prevent, if possible, Mr. Smith's suicide; he must find a door carrying the inscription "Emergency Admissions". The white nurse misspells the second word: "A-D-M-I-S-I-O-N-S" (7), whereupon the precocious five-year old Guitar replies:

"You left out a *s*, ma'am," the boy said. The North was new to him and he had just begun to learn he could speak up to white people. But she'd already gone, rubbing her arms against the cold.  
"Granny, she left out a *s*."  
"And a 'please.' " (7)

Note how the *s* corresponds to the initial letter in *sing* and in *Song of Solomon*.

The name itself, "Guitar", merits some comment. Names will be discussed in further detail below, and Guitar's name acquisition does not differ noticeably from other examples of *naming* in the narrative; that is to say, it is not the result of careful deliberation. Nor does the name connect its owner to his history or place him firmly within a family structure as, ideally, it should. The name is significant because it is part of the complex motif of *songs* and *singing* and can be linked to the musicality in the depiction of the bobcat hunt and other scenes including singing. It can also be associated with what I have said about Guitar's intuitiveness in hunting and interpreting – musicality implies the talent for improvisation and the knowledge of your instrument – and with his distorted politicalness as he forgets how to play it correctly.

No other character in the novel connects more to his or her *blackness*, first positively, then negatively. The musical name tells us that he has an innate understanding of how to play his role, also the role as a black man which he misinterprets unable to find the *juste-milieu*. Later in the scene where Pilate has insulted Milkman by refusing to accept the existence of more "Deads alive" than can be found in

her own house, the origin of Guitar's name is revealed as she asks him if he ever plays his instrument namesake. Their conversation goes like this:

“Leave him alone, Reba. He got to get the feel first. I asked you did you play any. That why they call you Guitar?”

“Not cause I do play. Because I wanted to. When I was real little. So they tell me.”

“Where'd you ever see a guitar?”

“It was a contest, in a store down home in Florida. I saw it when my mother took me downtown with her. I was just a baby. It was one of those things where you guess how many beans in the big glass jar and you win a guitar. I cried for it, they said. And always asked about it.” (45)

Perhaps Guitar's *warpedness*, “his perverted ethnic philosophy” (Bruck: 301), would have been less accentuated and some lives could have been saved had he only had that guitar and learned to play it like a true musician would instead of having to fantasize about it; then, perhaps, he would not have ended up playing so catastrophically *out of key*.

This scene connects naming to music and singing and the continuous reference to names thus becomes part of the defamiliarizing process, music, musicians and musical instruments being metaphors for the instinctive understanding and appreciation of your identity. It is my suggestion that although Guitar never owns or plays a musical instrument, he gradually becomes a guitar, only, regretfully, a weather vane instrument played on by others. Guitar has the instrument serve a lost cause, the group of assassins called “the Seven Days” (*Song*: 155). During the bobcat hunt when Milkman is on the verge of acquiring the ability to perceive and interpret, he tries “to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say” (279), much like a guitarist would pluck his strings. At this very moment Guitar has snuck up from behind without a sound which, of course, he, retaining some musicality, can control and has placed a wire – a *guitar* string? – around Milkman's neck in order to kill him for, allegedly, having taken the gold. However, Guitar is not the only instrument in the forest of

Shalimar. Remember the “tuba”, the “cornet” the “drumbeat sounds” and the “*unh unh unh* bass chords” (278), and the other hunters are very intuitive and musically adept, orchestrating the dogs in their own little band.

The enstranging process and the linking of scenes and themes are very complex in *Song of Solomon*. An example of this is one of the scenes early in the novel where Guitar is being identified. He is described like this: “His *cat* eyes were *gashes of gold*” (22, my emphasis). This foreshadows his presence in the bobcat hunt and his appetite for precious metal, the ancestral gold, literally speaking. When the bobcat is eventually *slit* open after the hunt, Guitar’s politicalness literally rings in the back of Milkman’s head: “*Everybody wants a black man’s life. . . . Not his dead life; I mean his living life. . . . It’s the condition our condition is in. . . . What good is a man’s life if he can’t even choose what to die for?*” (281-282). Duvall pointedly observes that “something larger ruptures in this moment and its aftermath” (104). It is the world according to Guitar which is being metaphorically slain. Having escaped the mortal wire by a hair, Milkman joins the hunters who have treed a bobcat. In the “subsequent butchering at King Walker’s gas station” (105) the cat-eyed man and the bobcat are paralleled as symbols of warped blackness “for hunting is something more than the literal stalking of animals; the hunted animals . . . are totemic substitutes for characters” (96). Duvall says:

As the hunters butcher the bobcat, the scene alternates between the graphic details of the way the cat is dismembered and Milkman’s memories, which are italicized, of pieces of the teachings of Guitar Baines. **Each cut rends another hole in the fabric of Guitar’s patriarchal world picture:**

Luther reached into the paunch and lifted the entrails. He dug under the rib cage to the diaphragm and carefully cut around it until it was free.

*“It is about love. What else but love? Can’t I love what I criticize?” . . .*

They turned to Milkman. “You want the heart?” they asked him. . . .

He found it and pulled. The heart fell away from the chest as easily as yolk slips out of its shell. [*Song: 282*] (105, bold type added)



When Milkman “disheartens” the cat, it is clear that Guitar’s understanding of brotherly love is categorically denounced and now the roles are reversed: whose is the “yolk” now? Not Milkman’s. However, Milkman once exclaimed: “I’m a soft-fried egg”

(*Song*: 115). Guitar answers:

“Negro’s been a lotta things, but he ain’t never been no egg.” . . .

“Nope. Can’t be no egg. It ain’t in him. Something about his genes. His genes won’t let him be no egg no matter how hard he tries. Nature says no. ‘No, you can’t be no egg, nigger. Now, *you can be a crow* if you wanna. Or a big baboon. But not no egg. Eggs is difficult, complicated. Fragile too. And white.’” (115-116, my italics)

Eggs are another aspect of Morrison’s symbolism, but there is no space for a detailed discussion. Duvall sees the egg metaphor as illustrating Pilate’s influence over Milkman as his association of the heart with a “yolk” “takes us back to the first meeting between Milkman and Pilate during which she makes for him the perfect soft-boiled egg” (107).

Guitar’s hollow circumference has been shattered, but Milkman’s wall of resistance has to be broken too. ““Then somebody got to bust your shell”” (*Song*: 116), Guitar says, metaphorically describing one of the main aspects of the novel: creating crevasses in Milkman’s callous exterior of indifference and selfishness. Being a hard egg is unacceptable, but a bird, or “crow”, you *can* be (Incidentally, “Crow Bird” [304], or “Crowell Byrd” [289], was one of Milkman’s ancestors: the brother of his grandmother Sing Bird). Guitar’s ascendancy over Milkman has ceased; his language is silenced by a violent metaphor when the bobcat’s “*tongue* lay in its mouth as harmless as a sandwich” (283, my italics). “Pilate scraped the eggshells together into a little heap” (43) the first time she met Milkman and later she turns out to be his proverbial egg-breaker.

The purpose of Guitar’s character is partly to serve as a foil to Milkman’s, showing how it is not sufficient to possess this ability to interpret and understand; it

must be used correctly. Pilate might have been able to use it productively had she had this talent. Instead, the influence these two characters have on Milkman helps *him* acquire the talent and, seeing how he changes towards the end of the narrative, it seems as if he may be able to employ it so that it will benefit not only himself, but other people as well, if only he survives the ambivalent ending of the novel.

In many of the examples given I have shown how names and their creation are important, whether they designate people or places. The enstranging effect of the motif of *naming* can be found in many other parts of the narrative. Significantly, the novel begins with a variegated enstrangement of the importance of knowing your correct name and identity and thus one of the novel's most important themes is presented at the very beginning. The reader gradually understands that knowing your name is analogous to knowing your family's history.

First, there is the controversy over a certain street name. The only colored doctor who ever lived in the city has had a street named after him, "Doctor Street" (4), but since the postal service did not tolerate such naming and returned mail sent to this address "to the Dead Letter Office" (4) and "city legislators . . . had notices posted . . . saying that the avenue . . . had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (4), the people called it just that: "Not Doctor Street" (4). One might say that the humorous anecdote about the *Not Doctor Street* name is a defamiliarization of the genesis and significance of names and this controversy tells the reader that naming is politics; it is inextricably linked with a person's identity and place in the community. Irony and humor in the narrator's tone is exemplified in the description of posters instructing people not to call the street *Not Doctor Street*:

It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to *keep their memories alive* and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street, and were inclined to call the charity hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital since it was 1931, on the day following Mr.

Smith's leap from its cupola, before the first colored expectant mother was allowed to give birth inside its wards and not on its steps. (4-5, my emphasis)

The song has elements of Black oral tradition and Clarke interestingly observes how the debate on the Doctor Street name illustrates how "textual authority, open to variable interpretations, lacks a stable foundation and thus a controlling position" (269). Clarke adds that "[b]y allowing the communal voice to modify written dominance, Morrison suggests the possibility of a discourse which draws on both orality and literacy" (268-269). It is also interesting how a name of their own choosing can preserve memories. Undoubtedly, names are important.

Just to indicate the cleverness, and I mean this in a positive way, of Morrison's presentation of the *fabula*, a cleverness I regret to say I will not have space to give full justice in this thesis, I would like to draw attention to the scene where the naming of Milkman's grandfather, Macon *Dead*, is being explained. Bureaucrats send letters "to the *Dead* Letter Office" (4, my emphasis) and it is because of a lazy, inattentive bureaucrat at "the Freedmen's Bureau" (53) when Milkman's slave grandfather was given his free papers that his name was taken down as "Dead" (53), "this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (18). All Macon meant to answer to the question of "who his father was" (53) was that he was no longer alive.

To get a fuller perspective of the *naming* process, a few more observations have to be made. The son of Ruth Foster and Macon Dead, Milkman Dead's real name is Macon Dead just like his father's and grandfather's. Having been breastfed until the age of four, he acquires the nickname "Milkman" (15), a name coined by "Freddie the janitor" (10) when he discovers this well-kept secret which he does not hesitate to divulge and spread: "A milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out womens. Here he come. Huh!" (15). Milkman's

father Macon does not approve. Not knowing the background for the naming, “he guessed that this name was not clean. . . . It sounded dirty, intimate, and hot.” (15). He suspected “some filthy connection” (17) because his wife “was lowering her eyelids and dabbing at the sweat on her top lip when she heard it” (17). This *filthiness* of naming, metaphorically speaking, is actually one of the main themes in the novel. The narrator endows Milkman with a confused identity at the very beginning of the *fabula* and the reader witnesses the gradual *purification* of this character as the latter finds out his real name.

