

## ICARUS AND DAEDALUS IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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**ABSTRACT.** *In Song of Solomon Toni Morrison rewrites the legend of the Flying Africans and the Myth of Icarus to create her own Myth. Her depiction of the black hero's search for identity has strong mythical overtones. Morrison rescues those elements of mythology black culture which are still relevant to blacks and fuses them with evident allusions to Greek mythology. She reinterprets old images and myths of flight, the main mythical motif in the story. Her Icarus engages on an archetypal journey to the South, to his family past, led by his Daedalic guide, on which he finally recovers his ancestral ability to fly. His flight signals a spiritual epiphany in the hero's quest for self-definition in the black community.*

*Keywords:* Myth, flight, quest, identity, Icarus, Daedalus.

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## ÍCARO Y DÉDALO EN *SONG OF SOLOMON* DE TONI MORRISON

**RESUMEN.** *En Song of Solomon Toni Morrison reescribe la leyenda de "Flying Africans" y el mito de Ícaro para crear su propio mito. Su descripción de la búsqueda de identidad del héroe negro tiene profundas connotaciones míticas. Morrison recupera aquellos elementos de la mitología negra que todavía son relevantes para los Afro-Americanos y los fusiona con evidentes alusiones a la mitología griega. Ella reinterpreta las viejas imágenes y mitos sobre volar, el principal motivo mítico de esta historia. El Ícaro de ésta novela se embarca en un viaje arquetípico al Sur, al pasado de su familia, dirigido por su dedálica guía espiritual, recuperando finalmente sus habilidades ancestrales para volar. El vuelo de Ícaro señala una epifanía espiritual en la búsqueda de identidad del héroe dentro de la comunidad negra.*

*Palabras clave:* Mito, vuelo, búsqueda, identidad, Ícaro, Dédalo.

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"The desire to reach for the sky runs deep in our human psyche".

Cesar Pelli<sup>1</sup>

Mythology is at the core of every culture. Mircea Eliade writes, "[...] myth is sacred history, the breakthrough of the supernatural or divine into the human to explain the origins, destiny, and cultural concerns of a people. Man, then, has always turned to myth to explain the inexplicable and to tie narratives into a larger cultural and perceptual framework" (Leslie Harris 1980: 69). Morrison wants to look back at old myths, since, as she says in her conversation with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson, "Myth is the first information there is and it says realms more than what is usually there" (1978: 183). She believes that "the novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is" (Ruas: 1994: 113) and that can only be done through mythology and folklore. In *Song of Solomon* mythical elements are embedded in the narrative. They are everywhere. Morrison's success at depicting the hero's search for identity is, in great measure, due to her use of myth. Flying is the main mythical motif. It is a pervasive element that signals crucial moments of the characters' search for definition as well as essential points in the story.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from "Flying Quotes and Sayings": <http://www.quote garden.com/flying.html>.

Morrison (1978) does not want to disregard the mythology black culture, even if it has been scorned as “discredited information held by discredited people”, and tries to distinguish between all those elements that are present in blacks, as human beings and also in their culture, and identify those elements which are still valuable for people (Ruas 1994: 113). As Leslie Harris (1980) says, Toni Morrison (1978) fuses “Afro-American myth with the cultural, moral, and religious beliefs of both the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman heritages to fashion *her own Myth*” (69-70; emphasis added). Morrison comments that, despite the fact that she had checked on certain aspects about people who fly in old slave narratives she had read, these were things she had literally heard of and everybody knew about them (Jones and Vinson 1994: 182). She tells LeClair (1994), “My meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts [...]. 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*” (122).

In fact, flying is a recurring trope in African American literature. During slavery, those slaves who kept close to their African heritage were said to be able to fly. They flew away from oppression. As Beaulieu (2003) points out, “newly enslaved Blacks [...] upon arriving at Ibo landing in South Carolina and sensing the nature of things, turn and fly (or walk) back to Africa” (122). The myth of Solomon/Sugarman, “the Flying African”, is based on a Yoruba folktale brought to America by enslaved African people. This tale tells the story of a witch doctor who empowers black slaves to fly back to Africa.<sup>2</sup> According to Wilentz (1989-1990), flight is “a life-giving force to build community strength and resist oppression. It is through the acknowledgment of one’s African heritage and the learning of the power of the ancestors that the African American community can achieve wholeness” (28). Beaulieu believes that, in this legend, “Flight signals spiritual rebirth in freedom, so the question of whether those who take flight to escape oppression survive in a physical sense is less important than the fact that they are no longer oppressed” (2003: 122).

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<sup>2</sup> Originally titled “All God’s Chillun Had Wings”, the story was first recorded in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, a book produced in the early 1900s by the Federal Writers’ Project, an organization committed to, among its other projects, documenting the stories of African Americans that had been passed down to them by their ancestors, many of whom had been slaves. The story also appeared in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, a collection of folktales compiled by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, two African-American writers best known for their works published during New York’s famous Harlem Renaissance (1915-35). A revised, contemporary version of the story, “People Who Could Fly”, appears in Julius Lester’s *Black Folktales*, published in 1969. In Cliffsnotes: <http://www.cliffsnotes.com>.

However, Morrison (1978) herself understands how her novel can clearly suggest the Myth of Icarus. She tells LeClair (1994), talking about *Song of Solomon*, “If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that” (122).<sup>3</sup> In fact, as Adell (1997) points out, the themes of *Song of Solomon* “are embedded in a complex network of allusions to Greek and Western African mythology” (63). Morrison uses in her novel one of the most pervasive mythic themes in Western culture “the hero and his quest, to inform and control her narrative structure” (Leslie Harris 1980: 70). She depicts a black man’s search for identity. However, unlike Greek or Roman heroes, Morrison (1978) ultimately intends a heroic figure “whose heroism can only be defined through dualistic, sometimes ambiguous actions, and whose qualifications for heroism do not depend upon his goodness” (Trudier Harris 1991: 88).

