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A Convergence of Surrealism and Realism: Why Spirituality, Folklore, and the Supernatural Saturate the Work of Toni Morrison

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A Convergence of Surrealism and Realism:
Why Spirituality, Folklore, and the Supernatural
Saturate the Work of Toni Morrison

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Introduction: The Fusion of Surrealism and Realism

The effects of slavery and the generational toll it took on a culture, more specifically the African American community, can be viewed as the central theme to Toni Morrison's oeuvre. The relationship African Americans have to their past – slavery and its after effects – and how that affects their present is something Morrison continually alludes to, consequently promoting the worth of one's heritage and the history that must not be forgotten. Thematically, Morrison touches on slavery, religion, community (society and the individual) and familial relationships (mother/daughter, father/son). Through the narrative, she explores the collapse of these connections and allows past and present to collide in order to expound on what African Americans of a certain era went through and the impact it had on their descendants. What Morrison does effectively in her novels is build a bridge between past and present, and it's through that bridge where she expresses the generational impact of slavery while also acknowledging the African traditions that must not be forgotten.

The bridge that is built, connecting past to present, varies; however, I will argue that there are two important aspects to Morrison's work that aid in identifying this connection. The first is the level of realism within her work: her novels deal with the historical reality of African Americans and slavery, they often depict African American culture, family dynamics, and middle-class life. Diametrically opposite to realism is the second aspect that permeates her work: surrealism. Interjected into her realist narratives are the portrayal of the supernatural, the reliance on folktale (indicative of African myths –stories passed down generationally that have attributed supernatural status by its absurdity), and the recurrence of spirituality.

Evident within these two aspects is a dichotomy; nevertheless, what is created are varying degrees of juxtapositions in her novels between the realist and surrealist elements, thus allowing

for a link – more so a fusion – between the two. By connecting two dichotomous elements (irrational and rational; realistic and unrealistic; natural and supernatural) she is 1) building a bridge from past to present using two disparate techniques that allow for a level of reflection and introspection to be done by the characters, with her larger point being African American culture and how to mentally advance both as an individual and collectively as a community. And 2), she is attempting to make society aware of the bizarre reality we live in through the use of supernatural, folklore and spirituality.

Before we marry these two terms: realism and surrealism, let me first define the terms and establish how they will be used here. Surrealism is classified by strange, bizarre and irrational representations that mystify truth and may associate with things that have no basis in reality altogether. Surrealism's roots are in France, circa 1920's, and started as a style of "automatic writing" in which the writing was "free-flowing onto the page", with a desire to explore strange, irrational and outrageous things straight from the unconscious mind. Inside of surrealist literature are juxtapositions, absurdism, and dreamlike descriptions/imagery aimed at drawing focus on the illogical, ultimately merging the rational with the absurd.¹

Realism, on the other hand, is defined by a depiction of reality and truth, realism in literature conveys particular kinds of subject matter and style (i.e., complex characters, representation of middle-class life, omniscient narrator, social critique, verisimilitude).² My definition of realism is a bit brusque and will be the one used throughout this analysis: the ability to represent a topic truthfully and authentically. From that definition, we can see Morrison's desire to describe the past and give vivid accounts of slavery (before and after the reconstruction era); to discuss the everyday mundane life of African Americans is the realistic part about her

¹ Andre Breton. *Manifesto of Surrealism*. October 1924. 27 April 2018.

² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. *Realism*. 10 March 2017. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

narratives. Moreover, she presents real-life incidents creating a holistic description around those events. The world in which she establishes forces us to understand real African American conflicts through irrational narrative elements, this permits the reader to have the requisite distance needed to examine events of the world from an illogical perspective; in essence, she is intentionally blurring the lines between what is real and what is fake. Much like the overall theme of good vs. evil, her novels operate within this territory of “binary thinking” in that it is ill-defined as just one entity, she functions on two, if not multiple levels.³

Rather than focus on the entirety of Morrison’s work I will exclusively concentrate on three books: *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987). While the core themes are the same across the board for these novels, one of the essential questions is how the surreal elements emerge in the three books. Furthermore, given a cursory glance one will find that there is a natural progression with how the surreal takes shape and the extent to which it pervades each book. There’s an evolution within Morrison’s work, and through these selected texts I will show exactly how the surreal has developed over time, relative to realism; and what becomes crafted by the varying juxtapositions. All her narratives are not constructed equally and as such do not have the same level of surrealism as the other, yet, they all find a way to tie surrealistic elements to the past. What will distinguish one book from the other, aside from the narrative, is what elements are used to create paradoxes that will aid in the surrealistic connection of past to present.

Morrison herself alludes to her desire to tackle binary concepts within her work. In revealing her motivation for her third novel *Song of Solomon* we can see that she aims to tackle both the real and fictional, while it is a myth it’s realistic from the standpoint of the belief it garners from individuals:

³ Rita A. Bergenholtz, "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking." *JSTOR* (1996): 89-98,

The flying myth in *Song of Solomon*. If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking –escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*.⁴

It's in her ability and desire to explore that “flying myth” and how that folktale is represented within the novel that permits an exploration into the surreal. We can infer from what she mentions above and extend it to her other novels on the basis of the surreal elements throughout her work. When Morrison declares, “What might it mean?” it's a level of investigation into certain things that she is determined to achieve, this adds to the realism within her work, as we will see, based on the books I will be examining.

For *Song of Solomon* flight announces itself from the outset, creating the central theme throughout the novel: “The North Carolina Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to Lake Superior at three o'clock.”⁵ The character that decides to take “flight” is going to commit suicide, we come to realize that this “flight” symbolizes something much greater for the character – and by extension our protagonist of the book, Milkman.

Flying also appears when Milkman begins his quest for gold but is really looking for answers to his family lineage (this turns out to be the real gold he needs). His great-grandfather was the legendary flying African, Solomon, who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa,

⁴ Toni Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation With Toni Morrison." *The New Republic*. Thomas LeClair. 21 March 1981

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1977), 3

leaving his family in the process. The myth, from which *Solomon* is based, follows the same motif as *Beloved*, which is that the surreal elements link its characters to the past. Flight follows Milkman as he finds clues to his familial past, thus having a better understanding of his cultural present.

Of all three books, the metaphorical bridge to the past is more prevalent in *Beloved*. The supernatural element of *Beloved* first takes shape as a ghost that terrorizes the house on 124 Bluestone Road. The novel begins by introducing us to a ghost so distinct that it makes Sethe's two sons run away from the house; it fights with Paul D (Sethe's lover and longtime friend) through the use of household objects, and it terrifies the entire community from approaching the house. The ghost then takes on a physical form and becomes the incarnation of Sethe's deceased child and names herself Beloved. She is representative of the tangible, fleshy reminder of the past sins of a society, a community, or a person, and the impediment that must be crossed to move forward.

The supernatural of the novel becomes a connection to the cultural past, something Pamela E. Barnett observes when writing about the characters Paul D and Beloved, "Although she has no particular knowledge of his past, his contact with her brings unpleasant memories to the surface of his consciousness".⁶ Barnett points out something crucial here, and that is the effect Beloved has on Paul D; because she represents a supernatural figure and is literally and figuratively the living embodiment of the past evils of slavery she is able to affect Paul D in the present by bringing his past to the surface. Beloved does this for the three main characters who reside at 124 Bluestone Road: Sethe, Paul D, and to a lesser extent Denver. There is an ambiguous realism to Beloved, because of her indefinite nature she operates as both real and

⁶ Pamela E. Barnett, "Figurations of rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." *JSTOR* (1997), 420

surreal. She becomes a walking paradox, a juxtaposition between natural and supernatural, a connection between the past and present sins of slavery. Since *Beloved* is representative of the past and resurfaces old wounds of pain and hurt for former slaves in the present, we must decipher what rational solution or outcome Morrison makes for African Americans to extricate themselves from past sins. I will argue that it is the community that Morrison sees as the savior, it is using your culture and family to aide in dealing with the damaged past.

It must be pointed out that Morrison based *Beloved* on an actual event in which an escaped slave, Margret Garner, killed her daughter. Garner was cornered by slave catchers and U.S. Marshals and had to make the unenviable choice of murdering her daughter with a butcher knife instead of having her child grow up a slave. She attempted to kill her two sons as well, but she was subdued before following through with the act. Because this is a real event that happened and because Morrison uses the supernatural to surround the narrative the case could be made that *Beloved* should be viewed as a magical realist text – as ghosts and reincarnation happen, and it is handled like any other rational event. Additionally, the characters in *Beloved* do believe in the supernatural occurrences that happen (the ghost and that of Beloved, Sethe's reincarnated child). Aside from the realism vs. surrealism, there is a juxtaposition between reality (the true story) and fantasy (the ghost), and this happens on a narrative level as the story moves between past and present; moreover, there then becomes a juxtaposition between the ghost and an entity (Beloved). They both ostensibly represent the same thing, but because Beloved can talk Sethe can utilize her to move on from the trauma of killing her own child. This could not be done before with the baby ghost because 'She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even'.⁷ These connections in *Beloved* will be explored,

⁷ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 281

dissecting the text from the standpoint of the ghost and the character Beloved, and how that relates to a bridge being built.