Macon Dead is dejected: “It was a matter that concerned him a good deal, for the giving of names in his family was always surrounded by what he believed to be monumental foolishness” (15). “He had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male” (18). Consequently, his two daughters are “Magdalene called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead” (18). His sister Pilate had in a similar manner been given a name from the Bible when “his father, confused and melancholy over his wife’s death in childbirth, had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome” (18). There is a highly significant contrast between this indifference in the naming of living family members and the grandfather who was shot dead and the naming of the man who is the source of myth and riddle in the narrative. Without knowing it, Milkman’s father is thinking of their common ancestor Mr. Solomon:

He walked there now – strutted is the better word, for he had a high behind and an athlete’s stride – *thinking of names*. Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had *a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name*. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. (17-18, my italics)

It can and will indeed be known through Morrison's defamiliarization of naming and search for family and identity.

Another significant episode, also part of the enstrangement, is the scene when the *Solomon* name is first mentioned. Milkman and Guitar have stolen from Pilate her father's bones – convinced they had finally put their hands on the gold – and to help their release from police custody, Pilate tells a lie and says the bones are the remains of her husband who was allegedly lynched and killed fifteen years ago. She calls this male figure “Mr. Solomon” (207), which she does not yet know is the name of her own grandfather. There is humor too in this paragraph. When Pilate found the body after the lynching,

she collected it and tried to bury it, but the “funeral peoples” wanted fifty dollars for a coffin, and the carpenter wanted twelve-fifty for a pine box and she just didn't have no twelve dollars and fifty cents so she just carried what was left of Mr. Solomon (she always called him Mr. Solomon cause he was such a dignified colored man) and put it in a sack and kept it with her. “Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder – Matthew Twenty-one: Two. We was bony fide and legal wed, suh,” she pleaded. (207)

In Pilate's idiom words play both metaphorically and semantically. In this context the “put asunder” which traditionally refers to breaking the holy wedlock also represents Pilate's guarding of the *bones*, a symbolism which will be explained below, from decay and oblivion. Likewise, the hilarious “bony fide” has tactile associations not contained in the legal term *bona fide* (i.e. “in good faith”). There is bitter irony in her seeing Mr. Solomon as a “dignified colored man” as he most ignobly flies away leaving all his children. Pilate had probably heard the song as a little child without knowing who Mr. Solomon was, just thinking he must be somebody decent and important since he has had a song written about him. She has not been able to identify the two, always singing

“Sugarman” as she does. Nor must the location in the Bible be overseen: “Matthew Twenty-one”. Guess how many children Solomon had?

Milkman had shown traces of name pride early in his life. At twelve he is taken by Guitar to visit Pilate, “the woman his father had forbidden him to go near” (36), for the first time. Milkman becomes angry when Pilate says:

“Ain’t but three Deads alive.”

Milkman, who had been unable to get one word out of his mouth after the foolish “Hi,” heard himself shouting: “I’m a Dead! My mother’s a Dead! My sisters. You and him ain’t the only ones!”

Even while he was screaming he wondered why he was suddenly so defensive – *so possessive about his name*. He had always hated that name, all of it, and until he and Guitar became friends, he had hated his nickname too. But in Guitar’s mouth it sounded clever, grown up. Now he was behaving with this strange woman *as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride*, as though she had tried to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged, but had exclusive rights. (38-39, my italics)

In saying that there are but three living “Deads”, Pilate would not exclude her own daughter and granddaughter so the implication is that her brother Macon merits neither the epithet “alive” nor the name “Dead” and, implicitly, nor do his wife and children. From this can be understood that Macon’s household needs to appreciate its history. A name must be earned; by consciously acknowledging your past, you show yourself worthy of a name. As demonstrated, Guitar is no role model for African Americans searching for an identity and few other characters in the novel share his opinions. He has his very own idea of how black people receive their names. He tells Milkman: ““Let me tell you somethin, baby. Niggers get their names the way they get everything else – the best way they can. The best way they can”” (88).

Although Milkman’s pride in names in general may not be shattered by Pilate’s rejection, he is somewhat disquieted when he thinks back and guesses the purport of his nickname. He is in his first stages of learning how to read beyond words:

The picture was developing, of the two men in the bed with his mother, each nibbling on a breast, but the picture cracked and in the crack another picture emerged. There was this green room, a very small green room, and his mother was sitting in the green room and her breasts were uncovered and somebody was sucking them and the somebody was himself. So? So what? My mother nursed me. Mothers nurse babies. . . . He tried to see more of the picture, but couldn't. Then he heard something that he knew was related to the picture. Laughter. Somebody he couldn't see, in the room laughing . . . at him and at his mother, and his mother is ashamed. (77)

Talking to himself now, he suspects incestuous relations may have occurred:

There was his face leaning out of the upturned collar of his jacket, and he knew. "My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers, and somebody saw it and laughed and – 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. And how did I forget that? And why? And if she did that to me . . . then maybe she did other things with her father?" (78)

In this manner the narrator makes the reader even more attentive to situations where names and naming are mentioned.

It is important to understand the complexity of *naming* in *Song of Solomon* in order to realize the significance of the song. I demonstrated the musical qualities in the description of the bobcat hunt. However, music has been ringing throughout the narrative. Morrison's song enstrangement project commences in the very first scene where Pilate, to take the edge off Mr. Smith's suicide and, unknowingly, to light the fuse of flight imagery, another example of Morrison's complex symbolism which burns through the novel, sings

in a powerful contralto:

*O Sugarman done fly away*  
*Sugarman done gone*  
*Sugarman cut across the sky*  
*Sugarman gone home. . . .* (6)

This stanza can be found as early as in the fifth paragraph of the narrative. A few lines above in the same paragraph is the first occurrence of the words *song*, *singer* and *singing*:

And the very young children couldn't make up their minds whether to watch the man circled in blue on the roof or the bits of red flashing around on the ground. *Their dilemma was solved* when a woman suddenly burst into *song*. The *singer*, standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor's daughter was well dressed. . . . The *singing* woman wore a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead. (5, italics added)

The “doctor’s daughter” is at this point in time pregnant with a boy child who is to be known as Milkman from the age of four. The scene is this: wearing “his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest” (5), Robert Smith is standing on the roof of Mercy hospital preparing for his suicidal flight. The pregnant Ruth Foster is perplexed by this charade and drops “her covered peck basket, spilling red velvet rose petals” (5) which had been meticulously stitched by her two daughters also present. There are also “forty or fifty people” (3) who had seen Mr. Smith’s announcement two days before. This palette of red and blue and white snow and the fascinating absurdity of the scene renders the crowd unable to focus, but then Pilate’s singing brings clarity: “Others listened as though it were *the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie*” (6, italics added). Once in his living life does Milkman imagine hearing a piano, but for the wrong reasons; “he smelled money” (250) visualizing the gold upon entering the cave: “It was like candy [*sweetness*] and sex and soft twinkling lights. Like *piano music* with a few *strings* in the background” (250-251, italics added).

*Dilemma* and *riddle* are near, if not strict, synonyms and it is interesting to see how singing already has the capacity to solve problems. It is striking in this quote how the narrator anticipates the rest of the narrative, hinting that there is some “defining” music which will accompany and assist the interpretation of the events that are to take



place later. The narrator announces the process of enstrangement. The scene also introduces the reader to the motif of flying and “constitutes a major device of foreshadowing” (Bruck: 299). The “silent movie” could be a metaphor for the narrative itself.

Ruth Foster is not merely perplexed for “[t]he next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time” (*Song*: 9). It is not incidental that Milkman’s birth is accelerated by these proceedings. The *coincidence* of events, Milkman’s being born in an atmosphere of people flying and singing associates his character with such activities and is of consequence for the further reading of the novel. Milkman is now “closely linked to the motif of flying” (Bruck: 299). Observe how the singing is intensified as the moment of flying approaches:

The singing woman quieted down and, humming the tune, walked through the crowd toward the rose-petal lady, who was still cradling her stomach.

“You should make yourself warm,” she whispered to her, touching her lightly on the elbow. “A little bird’ll be here with the morning.”

“Oh?” said the rose-petal lady. “Tomorrow morning?”

“That’s the only morning coming.”

“It can’t be,” the rose-petal lady said. “It’s too soon.”

“No it ain’t. Right on time.”

The women were looking deep into each other’s eyes when a loud roar went up from the crowd – a kind of wavy *oo* sound. Mr. Smith had lost his balance for a second, and was trying gallantly to hold on to a triangle of wood that jutted from the cupola. Immediately the singing woman began again:

*O Sugarman done fly*

*O Sugarman done gone . . . (9)*

Pilate almost panics when Mr. Smith loses his balance. On some level of consciousness, perhaps momentarily grazing some childhood remembrance, she senses that his vacillation evokes the flying of Mr. Solomon and this further relates the two incidents to each other. Admittedly, the implications of the two events for the characters involved are quite different, but there is a relationship in that the first scene sets the stage for the second through its introduction of symbolism which will become significant in the

narrative. As explained in the introduction, defamiliarization can be achieved by many means. I choose to call defamiliarization the way in which Morrison constructs an intricate weave of metaphors and symbols. This first scene of the novel is poetically named “a choral dance” (126) by O’Shaughnessy as “[t]he movements have a ritual quality, the dance of death with the blue wings on the tower contrasted with the chase of the rose petals, symbols of both love and blood against the white snow” (126).

Pilate, a semi-supernatural character having no navel, is correct in announcing the arrival of a “bird” the next morning. The bird is, of course, Milkman who presses to be born. This bird will fly later in the narrative as he gains knowledge and interpretative strength, the flying being a metaphor for, or defamiliarization of, independence, integrity and the desire and ability to know your ancestry. Flight imagery in the novel mirrors the act of flying described in the song, although in the latter flying does not only have positive connotations.

Pilate is perhaps the character who possesses the largest amount of integrity in *Song of Solomon*. It is only natural then that “[w]ithout ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). Nor is it without reason that her name’s homonym is *pilot*. Keeping in mind my comparison of the hunting scene and the song, the reader should also observe the emphasis on sound production in the quote above: “a kind of wavy *oo* sound”. The imagery of flight in the novel is multifarious, but I do not trace the development of this symbolism in detail. This could have been an interesting exercise, but although the flight imagery is linked to the song in several ways, a thorough study of this imagery is not absolutely essential for the delineation of the development of the song.

Interestingly, considering Pilate’s version of the stanza which is, of course, the last stanza of the song, one is struck by the fact that “Sugarman” and “Solomon” are not too dissimilar phonologically and, knowing the title of the novel, a perceptive reader

may already suspect word play. A child, the young Pilate hearing the song sung not by her mother Sing who miraculously died *before* Pilate was born, but perhaps by other people in the vicinity, may easily have mistaken the real for the phony, believing “Sugarman” was merely some hypothetical but insignificant dreamlover. In fact, “Pilate’s mistake stems from a fragmented oral tradition, not an ignorance of a written text. The recovery of that uninscribed tradition is the project that re-generates identity for Pilate and Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and is the project inscribed within the text itself” (Stryz: 32).