The mythic nature of flying is directly connected with its psychological importance. Everybody has ever dreamed of soaring up into the air. Even though psychoanalysis has frequently linked flying dreams to human sexuality: the early infantile wish to be able to fly is associated with sexual fulfillment and release; there are many other interpretations. Flying dreams are usually a joyful experience, which is accompanied by a great sense of freedom, a feeling of liberation of everyday tribulations. They may be connected to people who have risen above the circumstances of their life, over which they have a sense of command. However, scholars have also pointed to the fact that difficulties in staying in flight might be associated with a lack of power in controlling our own existential situation; or fear of flying might mean that the person is afraid of challenges and success.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that flying is extremely important in human psychology and connected to the identity’s development. The desire to fly is as old as human nature is; a dream which comes true with the invention of flying artifacts. Consequently, the motif of flying appears in all cultures. Myths and legends around the world are crowded with referents to flight: from Icarus or Phaeton of the Greek mythology, worshipped bird-headed deities as Egypt’s Horus or Thoth and Karura from Hindu and Buddhist cultures.<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of *Song of Solomon* Morrison (1978) introduces a mythic scene with Icarian overtones in which a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance

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<sup>3</sup> Allen (1988) also comments that “The dominant motif of flying may appropriately derive from either the Western myth of Daedalus or the Black folk legend of flying back to Africa or both” (32).

<sup>4</sup> Taken from: King’s Chronicler. “Dreams: Analysis, Interpretation and Significance in Human Psychology”. 26th Feb. 2010. [http:// health.wikinut.com](http://health.wikinut.com).

<sup>5</sup> Taken from: <http://thecreatorsproject.com/blog/our-dreams-come-true-introducing-mind-controlled-flight>.

agent flies from the roof of No Mercy Hospital. Mr. Smith's leap has a clear ritualistic and symbolic nature. When the pregnant woman sees him emerge from behind the cupola with his blue silk wings, she drops her basket full with red velvet rose petals that are blown by the wind. According to O'Shaughnessy (1988), "The movements have a ritual quality, the dance of death with the blue wings on the tower contrasted with the chase of the rose petals, symbols of both love and blood against the white snow" (126). Some of the white people who go out of the hospital think of the scene they are watching as "some form of worship", since "Philadelphia, where Father Divine reigned, wasn't all that far away" (12).<sup>6</sup> The pregnant woman's daughters, "two of his virgins", try to catch the rose petals, while their mother starts delivering her baby (12). A poorly dressed woman, some sort of priestess, suddenly begins singing with her eyes fixed on Mr. Smith. She seems to be performing some kind of ritual, repeating her chant:

O Sugarman done fly away  
 Sugarman done gone  
 Sugarman cut across the sky  
 Sugarman gone home ...

Despite the rose-petal lady's refusal, "It's too soon" (15), the priestess foretells the immediate birth of her son: "A little bird'll be here with the morning" (15).

Mr. Smith, as a black Icarus, is "heavily associated with illness and death" (15). He is said to be "More regular than the reaper" (14). His connection with death is not only due to his profession, but also because he is one of members of a secret society called the Seven Days, which seeks to avenge the death of black people by randomly executing white ones. It seems that Mr. Smith jumps off the roof because he can no longer continue killing innocent people. His Icarian leap has different meanings from those of Milkman's. His flight has one of the most common interpretations of all. As in the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the insurance agent wants to escape from his terrible life. Besides, this anodyne Icarus appears to be looking for the attention, a few minutes of glory, that he has never had before in his life. In Mr. Smith both the figures of Daedalus and Icarus fuse, since he himself builds the artificial wings he uses for his flight. As Lee (1982) suggests, the insurance agent probably lacks something that Milkman acquires on his journey and makes it possible for him to fly: "Mr. Smith is too far removed from his heritage, that he has lost the secret – sing, word,

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<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison (1978). *Song of Solomon*. New York: Signet. (All subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page number included in parentheses in the text).

timing – which would have allowed him to go home on his own power. He is unprepared for flight” (65).

As it is stated throughout the novel, Morrison (1978) depicts, in this very first scene, how flying is part of African American’s mythic heritage and culture. The black and white people’s reactions towards Mr. Smith’s actions are very different. The blacks gathered around the hospital are curious and interested in what is happening. However, none of them cries out to Mr. Smith. They do not seem concerned. They rather encourage him. Their behavior contrasts with that of the whites, who once decide to go out of the hospital, start shouting and giving orders, so as to notify emergency services. Blacks, in their calm attitude, seem to believe that Mr. Smith could really fly while the white people of the hospital can only give a logical explanation to what they see; a man is trying to commit suicide.

Mr. Smith’s Icarian leap signals the importance that the motif of flight has in the whole novel. His leap heralds the new life that is about to be born. On the day following his death, the first colored expectant mother, Ruth Foster Dead, is allowed to give birth in the hospital wards and not on its steps. Mr. Smith’s flight makes the acceptance of Milkman’s mother in the Mercy hospital possible. As in any other myth, the birth and death of the hero, Milkman, attain mythic stature. The insurance agent’s leap parallels his flight at the end of the novel. A Seven Days’ man announces Milkman’s birth and another man of the secret society, his childhood friend Guitar, will also be an essential part of his final Icarian leap. Lee says that Guitar’s attributes, his hawk-head and golden eyes, correspond to those of “several of the mythic gods who function as agents of rebirth [...] he guides Milkman to new thresholds of experience that are successive descents ‘underground’, metaphoric deaths preceding rebirth” (65). Milkman’s quest sets an example, as corresponds to a mythic hero, of how to change things; conversely to the revengeful scheme of the secret society of the Seven Days, as represented by Mr. Smith and Guitar.

In the legend of Daedalus and Icarus, both the two heroes are men. However, in *Song of Solomon*, in spite of the fact that Milkman, Icarus, is the male protagonist and hero of the novel, female characters are essential, especially Pilate, who plays the role of Daedalus.<sup>7</sup> Pilate, Milkman’s paternal

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<sup>7</sup> In feminist literature, the flying motif has a remarkable role: “flight is a major theme that often includes images of broken-winged birds and crashing planes, symbolizing women’s thwarted attempts to transcend their limited boundaries”. Taken from Cliffs Notes: [http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study\\_guide/literature/Song-of-Solomon-Critical-Essays-Levels-of-Language-and-Meaning-in-Song-of-Solomon-Song-of-Songs-and-Flying-Africans.id-188,pageNum-27.html](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/literature/Song-of-Solomon-Critical-Essays-Levels-of-Language-and-Meaning-in-Song-of-Solomon-Song-of-Songs-and-Flying-Africans.id-188,pageNum-27.html).

aunt, is the spiritual guide on his identity journey: "Milkman Dead lives in a world in which women are the main sources of the knowledge he must gain, and Pilate Dead [...] a larger-than-life character, is his guide to that understanding" (McKay 1994: 139). In black communities, females were the true culture bearers who transmit their knowledge of the past to future generations. According to Hunsicker (2000), Pilate has the role of a *griot* who passes "ancestral knowledge on to younger persons in the form of stories so that they might have a sense of personal, familial, and community identity" (49).