It's clear that we can categorize all three books from overt supernatural to ambiguous: *Beloved*, *Solomon* and *Sula*. While *Sula*'s supernatural is not in any way overt, as in *Beloved* or *Solomon*, the text does depict spirituality and the characters themselves do believe in superstition. For example, Sula, the protagonist of the book, returns to the town after having spent almost a decade away and the town is greeted to a plague of robins: "Although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula's return to the bottom."⁸ While Nel, Sula's best friend and the book's other protagonist, and the community believed that it was Sula's return that caused the plague of robins, it can be viewed as merely coincidental. However, the town that Morrison creates believes heavily in superstition, much like the characters in *Solomon* believed in the myth of the flying man and the characters of *Beloved* in the supernatural. The transition from one book to the next adds another, more distinct, layer of the surreal into the text.

Since *Sula*, out of the three novels mentioned, does not have any supernatural entities or visibly interject folklore into its novel it would seem that it's the text that doesn't have any surrealistic elements. However, the surreal in *Sula* arise out of two things, the first is the belief in the superstitious:

It was rumored that she had had no childhood diseases, was never known to have chicken pox, croup or even a runny nose. She had played rough as a child –where were the scars? Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability. Some of the men,

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Sula*, (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1973), 95

who as boys had dated her, remembered that on picnics neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her.⁹

The community has a very illogical and irrational belief of Sula, emblematic of the prevailing view for characters within the novel that take on this other-worldly position to everything around them; stories about Sula being the opposite of natural and “free of any normal signs of vulnerability” is how the surreal takes shape. Sula almost becomes a mythical character within the novel based on how she is viewed by others within her own community.

Spirituality is the other way Morrison gives this book its surrealist foundations.

Channette Romero wrote an article that argues that religion is used as a form of a cure, a way to suture the wounds left by the past of slavery. As she points out when discussing Morrison’s other work, *Paradise*: “The text extends the project begun in *Beloved* and *Jazz* of invoking traumatic histories, by using religion and spirituality in innovative ways that attempt to heal the pains of this history”¹⁰ Thus, she is making the argument that religion or spirituality operates much in the same way that the supernatural or folklore do; they all act as a link to the past and all are to be viewed as a rebuilding of the historical tragedy for African Americans and the future. When Romero claims that Morrison is trying to “heal the pains of this history” she is making the argument that Morrison has to find a way to counteract the degree to which slavery has had a lasting effect on African Americans.

Taking a look across the spectrum of the three books it’s clear that spirituality is present in all. However, rather than dissecting the relation the book has to the bible I will focus primarily

⁹ Morrison, *Sula*, 115

¹⁰ Channette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *JSTOR* (2005), 415

on the spiritual significance of a few particular events within *Sula* that use religion to symbolize its relation to the past and uses juxtaposition to invert reality.

I want to make it clear that I am not arguing that each book deals with one particular element which in turn makes it surreal, in fact all three novels have elements of each particular component I have outlined. *Solomon* has the inclusion of voodoo, which has African spiritual/religious overtones. Milkman's aunt, Pilate, uses voodoo at various points in the novel as an aid not to herself but to Milkman, it is through her efforts that Milkman was actually conceived. Religion appears throughout all books, characters have names that either add to or undermine the characters motivations; and events in the books are bereft of religious allegory. *Beloved* and *Sula* both have the underlying African myth in regard to water. So, each has a plague of surreal characteristics and has what Robert Yeates would classify as "a long tradition of African American culture" because of the use of certain African troupes.¹¹

While each book surrounds itself with an abundance of African tradition, they all have a central surreal element, established from the beginning, that will lay the foundation for the entirety of the novel. For *Sula* it's the spiritual and superstitious, for *Beloved* it's the supernatural, and in *Solomon* it's myth and folklore.

All novels represent the past as something that has to be explored in order for complete freedom from the recurring bonds of slavery. There is surrealism inherent in the act of slavery itself, the brutality of both the slave and slave owner, the generational disablement, the moral turpitude of human beings that would allow that to happen. Morrison finds a way of "subverting dominant cultural forms in order to sustain belief systems that have been suppressed" (Yates 533). Morrison uses the bizarre actions of slavery, incorporates surrealist motifs of an African

¹¹ Robert Yates, "'The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on The Loose': African and Caribbean Religious Heritage in Toni Morrison." *Modern Fiction Studies* 61.3 (2015), 517

culture (myth, folklore, spirituality) into that strange reality, and thus we are now able to be transported back to that time in order to move forward, as a community.

Chapter 1: Superstition and Spirituality in *Sula*

Sula, Morrison's second novel, is a coming of age tale about two women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. Spanning a period of 40 years, *Sula* takes place from 1919-1965 in the small town of Medallion, Ohio. Nel and Sula grow up together, becoming friends and eventually growing distant. There are distinct differences between the two women and while their actions allow for those differences to be evident, we really get a sense of the characters through the eyes of people in the community. Because of this we gain insight into the role that family and community has on an individual. Additionally, Morrison makes a greater philosophical point about the duality of man and the world, this is not just done by the growing opposition of our two protagonists, rather it is also through contrasting events, settings and characters.

While the supernatural doesn't saturate this book like in *Solomon* or *Beloved*, it does, however, manage to establish what will be the building blocks of literary surrealism within her work. The surrealism with *Sula* is subtle, understated and not overt; the mixture of superstition and spirituality, along with Morrison's ability to produce paradoxes within *Sula* is where the surrealism takes shape. For example, the passage on page 90 where the narrator describes the community's relationship with superstition: "They did not believe doctors could heal – for them, none had ever done so. They did not believe death was accidental – life might be, but death was deliberate [...] Plague and drought were as 'natural' as springtime".¹² The community has a certain way of thinking, their superstition within the story is a belief of evil spirits and the fantastical ways it can be combated.

This slight paradox through the narrator relating the prevailing mentality of the community is a repeated pattern in the novel. Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe highlights what she calls

¹² Morrison, *Sula*, 90

the “double/split self” between the two main characters of the novel. She makes a good point that underscores this idea of “deliberate” ambiguities by Morrison:

The reader is never sure who is ‘good’ and who is ‘evil’. A first superficial reading would necessarily lead to the conclusion that Sula’s self symbolizes the ‘bad’ and Nel’s self the ‘right’ – as, incidentally, her last name seems to prove (Nel Wright). But this impression is wrong –the author misdirects the reader purposefully to show that the two protagonists fall into both categories of good and evil.¹³

So even within the moral ambiguity of these two characters we see the contradictions within *Sula* that create a condition where events or characters in the novel run counter to normal literary expectations – i.e., Sula Peace, Tar Baby, Nel Wright, even their land that is referred to as “the Bottom”. It’s through these ironic manipulations where Morrison forms the subtext to *Sula* (albeit incongruous at times) that will aid in the understanding of the novels thematic meaning.

Within the aforementioned contradictory nature, there are two surrealist motifs: superstition and spirituality. We must first define what each means with respect to this novel. When I say superstition it's in how the characters retell and view supernatural or unnatural events, but it’s mostly the way in which the community chooses to attach superstition to the unknown. Spirituality simply means the religious representations within the book, not necessarily how and why there are religious references, but rather how Morrison undermines through the reversal of religious allusions. So, while the religious allegories are evident, she still

¹³ Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe, "Resolving the Paradox: An Interlinear Reding of Toni Morrison's "Sula"." *JSTOR* 22.2 (1992), 117

manages to distort the basic principles of particular acts within religion by constructing paradoxes in these events, thereby challenging its desired meaning.

It's crucial that we begin an examination into *Sula* – as well as the other two novels –with how Morrison opens the book. It's at the start where Morrison reveals information necessary for the understanding of how to interpret her books. *Sula*'s introduction begins with a description of what “the Bottom” – the fictional land in Medallion, Ohio given to slaves through trickery –is and how it has now been transformed into a golf resort for white people (she begins the book at the end). *Sula* is much more a retelling of a specific story by the narrator, the story of what the bottom meant and why it has now been appropriated by white people. The book's chapters are broken down into different years, from 1919 – 1965, describing the lives of the two protagonists in the Ohio town.

Within the explanation of how slaves came to live in the bottom is where we first see the base of what can be viewed as the symbolic paradoxical meaning of *Sula*; it's what flips *Sula* on its head to create an ironic text, making the subtext that much more evident. Page 5 of *Sula* details how blacks came to live in “the Bottom”, which is actually located on the hill of Medallion. Below in the valley is where whites live and the two areas are separated by a river of water. Slaves were given land as a promise of freedom by slave owners after having accomplished tasks:

When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The

slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, 'Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile' (5)

The true brilliance of this passage is that slaves were ostensibly tricked into taking "the Bottom" land (although a choice in the matter seems doubtful) by whites as a gift for their service; furthermore, what doesn't go unnoticed is the irony of the geographical peak of a section of town being called the bottom as opposed to the valley area – where whites live – which should be called the bottom. This play on location does two things: first, it highlights a figurative example of how African Americans were viewed in America. Even if slaves were above white people (geographically) they would still be considered less than whites (socially).