Pilate had been ripped away from her community at the age of twelve; “I was cut off from people early” (141) she says, before she had acquired the superior analytical strength that is Milkman’s – only when he is thirty-something. This incites her to undertake “twenty-some-odd years” (148) of roaming the land, “the wandering life” (148), looking for her people. The tragicomic irony is that while she has clung morbidly for decades to the remnants of a human carcass, wrongly believing they are the bones of some anonymous white-haired man and never guessing they are her father’s, she has in fact been pregnant with the clue to the *riddle* all her life. However, had she been able to construe the genealogical grammar contained in this verse, the narrative would have fallen apart. Milkman’s journey would have been pointless; he would never have become his aunt’s deliverer, disburdening her of this haunting conundrum as he finally does. Pilate was for years in her youth the adventurer and detective, much more so than Milkman, carrying her geography book, seeking her people, whereas Milkman succeeds within days as a result of an ever increasing curiosity, but also due to sheer luck, in finding what a lifetime of investigation has not yielded to Pilate.

Before I continue tracing the song, I would like to describe a scene from Macon’s and Pilate’s childhood which is the origin of the symbolism of *bones*. The

bones symbolize a connectedness with the past, a past to which the song is supposed to gradually connect Milkman. I will also describe some significant characteristics of Pilate's personality.

Shortly after Pilate's and Macon's father, the good farmer, was killed and they had buried him down by "the stream on Lincoln's Heaven" (166) in a shallow grave, they ran to escape their father's murderers and sought refuge for two weeks in the house where "Circe, the midwife who had delivered them both" (166) was working. Due to impatience, a longing for more familiar food and Pilate's soreness after having had her earlobe pierced to harbor an earring containing the piece of paper where her father had once scribbled the letters of her name, they leave this house and after three days begin to see the ghost of their dead father who eventually lures them into a cave. The earring is referred to several times in the narrative and serves as a symbol of the importance of carrying your name and history with you always. A name truly is a *gem*. Inside the cave is a "very old, very white" (169) man whom Macon unnecessarily kills in a fit of panic. Pilate is twelve and Macon sixteen years old at the time and they discover that the old man had been lying on "three boards" (170) which covered "little gray bags" (170) full of "gold nuggets" (170). The sister and brother fight when Pilate protests to Macon's urge to take the gold with him. She insists it must stay or else they will become simple thieves taking the loot and running. Hovet and Lounsberry claim that the gold serves "to represent the decadence and death associated with the Deads' pursuit of wealth, respectability, and position" (133).

I would like to comment on another aspect of this scene. Milkman had always been forbidden by his father to visit Pilate, this because Macon ever since the incident in the cave has suspected she is dishonest. Starting to relate the scene to his son, he says:

“A long time ago, I told you about when I was a boy on the farm. About Pilate and me. About my father getting killed. I never finished the story; I never told you all of it. The part I left out was about me and Pilate. I tried to keep you away from her and said *she was a snake*. Now I’m going to tell you why.” (165, my italics)

He calls her “a snake” because he thinks she took the gold and what I wish to discuss, if parenthetically, are the Biblical associations in the scene, which can be seen in relation to the way names in the Dead family are chosen from the Bible, and which also substantiate Pilate’s role as *singer* and *sorceress*. Pilate, the one who has always been interested in finding her people, is a *truth seeker* and *temptress* who works with fruits, fruits of which Milkman is forbidden to partake and one may see an allusion to the paradisiacal Eve. It is Pilate who is “near hysteria” (167) in Circe’s house, no longer stomaching the *artificial* “white toast and cherry jam for breakfast” (167). “She wanted her own cherries, from her own cherry *tree*, with stems and seeds; not some too-sweet mashed mush” (167, my italics). She is nature not culture if one may say so without condescension; she is even supernatural – she has no navel and from within her dead mother’s body “she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water” (27) – and it is her qualities as *enchantress* which frighten Macon. Deborah L. Clarke says that “Pilate, a woman of almost divine strength and understanding, replaces Christ, and her lack of a navel enhances her divinity” (273). Fabre claims that this physical idiosyncrasy “designates her as a mythical outsider, a sort of messiah” (110). Wilentz calls her “a conjure woman” and states that her anomaly “separates her – *like any religious figure* – from her community” (66, italics added). I will later demonstrate how Pilate and her daughter and granddaughter act as semi-*sirens* on both Macon and Milkman with their singing and it will become obvious how important it is for her to possess the talents portrayed above in order to fulfil her role as a singing spiritual guide. Circe, incidentally, is the name of an enchantress from classical mythology: “[D]aughter of Helios and aunt of

Medea, [she] had the power to turn men into swine” (De Weever: 142) and “[s]he showed him [Odysseus] the way to the underworld where, she said, Teiresias would give him further directions for finding his way home” (142). Morrison’s Circe tells Milkman where the cave is and similarly helps him find *his* spiritual home.

Finally Macon and Pilate leave the house and “[t]he first day out was joyous for them. They ate raspberries and *apples*; they took off their shoes and let the dewy grass and sun-warmed dirt soothe their feet” (167-168, my italics). However, their garden does not remain blissful for ever:

Now the land itself, the only one they knew and knew intimately, began to terrify them. The sun was blazing down, the air was sweet, but every leaf that the wind lifted, every rustle of a pheasant hen in a clump of ryegrass, sent needles of fear through their veins. The cardinals, the gray squirrels, the garden *snakes*, the butterflies, the ground hogs and rabbits – all the affectionate things that had peopled their lives ever since they were born became ominous signs of *a presence* that was searching for them, following them. Even the river’s babbling sounded like the call of a liquid throat waiting, just waiting for them. That was in the daylight. How much more terrible was the night. (168, my italics)

The “presence” is, of course, no demon but the ghost who wishes them no harm. Having had too much *truth* and after spending a night in the cave, Macon feels “a terrific urge to relieve his bowels, the consequence of three days’ diet of *wild fruit*” (169, my italics). Having eaten forbidden foods, immediately afterwards he discovers the old man and, unable to control his new-found violent urges, he kills him with a knife. He then discovers the bags of gold – has “some difficulty with the *wire*” (170, my italics) though – and the ghost reappears and whispers: “‘Sing. Sing,’ in a hollow voice before he melted away again” (170).

This scene is important because Macon will forever suspect Pilate took the gold since he was chased from the cave as she “got his knife, not yet dry from the old man’s blood, and held it ready for his heart” (171) and since the gold was no longer there when he re-entered the cave “three days and two nights later” (171). It is even more important

because it is the origin of the symbolism of *bones* in the narrative. When Pilate has given birth to her daughter Rebecca, shortened to “Reba” (147), chosen, of course, from the Bible, she leaves the island on which she now lives to obey the exhortation of her father’s ghost which she interprets as an incitement to return to the cave to collect the bones of the old man: ““You just can’t fly on off and leave a body”” (147). The bones she returns with are her father’s as Milkman later explains: ”Pilate, your father’s body floated up out of the grave you all dug for him. One month later it floated up. The Butlers, somebody, put his body in the cave. . . . That was your father you found. You’ve been carrying your father’s bones – all this time”” (333). This Pilate does not know, but, as Brenner says, “[w]hat matters is her regard of the bones as symbols of an obligation to a past event and a human relationship” (22).

Pilate, not having the information handed to her on a silver plate, is consistent in her misreading of the song. The scene where her father’s ghost pays a visit and tells her to “sing” and not “leave a body” is explained to Macon by Pilate in this manner:

“I spent that whole day and night in there, and when I looked out the next morning you was gone. I was scared I would run into you, but I didn’t see hide nor hair of you. It was three years or more ’fore I went back. The winter it was. Snow was everywhere and I couldn’t hardly find my way. I looked up Circe first, then went looking for the cave. It was a hard trek, I can tell you, and I was in frail condition. Snow piled up every which way. But you should of known better than to think I’d go back there for them little old bags. I wasn’t stuttin ’em when I first laid eyes on ’em, I sure wasn’t thinking about them three years later. I went cause papa told me to. He kept coming to see me, off and on. Tell me things to do. *First he just told me to sing, to keep on singing.* ‘Sing,’ he’d whisper. ‘Sing, sing.’ Then right after Reba was born he came and told me outright: ‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body,’ he tole me. A human life is precious. You shouldn’t fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when we did it. He meant that *if you take a life, then you own it.* You responsible for it. You can’t get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now. So I had to go back for it. And I did find the cave. And there he was. Some wolves or something must have drug it cause it was right in the mouth of the cave, laying up, sitting up almost, on that very rock we slept on. I put him in my sack, piece by piece. Some cloth was still on him, but his *bones* was clean and dry. I’ve had it every since. Papa told me to, and he was right, you know. You can’t take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. *And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you*

*anyway, in your mind. So it's a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind."*

Fucks up your mind, thought Milkman, fucks it up for good. (207-208, my emphasis)

The multiple meaning of the utterance of Jake the ghost clearly escapes Pilate. Firstly, it is an elegiac outburst lamenting the loss of Sing, Jake's wife. Secondly, it can be seen as an incitement to sing Solomon's song in order to break its code, to sing one's past metaphorically speaking. Pilate mistakenly reads it as an encouragement to have her vocal cords produce any melody, which "relieved her gloom immediately" (147). The order not to "leave a body" is understood by the down-to-earth Pilate as a request to collect the bones of the man who was killed in the cave, whereas a more plausible interpretation would be that the ghost blames his wife for leaving him, dying too soon, or he blames his father for "brush[ing] too close to a tree" (324), dropping him and leaving him behind as he flies to Africa. The reading most saturated with meaning, however, is the metaphorical interpretation where "body" signifies history and ancestry. The ghost then acts as a precursor to the teacher role later embraced by Milkman; he tries to educate his daughter Pilate instructing her to seek her family's roots, but, alas, she remains unreceptive to his intimations.

Singing was introduced in the very first scene of the *fabula* and I suggest that the *slow* unravelling of the song and its meaning has a defamiliarizing effect. Knowing Pilate's character better, it is easier to comprehend her function in other song-laden scenes. The second time singing occurs is when Pilate visits the Deads after Milkman is born without being of much help, but she is "singing to the baby" (20) and this is a significant foreshadowing of her special role as a singing guide to Milkman. Macon is embarrassed that "this raggedy bootlegger was his sister" (20) who together with her daughter and granddaughter constituted "[a] collection of lunatics who made wine and



*sang* in the streets ‘like common street women! Just like common street women!’” (20, my italics).