In *Song of Solomon* Daedalus's scientific endeavors become Pilate's witchlike powers. Morrison (1978) highlights her witchlike nature. Pilate's skin shows an unusual smoothness: it is "hairless, scarless and wrinkleless" (153). Besides, she has the "agility of a teen-aged girl" (229). However, her main physical witchlike mark is the absence of a navel. As Morrison (1978) says, she is "something God never made" (159). In fact, Morrison (1978) writes that Pilate is "larger than life", and that "She was not born, anyway – she gave birth to herself" (McKay 1994: 146); or, according to Fabre (1988), "She also has literally to invent herself" (110).<sup>8</sup> Pilate's flat stomach is her true mark of otherness. On account of her anomaly, people regard Milkman's aunt as a witch and "swept up her footprints or put mirrors on her door" (165). Men get horrified when they are going to sleep with her and realize that she has no navel. Already without family since she was twelve and separated from her brother, Pilate has been socially isolated because of her inexplicable oddity. She "was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion" (164). People see her with disgust, but also with some sort of reverence. Pilate overcomes her ostracism "by means of the power of love and self-knowledge" (Mason 1990: 183).

Pilate has supernatural powers, ancestral properties. She is believed to have the gift to see a bush on fire from some distance and turn a man into a rutabaga (105). She is "a natural healer" (165). Pilate "takes on Christ-like attributes" (Allen 1988: 31) and is associated with the afterlife. This connection is emphasized when her brother, Macon Dead, tells his son that Pilate cannot teach him

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<sup>8</sup> There are many interpretations of Pilate's lack of a navel. Jennings (2008) claims, "The Carib Indians interpolated into Voudoun the belief that an individual whose soul has fled or been stolen is a dead being and, therefore, lacks a navel, the anatomical sign of life [...]. Not having a navel symbolizes that Pilate is outside the mortal sphere and not the average communal member" (154). Ženíšek (2007) believes that "[...] the missing navel can also be seen as a metonymy of god-like status, which could be derived for example from the well-known religious controversy as to whether Adam and Eve could possibly be portrayed with navels, being the first and original progenitors of humankind. The missing navel on Pilate could then easily be understood as a rank of distinction, indicating her shamanic or even superhuman status" (131).

anything he can use in this world, “Maybe the next” (64). Milkman’s aunt can see ghosts, her father’s, and explains it to Ruth: “I seen him [her father] since he was shot [...]. Macon seen him too [...]. We both seen him. I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tell me things I need to know” (155-156). It comes to her on different occasions. One day, it visits her and her brother. A few years later, it whispers to Pilate the word “Sing”. Then it tells her “you just can’t fly on off and leave a body” (227). So, Milkman’s aunt returns to the cave, where the skeleton of the white man Macon Dead had killed was and puts his bones in a sack. In African beliefs the dead are not scary apparitions, but welcoming ones who help the living deal with their things, “All kinds of things [...]. It’s a good feelin to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on [...]. He’s the only one” (156).

Pilate’s witchlike powers are closely connected to her spirituality. As Adell (1997) writes, “Morrison’s fictional ancestors and ancestral figures possess mystical powers and a knowledge of the spiritual world that eludes those conditioned by Western logic. They make things happen. They interpret for their people things and events that defy practical reason and understanding” (65). Macon Dead, however, is just her opposite. His strong materialism contrasts with her indifference towards money or material things. Contrary to his sister, the terrible ordeal he undergoes when his father is killed makes him believe that owning worldly possessions is the only thing that matters: “Own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (64). Pilate’s wisdom as a female ancestor seems to be associated with her condition as a wanderer: she has been “from one end of the country to another” (154). After the confrontation with her brother, she goes away and heads for Virginia, where her forefathers had come from. Then she moves from one place to another. She only stops her wandering life when her daughter, Reba, has a baby.

According to African beliefs, spirituality is linked to the wild. As Morrison (1978) says, Pilate “was born wild” (183). When Circe hides her and her brother, Pilate feels that she would die if she did not eat cherries from the cherry tree, or drink warm milk from the goat’s teat, or a tomato off the vine. When they finally leave, the first day out in the wild is joyous for Milkman’s aunt. Everybody in Danville remembers her as “a pretty woods-wild girl ‘that couldn’t nobody put shoes on’” (255). Pilate is compared to a snake. When Milkman is taken to prison because he has stolen her aunt’s sack of bones. She comes there and tells the police a story about those being her husband’s remains. Milkman comments how Pilate changes her voice to convince the police that Guitar and he have only

played a joke on an old lady. His father answers him: "I told you she was a snake. Drop her skin in a split second" (224).

Pilate, as a Daedalus figure, is soon associated with the flight motif. She is the "priestess" who performs the ceremonial singing at the insurance agent's leap from Mercy hospital. Besides, when Pilate was in Virginia, she worked doing laundry for a man and his wife. One day the husband, who did not feel very well, came into the kitchen and told her that "he couldn't figure it out, but he felt like he was about to fall off a cliff" (49). Pilate asked the man if he wanted her to hold on to him so he could not fall. He seemed to calm down. However, his wife came in and inquired about what she was doing. It was soon after Pilate released him that he dropped dead on the floor. It took him only three minutes to collapse as if he were falling off a cliff. Even if for a short period of time, Pilate becomes the man's Daedalic spiritual guide, who prevented him from falling, until she let him go. This episode presages Pilate's mission in the novel, to play the role of Daedalus, so Milkman can fulfill his Icarian destiny.