This also alludes to the reality of what happened during the reconstruction era: racial prejudice still continued and blacks were given either bad land or in most cases had to rent land from white slave owners. As the narrator points out, they were "taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks" (Sula 5), so that small figurative victory can be seen as emblematic of the intermittent small victories that blacks steadily achieved over time after slavery ended.

Secondly, the subtext of the passage is marked by the incongruity of the hill area being named the bottom and that becomes interesting because the story itself did not hinge on the name of the black community. It could have been named "the Top" and the story would still be the same. So, the question is what point is Morrison trying to make by naming the community the bottom and by having slaves be duped into taking that land? I would argue that she intends to draw an ironical connection. And this is crucial to the contrast of the naming of the community, it draws a comparison between where whites and blacks live in the same town. The paradox is the transference of location: "the Bottom" is located on a hill and not where you would

traditionally expect the bottom of something to be located. Since this textual opposition is at the start of the book, and because it encompasses the town where the novel is set we can see the critical importance this paradox will have on the narrative. A “contrastive” cloud encapsulates the bottom and everything that takes place inside of the town should be viewed from the paradox lens (Hoffarth-Zelloe 114). While this may not seem surrealistic, it begins what can be seen as the novel’s paradoxical juxtaposition, used as a way to draw significance to certain events through inversion; where Morrison establishes the running thread for the rest of the text and foreshadows, by way of the identity inversion of the community.

Realism and surrealism converge here. The scene itself is steeped in realism because of how the slaves came to own the land, there is historical precedent regarding slavery that is at the forefront of the novel. That realism is immediately interrupted by the infusion of surrealism, the mere act of the incongruous concept that the bottom is located on top is a paradox. Morrison is undermining established narrative and reality-based norms, using it as a way to bridge the gap between reality and imagination. While we can’t say that this in of itself is a bridge for characters to understand their past in order to move forward in the present, we can view this as the building blocks or rather the foundation of the bridge that will be built for the remainder of the novel.

Within this paradoxical town, Morrison then creates a second layer of absurdity and that’s through the spirituality of the community mixed with the contrary actions. There are two significant events that take place, they are deaths and it is how they unfold in the narrative that I will evaluate. Since they both represent non-traditional, irrational ways of displaying death through textual allusion this creates a paradox between the text and the religious dogma that it symbolizes. For example, when Plum – Sula’s uncle and the youngest child to Eva (Sula’s

grandmother) comes home from World War I he struggles with drugs and alcohol addiction. He ultimately dies at the hands of Eva and the death draws a comparison to a baptism:

Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself –the wet light – all about him, splashing and running into his skin. He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. (47)

Eva proceeds to light a fire that engulfs Plum, as the “wet light” was kerosene she threw on him prior. Disregarding the unequivocal “some kind of baptism” reference, the text has plum going through a spiritual transformation. Baptism’s are usually done in water, it is through that ceremony where individuals come to a spiritual renewal for Christ. The purpose of a baptism is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, to make a public declaration and to move from death to life; following that logic it’s easy to see that Eva was trying to save Plum’s soul.

That act mirrors Jesus’ own baptism: Jesus went up out the water and Plum had the “wet light” that was engulfing his entire body. When Plum opened his eyes, he saw a “great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him”; whereas Jesus saw the “Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him”.¹⁴ The comparison here between plum and Jesus is the washing away of sins, Eva is trying to remove the sins of her son the only way she knows how –to kill him. Additionally, by using language that mimics Jesus’ baptism, while also creating an entirely new version of it – the use of kerosene instead of water – Morrison crafts a paradox. Bergenoltz

¹⁴ The Bible: *The Authorized King James Version*, Matthew 3:13-17

would denote that this event has a “broader view of satire” and that it “aligns itself closely with the poststructuralist project of inverting and then leveling hierarchies, whether they be moral, philosophical, or linguistic” (90).

The event in itself is not surreal, narratively it is simply a mother murdering her son; however, it is how Plum describes what is happening to him at that moment where the surrealistic elements are present: "He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him". From Plum's perspective, he is envisioning some of the same tenants of Jesus' own baptism, in a completely inverted way, however. The ironic religious reference builds upon the surrealism, the allusion to – as well as the opposition of– Plum and Jesus. It's the act of figuratively juxtaposing the two whereby using spirituality to draw a binary equivalency between Plum and Jesus; it reiterates the theme of *Sula* that we are all not one thing, Jesus needed to be baptized just the same as Plum. Furthermore, baptisms symbolize the move from death (a person's old sinful existence is buried underwater) to life (their new is a resurrection once out of the water). Morrison replaces water with fire, she makes Plum's baptism final, eschewing the conventional way we process baptisms and uses fire to establish an absurdity within this incident; but also, an absurdity within reality. Now, Morrison is making a comment on the effect of the war on African American men, not just the mental breakdown (as evidenced by the character Shadrack too, a war veteran as well) but what their only course of action had to be. Realism in this passage is the act of baptizing someone, surrealism is the paradox of coming out of fire instead of water, kerosene being used for this blessing instead of water.

Visible, but to a lesser extent, as a baptismal is when Hannah (Sula's mother) dies after catching on fire, seemingly from her “bending to set the yard fire”. Mr. and Mrs. Suggs,

neighbors of Eva's, used the tub full of water that housed their tomato's and douse it on Hannah (Sula 77). While this incident does not mirror a baptism like Plum's, it does use fire in the same way: fire is purifying for characters of questionable moral turpitude. While Eva killed Plum to ease his pain, Hannah dies accidentally, ostensibly from sexual promiscuity, which – religiously – is a sin. The point here is to flip the symbolic meaning of fire (conventionally viewed as pain and death) to be that of water (usually viewed as purity and life).

So, the spirituality mixed with the transposition of these events results in surrealism if only because the spiritual norms are distorted and used in such a way that they are supposed to relinquish the characters from the hold that the past has on them. Plum's past is tied to slavery, tied to the war, because of that his present is a dependent, destitute drunk. A bridge is then built from the realistic past of Plum's life and merged with the present through this surrealistic baptism. His death signifies a rebirth, a change to his mental make-up (albeit it is death that enables this change to happen) that transfers him from his past life to the next (future).

That is not to say that because of this replacement of water to fire that water has no significance in the novel. On the contrary, there is a cultural significance that *Sula* has to water, as well as the other two novels. There is an established African tradition or myth that highlights the meaning of water in relation to “river gods” and “goddesses” and the power of “healing waters” from “specific deities” (Hinton 294). In relation to Hannah and water they “threw it on the smoke-and-flame bound woman” (Sula 76); for Plum, Hannah ran to the “neighbors calling for water” in an attempt to save his life (Sula 48). So as Hinton points out “*Sula's* water figurations function” as a way to rebuild “the African American collective memory” (Hinton 292). This “collective memory” is the link to the past, Plum and Hannah die at the hands of fire, treated as though they are going through a transformation – a baptism. Water is another way to

link the event between past and present by using water to represent what must not be forgotten: heritage, cultural traditions. Fire then represents a passage on the figurative bridge from past to present through death. Two characters die in the same fashion and their past sins are being washed away because their death is symbolic of a spiritual ceremony, which includes a resurrection of the soul.

Aside from the spiritual paradoxes, there are also thematic dualities in *Sula* between life and death, good and evil, and pure vs. impure; while these union's do not effectively link past to present, what they do is provide a context for what can be seen as incongruous actions within the narrative. It is Morrison showing, through "satire", that characters – like people – represent more than one thing. Rita Bergenholtz refers to this as "binary thinking", where individuals operate within a dualistic role and cannot be reduced down to one definition.¹⁵

The characters of *Sula* are very superstitious, how that superstition is interjected is through the belief that characters have without adequate proof. The belief that certain things happen because something was done, or the belief that there is meaning in natural events that occur. There are three instances in *Sula* I want to focus on where superstition makes its mark, take for example the narrator explaining the first "strange thing" that happened:

The very night before the day Hannah had asked Eva if she had ever loved them, the wind tore over the hills rattling roofs and loosening doors. Everything shook, and although the people were frightened they thought it meant rain and welcomed it. Windows fell out and trees lost arms ... They waited in vain, for no lightning no thunder no rain came. (73)

¹⁵ Bergenholtz, "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking." 89-98

This passage signifies the undying relationship African Americans had to illogical beliefs in the world surrounding them. Superstition itself operates as a way to deal with things that are unknown; it's what individuals create in order to alleviate what they view as a strange event. Sula herself, because she is viewed as a witch or to have an evil spirit by the residents in the bottom. There are superstitions that are attached to her as a way of explaining events, or just an unscientific way of warding off evil spirits.

Part II of the novel begins in 1937 and Sula has just returned to the bottom after a ten-year hiatus. Her entrance into the town is "accompanied by a plague of robins". This robin plague is simply birds pervading the town, flying everywhere, and apparently "you couldn't go anywhere without stepping in their pearly shit" (89). This could very well be a coincidence but, it is the need of the community to attach a superstitious reason for the return of Sula to Medallion. Now I do want to make it clear that certain events or having characters that share in a superstitious approach are not what aides in the novel's surrealism. Rather, it is the textual contrast that is drawn by Morrison and how those contrasts both exude rationality and borders on the absurdity.

