

Freedom is a state of
mind



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Freedom is a seemingly simple word. General definition states that it is the power to act, think and speak as one pleases. If one wanted to become less concrete, it can also be suggested that freedom itself, is a state of mind. In addition to this, generally, when an individual expresses a desire for freedom, it is explained why said freedom is a necessity and freedom what situation. However, concepts, such as freedom have a tendency to lack simplicity when interpreted within literature. It is arguably common within literature for the theme of freedom and the concept of flight to coincide. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* emphasizes the use of flight imagery in order to greatly contribute to the theme of freedom.

This novel begins with a strong emphasis on the importance of flight, as Mr. Robert Smith, the insurance agent, commits suicide by jumping off of the roof of Mercy Hospital. His suicide note read, "...I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings" (Morrison 3). It is suggested that Mr. Smith's jump, and his supposed ability to soar, is symbolic of his spiritual and mental freedom. Though the morbidity behind this reasoning could be somewhat overwhelming, it can be interpreted that the jump off of Mercy hospital was Mr. Smith being granted mercy, and the ability to finally find his own freedom. As the story progresses, the audience later learns from Guitar that his suicide was an escape from the overbearing reign of the Seven Days organization; an organization in which crimes in the name of revenge are performed in secret. Guitar explains the importance of secrecy in this organization while talking to Milkman. He then went on to say, "...if it ever gets to be too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do that rather than crack and tell somebody" (158). In this instance, and in others that will later

be referenced, even in death, flight is representative of freedom. Mr. Smith's lack of flight deeply impacts the four-year old Milkman to the point that "... he lost all interest in himself" (9). At this young age, the belief that he would never achieve freedom due to his inability to fly, was a concept that he carried with him throughout the duration of this novel.

The narrator continues the story and begins to depict Sunday afternoon car rides that aside from Milkman, were found enjoyable to the entire family. He was described as being stuck between his parents and only being able to see "...the winged woman careening off of the nose of the car" (31). The winged woman is symbolizing freedom in flight to the rest of the family, the ability to move faster than any human and a form of superiority, in a sense. The physical manifestation on the nose of the car was the perfect representation of the family's desire to escape their duties, even if it were just for a little while. However, as mentioned before, Milkman was not particularly fond of these rides. For him, the winged woman was simply a painful reminder of both his lack of personal freedom and his inability to fly. The narrator goes on by stating that although Milkman was uncomfortable, it was better than sitting backwards. " It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going - just where he had been - troubled him" (32). This is highly symbolic due to the fact that it mirrors his existence. In other words, his personal belief that he would never be granted freedom affected his ability to see into the future and find peace and meaning in his life. In this instance, it becomes clear that the fact that he only knows his past, and has no future planned, is terrifying.

As Milkman grows up, he becomes very comparable to his father in the sense that they both seem to be obsessed with wealth – gold in particular. As his obsession grows, he becomes aware of a green tarp in which Pilate, his aunt, supposedly stored gold; although it is revealed later that it was in fact not gold. Soon after his “discovery”, Milkman goes to Guitar and a conversation pertaining on methods to acquire the loot ensues. While this conversation is taking place a white peacock mysteriously ambles into their view. A peacock, being a symbol of ostentation is extremely relevant due to their conversation of wealth. However, it is well known that peacocks are not able to sustain long periods of flight, thus making them a symbol of flightless ostentation. Guitar goes on to explain to Milkman that peacocks are not able to fly due to their ostentatious structure. He says, “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” (179). Since the peacock is a symbol of both wealth and the inability to fly, Guitar is suggesting that in order to achieve true freedom, one must first liberate themselves of the constructs that both themselves and society has placed on them.

Milkman takes this conversation to heart and sets out on his search for gold in Montour County, Pennsylvania. The very beginning of his trip set the stage for his personal development and the solidification of the importance of the theme of flight within this novel. Because of the fact that Milkman chose to travel by airplane to Pennsylvania, his theoretical or possibly even spiritual flight began. Morrison strengthens this by having the narrator inform the audience that while he is in the air, he is free from responsibilities, with a feeling of invulnerability. But when on the ground, he feels trapped and

constrained (220). After his quest for gold fails, Milkman purchases a car and leaves his hometown in search of his ancestral history in Shalimar, Virginia. He is metaphorically “flying” away from his personal struggles – a form of liberation. “And now, sitting behind a steering wheel, he felt even better. He was his own director” (262). Since Milkman not only owns this car, but is driving himself to find answers to his questions, he is experiencing his own freedom. This deeply contrasts the last time a vehicle held as much emphasis within this novel. As opposed to Milkman’s childhood, he finally is beginning to feel as though he is in control of his own life.

When Milkman returns to his hometown after his journey through his familial history, it is evident to the audience that he has come of age. Rather than chasing wealth and prosperity, he is able to find peace within himself because he is aware of others that came before him. At this point in the novel, it would be accurate to describe Milkman as having a certain degree of freedom; freedom from the constraints that he placed on himself in his early childhood. However, the rest of his family has not been through the same spiritual journey, and although Milkman feels at peace, the rest of his family and town are in the same state in which he left them – trapped by both societal expectations/constraints and personal duties. When he returns home, the novel unfolds in a series of rather unfortunate events. Following the off-screen death of his cousin and lover, Hagar, comes the on-screen, heart wrenching death of Hagar’s mother, Pilate. Pilate, after being accidentally shot by Guitar, passes away. Immediately following her passing, birds begin circling above them, one swoops down, picks up a shiny object, and flies off. This is once again representative of the notion that even in

death, flight represents freedom. In this moment, Milkman then comes to the conclusion that he loved Pilate as strongly as he did because “ Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). All along, Pilate had known that she had the power of freedom within herself; the power of courage and personal faith, but it had taken Milkman his whole life to finally witness her soar. She had this ability of flight naturally, while Milkman had to go on the journey of a lifetime, and dig deep within himself and his ancestry to achieve the exact same thing. The novel comes to a close with an interpretable ending of Milkman lunging at Guitar. The final line of Song of Solomon states, “ If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). Interpreting this with the thematic lens of freedom, it is suggesting that much like Pilate, Milkman is at peace with himself, and has found freedom in his death. In other words, he has finally been able to let his spirit soar.

The theme of freedom, although could be considered to be simplistic, is a highly complex topic, especially when paired with the extremely interpretable concept of flight imagery. Song of Solomon explores the vast potential of both of these thematic aspects in an extremely relatable way. The novel allows freedom to be interpreted as freedom from the constructs that are created by both society and themselves, as well as freedom from responsibilities and simple, daily life tasks. The consistent flight references pair with the desire of freedom very well in the sense that, possessing the ability to fly - the capability to escape any situation with a simple flap of the wings, is complete independence. This is something that the large majority of the “ main” characters, such as Guitar, Pilate and Milkman, spend most of the novel either searching for, or achieving. Although the ending of the novel

was essentially left to personal interpretation, after taking into consideration the power of flight, as well as the theme of freedom; it is acceptable to infer that Guitar, Pilate and Milkman, achieved a certain degree of their own personal freedom.