Pilate feels a strong concern for Milkman, even before he is born. As Morrison (1978) writes, among the similarities between Ruth and Pilate is the fact that "Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son" (154). She is a decisive person in her nephew's birth as well as in his later maturation, his search for self-knowledge. Milkman and his aunt's fates are intermingled from his birth to his flight. Not only is Pilate the priestess who sings and announces Milkman's delivery, but she also plays a crucial role in his conception. Ever since the death of Ruth's father, Macon has not had sexual relationships with his wife. He could not forgive Ruth's 'incestuous' relationship with her father. When Milkman's mother asks for Pilate's help, she, mysteriously, tells Ruth in a prophetic way: "[...] your baby ought to be his [Macon's]. He ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (139). Pilate gives Ruth something to put in her husband's food and, two months later, she gets pregnant. As in myths or fairy tales, the witch supplies the maiden with an aphrodisiac, so she can seduce her lover. Pilate also helps Ruth deliver Milkman safely. When Macon realizes that he has been bewitched and discovers that his wife is going to have a baby; in a rage, he threatens to kill her. Ruth goes to visit Pilate who promises her that she will take care of her brother. Then Pilate uses her witchcraft again. She makes a male doll with a small painted chicken bone between its legs and, on its belly, a painted round red circle and she puts it on Macon's chair in his office. Even though he burns it; after that, remembering the round red mark, he leaves Ruth alone. According to Leslie Harris (1980), "The young hero is traditionally born after a long period of barrenness, and subterfuge is frequently involved in both

his conception and his delivery” (72). Later on, Pilate also helps Milkman be released from prison by doing her number for the cops.

In the mythic framework that Morrison creates in *Song of Solomon* (1978), she describes, chronologically, the black hero's self-knowledge journey from birth to death. Leslie Harris (1980) argues that Milkman's identity follows “the clear pattern of birth and youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration common to mythic heroes as disparate as Moses, Achilles, and Beowulf” (70). As in any other myth, Morrison makes Milkman's life more extraordinary than that of an ordinary human being. His existence is full of elements that establish his mythic category. Mr. Smith's leap is the omen that prophesizes his birth. According to Leslie Harris, “Western man has always looked to childhood as a mythic time”, as we can see in *Song of Solomon*: “In the novel's opening Morrison” describes “Milkman's birth in terms of signs, omens, and portents” and presents his “childhood in a rapidly-passed-over series of narrative events resonating with symbolic and archetypal significance” (1980: 71).

In the first part of *Song of Solomon* Morrison exposes Milkman's alienation, the constraints from which he will later try to find Icarian liberation. He is raised in a dysfunctional family with an extremely strained relationship between his parents. As Lee points out, “Milkman's family dwelling is. Literally and figuratively, a house of death” (1982: 65); fact that is reflected in his last name, Dead, since “he is the inheritor of a dead culture” (Krumholz 1997: 109). On the other hand, Milkman receives his nickname because he had been nursed for too long. His mother breastfeeds him until he is four, and thus she makes for the lack of love in her life.<sup>9</sup> When, later in his life, Milkman remembers it, he cannot see her as “a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near – be it her father or her son” (90). According to Brenner (1988), one of Milkman's characteristics as a hero is the fact that he is the son of “most distinguished parents” (115): his father is the most respected and important black man in the city and his mother is the daughter of a black doctor.

Milkman's relationship with his father is critical in his identity development. Macon Dead has a despotic behavior towards other people, including his family. As Barbara Rigney comments, he “surely represents for Morrison an exaggerated and clearly parodic version of patriarchal inscriptions” (1997: 53). In addition, he has a materialistic approach to life that almost destroys his family and himself as well as isolates them from the rest of the community. When Milkman is

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<sup>9</sup> According to Theodore Mason, Ruth might also do it as “some form of protection against the outside world” (1990: 177).

fourteen, he realizes that one of his legs is shorter than the other, a deformity that he disguises. Milkman, who fears but also respects his father, knows that, because of his defect, he will never be like his father and, consequently, he tries to be as different as possible. Milkman also has a difficult relationship with his two sisters, who, as result of his self-centeredness, cannot stand him.

Milkman has always been ostracized. Neither blacks nor whites want him because his clothes and his manners show his social status. His father has used him and his sisters to make other people envious. Milkman has never been able to play with the other children and, as a consequence, he has always felt a hole in his heart. He is shut off his own people and his heritage. An important fact marks Milkman's infancy. He discovers at the age of four what the insurance agent had learned before, that men cannot fly and then he "lost all interest in himself" (15). He cannot stop thinking, "why he had to stay level on the ground" (16), and that makes him sad. During his search, Milkman must find out how to overcome those feelings. He must learn to be the Icarus figure he is destined to be and soar as his ancestors did before him.

From an early age Milkman takes small steps towards his final Icarian leap. When he is twelve, he meets a boy, Guitar, who becomes a key person in his life. In a sense, Guitar is also a Daedalic figure in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman learns from him part of the things that he needs to become a complete human being (McKay 1994: 154). As Brenner states, Guitar is a sort of surrogate father for Milkman (1988: 116). It is Guitar who helps him when the other boys bully him. He leads him to Pilate, his spiritual guide. Guitar "not only could liberate him [Milkman], but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had with his past" (43-44).

At his aunt's house Milkman begins to experience a different kind of life, in which harmony can exist. As his Daedalic guide on the journey back to his past and forward into his future, Pilate is connected to the sun. When Milkman first meets her, the sun streams, "strong and unfettered" (48), in the room they spend the afternoon; since "there were no curtains or shades at the windows that were all around the room" (48). Thus, from this moment on, Pilate becomes a sort of agent of light who leads her nephew to his spiritual destination. As Fabre points out, Milkman's "first visit to Pilate's house initiates his journey into the legacy [...] Pilate and her house, in sharp contrast to his father's house of death, bring a promise, suggest the possibility of flight [...] represents the liminal phase of his rites of passage [...]" (1988: 110). The day Guitar and Milkman visit his aunt, the two boys help her, her daughter, Reba, and granddaughter, Hagar, to pluck berries to make wine. At one point the three females start singing in perfect

concordance the rhyme Pilate had sung for Mr. Smith, except that they add a few more lines:

O Sugarman don't leave me here  
 Cotton balls to choke me  
 O Sugarman don't leave here  
 Buckra's arms to yoke me... (58)

This is the first time in the story that the Icarian myth hints at one of its main meanings in Morrison's fiction. Ever since slavery, men have abandoned their women and left them behind, as when Hagar's father had deserted her and her mother.

