

Song of solomon; desire to fly essay

Literature



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? Since the beginning of time human beings have had a fascination with human flight. As one watches a bird soar through the air they cannot help but desire that same capability. Imagine the point of view of the world from the bird that flies among the mountains, high above the trees, over the ocean and far away from the clamor of everyday life on the ground. To have the freedom and power to release ones self from the tribulations experienced with two feet on the ground, and spring up and away into the peaceful, blue sky, is a common human desire. Since ancient times, flight has represented the opportunity to free ones self from the chains of oppression. This theme of flight is exemplified in the novel Song of Solomon, by Toni Morrison. In the conclusion of this novel, Milkman, the protagonist, jumps off of a cliff and towards Guitar Bains, the man that was once Milkman's friend but is now deranged and trying to murder him. The ending is left ambiguous, and it is not known if Milkman soars or simply crumbles to his death, it is only known that he attempts to "ride" the air.

Thus, in Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison uses the unknown ending of this novel in conjunction with the ever-present theme of flying to emphasize the importance of Milkman's leap off of the cliff; it is not crucial to know if he soars or if he dies, but that he was able to reach such an understanding with his past as to be able to free himself and attempt to fly. In the very beginning of Song of Solomon, the theme of flight and its importance to the African-American community is instantly established. This is shown when insurance agent Robert Smith jumped from the roof of Mercy Hospital, it marked an event: the first black woman was admitted to that hospital when she went into labor just outside the front doors. This expecting mother

started into labor with her first son, who would be nicknamed Milkman, when “ she saw Mr. Smith emerge as promptly as he had promised from behind the cupola, his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest”(Morrison 5). Unfortunately, even with wings, he could not fly and Mr. Smith promptly lost his balance. But, “ Mr.

Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when [Milkman] discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier- that only birds and airplanes could fly- he lost all interest in himself” (Morrison 9). The realization for the young Milkman that he would “ have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull” (Morrison 9).

Thus the beginning of Milkman’s life is marked by the attempt of flight by Robert Smith, and this fascination with flight follows Milkman throughout the novel, and is established as a metaphor for the inner peace that he seeks.

Milkman’s fascination with flying never truly dies. As a young man on a journey to shed light on his heritage and find enlightenment, he comes across a male peacock in the parking lot of a Buick dealership. In this instance Milkman realizes his fascination with anything that could fly. When Milkman asks his friend Guitar why it cannot fly any better than a chicken, Guitar replies, ““ Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity.

Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down’” (Morrison 179). The meaning of Guitar’s words could be compared to the situation of the African-Americans in the novel, and perhaps even to modern society. A great majority of African-Americans in this novel

seem to be preoccupied with the attainment of material goods in a desperate attempt to emulate the Caucasians in American society, and pay no attention to their heritage. For example Milkman's father, Macon Dead, is consumed by his want for money or anything having to do for it.

Macon pushes this materialism onto Milkman thus trapping him into a life not of his choosing. This causes Milkman to want to experience more in life and there is where his fascination for anything that flies and is consequently free because of that trait. What Toni Morrison is trying to say is that African Americans are thus weighed down by all of the “jewelry” they strive to acquire in their faulty attempt to gain inner peace, and thus are ironically never able to come to peace with themselves, and fly. While flight remains conspicuously absent throughout Milkman's childhood, it frequently reoccurs when he is on his quest to rediscover his past.

Milkman's first act of flying is an airplane ride to an old town where his father's family once resided; it is his flight to finding himself. “The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed” (Morrison 220). Milkman feels immune to all the mistakes of his past, as though they could not have ever existed. “In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (Morrison 20).