Morrison uses curious conflicting word choices that underscore the perplexity of this town: "Sula stepped off the Cincinnati Flyer into the robin shit and began the long climb up into the Bottom" (90). The last part of that sentence, "climb up into the Bottom" is interesting because one doesn't climb into the bottom of something; yes, Sula would be climbing the hill to reach the town known as the bottom. However, these two phrases are a bit conflicting and the incongruity of it has echoes of surrealism. In the second part of the novel, once Sula returns, this is when the superstition begins to take form, fantasy being tied to the character of Sula. Nel notices that "although it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it

was all due to Sula's return to the Bottom" (95). Because of this Sula now becomes a magical element within the community, Nel's view is the same as the community that attaches superstition to her.

As Part II progresses we get a clearer picture of the chasm between adult Nel and Sula. Nel, now married and a pillar of the community, is in direct opposition to Sula, a "pariah", a "roach" and a "bitch" within the community. Sula's actions, taking over Eva's house and placing her in a nursing home, sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband, and sleeping around with the married men of the town, all lead to them ostracizing her from the community. The community is the one that ignites superstition in *Sula*, as such they make an effort to regard Sula as a magical, witch like figure:

It was rumored that she had had no childhood diseases, was never known to have chicken pox, croup or even a runny nose. She had played rough as a child-where were the scars? Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability. (115)

Additionally, after a rumor begun that Sula slept with white men the people in the community were incredulous. Interracial unions to the residents of the bottom may as well be an act of war on her part to African Americans. Much like the aforementioned paradoxical phrase of "climb up into the bottom", Morrison uses imagery to contrast two concepts. The narrator makes the argument that sexual relations between white men and black women generally should not happen, to the point that if a black woman was willing to have sex with a white man that this was "literally unthinkable".

On its own that phrase is innocuous, however, when paired with the passage in the very next paragraph: “So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps”, the deliberate textual paradox becomes evident. The description of something realistic that can literally happen – interracial dating – mixed with something that is an irrational belief that has shown no factual merits of being effective. It’s a deliberate conflation of realism (through the phrase “literally unthinkable”) and surrealism (through the superstitious act that the residents do as a result of Sula). This has ties to superstitions/myths that arose by blacks out slavery, we will eventually see how superstitions in *Sula* evolve to myths and folklore in *Solomon*, and then to ghosts and the supernatural in *Beloved*.

Now once Sula dies “a brighter day was dawning” (151). Yet, by the time we get to 1965 “the Bottom had collapsed”, and the that narrator points out that “white people were buying down river, cross river, stretching Medallion like two strings on the bank. Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more” (166). Thus, the paradox ends because the Bottom “is called the suburbs now”, as stated in the beginning of the book on page 3; however, by the time we reach the end of the book on page 174 Nel’s cry “had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow”. The original inversion of the name of the town ceases to exist and Sula, the character emblematic of superstition, is now dead. Is it because of Sula’s death that the town begins to thrive and as a result that leads to the collapse of the bottom; or, does the eventual gentrification of the bottom lead to its demise? I argue that this is purposefully ambiguous, the point Morrison is making is that the African tradition within the town of Medallion is fading away, as people die and as their culture begins to be refurbished, we lose traditional values inherent to a culture.

Chapter 2: Flight and Folklore in *Song of Solomon*

Tradition is one of the cornerstones of Morrison's work; the African traditions misplaced to a culture that journeyed to America while on chained ships. These cultural traditions were used to provide a means of a psychological reprieve from slavery. Superstition and spirituality, present in *Sula*, is part of that tradition and so are folktales and mythical figures. *Song of Solomon* has a recurring folktale that has to do with the representation of flight. The protagonist of *Solomon*, Milkman, is on a journey in this novel: a search for purpose, for an identity, but more significant to this journey is, as Morrison proclaims, a need to "escape the cultural prison that he found himself in".¹⁶ Like *Sula*, this is a multi-genre coming-of-age book that is a generational story of an African American family. *Solomon* soon turns into an adventure story as Milkman is on the hunt for gold in the third act of the novel; however, that quest is much more about him finding information related to his grandfather, tracing his family lineage and understanding the symbolic meaning of "flight", as it relates to its mythical roots.

There are three main characters that both aid –and deter –Milkman from accomplishing his pursuit: his abusive, controlling and niggardly father (Macon Dead); his meek, dubiously incestuous mother (Ruth Dead); and his idealistically abrasive best friend Guitar. Morrison sets up these characters as entry points, meaning the interaction between Milkman and these characters lead him down the path that he finds himself on; yet, much more crucial is that the interactions develop discussions of Morrison's larger thematic issues. So in order to understand the use of flight as the thematic centerpiece of this novel we must first explore how Morrison makes it necessary for Milkman to escape his surroundings.

¹⁶ Visonaryproject. *Toni Morrison*. 20 April 2010. 12 April 2018. <[youtube.com/watch?v=RTAQHbLF184](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTAQHbLF184)>.

Early in the novel Milkman meets his aunt, Pilate, as well as her daughter, Reba, and granddaughter, Hagar. Milkman begins a relationship with Hagar, who is ostensibly his cousin, and their relationship soon devolves because Hagar wants more than Milkman is willing to give (she makes attempts on his life, becoming the jilted lover). At home Milkman literally has to keep his father from abusing his mother: “Milkman had yanked him by the back of his coat collar, up out of his chair, and knocked him into the radiator”.¹⁷ There is an inherent problem within this household, not just the abuse at the hands of Milkman’s father. Specifically, it involves the relationship Milkman has with everyone. His mother breast feeds him well beyond the normal age for a child; the relationship he has with his sisters, First Corinthians and Magdalene, lacks traditional sibling interaction and Milkman “had never been able to distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother” (68).

Furthermore, his best friend, Guitar, is considered family as well, so the conversations that he has with Guitar about the killing of innocent black people speak volumes with regard to the philosophical views of both. Guitar is a member of the “seven days”, which is a group of black men whom take it upon themselves to exact retribution when an African American that is killed at the hands of whites is a national story. Once that happens they pick, at random, any white person and kill them in the same fashion. This is a way of restoring balance to an already unbalanced world. This is at odds with Milkman’s ethos and amplifies the Milkman/Guitar dynamic since they both have different world views. Morrison establishes that Milkman’s family relationships are broken, while some aren’t necessarily his fault they do result in him needing to find an identity and the need for him to extricate himself from this “cultural prison” that

¹⁷ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 67

Morrison talks about. This sets up the need for flight for our protagonist, hence using the symbolism of flight to transport us from present to past.

Since both *Beloved* and *Solomon* operate under two different types of supernatural, *Beloved* dealing with a quantifiable physical supernatural representation of paranormal events; and *Solomon* with a figurative supernatural – elements that are not physical, but rather rationally ambiguous, it is easier to disregard *Solomon* as magical realism. All supernatural within *Solomon* can be viewed under the scope of folktale, which is a myth that even characters within the novel make reference to its incredulity. Myths themselves are ambiguous as they are tales cast down from generation to generation.

Nonetheless, Morrison makes a shift further into surrealistic depths with *Solomon* by situating the narrative within the sphere of an African American myth. The myth of flying African is an overarching theme in this book and Morrison uses it to create that bridge to the past for African Americans (highlighting and acknowledging her ancestors), she is also using it as a tool – much like superstition in *Sula* – to place the book in a surrealistic atmosphere; juxtaposing reality and myth.

Looking at the mythology of flying Africans, Morrison herself makes note of how this myth came to take form and why it intrigued her. African Americans, or slaves rather, would come to America and leave, via flight, back to Africa. On the surface, it is fundamentally escapism for black slaves, and as such can also be dissected from a psychological aspect, the impact of slavery and the desire to return back to the place of birth by any means necessary. While this folklore came out of slave narratives, and while obviously not true, there is some validity to a group of people all believing in and hearing the same thing. As Morrison points out:

“the one thing you can say about a myth is that there is some truth to it, no matter how bizarre it is”.¹⁸

“Bizarre” is a good way to describe the myth’s role within this book: our protagonist is connected to the supernatural before he is even born. His survival inside of his mother’s womb – as well as the reason behind how he was conceived – was at the hands of Pilate, who lives on the outskirts of town and is well known to be associated with voodoo. Pilate gives Milkman’s mother a concoction that Ruth uses on Milkman’s father in order to have another child (Milkman at the time): “She gave me some funny things to do. And some greenish-grey grassy-looking stuff to put in his food” (125). Pilate also used a voodoo doll that she placed “on Macon’s chair in his office”, Macon would eventually burn the doll once he found it but it still had its desired effect since “he left Ruth alone after that” (132). These incidents are unnatural, and there are other events within the book that are mystically aligned as well; however, by an overwhelming degree the book is shrouded in folklore.

