

Critical analysis of naming and imposition in song of solomon



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In Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, the names of people and even of places take center-stage as arguably the driving motif of the book. Names are used to create Biblical allusions and delineate legacy among related characters, but one of the most significant contributions this motif makes to the story is examining the importance of being able to accept and embrace one's name for the sake of developing a healthy sense of identity; the text considers this issue in depth primarily by exemplifying how reductive of identity it is to have a name imposed rather than embraced.

The reductive qualities of the imposition of a name stem from the fact that the individual on whom the name was imposed must be defined, at least partially, by something outside the self, even in the eyes of the individual in question. Identity becomes particularly problematic for both self-perception and the perceptions of others when it is based in any capacity on something that is not actually part of the person being identified. First and foremost, this principle applies to the name, Milkman, because Freddie bestows it upon Macon Dead III by simply spreading the name and its pertinent gossip throughout the community in which Macon Dead, Jr. owned many rent houses. Milkman neither embraced nor affirmed the name personally, but the reductive elements of imposition also pertain to the real name, Macon Dead, inasmuch as constructing an independent identity is that much harder for an individual who inherits his father's name.

Beyond the names, Milkman and Macon Dead, though, there is the more inadvertent example surrounding the name, Shalimar or Solomon, which can also be viewed similarly. The name is imposed upon an entire town in Virginia after all, and as a result, the legacy of the man who bore the name is

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treated like the town's own history; moreover, people in Shalimar, Virginia all seem preoccupied with being able to prove their relation to the original man, and these things prove reductive to the town both collectively and individually. The name, Shalimar, causes Solomon's identity to encroach upon seemingly each individual by establishing a sort of ideological sign value to relation to Solomon; in other words, it is consistent with the discourse of Shalimar, Virginia that one's identity should, indeed, relate to Solomon in some way, which is emphasized more than simply identifying self based on self alone.

Problems arise and abound as a result of the imposition of a name and the resultant misappropriation of identity. One major reason for this is the fact that it affects not only the individual—the object of the imposition—but also anything or anyone with whom the individual's identity is shared as a consequence of said imposition. In Milkman's case, this pertains to both his mother and his father. It creates a rift between him and his father, and it serves as a sort of nomenclatural symbol of his mother's unwillingness to separate him from herself and actually individualize him.

Early in the text, Morrison addresses Macon Dead, Jr.'s sentiments toward the name, Milkman, on more than one occasion, and by and large, Macon II despises the name, discerning via context clues that it could only be pejorative in nature. " This disgust and the uneasiness with which [Macon Dead] regarded his son affected everything he did in that city. If he could have felt sad, simply sad, it would have relieved him. Fifteen years of regret at not having a son had become the bitterness of finally having one in the most revolting circumstances" (Morrison 15). The reality of Macon Dead's <https://assignbuster.com/critical-analysis-of-naming-and-imposition-in-song-of-solomon/>

problem with Milkman is that Milkman is, at this early point in the book, proving somewhat unlikely to be the male heir Macon Dead had wanted. Macon is anticipating disappointment in his son, and he loathes it; all of which is the collateral damage wrought by the imposition of a name on one individual.

Milkman's relationship Macon Dead remains problematic to varying degrees throughout the text. The initial disappointment abates with time, but this says nothing of Macon Dead's resentment toward his wife, Ruth:

Macon was delighted. His son belonged to him now and not to Ruth, and he was relieved at not having to walk all over town like a peddler collecting rents. [...] Everything had improved for Macon Dead during the war. [...] and less often did he get angry enough to slap her. Particularly after the final time, which became final because his son jumped up and knocked him back into the radiator. (Morrison 63)

This physical altercation is a pivotal moment, and its significance comes from Macon Dead delighting in his son and, within the same paragraph, trespassing into the jurisdiction of the inordinate intimacy between Ruth and her son. Granted, it is perfectly normal for a child with no such intimacy with the mother to seek to defend her from abuse, but the point is simply that this intimacy would likely have only exacerbated that fact.

Later in the text, when Ruth learns from Freddie that Hagar is out to kill Milkman, she becomes aware of the aforementioned, inordinate intimacy—the facets thereof that make it problematic:

Ruth was relieved. For a moment she imagined that Pilate, who had brought her son to life in the first place, was now bound to see him dead. But right after that moment of relief, she felt hurt because Milkman had not told her himself. Then she realized that he really didn't tell her anything, and hadn't for years. Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person.

This passage is indicative of two sides of the issue of identity, both dealing with the imposition of the name, Milkman. For Ruth, there is a budding revelation that she has robbed Milkman of what Dobie refers to as individuation—one's maturation into a "psychologically healthy, well-balanced adult" (Dobie 64). For Milkman, though, the nickname is indicative of the lack of completeness or self-sufficiency to his identity because it is dependent upon the abnormality of his relationship with his mother during his formative years and, thus, dependent upon Ruth herself.

More evidence that the imposition of a name is damaging to an individual may very well be the positivity of a name the individual embraces. It is interesting to note that Milkman responds positively to his father from time to time and that, on such occasions, Macon Dead, Jr., of course, refers to him by his real name. One of the earliest examples of Macon speaking to Milkman as an equal, actually supplicating while using Milkman's real name, appears when Milkman mentions the tarpaulin in Pilate's house. Speaking of Macon, the text reads, "He turned to his son full face and licked his lips. 'Macon, get it and you can have half of it; go wherever you want. Get it. For both of us. Please get it, son. Get the gold.'" He calls Milkman both "son" and "Macon," never Milkman, and as may have been expected, Milkman

most certainly obliged, responding positively to his father's supplication and arguably to his father's consistent use of his real name.

In essence, a name as an imposition is shown in Morrison's work to be a hindrance to identity. Milkman, of course, ultimately endeavors toward self-discovery, yet part of the significance of the name, Milkman, can be viewed as a sign to suggest that he is beginning his journey of self-exploration at a deficit; in other words, he not only lacks understanding of self but even misunderstands self as something other than what is purely him. In this and many other ways, as with the relations of Shalimar and the legacy of the name Macon Dead despite Milkman's father's disdain for it, the imposition of naming is shown to have, at least, an indirect yet reductive impact on identity from several perspectives simultaneously.

Works Cited

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