Milkman searches for freedom from his past mistakes, from the baggage of the people in his life, and from the expectations of his father. This first flight

on an airplane grants Milkman the feeling of freedom he has searched for all his life, at least for the short amount of time he remains in the air in the “intricate metal become glistening bird” (Morrison 220). He gains a taste of the freedom towards which he strives, and this momentary bliss helps him to realize the importance of flying and strengthens his zeal to rediscover his past, and permanently fly. Milkman’s continuing rediscovery of his past helps him to feel more comfortable with flying, and helps to further motivate him to take the final jump and gain transcendence. In the beginning of the novel Milkman was kept in the dark about much of his past, therefore making him feel lost. When the secrets of his past do come to light it gives him a chance to reevaluate himself in a way he was unable to do so before. Once Milkman arrives in the old town of his father’s past, Shalimar, he rests, and he dreams “about flying, about sailing high over the earth. But not with arms stretched out like airplane wings, not shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive, but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper” (Morrison 298).

During his journey to explore his past, Milkman maintains that “sense of lightness and power that flying had given him” (Morrison 298). Milkman makes a discovery about his families past when he learns that his great-grandfather, Shalimar, was infamous for his flight from the town of his name. He simply lifted himself into the air one day, leaving behind his wife and children, and flew. Shalimar’s flight gives Milkman newfound confidence in his abilities to fly, and gain his transcendence.

Since his great-grandfather was able to fly he sees in his family the ability to fly, and so in this way his rediscovery of his past helps to facilitate his own

flight. By uncovering his past and being comfortable with the legend of Shalimar, Milkman embraces his past and is able to gain such an understanding of it as to try to incorporate himself into the legend by jumping and attempting to fly away like Shalimar once did. Pilate's relationship with flight also plays a vital role in Milkman's development and eventual flight of his own. When Guitar tries to shoot Milkman, he instead fatally shoots Pilate.

As her body lies on the ground at Milkman's feet, a bird swoops down and flies off with Pilate's most treasured possession, a homemade earring with her name enclosed inside. Through objects such as the green bag and the earring with her name, Pilate was able to keep in touch with and embrace her past. Since she was at peace with her past she was not tied down by material possessions like the white peacock, and so spiritually she could fly with her grandfather Shalimar, as shown by the bird flying away with the earring. The differences between Pilate and Macon Dead are shown numerous times throughout the novel. Pilate, as said earlier, is at peace with her past therefore comfortable with her current self, allowing her freedom in her life. Macon has much more controversy over his past than Pilate, he strives for money and materialistic objects to make him feel more accomplished with his life. He feels that money will give him his freedom to fly when in reality it's the exact opposite. This sense of spiritual flight is what Milkman strives to attain, and eventually does by jumping off the cliff and attempting to physically fly.

Therefore, Pilate plays a pivotal role in helping Milkman realize the importance of embracing the past, and furthering him on his way to his

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eventual jump. However, Milkman must complete one more step to fully embrace his past and discover his inner peace. As Guitar waits to take another shot, Milkman finally makes the decision to jump, and: Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees- he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it (Morrison 337). Unlike Milkman's first flight in which he is destined to learn about his family history and is dependent on the wings of a man made airplane to soar through the air, his second flight is very different.

Milkman has made many discoveries about himself, and his heritage, and he is able to shed all the expectations and concerns of the material world weighing him down and lift himself into the air, just as his great-grandfather Shalimar once did. Shalimar's winged emancipation from slavery, Robert Smith's suicidal take-off from a rooftop, and Milkman's final leap into the killing arms of his brother are all instances in which liberation from social tyranny is represented through flight. By embracing his past Milkman comes to terms with the social tyranny around him, and relinquishes all materialistic burdens, flying like his African forefathers and embracing his culture. The theme of flying and the ambiguous ending of the novel both serve to shed light on the importance of Milkman's leap off of the cliff; what happens to him is far less important than the fact that he attempted it in the first place.

Unlike others such as Guitar or Macon Dead II who are fascinated with money and materialistic possessions like the white peacock, he chooses the <https://assignbuster.com/song-of-solomon-desire-to-fly-essay/>

path of Pilate and embraces his past as a way to find himself and truly fly. This choice results in an inner peace which others such as Guitar never find; they instead only lead themselves on a downward path of destruction and derangement. Milkman's final decision to fly is more than just a recognition of self, it is a decision to step into the legend as though it defined his reality and his actual past; in giving himself to the legend, he can completely claim it as his own.