The theme and historical myth of flight is at the heart of how Morrison began *Solomon*. Taking a look at the different connotations flight has we can see its relation to spirituality and escapism, and how that can be used as a symbolic element for the protagonist to remove themselves, not geographically from America, but rather mentality from the “cultural prison”. Morrison stated that this folktale of flight was front and center when she began thinking about this novel. Thematically – and symbolically for that matter – *Solomon* uses the flying Africans motif much in the same way that *Sula* uses spirituality, as well as *Beloved* uses ghosts and the character Beloved. There is a relationship each has to the past, specifically for *Solomon* it is the representational act of flying and how that relates to African Americans, past and present, and their ability to be liberated.

¹⁸ Visionaryproject. *Toni Morrison*.

So how should we view *Solomon* from an analytical perspective? We must first put the central theme, flight, into its proper context. Analyzing its purpose and realizing what the folktale of flight means to the protagonist in relation to his past, but more importantly to his present that will give him a greater individual and cultural awakening. Flight is the guiding principle in this book and that will lead us into the different sub-divisions of the surreal: myth, supernatural, and religion.

Lorna McDaniel, who wrote about the myth of African flight, pinpoints the reason behind its origin and its significance amongst slaves and African tribes. She states that flight "alludes not only to the imagination of supernatural power and the soul's return from exile but also to the ideological choice of suicide that was often made by enslaved".¹⁹ Flight as a myth is not only relegated to Africans, McDaniel points out that Caribbean and Western cultures as well have some form of this myth, however, for enslaved Africans it was representative of a desire to return back to Africa; it was the only retaliation that was afforded to them, suicide in an attempt to return their soul back to Africa. They would leave the physical world for the spiritual one.

Morrison normally lays the groundwork for the context of each book within the first paragraph. *Solomon* is no different as she immediately jumps into flying, fusing myth and reality, thereby showcasing the reality of an individual trying to fly (this leads to death) and the symbolism inherent in flight (this leads to rebirth). The narrative is grounded in realism through rational events, but we must look at the subtext – innate in the use of folklore and magic – to place it in a surrealist space.

Morrison begins *Solomon* with a symbolic reference to flight that will be alluded to throughout the book. The book begins, "The North Carolina Life Insurance agent promised to fly

¹⁹ Lorna McDaniel. "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of The Myth in The Americas." *JSTOR* 64 (1990),32

from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" (3). It is in those words, plus what the Life Insurance agent tacked on his door: "fly away on my own wings", where we get a sense of what can be known in her work as magically metaphorical. McDaniel makes the case of what water signifies to her, it is "The sea (or a body of water) represents the obstacle against return and is used as the symbol of deterrence in much of the lore presented here".²⁰ Water, what slaves were transported over and what they would need to overcome to get back to their place of origin is first referenced here by "the other side of Lake Superior". Morrison is specifically summing and introducing readers to the myth of the flying African, its oppositional relation to large bodies of water and the outcome.

The Life Insurance agent, Robert Smith, is not literally going to fly, and by all rationalistic accounts cannot fly and does not have wings. However, Morrison doesn't just make the case of flight without interjecting magical imagery (descriptive language that has supernatural or magical connotations). Take for example how she introduces Milkman's mother, Ruth Dead, seeing Robert Smith for the first time right before giving birth to Milkman:

When the dead doctor's daughter saw Mr. Smith emerge as promptly as he had promised from behind the cupola, his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest, she dropped her covered peck basket, spilling red velvet rose petals. The wind blew them about, up, down, and into small mounds of snow. Her half-grown daughters scrambled about trying to catch them, while their mother moaned and held the underside of her stomach. (5)

²⁰ Lorna McDaniel. "The Flying Africans", 29-30

For starters, the "blue silk wings" aren't wings but rather his arms. The reason for the imagery Morrison paints refers to the supernatural idea of flight, she is creating a magical space within the act of flying to allude to its mythical roots. This allusion allows the reader to view this act, not from the standpoint of a mentally unstable man taking his life (which on the surface it is) but, to view it from the perspective of myth. A symbolically supernatural image that has spiritual meanings.

There is also the contrast in that scene with "blue silk wings" and "red velvet rose petals". This distinction on color does two things, first it foreshadows the death of Robert Smith, as the image of red roses spilled on the floor indicates his blood that will be spilled after he jumps from the building. Secondly, it juxtaposes two diametrically opposite colors, each having its own meaning. We can make the connection between blue – symbolic of water, of life – and red symbolizing death. More than that however, it underlines the previously mentioned McDaniel argument of what water means in terms of the "obstacle" for African Americans. Morrison is figuratively saying that Robert Smith's attire (representative of the physical world) is literally an impediment for mental stability.

So, while we can see the symbolic relationship between red and blue, we can also see the cyclical nature of life, as is evident with how the birth of Milkman is detailed. Milkman is born directly after (the next day) the suicide of Robert Smith takes place, and there is a link between Robert Smith's death, off the top of Mercy Hospital, and the birth of the first colored baby born inside Mercy Hospital. These are two rational events taking place and one may have nothing to do with the other, yet, the juxtaposition of the two events creates a surreal moment where death leads to birth. Milkman, entering this world as a false belief in self-flight is the cause of death for

another. Sub-textually, after reading the book in its entirety, we realize it is much more about his need to escape his current life; much like the slaves from whom this myth originated.

The narrator makes mention of Milkman learning that he can't really fly, that it's for birds and airplanes and when this happens he loses "all interest in himself" (9). If Robert Smith's "blue silk wings left their mark" then that is an indication that Milkman must find a way to extract himself, through flight, from the cultural oppression that will lead to him ending up like Robert Smith. Flight here can be viewed as representative of the past, not just because it is "supernatural" but because of the origin of the folklore and what it means in terms of an individual escaping their current situation. That correlation that Morrison drew between life and death, Milkman and Robert Smith, outlines the past tradition (folktale) of flying Africans who died (either from attempted flight or from escape) and the present or future of African Americans with the birth of Milkman. She manages to combine two disparate things and crafts a connecting bridge between them.

The novel is divided by two parts and it is the division of these two parts that allow us to see where Milkman is on his journey. Right before Part I finishes, his sister, Magdalene, has a conversation with him where she chastises him not just for his behavior, but his actions toward his family. She tells him that "After you peed on me, I wanted to kill you. I even tried to once or twice" (213). We now have two people that aim to see Milkman dead. Magdalene explains to Milkman how his actions are in direct infringement of his family's feelings:

You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. But now, all of a sudden, you have Corinthians' welfare at heart and break her up from a man you don't approve of [...] You have yet to wash your own

underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of dirt from one place to another [...] You think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her. Taking her side. It's a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what to do. (215-216)

This is the crux of who Milkman is, he is not sympathetic to what others may feel, least of all his family. This is coming-of-age tale, and by this point in the book he is at least in his 30's, though, he still hasn't grown up, doesn't understand how to be a man, nor does he have the cultural awareness needed as an African American.

If part one of this novel focused on the inadequate character that is Milkman, then part two's focal point is the evolution of Milkman, his awakening through the symbolism of flight. Before Milkman meets Susan Byrd, the woman who would give him the information about his family lineage she calls Solomon, there is an interaction that he has once entering the down south town. He proceeds, through no fault of his own, to get into a fight with a group of strangers in a store. Immediately after that altercation another group of strangers invites him hunting, which leads to a confrontation with Guitar in the woods – and the third person that wants to take his life. While this may seem unrelated, it should be viewed as the transition, or the progression of Milkman; it's a rite of passage for this character being that he has lived a rather sheltered and coddled life, as his sister points out. There are steps that Milkman has to go through before he can fully understand what it truly means to fly.

Accordingly, the search for gold, which was first thought to be at Pilate's house, is interesting, if only because while he was on a search for a materialistic item like gold he received it in the form of information about his family's past. When he visits Susan Byrd's house she tells

him about his great-grandfather, a “flying African”, to which Milkman questions the name. Susan’s response to him is equally skeptic and believer:

Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did, his name was Solomon [...] No I mean flew, 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 [...] went right back to wherever it was he came from (322 – 323).

This passage sums up the view on the actual validity of flight, ambiguous or not; to a larger extent, it allows us to see the progression of the supernatural within Morrison’s work. Because of the vagueness of this folktale, we cannot specifically say this book has "magical" elements or is operating under a fabulist lens. As the character Susan said: "it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story"; characters within *Solomon* do not believe in the myth themselves, it is just a story passed down from generations, yet it isn’t explicitly dismissed as fictitious.

Is it still surreal, yes, because by all accounts the use of this myth gives the novel odd, irrational events and evokes something of a fantasy for the reader. It is here where we see Morrison juxtapose two distinct elements: the rational (the narrative quest for Milkman) and the irrational (the flying African). This juxtaposition operates on a few levels, but most importantly, it adds to the idea that she is building a bridge from the past, with the use of the flight folktale. Our protagonist has to learn about his past – the collective past of African Americans – before he can evolve and break free of the “cultural imprisonment” that is currently holding him back.

If past informs present then by the time Milkman returns home he should be a transformed figure, the novel represents this by examining how his family reacts upon seeing him, “His return to Not Doctor Street was not the triumph he’d hoped it would be, but there was relief in his mother’s crooked smile. And Lena, though unforgiving as ever, was civil to him, since Corinthians had moved to a small house in Southside, which she shared with Porter” (335). Not a hero’s welcome, nonetheless it shows his change in relation to others, especially when juxtaposed with his father’s concern only for who remembered him, but “he wasn’t a bit interested in the flying part”. His father has not escaped the cultural bonds that holds him back, flight, along with his past, is lost upon him.