Milkman's encounter with his aunt and cousins transforms him. He has met a woman "who was just as tall" as his father, who has always been the biggest thing in the world for him, and that "made him feel tall too" (59). His self-esteem grows. That is why when his father recriminates him for having visited Pilate, Milkman defies him and tells him that he is no longer a baby. As Lee points out, Macon insists that his sister is a snake, in a negative sense, "ignorant as he is of the serpent's mythic role as facilitator of rebirth" (1982: 65). Milkman confronts his father and hits him when he beats his mother. He threatens to kill him if he ever touches her again. It is at this point that Macon Dead, of whom Milkman has always thought to be "impregnable", discovers that his son is as tall as he is, though younger. It is then that his father comes to him with "a terrible piece of news" (89); since, if Milkman wanted to be a whole man, he would need to know the truth. Macon Dead explains to his son what had happened between him and his mother. Milkman's search for self-knowledge starts with him learning about his family's innermost secrets.

On the other hand, Milkman's rupture with Hagar symbolizes his egotistical relationship with other people, his self-centered attitude. After a dozen years, he gets tired of being with her, since there is no excitement, and he starts thinking about putting an end to it. Finally, he decides to send her a break-up letter. Then he begins seeing other women, without any kind of worries. Milkman is a self-absorbed person that cannot think of anything but himself. He believes, as when he hits his father, that "everybody's going in the wrong direction" (118); everybody except him. When Guitar accuses him for the kind of life he leads, Milkman thinks that his friend is partly right, "His life was pointless, aimless" (119). He does not truly care for anyone. Neither has he wanted anything real bad so as to risk anything for it. He is not interested in money, as his father, or in politics, as Guitar. He is only concerned about himself. Milkman is a spoiled city man who lacks connection and commitment to others and who questions

his place in the world. When he looks at his reflection in the mirror, Milkman realizes that he does not know what he really wants; he is not a whole self: "it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back" (79).

At the symbolic age of thirty, Milkman starts his true Icarian identity journey, "a quest for roots, and spirituality" (Ruas 1994: 110). As Leslie Harris writes, Milkman's "recognition that he is just drifting and lacks both internal and external coherence in his life directs him toward his third stage of development – a quest" (1980: 71). He decides to escape from present constraints and responsibilities at home. He wants liberation from his alienation and family. He is bored of everything and fed up of living a life of rejection. However, as he only cares for himself; at this point, he just has the urge to fly away. According to Leslie Harris, "As we watch Milkman grow up and reject the restrictions of his Southside life, we see him undergoing not only psychological and physical maturation but an approximation of the development of a true hero" (1980: 70). As other landlocked people living in Wyoming who "seldom dream of flight" (179), he starts feeling "appetite for other streets" and a "yearning to be surrounded by strangers" (179). As Milkman tells his father about his decision, Macon Dead tries to convince him to stay. He explains to his son that all the money, "the only real freedom there is" (179), will be his. Milkman feels that his heart is hidden deep down in a pocket and that, throughout his entire life, everybody has used him: "Working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom. Everything they did seemed to be about him, yet nothing he wanted was part of it" (182).

Milkman's escape acquires a materialistic turn when it becomes a search for gold. After he has informed his father about his departure, Milkman mentions the green sack that hangs in Pilate's house and that Hagar calls her grandmother's inheritance. That is when Macon Dead tells him about the time when he killed the white man with the gold. His father believes that Pilate keeps it in that green sack. Milkman proposes Guitar to steal it. This becomes a chance at an erroneously understood defiance, "his latest Jack and the Beanstalk bid for freedom" (197), against his family; rebellions which he has always shared with his friend, even if that has been his father's idea. Nevertheless, Milkman is not so eager to go through with it. For three days Milkman cannot make up his mind about the theft. Guitar recriminates him that he does not really want to steal that gold, since "money ain't never been what you needed or couldn't get" (198).

Milkman soon learns that materialism would stop him from being able to fly. When Milkman and Guitar are planning the robbery, they see a white peacock poised on a roof. Milkman feels the happiness that he experienced, as a child, at the sight of anything that could soar. However, a little later, he notices that the bird can hardly fly. Then Guitar states the secret of the flying ability. The peacock cannot take to the air because it has “Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like the vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (196).<sup>10</sup> Then Milkman realizes that he has been wrong in believing that he wanted to have the gold. What he truly wishes is a new life: new people and places; and command over his life. He wants to “beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present” (197). He becomes aware that he needs to fly away from home.

After the unsuccessful theft, Milkman leaves his city, on his own, in search of the gold, since his father believes that it might still be hidden in Hunter Cave. He heads south, where his ancestors came from.<sup>11</sup> The way Milkman describes his airplane ride to Pittsburgh parallels his final leap into the air. It exhilarates him, “encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability” (240). As an Icarian figure, “In the air, away from real life, he felt free” (240). Far from home, Milkman experiences freedom from those restraints his family and Hagar had imposed on him and that he could no longer stand: “the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (240). Milkman realizes how everybody has always wanted something from him “Something they think they can’t get anywhere else. Something they think I got. I don’t know what it is – I mean what it is they really want” (242). All of them want his “living life” (242).

It is when Milkman gets to Danville that he starts to recover his heritage, his family past, which has been dead to him until that moment: “He gains insight into the generations that preceded him, the names and deeds of people that make his privileged life possible” (Jennings 2008: 107). Milkman talks to the old people who knew his family and he begins to understand what had happened to his granddad, his father and his aunt. For the first time, he really wishes the gold to take revenge. He wants to prove that the Butlers, who envious of his grandfather’s successful farm, had murdered him, “were dumb enough to believe

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<sup>10</sup> As Ženišek says, the flying act has many symbolical meanings among which the peacock scene can be considered as an “allegory praising selflessness (as opposed to vanity)” (2007: 132).

<sup>11</sup> According to Trudier Harris, Milkman’s journey to the South reverses the usual pattern, which was to go north, since the North was equated with the freer place, “where money was plentiful and liberty unchallenged” (1991: 96).

that if they killed one man his whole line died" (257). Milkman feels proud of his father and repeats what he had said about his own one "I work right alongside him" (257). These words expressed, more than anything else, Macon Dead's love for his dad. Milkman realizes how his father's "relentless, excessive acquisition of property is his material way of paying loving homage to the life of Macon Dead the first as well as psychically recouping the land that the rapacious Butler ruthlessly stole" (Jennings 2008: 111).

