

Magical realism in song of solomon



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Throughout the course of history, mystical concepts and magical elements have been woven into virtually every civilization's culture. From angels and demons to fantastical creatures like unicorns and leprechauns, supernatural beliefs have permeated the songs, stories, and other fundamental aspects of numerous societies throughout history. This characterization is especially true in African culture. For thousands of years, indigenous Africans have worshipped a plethora of spirits and Gods-practices that have allowed them to accept seemingly supernatural events into their daily reality.

Circumstances such as these have been recorded and documented extensively through art and literature, creating a genre of expression known as magical realism. This technique allows the author to blend realistic narrative with surreal elements of the supernatural. Examples of this can be seen throughout Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's novel follows a young African American man by the name of Milkman Dead as he explores his heritage on an existential journey of self-discovery. Throughout *Song of Solomon*, Morrison incorporates magical realism to blur the line between the supernatural and plausible reality in order to challenge various elements of modern American society's accepted sensibilities in regard to African Americans.

Morrison begins her transcendence into the world of magical realism as she presents Pilate Dead, Milkman's aunt, without a navel. Pilate's stomach "... was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel... there was not another stomach on earth like hers," (Morrison 29). This almost supernatural absence of a navel, a scientific implausibility, sets Pilate apart from her peers. She is the only person on earth lacking this feature,

and she is spurned by society because of it. People "...froze at the sight of that belly...became limp even...'What are you?' one man had shouted...it isolated her...even a traveling sideshow would have rejected her..."

(Morrison 148). Pilate is a person of tremendous character; she is honest, caring, and wise-yet these facts are forgotten when people discover that she is different from themselves. Kamal Pradhan, an English literature researcher with Academia, describes Pilate as "...a fearless mother who is selflessly devoted to others...she is responsible for Milkman's safe birth and continues to protect him for years afterward..." (Pradhan 1). He continues to state "Despite these positive attributes...she is discriminated against because...she is different," (Pradhan 2). It is through Pilate and her uninterrupted stomach that Morrison comments on the mistreatment of African Americans throughout history and even in present day America. She presents the reasoning behind Pilate's isolation, a missing navel, as absurd and unrealistic. This allegorical message extends throughout the novel as racial tension and acts of discrimination are prominent. Morrison is suggesting society hating African Americans based solely on their skin color is just as irrational as a community isolating an individual who was born, through some act of magic, without a navel. She incorporates magical realism in order to challenge the audience to consider the progress made by their great nation in regard to African Americans over the last few decades, because-despite the Civil Rights Movement-many are still struggling for basic equality.

This theme of racial injustice continues as Morrison explores Pilate Dead's connection with the spiritual world. Though her father died when she was a

young girl, Pilate is constantly visited by his ghost. She "...sees him around... guiding...helping," (Morrison 168-169). It is the Pilate's ability to accept her father's spirit that allows him to visit and assist her. His presence comforts her and guides her through troubling times, and her belief in the supernatural strengthens her connection with the natural world and her own self-allowing her to lead a more sincere, authentic life. Freda Kirkham, author of "Women and Voice in Song of Solomon" states that "...her spirituality...including her connection to her dead father...him speaking to her from the spirit world, telling her to 'Sing'...defines Pilate as a person. She is willing to learn...accepting...and she introduces those close to her to this...connection with this realm...this use of spiritual song," (Kirkham 4-5). Pilate's open-mindedness and acceptance of the supernatural has led to her ability to live a happy, authentic life-unmarred by the corruption of capitalistic greed and motivation. This in stark contrast with her niece, First Corinthians Dead. Corinthians was raised in part by her father, Macon Dead, who "...behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man...brought his kids up like a white man...he's greedy," (Morrison 224-226). Throughout her childhood, Corinthians was never introduced to the possibility of a supernatural world beyond the one in which she lives. Instead, she was taught the conservative lessons of 1940's America and is made to follow the path that is expected of her. Corinthians goes to college, and "Her education had taught her how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization.... she believed she was a prize for a professional man," (Morrison 188). Corinthians is smart and well educated, but because she is unable to connect to the world of supernatural possibilities, she is closed-minded and unable to connect to herself fully and by truly successful and

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happy. She "...lacked the drive...no hunger, no hustle," (Morrison 188). Morrison highlights this contrast between Pilate and Corinthians in order to address the issue of discredited knowledge among African Americans. Throughout history, African Americans and their knowledge was often disregarded because it was insinuated that blacks were morally and intellectually inferior to whites. By comparing Pilate's innate, supernatural wisdom to Corinthians' "white...academic knowledge", which leaves Corinthians completely incapable of dealing with the harsh reality of society, Morrison is using magical realism in order to exhibit the importance of the knowledge African Americans possess (Morrison 187-188). Corinthian's knowledge represents the idealistic vision of white education, but this intelligence leaves her helpless in a world of unexpectedly difficult realities, whereas Pilate's seemingly useless wisdom, representative of African American knowledge, allows her to thrive.

Magical realism continues to establish itself throughout the novel as Morrison incorporates instances of human flight. From the moment Milkman comes into the world, human flight is accepted as possible by the community around him. The only person who is skeptical of this supernatural ability is Milkman himself. When "...he discovered, at four...that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull..." (Morrison 9). As an African American, Milkman is from a culture that regards flight and other surreal events as plausible. Since he is choosing not to believe in his own ability to fly, he is choosing to ignore an entire aspect of his own background. Because he does not accept his heritage in its

completion, Milkman feels empty-like ...” something is...missing,” (Morrison 159-160). It is only after his journey of self discovery that Milkman is able to accept the culture from which he came and become “...so happy...with his eyes and mouth full of light...laughing, hollering... finally felt right...” (Morrison 326-327). Through visiting the town his father and aunt came from and talking to townspeople that knew his grandfather, including Circe’s spirit and Mr. Solomon, Milkman is finally able to accept himself completely—he realizes that “ some people...without ever leaving the ground...could fly... and if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it,” (Morrison 336-337). By accepting an apparently impossible concept such as human flight, and thus come to terms with the background of himself and his ancestors, Milkman is able to complete his existential journey and discover his complete self. Morrison uses this transformation to highlight the importance of self-acceptance. Throughout her novel, many characters put on a facade in an attempt to seem as something they are not. From Hagar’s attempts to appear lighter-skinned to impress Milkman to Macon Dead’s attempts to show off his family in order to appear happy, very few of the people in Milkman’s life are genuine. Morrison highlights the importance of self-acceptance through Milkman’s transformation in regard to his belief in flight.

As Morrison examines societal issues such as unjust inequality, discredited knowledge among African Americans, and self-acceptance, it is easy to feel disconnected from these problems. Most of the story is set between 1930 and 1960, and the novel was written in 1977, giving the illusion that Morrison’s concerns are outdated conflicts of the past. However, her writing style presents this story with a non-linear plot as narration jumps back and

forth from past and present. Morrison jumps between time periods in order to suggest that there is no end to these problems, that they will not just solve themselves with time. These issues are recurring, planting themselves within each time frame of the story as well as every decade of reality. Toni Morrison utilizes magical realism throughout Song of Solomon in order to draw attention to timeless issues that are deep-rooted in modern American society.