As Milkman embarks on his journey from present (with his family up north) to past (his heritage down south) Guitar is with him every step of the way. Guitar’s motivation is strictly materialistic; he wants the gold (not realizing there is no literal gold but a figurative one). On the other hand, the character of Guitar is there to push Milkman beyond his limits, to be the antagonizing obstacle that must be overcome. When Milkman goes with Pilate to bury her father’s bones Guitar shoots Pilate from afar, a distraught Milkman stands up to look for Guitar in the hills and “Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees –he leaped” (337). The symbolic meaning behind flight is reached here by Milkman, Morrison is informing us that Guitar has finally pushed Milkman over the edge and he is now able to take that figurative leap, Milkman has now gone through his past, and is ready to face his cultural present.

Susan Blake wrote about folklore in *Solomon* and she makes the argument that the use of folklore in the book drives the protagonist, Milkman, to make the tale come to fruition while destabilizing it:

Thus, the significance of both Milkman's quest and the folktale his search is founded on are paradoxical. On the one hand, his quest leads Milkman to his kin, close and remote; on the other, it sets him apart, like the quest hero of myth and fairy tale (whom he also resembles) as one who overcomes obstacles and plumbs mysteries with the help of magical guides (like Pilate), but who ascends the throne or transcends mortality (as Milkman does when he dares to fly) alone.²¹

Yes, there is a paradox as Blake astutely observes, and that paradox leads to another. That is the realism of the events of Milkman going on a journey to find his family vs. the surrealism of the symbolism it has with its folkloric roots, not to mention the novels use of the “help of magical guides” (like Pilate).

The paradoxes lead to *Solomon* being a journey into existentialism. This duality between rational and irrational, the choices characters make blur the lines between good and evil and are all tenants of an existentialist viewpoint. This point is buttressed by the person opposite of Milkman, his best friend Guitar. Guitar's pragmatic vision of the world and the narrative's inclusion of the "Seven Days" (retribution for murdered blacks) are elements of the novel that add to its absurdity. We can see the similarities in duality here and in *Sula*, and no doubt *Beloved* can be approached from an existentialist perspective as well, as it is rife with surrealist elements.

²¹ Susan L. Blake "Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon." *JSTOR* (1980), 82

Chapter 3: Ghosts and the Undead in *Beloved*

Beloved, unlike *Solomon* and *Sula*, was inspired by and bases its plot on the true story of an African American slave, Margret Garner, who escaped slavery and fled to a free state. After being tracked down Margret would eventually be forced to make the gruesome choice of killing her own baby in order to spare them from slavery. *Beloved* takes place in Cincinnati, Ohio, circa 1873 where the protagonist Sethe, a former slave, has been living with her eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver, and two sons, Howard and Buglar (both of whom flee from the outset of the book due to the malicious spirit living in the house) and Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law). The spirit living in the house is Sethe's dead baby, who then reincarnates itself into the character of *Beloved*, which is Sethe's, now grown, child.

This novel, dissimilar in style to the rest in her cannon, still deals with slavery, the effect it has on the individual, the community, familial relationships and the subsequent loss of identity. Surrealistically, *Sula*, *Solomon* and *Beloved* all have established elements that put them within that domain; yet, it is in *Beloved* where both of these elements are more prominent. *Beloved* has an actual supernatural entity, because of this, there is an unequivocal rationality and irrationality to the narrative that was indistinct with the other two novels. The juxtaposition between realistic and illogical, natural and supernatural is so stark that the surrealism manifests itself in such a way that there is a stark relation to magical realism. This is not a title I would give any of her other work, but the unambiguous nature of the ghost and its bodily personification make it such that the basic elements of magical realism are present in *Beloved*.

Since there are two distinct supernatural elements that are evident: the ghost of 124 and the resurrected deceased baby taking human form (*Beloved*), my focus will be on the supernatural elements within *Beloved* – the ghost and the character *Beloved*. Concentrating on these two entities will allow us to view the juxtapositions used in order to link past to present. I

will separate the two, first discussing how the "ghost" is treated as a supernatural being and has ties to the past; and then discuss Beloved and her relation to the present – and future – as well as what type of entity she should be viewed as, since there is a “conspicuous gap in classifications of the character Beloved: that of the living-dead, the zombie, or zombie”.²²

When Beloved first appears Sethe has what can only be described as a figurative child delivery, symbolizing that she just birthed Beloved. It is at this point where the ghost ceases to exist, taking on a physical body, becoming Beloved. All the events prior deals with the supernatural entity that is a ghost, and all events after deals with an ineffable supernatural entity.

There are a few distinct juxtapositions within the novel that must first be addressed when looking at how they relate to the supernatural. The first is the narrative, there is an abrupt change in the narrative between Sethe’s past at “Sweet Home” (the plantation where she lived before her escape) and present when she is residing at the house on 124 Bluestone Road (after the events of killing her child). The novels switch between the two at different times, swiftly changing gears without indication. What this does is distort the lines between past and present; does it make it difficult to fully grasp which particular period we’re in as a reader, at times it may seem so. Though, through the supernatural it becomes more apparent. The supernatural in *Beloved* is only in the present, when the novel switches to Sethe and Paul D’s time at Sweet Home – in the past – this is the rational world with no ghosts or entities. This correlates to the idea that the entity (ghost and Beloved) is there to allow a passageway to the past for the residents of 124. Attached to the narrative is past and present, real and surreal, the only way characters can move forward is to remember, understand and come to terms with their past.

²² Robert Yates, "The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on The Loose", 516

Much like the textual paradox of the land called “the Bottom” in *Sula*, there is something similar here in the name of the plantation where Sethe lived: “Sweet Home”. The fact that it was a plantation for slaves means that the actual name is a misnomer, and as Sethe recounts her time there we can see that nothing about it was sweet for the black people who occupied that plantation. There is also the connection that Morrison draws by having Beloved be enamored with sweets, “and she whined for sweets although she was getting bigger. Plumper by the day”.²³ This adds to the significance of Beloved being a link to Sethe’s past, Sethe escaped “Sweet Home”, she chooses to kill her child (Beloved apparently) because of her escape and now Beloved eats sweets constantly, as the novel describes it, it is all she eats. It is a subtle link that Morrison exposes to the reader.

Although the ghost and Beloved are one in the same, from a supernatural perspective they operate very differently, in terms of how the supernatural presents itself and how the characters within the novel interact with them. Moreover, they are both representative of two different ideas. The ghost represents that past sin of Sethe, the past sin of slavery; Beloved on the other hand is that bridge to the past, allowing for a link between present and past.

We must first begin, as in previous chapters, with how *Beloved* opens: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spits in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims" (3). The introduction of the novel begins with an introduction to the ghost that haunts the house; this immediately places the book into the supernatural realm as a clear-cut malicious ghost –that is a baby –that haunts the house. It also creates a world where ghosts are present, and the family and community are aware of the supernatural entity. There are a few things that having this juxtaposition between reality and irrationality at the very beginning does. It

²³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1987), 281

foreshadows the bridge that will lead past to present, the supernatural (ghost and Beloved) representative of the past and the natural world representative of the present. It also sets up a world where the supernatural is accepted as something that is an everyday part of life (echoes of magical realism). The community, much like the communities in *Sula* and *Solomon* are ones in which the belief in the unnatural are accepted by all.

Diving further into the notion that the characters in *Beloved* have an understanding of the ghost that surrounds them, we can see when Sethe recounts Baby Suggs' response when she brought up moving to another house in order to get away from the spirit:

'We could move,' she suggested once to her mother-in-law. 'What'd be the point?' asked Baby Suggs. 'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don't talk to me. (6)

This dialogue between Sethe and Baby Suggs allows for something significant that Morrison wants the reader to understand: within this narrative, ghosts, the paranormal and the supernatural exist and characters view it as a reality that they deal with (this alone would give this novel a magical realist classification). By throwing the reader immediately into a surreal event Morrison is dictating what constitutes realism and surrealism within the novel.

Sethe killing her daughter is a sin, not necessarily a sin on behalf of Sethe, but rather the sin of slavery. Sethe herself has to learn to deal with the guilt of killing her own child, she has to learn to move forward and not feel responsible for the death of her child. From a macro standpoint, Morrison is indicting the larger scope of slavery to include both whites and blacks: whites for the construction of slavery and the brutality that it created and blacks for the ability to

allow themselves to heal, accept and move on. And that is what the ghost of 124 represents for Sethe, the sin of slavery, her sin, that she is unable to forgive herself for. When Sethe and Denver decide to invite the ghost to come and nothing happens and Sethe has an interesting explanation for Denver:

‘You forgetting how little it is’ said her mother. ‘She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even.’

“Maybe she don’t want to understand,” said Denver

‘Maybe. But if she’d only come, I could make it clear to her.’ (5)

Sethe is insistent that she explain to her child why she had to kill her since her daughter "wasn't even two years old when she died" it's understandable that she feels guilty. The ghost, at this point, is the link that Sethe has to her past.