One of the more ravishing scenes occurs when Macon, previously repelled by Pilate, walks around town contemplating “his houses stretched up beyond him like squat *ghosts* with hooded eyes” (27, my italics) – he is a house owner and landlord, a “propertied Negro” (20) – and a “feeling of loneliness” (27) befalls him; he cannot help but be drawn to his sister’s house. He tries to convince himself he hates her, but it is obvious that deep in his soul he still harbors sympathy for her. Now for the first time we see her in the role of the *enchantress*. His *dear* sister lives in “Darling Street” (27) where he now passes her house: “Now, nearing her yard, he trusted that the dark would keep anyone in her house from seeing him. He did not even look to his left as he walked by it. *But then he heard the music. They were singing. All of them. Pilate, Reba, and Reba’s daughter, Hagar*” (28, my italics). A few lines below the narrative goes on:

There were no street lights in this part of town; only the moon directed the way of a pedestrian. Macon walked on, resisting as best he could the sound of the voices that followed him. He was rapidly approaching a part of the road where the *music* could not follow, when he saw, like a scene on the back of a postcard, a picture of where he was headed – his own home; his wife’s narrow unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning; his son, to whom he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism. “Hello, Daddy.” “Hello, son, tuck your shirt in.” “I found a *dead bird*, Daddy.” “Don’t bring that mess in this house. . . .” There was no *music* there, and *tonight he wanted just a bit of music* – from the person who had been his first caring for.

He turned back and walked slowly toward Pilate’s house. They were *singing some melody* that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba’s piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, *pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet*.

*Surrendering to the sound*, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, *the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico*. Treading as lightly as he could, he crept up to the side window where the candlelight flickered lowest, and peeped in. . . .

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women *singing* in the candlelight. Reba’s soft profile, Hagar’s hands moving, moving in her heavy hair, and Pilate. He knew her face better than he knew his own. *Singing* now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered

her voice. But he knew that when she was neither singing nor talking, her face was animated by her constantly moving lips. She chewed things. . . .

As Macon felt himself softening *under the weight of memory and music*, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They didn't move. They simply stopped singing and Reba went on paring her toenails, Hagar threaded and unthreaded her hair, and Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring. (28-30, my italics)

“Like sirens, Pilate, Reba, Hagar hold Macon in the magic of their song so that he *cannot leave*” (De Weever: 137). He cannot resist this *defining music* whose close association with memory is underscored by the narrator. Soothing song evokes adolescent innocence in a momentary lapse in his stifling severity of character. However, music is lost on him and can never define his problem. *Song* and *flight* are combined in that Milkman's discovery of “a dead bird” is included in this scene brimful of singing.

In a later scene Pilate has a similar enchanting effect on Milkman and Guitar. They are blossoming *truth seekers* and when Milkman is twelve years old, the older Guitar who “[h]ad even been inside her house” (36) takes him to Pilate's home:

All those unbelievable but entirely possible stories about his father's sister – the woman his father had forbidden him to go near – *had both of them spellbound*. Neither wished to live one more day *without finding out the truth*, and they believed they were the legitimate and natural ones to do so. After all, Guitar already knew her, and Milkman was her nephew. . . .

As they came closer and saw the brass box dangling from her ear, Milkman knew that what with the earring, the orange, and the angled black cloth, nothing – not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world – could keep him from her. (36, my italics)

It is in this scene that Milkman becomes “so possessive about his name” (38). The ambiance in the house intensifies and captivates the boys by degrees: “[t]he piny-winy smell was narcotic” (40) and the boys “sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on” (40). Pilate is a producer of wine giving people also the physical means to suspend their inhibited selves and now Milkman and Guitar participate in the cleansing

of brambles for wine making. Milkman's power of resistance to the *enthralment* is fast eroding:

Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy – wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (47)

Wilentz claims "it is her [Pilate's] sensory world of African smells, tastes, and visions which both engages his curiosity and *enlivens his recursive memory*" (64, my italics).

When, subsequently, the discussion turns to hunger, it is Hagar's longing for love which is referred to. The singing is about to begin:

Hagar tossed a branch to the heap on the floor and rubbed her fingers. The tips were colored a deep red. "Some of my days were hungry ones."

With the quickness of **birds**, the heads of Pilate and Reba shot up. They peered at Hagar, then exchanged looks.

"Baby?" Reba's voice was soft. "You been hungry, baby? Why didn't you say so?" Reba looked hurt. "We get you anything you want, baby. Anything. You *been* knowing that."

Pilate spit her twig into the palm of her hand. Her face went still. Without those moving lips **her face was like a mask**. It seemed to Milkman that somebody had just clicked off a light. He looked at the faces of the women. Reba's had crumpled. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Pilate's face was still as death, but alert as though waiting for some signal. Hagar's profile was hidden by her hair. She leaned forward, her elbows on her thighs, rubbing fingers that looked bloodstained in the lessening light. Her nails were very very long.

The quiet held. Even Guitar didn't dare break it.

Then Pilate spoke. "Reba. She don't mean food."

Realization swept slowly across Reba's face, but she didn't answer. Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead:

*O Sugarman don't leave me here  
Cotton balls to choke me  
O Sugarman don't leave me here  
Buckra's arms to yoke me. . . .*

When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too.

*Sugarman done fly away  
Sugarman done gone  
Sugarman cut across the sky  
Sugarman gone home.*

Milkman could hardly breathe. Hagar's voice swooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own. When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, he risked a glance at his friend and saw the setting sun **gilding** Guitar's eyes, putting into shadow a slow smile of recognition. (48-49, bold type added)

The women are birdlike in appearance, their heads shooting up and peering. There is tragic irony in how Hagar's singing foreshadows Milkman's abandoning her. The song is also addressed to him – she will later hunger for his love; he too is a “Sugarman”, but, naturally, he does not yet recognize the significance of singing, nor the true purport of the song. To him music is still *undefined*. The alteration in Pilate's face during singing underscores the solemnity of the moment. And, the gold is already shining in the eyes of Guitar, the *musician*, whose “recognition” may be evidence of an understanding of song which eludes Milkman.

At home Milkman is being reprimanded for having visited Pilate, the “snake”. However, the singing has had an effect on the twelve-year-old boy. He replies: ““You treat me like I was a baby. You keep saying you don't have to explain nothing to me. How do you think that makes me feel? Like a baby, that's what”” (50). Exposure to singing makes people grow; they gain new strength and I have illustrated above how the young Guitar answered back at people in a scene which included singing.

What is more interesting is the fact that after the singing at Pilate's house comes a long section where Macon relates some of his family history to his son Milkman. He talks about the farm he grew up on, how they *named* their animals “President Lincoln”, “Ulysses S. Grant”, “General Lee” (52), etc., and he describes the *naming* of his father by the “Yankee” in “the Freedmen's Bureau” (53). Singing, apparently, is a defining *catalyst* and it is highly significant how history, naming and singing concur in the narrative. The reader should also consider the presence of birds in the scenes, some *dead*, some alive.

Elements of songs and singing are found in other parts of the novel. We learn that Milkman's grandfather Macon Dead the heroic super-farmer "could plow forty in no time flat and *sang like an angel* while he did it" (235, my italics). Later in the same paragraph the narrator almost starts singing, or becomes very rhythmical as the prose assumes the mode of a beating drum, all part of the governing defamiliarization project. It is as if the farm, named "Lincoln's Heaven" (51) after the president, and an implied author, the textual intention or moral message of the text if one may speak of such, unite in a "We" which shakes with a pounding pulse of emotion. In this way narrative perspective also plays a part in the defamiliarizing process. The next section immediately follows the quote above:

He had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict, with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife, and in one year he'd leased ten acres, the next ten more. Sixteen years later he had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. "You see?" the farm said to them. "See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling", it said. "Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. *Nowhere* else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on!" (235)

Hubbard sees Biblical implications in this section, calling Morrison's prose "sermonic" (297). Musically inspired, he claims that "[t]hrough her verbal *arpeggios*, the cascading adjectives, and the *rhythmic repetitions*, Morrison's narrator-preacher takes the woolly haired Jesus from the lofty throne of a faraway heaven and makes him a part of the people's daily rituals – rituals of toil, despair, triumph. They see, hear, and touch Him as He walks a mile in their shoes. . . ." (297-298, my italics).

Towards the end of the novel, in his final stages of education, Milkman finds the truths to which songs have made him perceptive. Much of “the family story he seeks is embedded in the song” (Byerman: 139) and parts he can read by himself, but he benefits from one last visit to Susan Byrd whose aunt was Milkman’s grandmother and who finally imparts the so far unexposed details of his past. Having been fully informed by this distant relative, Milkman is at the peak of elation and refers to the song when saying to a local prostitute, Sweet, a woman Milkman treats better than he usually handles women due to his emotional awakening: “I can play it now. It’s my game now” (Song: 327). O’Shaughnessy calls Sweet “[t]he reward of Milkman’s new understanding” (130) and says that “[t]he language with its harmony describing their actions following lovemaking, shows the responsibility Milkman now gladly undertakes” (130). The song has eventually brought sound to the silent movie that was Milkman’s former life. His previous *impuissance* in game comprehension can be traced back to his childhood: “he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games” (Song: 264). Milkman has lead a relatively sheltered life, never having been in financial straits, going to fancy parties, living a “white” life unconcerned with his blackness, his roots.

Whether Milkman has acquired full mastery of singing games and gained the new personal insights this metaphorically implies was disputed among scholars. Three to four pages at the end of the novel render Milkman’s deciphering efforts. In Shalimar he sees dancing children and suddenly

they all dropped to their knees and he was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: “O Sugarman don’t leave me here,” except the children sang, “Solomon don’t leave me here.” (299-300)

Immediately Milkman thinks of Pilate and his mother to whose plight he is now sensitized; “sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her. . .” (300), and: “What might she have been like had her husband loved her?” (300). This is also the moment when he acknowledges his own disrespectful treatment of Hagar. Then he becomes absorbed by song interpretation. First hearing “Reiner” (302), he identifies it as “Ryna” (302) and after finally realizing that Solomon and Ryna had had “Solomon’s Leap” (302) and “Ryna’s Gulch” (302) named after them, he ponders: “If Solomon and Ryna were names of people, the others might be also” (302). Other events and names are gradually disclosed as he pieces together parts of his genealogy. There is, for example, the “*red man’s house*” (303) in the song which refers to the fact that his grandmother Sing was of Native American ancestry. Milkman also deduces that Solomon and Ryna must have been lovers before Solomon flew away, but, as mentioned above, he still needs Susan Byrd to explain a considerable amount of details which he is not able to read and decode himself from the song. He depends on women guides to the very end.