In Danville, Milkman goes to the Butler place, where he meets another Daedalic figure of *Song of Solomon*, Circe, who tells him about his inability to truly listen. She says to him: "You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (268). As Morrison writes, "he [Milkman] hangs around that town for a long time – not listening to what he hears, not paying any attention to what it is" (McKay 1994: 142). However, it is not until later that Milkman realizes that he must really listen to understand everything. Circe was his father and his aunt's midwife. She also gave them shelter in the house she worked in, after their father had been killed. Circe is a "healer" and a "deliverer" (267). Like Pilate, she is a witch. Both of them have the quality of eternal youth. Circe is "a woman older than death" (239). In fact, at her age she should be dead. However, out of her toothless mouth, "the strong mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl" (262) comes out. Just before Milkman meets Circe, he recalls the dreams about witches he had as a child. He cannot resist the witch's magical magnetism. Milkman climbs up the stairs to the old lady that welcomes him. His embrace is accompanied by an erection. As Lee writes, "Circe is a fairy-tale witch – wizened but with a young girl's voice, capable of arousing Milkman sexually" (1982: 68).

Circe passes on to Milkman her knowledge of his ancestors:

More a Sibyl than her siren namesake, Circe guards this entrance into the past. She initiates Milkman into his own past, showing both the power and the destructiveness of his heritage, and channels his rebelliousness into a quest for his own identity. He could not reach the dream-like core of his quest, his journey into Virginia, without direct contact with the world of the past and the dead. Lincoln's Heaven, Circe, and the decayed plantation all represent the past which still exerts its influence on Milkman. Like Aeneas, like Ulysses, Milkman needs to look into his, his family's, and his people's past before he can move into the future. (Leslie Harris 1980: 74)

Milkman walks into the cave, the womb, where his father had murdered the white man and he does not find the gold. So, he decides to go to Virginia. He thinks that Pilate might have taken it there. Milkman continues his trip down south, to Shalimar, the hometown of his ancestors, Macon and Sing, the true origins of his family. Despite the troubles he undergoes, on his way there he

feels that “his morale had soared and he was beginning to enjoy the trip” (282). Milkman starts to feel as “his own director” and his “sense of power was strong” (282): he could do anything he wanted. His quest for monetary inheritance becomes a search for selfhood and manhood.

Milkman’s mythical and heroic stature is confirmed through his ‘immortality’. On different occasions in the narrative, he proves to be indestructible. He has survived everything; usually saved by women, such as Pilate or his mother. First, Pilate manages to rescue him from his father’s attempts to kill him, she “had brought him into the world when only a miracle could have” (229). Later on, Milkman lives through Hagar’s clumsy endeavors to murder him and he is only slightly hurt, a small cut, when he finally decides to wait for her and let her stab him. Pilate tells Ruth that Hagar will “never pull it off” (154), since Milkman has “come in the world tryin to keep from getting killed [...]. When he was at his most helpless, he made it [...] and won’t no woman ever kill him” (155). In Shalimar, his ‘home’, Milkman, who has been treated extremely well all the way down there, is now “unknown, unloved, and damn near killed” (293): a young man pulls, unsuccessfully, a knife on him. In his ancestors’ abode, Milkman comes to the full understanding of his name, Dead. It seems that he cannot be murdered since, as he says, he is already dead (293).

Milkman “must undergo rituals of cleansing and testing before he can decode the tale of history” (Byerman 1997: 138). He must endure a process of initiation, hunting, to reach self-knowledge and manhood. In fact, in many tribes, hunting is a basic ritualistic part of the boy’s process of becoming a man; a male initiation rite that, as Byerman writes, helps him “emerge from his extended, narcissistic childhood” (1997: 138). Milkman accepts the invitation of one of Shalimar’s inhabitants, Omar, to go hunting with the men of the town. He cannot shoot, but he thinks that if he has survived Hagar, he can survive anything. There is a moment, during the hunt, when he cannot keep up with his hunting partner’s pace and stops to rest. He is alone in the dark. For the first time, he can truly see himself, “the cocoon that was ‘personality’ – gave way” (300), “unobstructed” by himself, by other people, or even by his belongings, since he has lost them on his journey there. As Guitar tells him, when they both see the peacock, Milkman must leave behind his possessions to be able to fly.

The hunt makes it possible for a Milkman bereft of material things to reflect about himself, his selfishness towards all those who love him and his incapacity to take responsibilities. His flight away from Western materialism shows him the true journey to self-knowledge. In *Song of Solomon* hunting is a spiritual experience which allows the primal self to surface and merge with nature. Milkman realizes how the village hunters communicate with the animals in the

wild, using the language of the time “when men and animals did talk to one another” (301). They have not lost those connections that make them part of nature, part of life:

And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they now about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter. It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for – he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers. (302)

After the spiritual journey into his inner self, Milkman needs to confront death in order to be reborn. His friend chases him, as the cat is chased by the hunters and their dogs. While Milkman is in the middle of the woods, Guitar tries to strangle him. His life flashes before him. However, it just consists of one image, Hagar bending over him “in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable” (302). Sadness invades him and that makes him relax, which, ultimately, saves his life. On his ritualistic initiation process, Milkman experiences death and is restored to a new existence. As Krumholz points out, this hunt section can be read “as a symbolic death and rebirth (at Guitar's hands)” (1997: 108). When Milkman joins the rest of the hunting party again, he finds himself “exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it [...]. And he did not limp” (304).

Morrison uses the ritual of skinning to indicate Milkman's integration into the community. While the village men skin the bobcat, he remembers Guitar's words “Everybody wants a black man's life” (305), which symbolize slavery and black males' oppression. Milkman has made it through his initiation and his trophy is the heart of the bobcat. According to Trudier Harris, “the bobcat also culminates the ritual of acceptance; by allowing Milkman, the initiate, to pull out its heart, the men incorporate him into their fraternity and forgive him his former superiority over them” (1991: 102). Then, “A peacock soared away and lit on the hood of a blue Buick” (1991: 306). Milkman undergoes a passage rite that ends up with his final resurrection into a different level of self-awareness. Later on, he experiences a different kind of ritual, in which Milkman's relationship with women changes drastically. Sweet washes him in a sort of baptism, a birth into a new self. Then they make love. For the first time in his life, Milkman is capable of sharing with a woman and he offers to bathe her. In the successive actions both lovers do, he shows that now he can give love and not only receive it, as with his cousin Hagar.