It took Paul D, after an altercation with the ghost, to get the entity to leave 124. When he first arrives, he stops at the door and finds "a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood". This is the only imagery we get of the ghost and based on what Sethe recounts, this is the reason why no one visits the house, the ghost is always present. Paul D decides to enter the house but not before inquiring about the evil spirit that occupies it, to which Sethe explains the spirit as “sad” not “evil” (10).

Now Paul D was with Sethe at “Sweet Home” and they have not seen each other in a few years, so after this encounter Paul D stays at the house as he and Sethe start a relationship, it isn’t until a confrontation between Paul D and the ghost that the ghost seemingly ceases to exist and has left the house: “Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had got rid of the only other

company she had. Denver dipped a bit of the bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserably, she ate it” (23).

There is an ontological argument to be made for the validity of ghosts. Conversely, the return of her dead baby is baffling, it’s not quite a resurrection – as she returns in the body of what her age would be if she was never killed; it’s also not quite a reincarnation since she doesn’t come back as a baby, however, it could be a delayed reincarnation. Nonetheless, *Beloved* is problematic in this area when trying to understand what the nature of Beloved is, where she came from and how she has just appeared out of nowhere. Indeed, the character can be viewed as a physical ghost. In trying to understand the origins of Beloved we can break down what she means as a figure of slavery. She too represents the sins of slavery, both of blacks and whites, slave owners and those enslaved, the past coming back to haunt African Americans. However, unlike the ghost Beloved is here to give us a better understanding of how to mentally deal with those tragedies.

There is a juxtaposition that Morrison makes when we first encounter Beloved. It's the association of both Beloved and Sethe with water. "A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank if the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree"(60). The metaphorical representation of someone drenched in and walking out of, water; born new to this world. Only a few paragraphs later do we see Morrison add another person, Sethe, at the opposite end of this metaphorical supernatural spectrum:

And, for some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe’s bladder filled to capacity. She said, ‘Oh, excuse me,’ and ran around to the back of 124 ... She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she

voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born ... But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now. (61)

This combination that Morrison creates between Sethe (releasing her bladder) and Beloved (rising from the water) is both a figurative and literal depiction of a mother giving birth to her offspring; it's both real (through the narrative events) and surreal (through its symbolism). Allegorically, this represents the past birth Sethe had of her unnamed child whom she would later have to kill and the present birth/reincarnation of that child now known as Beloved. This description is emblematic of what Morrison wants to accomplish in this novel, it's the connection between what is viewed as rational and realistic, with that of the irrational and surrealist. By tying a symbolically surrealist connection to both characters Morrison not only allows for the reader to draw a connection between Sethe and Beloved, but she also manages to thrust the book further into a magical realist space.

Vashti Crutcher Lewis writes about the African traditions present in *Sula* and part of that tradition has to do with water, divinities and spirits. As he points out, "Lakes, streams, and rivers have always been associated with divinities and spirits among the Yoruba people in West Africa. They believe that in connection with every lake, stream and river is a lord or owner. Shrines have been built throughout West Africa to honor water spirits".²⁴ All three novels have the occurrence of an event near water, however, it is here in *Beloved* where the idea of a water spirit is prominent because, "A FULLY DRESSED woman walked out of the water". Beloved is a spirit,

²⁴ Vashti Crutcher Lewis, "African Tradition in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *JSTOR* 48.1 (1987): 93

she did come from nowhere, water is the only signifier we have to where Beloved came from; it's the first –and last –place that she was spotted.

Now the name Beloved is the same name that Sethe used for her daughter's gravestone. The correlation is that this is the physical form of the child that Sethe had to kill. These are ways in which Morrison lets us know that the ghost, Beloved, and the murdered child are one in the same. Another would be the origin of Beloved: she and Denver have a discussion regarding her creation. Denver is asking her where she came from and if she saw anybody (Jesus or Baby Suggs), Beloved explains that she saw a lot of people “down there” and that she came back “to see her face” in reference to Sethe (88). There are a few things to dissect from this interaction. Most importantly, it establishes Beloved as having been dead (apparently in torment based on the “down there” comment she tells Denver), coming back to life the same age she would have been had she not died. Before this conversation between them, Beloved could be seen as rationally ambiguous; the question of if she is the reincarnation of Sethe's child was left unclear. The entity of Beloved is a bit unclear and there isn't a distinct word for Beloved, reincarnation or ghost. According to Robert Yates, *Beloved* uses the depiction of “the zombi or Zombie” to relate it to slavery; the characters in *Beloved* are caught between two worlds and as such they operate in both “life and death”. Yates expounds on how each character functions among both worlds, however, it is his interpretation of Beloved that is relevant:

Despite the human appearance of Beloved, she is not a living person, but a corpse. As a result she is plunged into the Uncanny Valley, and this can be seen in the association of her with repressed memories, her previous

incarnation as the baby ghost of 124, and her gradual movement toward becoming Sethe's uncanny double.²⁵

I agree with Yates that Beloved is “not a living person, but a corpse.”, and that is the definition that best explains the territory that Beloved exists within –she is not human and not a ghost. We see the corpse like effect when Beloved extracts her own tooth from her mouth and her thoughts about it after dictate that she too views herself as decomposing. Beloved thinks that “next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once ... When her tooth came out –an odd fragment, last in the row –she thought it was starting” (157)

For the inhabitants of 124 Beloved is not immediately seen as the reincarnated daughter of Sethe. Only gradually through time does Paul D, Denver and Sethe realize who Beloved is; and for the reader as well, the unclear nature of Beloved being an entity soon turns to an empirical truth. Denver is the first to understand who Beloved really is, it's no surprise then that she also realizes that Beloved is a gateway into the past. After Sethe shares her thoughts on where she believes Beloved came from, the narrator describes Denver's reaction:

Denver neither believed nor commented on Sethe's speculations, and she lowered her eyes and never said a word about the cold house [...] Besides, she had her own set of questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested Denver, but she was careful to appear uninquisitive about the things she was dying to ask Beloved, for if she pressed too hard, she might lose the penny that the held-out pal wanted, and lose, therefore, the place beyond appetite. (141)

²⁵ Robert Yates, "The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on The Loose", 518

The reference to the past and the present here is used to show how Beloved operates within the novel. She is the link, more notably, the fact that Denver is the only one to realize it is because she herself was not affected by slavery like Sethe or Paul D. Both those characters have the past sin that they must rid themselves of; Denver does not and that is why she is more preoccupied with the present.

There is a gradual change throughout the novel where Beloved seems to be sucking the life-force out of Sethe. It happens because of the neediness of Beloved but it's also because once Sethe realizes that Beloved is her dead child, the guilt takes over and tries to overcompensate by acquiescing to Beloved's (representative of her past sin), demands. Sethe is eager to explain her sins to her daughter:

BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be ... Paul D run her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh ... I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. (237)

Sethe is intent on having Beloved understand "Why I did it", she becomes preoccupied with explaining away her past sin. This is the difference with the ghost that occupied 124 and Beloved; the ghost was an entity that was a constant reminder about the past that could never be solved, could never be spoken to, could never be reasoned with; but in Beloved Sethe found her

atonement. The last part of that passage speaks to an inconsistency as well, Sethe claims that if she “hadn’t killed her she would have died”. It begs the question why Sethe felt the need to kill her daughter herself if she felt she was going to die regardless? Sethe is no doubt referring to the death that one goes through as a slave, and not an actually dying, if it were the latter why would she take a knife to her child’s throat. This brings up another interesting question that Morrison poses in *Beloved*, is death better than living life as a slave? It represents the fear of African Americans, the fear of slavery, of everything that was involved. It represents the spanning of generations and how the institution of slavery prevents the cultural growth of people.

This leads to the role of the community within *Beloved*. The community knew about the ghost that occupied 124: “Years ago –when 124 was alive –she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house, and she returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated” (112). The community in *Beloved* is accepting of Sethe to an extent, once the ghost appears they stay away from 124. They are seemingly unaware of *Beloved* until Denver seeks out help to deal with *Beloved*’s overtaking of Sethe, after Denver tells them the situation they are first incredulous about the baby that she killed coming back to life. While one person said that “she had it coming”, Ella managed to turn the community around and persuaded them to help out Sethe (301).

When 30 community residents made their way up to the house on 124 in order to exorcise *Beloved* from the house: “Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith –as shield and sword”. The narrator goes on to say that they “walked down Bluestone Road” together and while some people in the community showed up,

“the heat kept a few women who promised to go at home”. For some the belief of the ghost was enough to scare them away because being “part of the confrontation” was not something that they wanted (303).

After Beloved and Sethe leave their house and go to their porch they are now face to face with the residents and it is here where Sethe has a surreal moment, she notices “the loving faces before her” and that act of the community coming to save her creates a relapse. She envisions the slave catcher that cornered her, which forced her to kill her child, “he is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing” (308). Much like U.S. Marshalls and slave catchers came for her before, now the community has come for Beloved. Morrison uses the community as a way for Sethe to break the connection that Beloved has to her, for Sethe she is losing her child again, hence why she sees the “man without skin, looking”. What becomes clear is that once Sethe starts “running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again” (309) she has finally exorcised her demon, that of the guilt that she has held onto for murdering her own child. Because of the value and use of the community, Morrison is also addressing the need for the community to assist in the crossing of the figurative bridge.