Another example of Milkman’s new awareness is his eagerness to understand placenames. On the bus ride home to tell his family all he has learned “[h]e read the road signs with interest . . . wondering what lay beneath the names” (329).

Under the recorded names were other names, just as “Macon Dead,” recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. (329)

Reading “names that had seemed like disused signposts pointing nowhere” (Guth: 581-582), Milkman, in Moraru’s words, “becomes suddenly alert to the onomastic world” (200).

Chapter 13, significantly placed between Milkman's reading of song and his final enlightening visit to Susan Byrd, relates Hagar's madness and demise and bitterly proves the tardiness of Milkman's awakening and that "the consequences of Milkman's own stupidity would remain" (335). This chapter ends with Hagar's funeral where Pilate and her daughter Reba sing:

*In the nighttime.  
Mercy.  
In the darkness.  
Mercy.  
In the morning.  
Mercy. (317)*

They cry for mercy at her death and Milkman was born at "Mercy Hospital" (4). It is not made clear in the novel, but it is likely that their hometown is called Mercy. Thus, the lament becomes a cry to not only Milkman, but to the whole community – Pilate cries "Mercy!" and "I want mercy!" (316-317) several times. Shortly after, still at the funeral, Milkman's actions are evoked, but, more interestingly, for the first time in the narrative the word *sugar* is used with reference to a *woman* in a song. Pilate sings: "*Who's been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin? . . . I'll find who's botherin my baby girl*" (318). She finds him, of course, or, rather, he comes to her elated by his new knowledge and she breaks "a wet green bottle over his head" (331).

One last time in *Song of Solomon* there is singing and now for the second time it is a woman who is associated with sugar. The narrative has come full circle; it started with Pilate singing "*Sugarman*" (6) when Milkman was born, but now it is Milkman who sings "*Sugargirl don't leave me here*" (336, my italics) to Pilate who is dying, shot by Guitar, in her nephew's arms. Susan Farrell states that when he sings to Pilate,

not only does Milkman recognize and affirm female experience, but he actually lives it. Milkman becomes the "other," the person left behind. . . . Milkman is now



the nurturer as he cradles Pilate in his arms. . . . Contrary to Brenner's assertions that Milkman's final flight is "but one more gesture of irresponsibility" and that Milkman "flies . . . from the burdens of doing something meaningful in life," Milkman's flight represents an acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility to others. . . . The novel's dominant metaphor of flying changes from a "flying away" to a "flying toward". (147)

Finally Milkman has learned to respect and praise the *sugar girls* in his life as, singing the blues, he *appropriates* the song. He makes it his own although he "knew no songs, and had no singing voice" (*Song*: 336). He internalizes it after it has hovered in his life as an emotionally expressive language he has not understood, but only used for some undefined enjoyment at Pilate's house. He has found the right kind of gold in "the pursuit of the song which yields the nugget of [his] identity" (De Weever: 143), and when he sings to Pilate, it "is not the wailing lament of Pilate and Reba's 'Mercy' song, but a song of direct involvement between speaker and listener, and it holds the promise of flight to another world" (O'Shaughnessy: 131).

Milkman's sister First Corinthians Dead, one of his sugargirls, is able to break out of the Dead household by starting a secret relationship with Henry Porter, member of the Seven Days. Milkman later sabotages this liaison by telling their father this man is of poor repute. Corinthians had had the strength of character to even humiliate herself in front of Porter, "banging on the car-door window of a yardman" (*Song*: 198), desperate for him to "protect her from a smothering death of dry roses" (199). She had felt "superior to" (196) "those women on the bus" (196), "'You can have one of *them*, you know'" (196) she had told Porter, and at first she had spoken contemptuously about the "greeting card" (196) she had been given by Porter: "[I]t was the most ridiculous, most clichéd, most commercial piece of tripe the drugstore world has to offer" (196).

Magdalene called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead have been kept away from this alternative "world" which is the antithesis of the girls' prudish, prisonlike existence, but what is more interesting is the philosophy expressed in the banal wording

of the greeting card itself. This “verse” (193) is italicized and pulled out from the rest of the text and the reader cannot avoid a comparison with the song. Part of the defamiliarizing song device, slightly comical in the context, it is a contrast to Milkman’s callousness and foreshadows in plain language what singing can teach a perceptive listener. In simplistic poeticalness, leaving out the historical and other dimensions, it paraphrases *Song of Solomon*’s songs, perhaps foreshadowing the only “outstretched” (264) hands in the novel which are those of the boy in the circle of children in Shalimar who “turned around like an airplane” (264):

*Friendship is an outstretched hand,  
A smile of warm devotion.  
I offer both to you this day,  
With all the heart’s emotion. (193)*

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### *The Tree as Metaphor in Beloved*

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the complexity of symbolism and figurative language in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's richness of tropes and her passionate poetical style are perhaps the traits of her prose which most fascinate me as a reader and in order not to confine my analysis to the study of one novel only, I will now examine possible implications of the tree-shaped scar on the back of one of the main protagonists in *Beloved*, the mother of the ghostly mysterious Beloved character, Sethe. I will not, however, primarily aim for a comparative analysis; this I will leave to the reader. Before I start my analysis, I will present a general introduction to how I understand the concept of *metaphor*, also citing Formalism for the sake of analytical coherence with the preceding bulk of my thesis.

The cicatrice on Sethe's back, a result of the whipping she had to endure under slavery, is a literary trope with several possible interpretations to which I will return. One may dispute whether the term *metaphor* is attributable to this *tree*, or if it would be more correctly referred to as a *symbol*. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* defines metaphor as "the application of a word or phrase to an object or concept which it does not literally denote, in order to suggest comparison with another object or concept, as in 'A mighty fortress is our God'" (901). The etymological source of the term is the Greek *metaphérein* which means *to transfer*. The same dictionary says that a symbol can be "something used for or regarded as representing something else" or "a material object representing something, often something immaterial" (1440). It can also be "a word, phrase, image, or the like, having a complex of associated meanings and perceived as having inherent value separable from that which is symbolized" (1440).

Adhering to these definitions, it would seem most reasonable to call the tree-shaped scar a symbol, as a metaphor is, strictly speaking, a verbal expression contained within one phrase in which the semantic content of one word is *transferred* to another word or phenomenon by association of the two.

The comparing locution, the *metaphor*, can either be an arrangement where the “*tenor*” (the item which is to be figuratively, one might add defamiliarizingly, *represented*) and the “*vehicle*” (the word or expression which *represents* through “a deviant use of language . . . which is in some way semantically foregrounded”) (both terms from G. N. Leech, quoted in Carter: 139) are syntactically linked by a *copula* verb, usually a form of BE, such as in the phrase “*You* (“*tenor*”) are *the sunshine* (“*vehicle*”) of my life”, or it can be a construction where the *tenor* is implicit and must be inferred from the context: “*She is killing me* (“*vehicle*”)” (meaning “*She makes me laugh* [“*tenor*”]).

Having thus established the distinction between the *referrer* (“*vehicle*”) and the *referent* (“*tenor*”), I would like to direct the attention to Leech’s term “ground of likeness” (Quoted in Carter: 139). In “selecting certain common features and rejecting others” (139), it is possible to make the connection between *tenor* and *vehicle* by discovering equivalents among their respective semantic features. If no such “ground of likeness” obtains, the metaphor will fail to be understood. In the phrase “*You are the sunshine of my life*” common features between “*You*” and “*sunshine*” could be that they are both life-giving; they radiate and exude warmth, the first metaphorically, the latter literally.

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, however, expands the definition of metaphor, stating that it can also mean “a *symbol* of a usu. abstract thing” (856, my italics), thus creating fuzzy boundaries between the two concepts. Some scholars also use the term

metaphor in their discussion of the tree in *Beloved*. In this novel the tree represents both the green plant and the scar which takes its form. Also, some of the properties of this plant are *transferred* to abstract phenomena in the lives of the characters, and it will be demonstrated in my analysis that the tree and its variations have further implications besides being a physical emblem on the back of one of the characters; trees occur in many scenes in the novel and the concept of metaphor will help elucidate the function of these. It is not a matter of great importance in this thesis to classify each manifestation of the tree as either *symbol* or *metaphor*; it is more interesting to examine the variations of the tree *motif* as such and its possible interpretations and also its connections to the thematics of *Beloved*.

Viktor Shklovsky, much cited in my introduction, also discusses the role of images in literature in “Art as Technique”. Always loyal to his Formalist doctrine, he does not seem to think an author can have the capacity to invent new metaphors or to evince any genuine creative originality. Just as literary devices and the renewal of these are contingent upon “pre-existing forms” (1990: 20) and their *deautomatization*, “[i]mages are given to poets; the ability to remember them is far more important than the ability to create them” (1965: 7). It is Shklovsky’s opinion that “images change little; from century to century, from nation to nation, from poet to poet, they flow on without changing. Images belong to no one: they are ‘the Lord’s’” (7). According to Lemon and Reis, in the section introducing “Art as Technique”, “Shklovsky attacks the views . . . that ‘art is thinking in images’ and that its purpose is to present the unknown (most often the abstract or transcendent) in terms of the known” (3). The reason is that often in literature, for example in poetry with imagery from classical mythology, “the image . . . is *less familiar* than the thing it stands for” (4, my italics) (The device of

defamiliarization would present a thing in a less familiar manner to familiarize the reader with it, to make him or her perceive it anew).

Shklovsky's downplaying of originality may rest on his own account, but he makes some statements which are useful in this context and which compare well to what has been said in the beginning of this chapter. He contends that "[p]rose imagery is a means of abstraction" (1965: 9) and that "[t]he general purpose of imagery, is to *transfer* the usual perception of an object into the sphere of *a new perception* – that is, to make a *unique semantic modification*" (21, italics added).

Krystyna Pomorska discusses Shklovsky's idea of the position of the image in literature. She starts by stating that

[t]he idea of imagery as a distinctive feature of poetry . . . was promoted in Romanticism; therefore, the creative process as such, so often discussed in Romanticism, was usually claimed to be "thinking in images". This concept, naturally, was unacceptable for the Opojaz as it necessarily involved the creative personality and the psychology of perception. (23)

To Shklovsky images were, of course, "the Lord's". Pomorska goes on to say that

Shklovsky disagrees, first of all, with the interpretation of the literary metaphor as a condensation of thought, because the aim of literature is not cognition. Only in "practical language" can an image have this function, for there it is "connected with thinking". In poetry, metaphor, equally with other tropes, intensifies the artistic effect, focusses the attention of the receiver upon the material of a literary work. (23-24)

One may be critical of Shklovsky's puristic attitude towards literature; it would be useful, then, to recall Jakobson and his emphasis of "the autonomy of the aesthetic function" (Q. in Jefferson: 31) and, thus, his reluctance to exclude other perspectives.