Milkman's identity quest becomes a journey to solve the puzzle of his ancestry. When he hears, for the second time, a group of children singing in a ring-around game, he begins to connect some memories. A boy is in the middle

with his arms outstretched, turning around as an airplane until all the children drop to their knees and start to recite a rhyme he had heard Pilate sing before. She sang it all the time, “O Sugarman don’t leave me here”, except that the children change it a little bit, “Solomon don’t leave me here” (324). The song triggers Milkman’s recollections about Pilate. He wonders how she could stand sexual deprivation. Then he remembers how her mother also experienced it and could manage by nursing him for such a long time. Now he can understand how his father paid homage to his dad by acquiring property and, that way, he expressed his terrible loss. He feels ashamed of having tried to steal from Pilate, when he had always felt at home in her house.

Milkman also questions how badly he had treated his cousin. He was never honest with Hagar, using her to increase his popularity:

[...] it made him a star, a celebrity in the Blood Bank; it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind, to destroy her, and not because she hated him, or because he had done some unforgivable thing to her, but because he had fucked her and she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint. (326)

Milkman thinks he had exerted his will against her, “an ultimatum to the universe, ‘Die, Hagar, die’” (326). In both couples Solomon and Ryna, Milkman and Hagar, flight equates abandonment. Flying away, as Solomon did, means leaving behind those you love. Byerman claims that Solomon’s act “begins a tradition of family disruption that persists into the present” (1997: 137).

In Shalimar, Milkman finds his true community. There he feels connected to the people around him, just as he felt when he was at Pilate’s house. At home, however, he had always had the sense of being an outsider and, with his friends, he was vaguely involved, except for Guitar. On the other hand, ever since Milkman left Danville, his interest in his own people has been growing. He truly wants to know who his ancestors, Jake and Sing, truly were. At this point it is more important for him to decipher his genealogy than looking for the gold. Milkman needs to fully recover his family history in order to understand who he really is. Finally, in Shalimar he finds someone who can tell him about his grandmother Sing, an Indian, who lived near Solomon’s Leap and whose parents, the Byrds, did not let her play with other black children (313-315).

Milkman has been changed by his identity quest. He has become much more confident. He decides that Guitar is not going to determine what he is going to do, since “If I do that now I’ll do it all my life and he’ll run me off the earth” (319). When Milkman confronts his friend after his visit to Susan Byrd, he is not

scared any more. That night he sleeps peacefully in Sweet's arms and he dreams about soaring the sky, "about sailing high over the earth" (322). His flying is like

[...] floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper. Part of his flight was over the dark sea, but it didn't frighten him because he knew he could not fall. He was alone in the sky, but somebody was applauding him, watching him and applauding. He couldn't see who it was. (323)

The following day he cannot shake the dream and he does not want to, since it has given him a "sense of lightness and power" (323). Milkman does not seem to be afraid of flying any more. He is no longer the spoiled city man who did not know what he wanted. He is a whole different man.

From the rhyme the children sing, "a mythologizing of his own heritage" (Leslie Harris 1980: 71), and what Susan Byrd tells him, Milkman pieces together the story of his ancestry. The Jay of the song is Jake, the man who lived in Shalimar with his wife, Sing. Some of the places he passes by on his hunting trip are mentioned too, Solomon's Leap and Ryna's Gulch. Jake was the last of Solomon's twenty-one children, one of those flying Africans. According to the legend, Solomon had flown away to where he was from and his wife, Ryna, had lost her mind. Jake was the only one his father had tried to take with him, but dropped near the porch of a house. Heddy, an Indian woman, who had a daughter, Sing (Singing Bird), found him and raised him. Sing and Jake grew up together. They got married and ran away on a wagon with a lot of ex-slaves.

Once Milkman has found out about his ancestors, he wants to go swimming, another baptism, a celebration of his new self. On his way to the river, he starts reciting the children's rhyme. When Sweet tells him that she used to sing it when she was little, he says: "Of course you did. Everybody did. Everybody but me. But I can play it now. It's my game now" (352). Milkman has been disengaged from his community and his heritage his whole life. In the water he begins to whoop, dive and splash happily, announcing to the world that his grandfather could fly and that he belongs to the legendary tribe of flying Africans. However, Sweet asks him two questions, which highlight Morrison's feminist approach, casting doubt on the heroism of his ancestor's deed: "Where'd he go, Macon?" and "Who'd he leave behind?" (353). As Morrison points out in her conversation with Anne Koenen, in his identity quest Milkman has walked into the earth, the cave, has then walked the surface of the earth, has gone into the water and now he is ready to get to the air (1994: 76).

Uncovering the hidden truths of his ancestry has transformed Milkman. Now, on his way back home, he realizes that everybody wants to have him dead, except for two women, Pilate and his mother, whom he had never thanked.

Milkman decides to visit his aunt, who knocks him out. Then he knows that Hagar has died. Milkman associates the story of Ryna and her twenty-one children, who were abandoned when Solomon flew away back to Africa, with his relationship with Pilate's granddaughter. Both Hagar and Ryna go mad when their lovers desert them. Milkman wonders: "Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children!" (357). Pilate makes Milkman assume responsibility for Hagar's death, since "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (358). Consequently, he has to keep something that belonged to her, so he takes home with him a box of Hagar's hair.<sup>12</sup>

Icarus and Daedalus, Milkman and Pilate, must go together on their final journey to fulfill their fate, to fly. As Leslie Harris claims, "by the end of the novel he [Milkman] knows himself and his obligations to both present and past, to himself and his world" (1980: 70). It is Macon's sister who helps her nephew find his own destiny away from his father's materialism. Pilate "must guide him beyond the peacock plumage of materialism that binds him to earth and teach him how to fly" (Trudier Harris 1991: 91). She transmits to Milkman her ancestral knowledge. They come back to Shalimar to leave the bones of Pilate's father, Jake, which she has been carrying along all her life, so that they rest in peace. Pilate can finally bury them in Solomon's Leap, where the remains of Jake's own parents rest too. Next to the bones' burial place, in a little hole, she also deposits Sing's snuffbox with the only word her husband had ever written. There, beside her ancestors, Pilate finally ends up her journey. As a spiritual agent who leads her nephew on his quest, she dies when she can no longer be of assistance. He has already fulfilled his destiny, and so has she. Guitar shoots her dead. Pilate, Milkman's Daedalic guide, dies with a wish of love: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (361). Pilate has shown true heroic stature in her commitment to the others and in her ethic of love.