Beloved is not heard from again, and once we get to the end Paul D, who hasn't talked to Sethe in a while, returns to 124 and makes a declaration to Sethe that allows us to effectively put the book into context, on page 322: “‘Sethe’, he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’” Yesterday and tomorrow is past and present, Paul D is acknowledging the tragic past that they lived (representative of the supernatural) and they now have the opportunity to have “some kind of tomorrow”. This is a result of Beloved (the entity) that was a symbolic bridge that allowed these characters to accept their past and move on.

Conclusion: Connecting the Dots in Morrison's Work

Past and present collide in these books and through the use of the surrealistic elements Morrison transports the reader, by way of her characters, to the past. This is done in order to effectively make a case for remembering historical transgressions as a way to move forward. Morrison writes with African traditions in mind, the foundations of the surreal that the books are built on are indicative of traditions that have been known to originate from African culture. The reason for using these surreal components in her work is two-fold. First, it's a way of remembering the customs of a past civilization, it brings to life the traditions that were lost or misplaced to a culture. Through the act of interposing those traditions in her books she is allowing the reader, through her narrative, to come to the past to learn and understand about the culture. In all three books, superstition in *Sula*, flight in *Solomon* and ghosts in *Beloved*, the representation of the past is through these bizarre events that aren't wholly rational, however, they were, and are, believed by some of a certain background.

Secondly, the surreal creates balance within these novels, its literary use runs counter to that of realism; counter to the brutality of what was constituted as rational; counter to the verisimilitude intrinsic in her work due to the historical challenges faced by African Americans. Morrison aims to expound on history, but the nature of retelling events will need the injection of something that will dilute the callousness of it, and the surreal does just that. She manages to use two diametrically opposite literary elements in order to create a space where both fact and fiction live, and as such she crafts juxtapositions within the narrative that aid in the transport between past and present. By inverting surrealism and realism, her goal is to put an emphasis on a real event, surround it with surreal elements and obfuscate the meaning of both.

I have mostly focused on what the surreal represents in relation to her work, however, one thing that must be discussed are the realistic events that Morrison sets the story within. Specifically, *Solomon* – through two real events mentioned by the seven days – *and Beloved*, as evidenced by the story of Margret Gardner. The difference is the impetus for *Solomon*, according to Morrison it was from something that is a myth; and *Beloved*'s motivation is from the real-life event of a runaway slave, Margret Garner. These stories having historical relevance add to the realism that is present in the novels. *Solomon* uses the story of Emmitt Till, an African American who whistled at white woman and was lynched for his actions. And that of a Birmingham Church Bombing in which four young girls were killed. Both stories made national headlines and both are incidents that saturate the collective minds of African Americans still. The infusion of incidents – based in reality – into her work is a way to link her novels to the reality of what life as an African American is. As Morrison explains: "I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment".²⁶ She is making a statement on the events that have plagued African Americans for generations, and through that statement her focus is the sins of slavery.

Morrison's work deals heavily with African tradition and social issues surrounding African Americans. There is a reason for the two, her goal is in "subverting dominant cultural forms in order to sustain belief systems that have been suppressed".²⁷ She merges these two things and what we get is a progression in realism and surrealism, across the spectrum of the three-works discussed. This is an evolution, and while each subsequent book does manage to plunge deeper into the surreal, they also become more grounded in reality.

²⁶ Toni Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation With Toni Morrison", Thomas LeClair

²⁷ Robert Yates, "The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on The Loose", 533

Consequently, as we begin the progress from superstition to myth to the supernatural we can also see the novels' realistic growth, from its historical perspective. As Morrison heightens the historical realism and starts to include specific events so too do the surrealistic elements intensify. This all allows for the particular element to aid in the thematic development of the book by the impact the element has on the characters in the novel. Ostensibly, one notices that the surreal in Morrison's work is a tool used to unpack historical events, mainly because of the viciousness of these events and the best way to describe them is combining it with fantastical elements. In addition, it showcases just how surreal slavery is, she is drawing a parallel between the surreal and slavery, thus saying the reality that was slavery should never have been real. The notion that someone could bomb a church and four young girls die; or that a man could be lynched for whistling at a woman, with no repercussions to the individuals that conducted such heinous acts is surreal.

Starting with *Sula*, this novel contains the slightest level, out of all three novels, of surrealism. It's robust with spiritual allusions and superstitious acts, and while it does have some instances where folktale is present, it never rises to the level of *Solomon*. This book has no historical examples and is different than the other two books because it doesn't draw from a single historical event (that we know of). Because this is the beginning of Morrison's literary journey *Sula* gives a broad overview of slavery, makes no mention of specific examples, yet focuses on the generality of the reality.

Solomon, by contrast, uses historical context for both its surreal and its realism. The myth of the flying man is explored because of the stories that were told from individuals and Morrison wanted to investigate what the folktale means. There is a deeper level of surrealism here because of everything associated with myths, folktales and voodoo. She throws in references to historical

events (mostly using the seven days as a spring board to discuss these events): the story of Emmett Till is discussed; also, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama that happened in 1963 is mentioned. These are national events on a large scale that Morrison is tapping into and using. Unlike *Sula*, *Solomon* has an actual event that we know took place, so where *Sula* was just a broad overview of slavery, the inclusion of an historical event in *Solomon* shows the development of the merging of the two terms, realism and surrealism. Since real events are mentioned, the surreal must now go up a level as well, and we see that transition from *Sula* to *Solomon*.

When *Beloved* comes into the picture we now have a fully developed integration, realism and surrealism have both expanded, more vital though is that they are now blended, seamlessly, within the narrative. The novel is based on a true story and from that story Morrison creates a world in which ghosts and entities carry the same value as characters, they mean so much to the point and theme of the novel. Because the impetus for this novel is about a woman who killed her daughter Morrison increases the surreal, making it equal with realism, therefore allowing the text to be more palatable. A ghost and a reincarnated spirit vs that of a runaway slave and a murder, she is highlighting the atrocious reality of slavery by conflating real (rational) and fake (surreal) in order to show how bizarre and unbelievable the concept of slavery is.

What we have within Morrison's novels, aside from real and surreal elements, are various troupes throughout each novel that Morrison highlights. So, it isn't just the trajectory of the surreal and real, but it's that she builds on each element with each successive book, culminating (from the perspective of the time period for these three novels) in what is widely seen as her most expressive, surrealistic and stylistic achievement: *Beloved*. They all tell past and present stories, *Sula* through the natural progression of the narrative, *Beloved* in a more fragmented and

disjointed way, and *Solomon* through the retelling of stories and events by characters. That constitutes the first level of past and present, through narrative technique; the second level is how she uses the surreal as a transportation device to the past, while grounding it in realistic events, through literary technique.

While I have just pointed out how Morrison uses surrealism and realism in her work, it must also be pointed out that evident in her work are different thematic elements that run throughout. For example, the parent child relationships: a non-existent (*Sula*, *Beloved*) or abusive and domineering (*Solomon*) father. The cyclical nature of the mother-daughter relationships, of daughters following in the footsteps of their mothers, forecasted through Sula and Hannah's actions. In addition, the comment that Milkman makes to his sister that he "had never been able to distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother" shows the pairing of his mother to her two daughters. *Beloved* uses the connection between Beloved and Sethe to illustrate this idea, Denver notices over time they form a bond and are linked in such a way that Beloved is seen as draining the life out of Sethe, almost becoming her. Additionally, this is a coming-of-age story for Nel, Sula and Milkman; they each start out as a youth and move into adulthood. I would also argue that Beloved falls under this classification as the symbolic birth of Beloved begins her youth; we are then treated to her learning various things and the character actually grows up in a short amount of time. So there is a progression from birth, to adolescence to adulthood (pregnancy) to her eventual disappearance.

Another thematic link is Morrison's Christian roots that make its way into all her novels. I spoke about baptisms and the representations of that ceremony in *Sula*, but *Solomon* had strong ties to religion. Character names (i.e. Pilate, Magdalene, and First Corinthians) being both representative and in some cases opposite of their biblical counterparts. The name of the book

itself stems from a book in the Old Testament. *Beloved* has allusions to Christianity, like the epigraph, or the mention to the horsemen coming to take Sethe back to Sweet Home, reminiscent of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

These are all ways in which Morrison ties each novel to the next, it is her signature and allows for a connection across her work. Once these cursory associations are made we can then move to the larger point she is making, thus categorizing specific elements within her work and use these classifications to establish her overall argument. By the end of each book, as well as the end of this exploration into Toni Morrison, one thing becomes clear: Morrison exposes her pedagogical roots to the reader by allowing us – vicariously through the characters –to view not only certain events or depictions of slavery, but also the psychological effects of slavery. How those events shaped individuals and spread, generationally, to a culture. We are given the opportunity to learn a valuable lesson tied to African Americans, African traditions and the virtue –as Sethe mentions –of "re-memory".

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