Pomorska continues, however, to contend that "[t]he notion of metaphor as *a visually perceptible image* was definitely discarded by the Opojaz" (24, italics added). This Formalist stand, together with their rejection of "thinking in images", seems to me literary purism taken to the extreme. Non-referential poeticalness can and does,

undoubtedly, fascinate, but it is unreasonable entirely to dispossess metaphor of its ability to inspire a reader to form mental pictures.

In his study of vocabulary Ronald Carter has yet another perspective on metaphor, apart from his discussion of *tenor* and *vehicle*. Many of his other ideas parallel those examined above, but, more interestingly, they also recapitulate some Formalist views on *defamiliarization* and *automatization* which were cited in my introduction:

Metaphor has always been seen as a fundamentally literary property as a result of the apparent propensity of its users to *create new insights into human experience and values*; and metaphorization has been conventionally regarded as a liberating process in which divergent and *deautomatizing ways of thinking* are made possible. . . . [T]he metaphors we live and think by are often dead metaphors or at least metaphors which have been overused and . . . the creative artist is one who can *transform our ways of seeing* by displacing ordinary, stale and overstrained expressions with metaphoric choices which *introduce new "schema refreshing" perceptions*. (144, my italics)

Immediately, this would seem to posit a close relationship between *metaphor* and *defamiliarization* (Carter explicitly establishes a rapport between the two in claiming that the “defamiliarization of or deviation from the routine common-sense perception of the world [are] brought about by those metaphors generally assumed to possess greater degrees of literariness” [141]) which, presumably, would be welcomed in this thesis. And so it is, but I repeat that defamiliarization can also be achieved by many means which I do not examine. However, the centrality of figurative language in prose may suggest at least a high prominence of metaphor in the wide range of enstranging devices.

Before I start to review various scholarly essays on the tree metaphor, I would like to include a statement by Toni Morrison in an interview from 1977. Commenting on Morrison’s explicitly stated wish “[t]o try to say a lot in a line” (Taylor-Guthrie: 35), Jane Bakerman, the interrogator, claims that this “requires close attention to the *symbol*

*structure* of each book . . . [as] those symbols are often the route into a character or a scene” (35, italics added). Morrison then says:

A metaphor is a way of seeing something, either *familiar* or *unfamiliar*, in a way that you can grasp it. If I get the right one, then I’m all right. But I can’t just leap in with words, I have to get a hook. That’s the way I think; I need it, the phrase or the picture or the word or some gesture. I need that thing over Sula’s eye [the symbolic birthmark on one of the main characters in Morrison’s *Sula*]. (35, italics added)

Bakerman says that the particular features Morrison endows her characters with are “devices [which] come to stand for characterization, attitudes, roles in society” (35) and that “the symbol becomes the evocation of the character” (36).

“The figurative often has an origin in physical, *bodily experience*” (143, italics added), says Carter, and, turning now to a review of scholarship on the tree metaphor, I need to explain briefly the origin of Sethe’s scar, that is to say, the bodily experience which has produced this figure on her back. On “Sweet Home” (*Beloved*: 6), the Kentucky plantation where Sethe served as a slave, she was once severely humiliated when white boys took milk from her breasts, and when she later “told Mrs. Garner on em” (16), she received a whipping which resulted in an indelible scar. Eighteen years later she relates this episode to Paul D, one of the other slaves from Sweet Home who now visits her in her haunted home outside Cincinnati, Ohio: ““Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher [the slave master] made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still”” (17).

Many scholars have found that this scar and also the whole complex of tree symbolism in *Beloved* are highly allusive and that this motif is probably the most central one in the novel. Perhaps the most thorough examination of this trope is undertaken by Michèle Bonnet. Her starting point is a seemingly innocuous remark made by the narrator as Sethe, her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver and Paul D go to attend “a carnival” (*Beloved*: 46). They pass a “lumberyard” (47) which is the “workplace” (47)



of a man who saws down trees, “[t]he sawyer” (47), and they see some “old roses [which] were dying” (47). Commenting on their planting “twelve years ago” (47), the narrator claims it was merely “something to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living” (47). In the sawyer’s yard must lie scores of felled trees – dead – and there was “a stench of rotten roses” (47), and “[t]he closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent” (47). Apparently, dead trees are ominous things. Bonnet takes the opportunity to formulate one of her laws (“the tree is a natural element that serves as a law” [42]):

[T]he religious referent that *transgression* is measured against is not Western religion or even some secular yet holy human law, but *man’s natural environment*. This might seem to be a somewhat extravagant or incidental remark were it not for the fact that *trees play such a prominent part in the novel*, either in the form of the highly symbolic tree stamped upon Sethe’s back by schoolteacher’s whip, or as the real trees that the protagonists repeatedly turn to for spiritual support. (42, italics added)

In *Song of Solomon* it was singing which brought new life and insight to the characters. In *Beloved* trees perform this role. Sixo, a Sweet Home slave, “went among trees at night . . . to keep his bloodlines open” (*Beloved*: 25); trees “are revivifying” (42), Bonnet says. In the major part of the novel Denver is a very weak character totally dependent upon her mother and later upon Beloved, the ghost of Sethe’s two-year-old child who was killed eighteen years earlier. Sethe took the life of her own child to prevent her from being recaptured by the slaveholder and, subsequently, returned to slavery when Sethe was tracked down after her escape from Sweet Home. Parenthetically, I would like to mention that Sethe used a “handsaw” (*Beloved*: 251) for the purpose. She had “to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin” (251). This is part of the tree *motif* and associates Beloved with trees, as well as illustrates the importance of respecting trees, Sethe’s tree, too.

I indicated that Denver lacks strength, and whenever she needs comfort “because loneliness wore her out” (*Beloved*: 29), she goes to her “bower” (28) in the forest

nearby. Made up of “five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring” (28) and forming a “womb-like shape” (Bonnet: 43), it “closed [her] off from the hurt of the hurt world” (*Beloved*: 28). “Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish” (29). “Denver’s bower is . . . endowed with a nurturing, healing, rejuvenating power” (Bonnet: 42) and “[t]he juxtaposition of the two adjectives *green* and *live* suggests a semantic equivalence between the two terms” (42).

“Furthermore, one should bear in mind that trees, and in particular sacred groves, play a crucial role in African religion, where they are considered as intermediaries between God and man” (42). In fact, in Bonnet’s view, “the print of Africa is to be felt everywhere in the novel, much more so than in Morrison’s previous fiction” (42).

Another striking example of the sacred grove is “the Clearing, whose name obviously carries a metaphorical connotation of spiritual cleansing” (Bonnet: 43). In this forest glade Baby Suggs, “the outraged female *ancestor*” (Peach: 98, italics added) and also the mother of Sethe’s husband Halle who went insane when he saw his wife’s humiliation, speaks her message of healing to the community. She teaches self-love:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. . . . More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart.” (*Beloved*: 88-89)

If this were not enough, there is a tree called “Brother” (21) at Sweet Home under which the male slaves of the farm used to sit and also have their meals. For Paul D “trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to . . .” (21), and on his escape route north, away from slavery, trees are “active catalysts of his spiritual rebirth, they are shown to have a creative force of their own” (Bonnet: 43). A Cherokee Indian Paul D meets gives him instructions:

“Follow the tree flowers,” he said. “Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone.”

So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the *cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear*. At last he reached a field of *apple trees* whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north, but he had to run like hell to keep it as his traveling companion. From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and *found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree* on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him. He did not touch them or stop to smell. He merely followed in their wake, a dark ragged figure *guided by the blossoming plums*. (*Beloved*: 112-113, my italics)

The fact that trees in this scene are also linked to different foods suggests the role of trees as a source of sustenance and the fruit metaphorically represents the possibility of productive life for the freed slave.

Bonnet’s second law is “the Law of Growth” (46). When Sethe tells Paul D ““I got a tree on my back”” (*Beloved*: 15), he replies: ““What tree on your back? Is something *growing* on your back?”” (15, italics added). To Bonnet this means that “Sethe’s tree is not only inscribed in her flesh, as his choice of the verb *to grow* and his insistence on it emphasize; it also takes root in her body. It is not merely an image or a mark bearing a resemblance to a tree; it is an active, living tree with an irrefutable power and reality of its own” (46). One implication of this law is “the principle of division and extension, growth and transformation represented by the passage from trunk to big bough to smaller branch and finally to blossoms. It thus conjures up the image of the genealogical tree” (47). This is evidenced by “the strategic importance of the family theme in the novel” (47), but Bonnet goes beyond “the family in the narrow sense of the term” (47) and sees it in the context of “the much broader extension it is given in the African culture” (47). It is “the clan, the community” (47) which the genealogical tree represents, and in the end when *Beloved*’s haunting stops, it is the Clearing, in other words trees, personified which exorcises the ghost as the people in the community, who used to gather strength there in the past, sing outside Sethe’s house to

expel the evil (“It is the sacred grove that is the *agent* of the spiritual rebirth connoted by the image of baptism” [44, my italics]). Some scholars see the Beloved character as a metaphor for a slave past to which the victims of slavery can only be reconciled by a joint communal effort, or, at least, by consciously remembering (“rememorying”) and acknowledging it.

Kristine Holmes is also interested in the people around Sethe, but in a slightly different manner. Firstly, she is not so concerned with the support Sethe receives from the community. Secondly, she focusses on the significance of the tree-shaped scar itself which she sees as what I referred to in my introduction: namely, a metaphor for textual *inscription*. This interpretation provides many interesting perspectives on the physical and mental imprisonment that is slavery. Seeing the cicatrice as *text* is not merely a facile allusion to the illiteracy of the slaves. The infliction of this “chokecherry tree” (*Beloved*: 16) on Sethe’s back turns her into an object and since she cannot see the mark herself (“I’ve never seen it and never will” [16]), she is subject to the various interpretations of other people. Like in *Song of Solomon*, the relationship to the past is a central theme in *Beloved* where Sethe’s struggle to come to terms with her slave past as well as with her own cruel deeds is so crucial. Bonnet claims that when Sethe announces that she will never see the tree herself, “[t]here could be no clearer hint that she is going to disregard the lesson imprinted on her back” (48). Sethe manifests a much greater disinclination to face the past than Milkman does, but Sethe, too, gets help – by the community, by the “Whitegirl” (*Beloved*: 16) Amy, and by Paul D, etc.