Before dying, Pilate asks her nephew to sing something for her. Milkman's song wakes up two birds, which circle them. One of these birds dives into the grave and takes something shiny – probably the snuffbox with her name – in its beak and then flies away. Finally, Pilate's spirit can soar. Milkman realizes why

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<sup>12</sup> By giving Milkman the box containing Hagar's hair, Pilate entrusts him with her granddaughter's soul which, according to the voodoo religion, is contained in the deceased's hair and fingernails. Milkman must take responsibility for his cousin's soul; thus carrying on with the tradition Pilate has established by caring for the bones she thinks belong to the white man. Taken from CliffsNotes. [http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study\\_guide/Literature/Song-of-Solomon-Summary-and-Analysis-Epigraph-Part-2-Chapter-15.id-188.pageNum-19.html](http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/Literature/Song-of-Solomon-Summary-and-Analysis-Epigraph-Part-2-Chapter-15.id-188.pageNum-19.html).

he loves his aunt so much: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (362). Daedalus, Pilate, has started her flight and Icarus, Milkman, must follow her. On his identity search he has regained family knowledge and his African heritage. As a result, he has recovered the lost ancestral powers he has inherited from his forefathers. Milkman leaps toward Guitar's killing arms. Now he knows "what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (363). As Fabre argues, Milkman's flight "is an act of faith in the legacy, an act of communion with Pilate, and with his flying ancestor" (1988: 113).

On his final leap, Milkman soars towards his friend. Guitar, in his involvement in the Seven Days, has become the antithesis of Milkman's new values. Their ways have become separated. Guitar has devoted his life to death and vengeance, while Milkman's struggle for identity leads him towards love and commitment to others. Despite the differences between them, Milkman cannot complete his spiritual growth until he embraces his friendship. As Morrison claims,

[...] in *Song of Solomon* I really did not mean to suggest that they [Milkman and Guitar] kill each other, but out of a commitment and love and selflessness they are willing to risk the one thing that we have, life, and that's the positive nature of the action [...]. It's important that the metaphor be in the killing of this brother, that the two men who love each other nevertheless have no area in which they can talk, so they exercise some dominion over and demolition of the other. I wanted the language to be placid enough to suggest he was suspended in the air in the leap towards this thing, both loved and despised, and that he was willing to die for that idea, but not necessarily to die. (Ruas 1994: 111)

Milkman's flight can be understood, according to Trudier Harris, as "an act of love" (1991: 106) towards his brother, Guitar. It does not matter whether he dies or not, since, as Morrison says, "it's not about dying or not dying, it's just that this marvelous epiphany has taken place" (Davis 1994: 232).<sup>13</sup> Milkman's leap is not a flight of escape, as his ancestor Solomon was, but a flight of commitment to others, as Pilate's (362).

Milkman's quest starts as a greedy one, a search for a treasure of hidden gold. However, throughout the narrative, it becomes an identity journey, which takes him back to his roots. As Krumholz points out, "Milkman's quest shifts from one for gold to one for knowledge, his quest for freedom changes from the freedom obtained through the solitary power of money to the freedom gained

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<sup>13</sup> In this last scene, Krumholz sees Morrison's "redefinition of the hero quest and of black manhood" (1997: 111).

through connections to others, imaginative engagement, and love” (1997: 109). It is an archetypal journey full of baptisms and rites of passage, which will initiate him back into his ancestry. Milkman must discover his role in his family and in his community. After his quest, he ends up as a whole person. The constraints Milkman had suffered at his household had suppressed the ability to fly that his forefathers had, but he has recovered it on his journey to the South, to his ancestral roots. As Trudier Harris argues,

Milkman’s growth on his journey is measurable. He changes from a self-centered, middle-class bore to a man genuinely able to share in a physical relationship as well as in societal and communal interchanges. He realizes how wrongheaded he has been about his father and mother and how he has used all the women in his life, especially Hagar. (1991: 104-105)

In Morrison’s Icarian story, women get some well-deserved recognition. Although *Song of Solomon* features a male protagonist, it also focuses on its female characters’ experiences. While Solomon flew away and dropped his baby, Ryna stayed and raised twenty children.<sup>14</sup> However, it is Solomon who appears as a hero. Morrison emphasizes a new perspective, that of the women and children who are left behind. Pilate can fly without ever leaving ground. This way she can assume her responsibilities towards her family and community. When Milkman sings to her the rhyme devoted to Solomon, he changes the lyrics:

Sugargirl don’t leave me here  
Cotton balls to choke me  
Sugargirl don’t leave me here  
Buckra’s arms to yoke me

Milkman is rendering homage to his aunt. She has been his Daedalus, his spiritual guide. Pilate has helped him transform his search for gold into an acceptance of his African heritage. As Morrison says, “What’s likelier is that it’ll be a woman save his life” (155).

Not only women, but also children find recognition in *Song of Solomon*. They also play a key role. They preserve the story through a song and, as Virginia Hamilton writes at the end of her tale “The People Could Fly”, they will pass it on to their own offspring.<sup>15</sup> Morrison emphasizes an aspect of the legend

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<sup>14</sup> According to Wilentz, when Solomon drops his baby, he abandons “the life-giving qualities of the legend” (1989-1990: 31).

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton writes, “They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children” (1985: 172).

that had been neglected, the fact that children are also transmitters of ancestral knowledge. In her conversation with Mel Watkins, she claims:

The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of Song: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history. (1994: 46)

In *Song of Solomon*, myth becomes art. Morrison reinterprets the legend of the Flying Africans as well as the myth of Icarus and Daedalus. She gives her own view of the motif of flying, which has always played a pivotal role in both African and Western cultures: "She not only adapts old images and myths of flight to new characters and situations. She also extends and enlarges them" (Hovet and Lounsberry 1983: 133). As Beaulieu argues, in Morrison's novels, the myth of the flying African or the Icarian legend are "invoked to examine the potential that exists for self-knowledge and self-actualization, both of which are tied to the capacity to locate value and authority in Black experience" (2003: 124). Morrison truly fashions her own myth: "[...] rather than picking up the Icarus motif of escape and doomed flight, Morrison creates her own myth of those who fumble in their efforts to fly and then soar higher – more Daedaluses than Icaruses" (Leslie Harris 1980: 76).

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