I indicated that Holmes regards the scar as a metaphorical *text* and it is in this analysis that she makes her most pertinent observations. She starts by questioning whether Sethe’s body is “a slate to be *inscribed* by the slaveholder’s whip, later to be decoded by lovers, daughters, and other readers” (133, italics added). Her answer is

both yes and no, depending on whether the body is seen from the perspective of malicious or benevolent characters. In establishing “the equation of body and text” (138) (or rather the *scar*, that is to say the *inscription*, and text, as the body would more reasonably represent the “canvas” upon which the words are written), Holmes extends the semantic field of the *vehicle* and in so doing, she facilitates the perception of the metaphor whose *referent*, or *tenor*, could be the way in which, as I indicated in my introduction, an external, authoritarian force imposes its sway on the suppressed self of the victim. As a text, the scar immediately connotes *language* and *rhetoric*, and a master/servant power play is introduced.

To illustrate this master/servant dichotomy, I would like to preempt some viewpoints by Mae G. Henderson before I continue my commentary on Holmes as Henderson more keenly observes the slaveholder schoolteacher’s role. The master’s anonymous appellation is not capitalized in the novel, something which may have pejorative implications. Furthermore, his very name is indicative of his authority as transmitter of truth and law. Some critics seem to believe it was schoolteacher who whipped Sethe, but her words, quoted above, make it clear that one of the “boys” did it, under schoolteacher’s orders, though. He has *his* text inscribed on Sethe’s back and in a similar manner he used “to carry round a notebook and write down what . . . [the slaves] said” (*Beloved*: 37). The cruel irony is that it is Sethe who mixed the ink he used (“He liked the ink I made” [37]) when “at night he sat down to write in his book” (37). In one scene he instructs a young pupil who is studying Sethe – and she hears it all – “to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (193). Henderson says that “[h]is methodology – based on numbering, weighing, dividing – suggests the role of the cultural historian (or ethnologist)” (88). “Schoolteacher possesses the master(?’s) *text*, and as a data collector, cataloger, classifier, and taxonomist . . . he

divides or dismembers the indivisibility of the slaves' humanity to reconstruct (or perhaps deconstruct) the slave in his *text*" (88, italics added).

If Sethe, for the most part, "disregard[s] the lesson", there are other characters who do *read* the tree. The first person who sees it is a white girl called Amy Denver who meets and heals Sethe on her escape from Sweet Home when the tree is still an open wound:

"It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this." (*Beloved*: 79)

On a small boat crossing the Ohio River with Amy, a "symbolic rebirth" (Bonnet: 45) takes place for Sethe (water is another symbolic motif in the novel; *Beloved*, for example, comes out of the water when she enters into the narrative: "A fully dressed woman *walked out of the water*. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and *leaned against a mulberry tree*" [*Beloved*: 50, italics added]), and on the boat, while "river water, seeping through any hole it chose, was spreading over Sethe's hips" (84), Amy helps her give birth to a baby girl who is named Denver after Amy's last name. Sethe *and* her child are born. Sethe is on her way to freedom, and, significantly, in her reading of the tree, the *text*, Amy only associates positive connotations with the tree, which at this stage must look horribly repulsive. Nonetheless, Amy can only think in terms of growth, spring, bloom, rebirth and, subverting the oppressor's reading, she shows the reader of the novel that the tree can be a symbol of hope and reconstruction.

The next time in Sethe's life when the tree is read is when Paul D seeks out Sethe's home eighteen years after she escaped. In the days of slavery he had

passionately desired Sethe who had chosen another man, Halle, the son of Baby Suggs, and now, seeing her again, “Paul D simultaneously sympathizes with, aestheticizes and eroticizes Sethe’s scar, tracing it with his fingers and mouth. Paul D attempts to rewrite the white man’s inscription, to erase Sethe’s pain and replace it with pleasure” (Holmes: 139). Again the tree has positive connotations; Paul D admires “the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith” (*Beloved*: 17). However, Holmes observes that “[a]fter making love to Sethe, Paul D repudiates his earlier reading of the chokecherry scar” (139); now it is just “a revolting clump of scars” (*Beloved*: 21). Holmes suggests two reasons for this change: either Paul D no longer needs to eroticize the tree “after his sexual pleasure is fulfilled” (140), or the “reversal in Paul D’s reading . . . suggests that it takes more than sexual pleasure to erase the inscription of slavery on the black woman’s body” (140).

Another way of dealing with a slave past is through storytelling. *Beloved*, the embodiment of this past, is extremely eager to hear stories told by Denver and Sethe, so part of her role is clearly to incite them to acknowledge their history. The reading of the tree metaphorically represents the reading of the past and reading, or at least listening and interpreting, is implied in the act of storytelling. Holmes observed how Paul D and Amy in euphemistical language attempted to see constructive and optimistic aspects in the slave woman’s tree-shaped scar, and she extends this hopeful attitude to storytelling, contrasting male and female approaches to text. In *Beloved* “[s]torytelling becomes a collective, nourishing, oral, **matrilineal**, bodily *process* rather than an inscriptive, sterile, violating *product*” (142, bold type added), and there is a “beautiful and astounding revision of the **patriarchal** historical text that insists on inscriptive, fixed identity and linear chronology” (143, bold type added).

In *Beloved* there are continuous references to “rememory” (36), which is a sort of “physical” storytelling. It is when “you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (36), Sethe says. Rememory represents ethereal fragments of storytelling that hover in the air, metaphorically speaking. It is a set of accessible “x-files” one can “bump into”. Sethe continues her explanation of this phenomenon to Denver who has just seen “a white dress holding on to” (35) her mother (this “dress” may refer synecdochically to Beloved; it may be her actual ghost, or it could be some other “rememory”):

“Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (35-36)

Many of the scholars find a propitious occasion for *translating* the tree into *language* or *text*. In this way the scar, a sort of *sign* which is significantly said to be *inscribed*, can be reconceptualized into an abstract, analyzable format which accommodates the demands of a literature critic. This scholarly legerdemain is not entirely unwarranted inasmuch as Sethe herself “must learn to represent the unspeakable and unspoken in language – and, more precisely, as narrative” (Henderson: 85); “Sethe must transform the residual images (“rememories”) of her past into a historical discourse shaped by narrativity” (84). Sethe is unable to decode the enigmatic hieroglyphics, the metaphorical *text*, on her back; using the terms loosely, one might say that the *vehicle* grows on her, but she cannot infer the *referent*, or *tenor*. It is no coincidence that Sethe’s “first construction of a text . . . degrades and violates her” (Holmes: 140) as she exchanges ten minutes of sex with “the engraver” (*Beloved*: 5) for



the inscription of “Beloved” (5) on her daughter’s grave (it was “[t]en minutes for seven letters” [5]).

Henderson does not cease to expand on the idea of the tree as *text*. One of her main propositions is that Sethe’s “challenge is to learn to read herself – that is, to configure the history of her body’s text” (87); she must take charge of the process of deciphering, like Milkman did – he was, of course, a spoiled bourgeois boy whose trauma bore no resemblance to that of Sethe – for in *Beloved*

[t]he presumption is . . . that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history. They can be written and written upon precisely because they exist as the ultimate Other, whose absence or (non)being only serves to define the being or presence of the white or male subject. The black woman, symbolizing a kind of double negativity, becomes *a tabula rasa* upon which the racial/sexual identity of the other(s) can be positively inscribed. (87, italics added)

Henderson also discusses a metaphor which draws on another aspect of the opposition female/male: “Morrison uses *the metaphor of maternity* to establish an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse” (94, my italics). This female metaphor is represented by Sethe’s “act of birthing” (94), delivering Denver on a boat, but there is also “the womb [which] functions as an image of *corporeal interiority*” (94, my italics). Henderson states that “[a]s a narrative metaphor, maternity privileges interiority and marks Sethe’s entry into subjectivity” (94). She gradually becomes a subject after having been a “canvas” to be inscribed upon and interpreted by other people and is able “to fashion a counternarrative” (95), partly through relating stories to her ghostly daughter Beloved. “By privileging specifically female tropes in her narrative, Sethe is able to reconstitute her self and *herstory* . . .” (98).

Heike Härting similarly contends that “[t]he specific figurative orchestration of Morrison’s texts by way of metaphor . . . provides access to the *interior lives* of her

novels' characters" (23-24, my italics). Notwithstanding, "[a] critical textual analysis of Morrison's novel . . . cannot rely on conventional taxonomies of rhetorical figures such as metaphor, irony, metonymy, or allegory, but instead must interrogate the definitions and applicability of those tropes within the context of postcolonial writing and theory" (24, my italics). As I understand Härting, the chokecherry tree, or *vehicle*, has "such a wide field of semantic connotations" (25) that the accordance between *tenor* and *vehicle* is loosened. Moreover, "metaphors are historically and culturally inscribed and subsequently de-scribed or divested within postcolonial discourse" (24); metaphors are contemporary and must be understood in their historical context. In his reading of *Beloved* Härting "contests the conventional notion of metaphor as a trope of substitution and resemblance" (24) and claims that "Morrison's metaphor is not generated from a direct translation process of overlapping lexical features but from a transcoding of memories into narrative space" (26). Härting advocates a "performative reading of metaphor" (24) as it "insist[s] on permanent reinventions and recombinations of presumed identities" (24). In *Beloved* there is a "modifying [of] the signifier [the *vehicle*] of the metaphor so that the 'chokecherry tree' can be simultaneously read as gallows, iron-maze, Brother, aspen, roses of blood" (32), etc. This disruption of the normal structure of metaphor ensures that "Morrison's metaphor textually mediates the necessity and pain of unstrangling and connecting the different voices of the past" (26), which is a main theme in *Beloved*.

Coming to terms with the past is a strenuous process for Sethe, even painful, as can be seen when Amy massages Sethe's feet which are swollen from running: "'It's gonna hurt, now,' said Amy. 'Anything dead coming back to life hurts'" (*Beloved*: 35). The implication is, of course, that Sethe is at this point emotionally numbed by years of

humiliation. Paul D, too, is reluctant to confront his past, and this is metaphorically represented by “the tobacco tin” (113):

It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open. (113)

Many of the things on Paul D’s list refer to previous degrading incidents. The “notebook paper” represents schoolteacher; “the sight of butter” hints at the butter Halle smeared himself with as he went insane; “Alfred, Georgia” was the site of a particularly humiliating and almost lethal experience in a chain gang where he was caged in a “ditch [which] was caving in and mud oozed under and through the bars” (110), almost drowning “[a]ll forty-six men” (107). This is also the place where Paul D escaped from to “[f]ollow the tree flowers” (112) north. “[T]he taste of iron” evokes the animalistic “iron bit” (70) which was once put in his mouth for days at Sweet Home (Sethe “had seen it time after time” [71]: “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. . . . The wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back [71]). “Mister” is one of “the roosters” (71) which beheld Paul D eating humble pie on this very occasion ( “I watched that son a bitch . . .”, Paul D says, “I swear he smiled” [72]).

*Beloved* is a novel where the events are presented in fragments. Episodes are narrated in an order which does not follow a normal chronology. There is “*prolepsis*” (the “narration of a story-event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned” [Rimmon-Kenan: 46]; synonymous with *foreshadowing*), for example when the novel starts with Sethe’s and Paul D’s reunion after eighteen years of separation. Only later will the past be narrated. There is also “*analepsis*” (the “narration of a story-event at a point in the text after later events have been told” [46]), exemplified when the narrator

describes the meetings Baby Suggs used to preside over in the Clearing “every Saturday afternoon” (*Beloved*: 87). This way of relating the past can also be called a *flashback*, another term for *analepsis*. Thus, “the novel is an occluded text buried within the surface narrative which the reader has to recover in order to make sense of the whole” (Peach: 94). Many scholars, and Morrison herself, have underscored the importance of participatory reading and Peach states that “Sethe’s experience in this respect mirrors the experience of the reader in tackling the intricately woven structure of the novel as a whole” (101). One might say that the novel’s form *defamiliarizes* the act of mentally structuring and, subsequently, acknowledging one’s history.

Brian Finney discusses *Beloved* from exactly this Russian Formalist perspective.

He claims that

[t]he more one examines the actual time shifts in the novels the more one appreciates the skill with which she manipulates the reader for very special purposes. Further, the Black oral tradition encourages the listener/reader to contribute to the story as well. . . . Part of her narrative strategy, then, is to position the reader within the text in such a way as to invite participation in the (re)construction of the story, one which is usually complicated by an achronological ordering of events.

In effect, the distance between what the Russian Formalist [sic] called the *fabula* (the chronological ordering of events) and the *syuzhet* (the order in which events are actually presented in the narrative) in *Beloved* is almost as great as can be tolerated by most modern readers. And just as listeners are induced by the teller’s “meandering” technique to intervene in order to make sense of the story, so the reader of *Beloved* is virtually forced by Toni Morrison’s narrative strategy to make sense of the jumps in time, place and causality by attending to the connections and associations that the jumps create. (21)

This technique of involving the reader and having the *syuzhet* estrange the *fabula* is a well considered maneuver by Morrison. Finney continues: “As readers, we piece together the *fabula* from a *syuzhet* that coils about itself and unwinds in just that meandering manner the [sic] Toni Morrison associates with the Black tradition of oral narrative” (24). “Only by returning to the past can the present lead on to the future. That is why the *syuzhet* takes its highly involuted form” (25). In a detailed fashion Finney

undertakes the “process of extrapolating the *fabula* from the *syuzhet*” (21) before he concludes:

Ultimately the novel is about the haunting of the entire Black race by the inhuman experience of slavery, about the damage it did to their collective psyche and the need to summon all the skills of their community (including that of oral narrative) to exorcise this ghost that will otherwise turn destructive. (35)

Finally, then, there is the question of whether Sethe learns the law of the tree and achieves a reconciliation with the past. The answer to this question is not obvious, much due to the fragmentary and enigmatic style of the novel, but also for the reason that at the very end she hysterically attacks the more than seventy years old Mr. Bodwin, Denver’s employer, whom she mistakes for the cruel schoolteacher. Carmean, however, sees this episode as liberating in that Sethe rushes “at the white man, not away into hiding as before, in order to fight him directly” (91). Before *Beloved*’s arrival Sethe’s “devious” brain would repress memory. Still she vaguely remembers her two runaway sons.

As for the rest, she worked hard to *remember as close to nothing as was safe*. Unfortunately *her brain was devious*. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her *was as lifeless as the nerves in her back* where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of *ink* or the cherry gum and *oak bark* from which it was made. Nothing. . . . Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not *a leaf* on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in *lacy groves*. Boys hanging from *the most beautiful sycamores* in the world. *It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys*. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the *sycamores* beat out the children every time and *she could not forgive her memory* for that. (*Beloved*: 6, italics added)

In this quote in the beginning of the narrative we see the tree metaphor rolling out before us in all its splendor; we see subtle foreshadowing of the controlling power of

text, the “ink”, and we learn about the importance of memory and how the latter is painful and has connotations of shame for Sethe. Carmean observes a change in this very selective memory (she had been “in a state of sorrowful truce as close to amnesia as possible” [97]) when Beloved comes on the scene “to break down her resolve to the point where she can confront the most disturbing parts of her past” (89).

Undoubtedly, Beloved is significant in Sethe’s resurrection (“[s]he is the inconvenient reemodiment of that which we would like to keep silent and submerged” [Holmes: 145]), but the reader should not underestimate the role played by Paul D. Not entirely unlike Pilate does for Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, he acts as a *confidant* for Sethe. There is even “something blessed” and Messianic about him:

Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and *make the women cry*. Because with him, in his presence, they could. *There was something blessed in his manner*. Women saw him and wanted to weep – *to tell him* that their chest hurt and their knees did too. Strong women and wise saw him and *told him things they only told each other*: that way past the Change of Life, desire in them had suddenly become enormous, greedy, more savage than when they were fifteen, and that it embarrassed them and made them sad; that secretly they longed to die – to be quit of it – that sleep was more precious to them than any waking day. *Young girls sidled up to him to confess* or describe how well-dressed the visitations were that had followed them straight from their dreams. Therefore, although he did not understand why this was so, he was not surprised when *Denver dripped tears* into the stovefire. Nor, fifteen minutes later, after telling him about her stolen milk, *her mother wept as well*. (*Beloved*: 17, my italics)

The first time Denver meets him she releases “[t]he tears she had not shed for nine years” (14). This “*singing man*” (39, italics added) was the one who chased the haunting ghost of Beloved out of 124 Bluestone Road which had been “[f]ull of a baby’s venom” (3). Besides, he knows Sethe’s scar, literally from caressing it and metaphorically from having shared her slave experience. The novel starts with his entrance into Sethe’s life and, after having been absent for a while, shocked to learn that Sethe had killed her own daughter, he returns to invest in a future with her.

When the novel ends, Sethe is missing her daughter/ghost who has newly been exorcized by the singing women of the community and she cries: ““*She was my best thing*”” (272, italics added). Paul D, however, disagrees and in the last scene, before the narrator terminates with a poetical farewell to Beloved, the reader may perceive a burgeoning hope of healing and reconciliation for both Paul D and Sethe:

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back . . . [H]e did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to *put his story next to hers*.

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “*You your best thing, Sethe. You are.*” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?” (273, italics added)

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### *Conclusion*

It was not my ambition when I started writing this thesis to compare *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The concepts of *defamiliarization* and *metaphor* were chosen because I believe these are particularly fruitful in literary analysis, especially in relation to Morrison's novels which are so full of deliberate and complex symbolism that I might, in fact, have used the same approach for any one of them. In *Beloved* there is still the water symbolism, the quilt metaphor, the characters' preoccupation with colors, or the symbolic turtles. In *Sula* one might have analyzed the birthmark over Sula's eye or the portentous "gray ball" Nel imagines; *Jazz* invites a study of musical metaphors; in *Paradise* there is the "Oven", etc. I thought, however, that the *song* and the *tree* were among Toni Morrison's most powerful tropes because of the sheer complexity of their configurations and because of the ingeniousness with which they are woven into the narratives.

It is possible to see similarities between the two novels, if one were to compare them. Both the song and the tree serve as what I would call *historiographical* devices. They both estrange the protagonists' efforts to identify with their *stories*. Morrison, quoted in Henderson, states that it is important "to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate . . . [and to] expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" (81). This is what *Beloved* does, unlike "the texts of the slave narratives" (81) which were often "self-censored" (81) and hid the awful truth.

In *Song of Solomon* Milkman, whose great-grandfather was Mr. Solomon, is for a long time "a solo-man" (Brenner: 18), but this changes after he engages himself in what Fabre calls a "[g]enealogical [a]rchaeology" (105). Campbell contends that



“Milkman is like a tree” (406), and that “the tree is the world axis, a symbol of the life-process” (406), to recall the main metaphor in *Beloved*. After his hunting experience Milkman “found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were *stalks, tree trunks*, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked” (*Song*: 281, my italics). Reversely, the tree is associated with archaeology; thus, another correspondence between the two novels is created. Henderson contends that “[l]ike the inscription of *Beloved* and the pictorial images of the past, the scars function as an *archaeological site or memory trace*” (86, my italics).

To achieve his freedom, Milkman has trampled on many people, especially his sisters. Duvall discusses an intriguing metaphor: it is, as he puts it, “a different metaphor – that of urinating” (99). There are several incidents of urinating in *Song of Solomon*: Milkman accidentally pees on his sister Lena on a Sunday excursion as a little boy; he pees on Lena’s flowers and calls it “a helluva piss” (214); Macon pees when he discovers the gold (which he can use to increase his power); and Porter, a member of the Seven Days, “peed over the heads of the women” (25) in a scene where he threatens to kill himself unless the women accommodate his command: ““Send me up somebody to fuck!”” (25). The women tauntingly reply: ““Do it have to be a woman? Do it got to be human? Do it got to be alive? Can it be a piece of liver?”” (25).

Duvall states that these scenes “are about males staking claim to woman-as-property” (103) and points to “a pun lurking in the bird’s name” (101) if one considers the two syllables in “peacock” (101). Male characters in *Song of Solomon*, some of them, are associated with this bird, which is part of the novel’s *flight* imagery, of course, and it represents the “perpetuation of patriarchal authority, pea/e-cock power” (103). I have mentioned earlier how Lena berates Milkman for his disrespectful treatment of the

women in his family (““Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you”” [*Song*: 215]), and she ends her tirade by evoking this urinating metaphor: ““I don’t make roses anymore, and you have pissed your last in this house”” (216). Gradually this becomes true, for through his spiritual rebirth Milkman “ceases to be both the vain peacock and the cock who pees on women” (Duvall: 107).

In this thesis I have wished to draw attention to formal features of two of Toni Morrison novels. It is my opinion that the concepts of *defamiliarization* and *metaphor* complement each other in many interesting ways. Defamiliarization is, of course, a more encompassing and vague term, but this is not necessarily a problem. In Morrison’s fictional universe the characters are often clad in metaphor; remember Morrison’s words, quoted in chapter four, about her needing “to get a hook”. Thus, they tend to have some physical “badge” or idiosyncrasy, like Sula’s birthmark, Pecola Breedlove’s imaginary blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*; like Milkman’s limp, Pilate’s lack of a navel, and, of course, Sethe’s scar.

When *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* end, there is hope for both Milkman and Sethe – provided that Milkman lives – if only for the reason that they have both found *music*. Sethe has found herself a *singing* man and the community of women sing for her; Milkman has learned to *sing* to his sugargirls. This is very promising, for, as Kate Ellis reminds us, “[a] Morrison character who can sing . . . has what she [or he] needs to transcend the life-denying gaze of the blue-eyed white world” (43).

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