

The Use of Western Literary Traditions in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

This paper explores Toni Morrison's use of Western literary traditions such as fairy tales and Scandinavian myths in her novels, with emphasis on *Song of Solomon*, her third novel. While Morrison utilizes such traditions in her first and second novels, she does so only sparingly. In contrast, she scatters images and references taken from Western literary sources throughout *Song of Solomon*. After this work, Morrison rarely uses them in her novels, even though she has considerable knowledge of them, having been a classics major at Howard University. In this paper, I consider the novelist's purposes of using these traditions in her works.

Toni Morrison utilizes many literary traditions in her novels. Especially in her early works, she relies on such literary traditions as fairy tales and Greek and Roman myths. While her use of them is rare and whimsical in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, she makes an extensive use of them in her third novel, *Song of Solomon*. This paper attempts to analyze the various ways in which Morrison utilizes her considerable knowledge of such literary traditions.

At one point of her first novel, Morrison compares the father of the novel's narrator Claudia to Thor, the Blacksmith God in Scandinavian mythology. Morrison wishes to emphasize Claudia's father's watchfulness in maintaining the security of his household, which, as a lower-middle class black family during the depression time of 1950's, must have been particularly precarious.

In contrast, in her second novel *Sula*, Morrison depicts the protagonist Sula as Semele in the Greek mythology. A woman claiming her autonomy in an African American community which defines women in a number of traditional images such as mothers, wives, good Christians, or sluts, Sula is defiant and is inevitably deemed as a freak of nature; she sleeps around and puts her grandmother Eva into an old folks' home. Having been born and raised in a self-sufficient all-women household, Sula has no idea of love as possession. Consequently she sleeps with the husbands of her acquaintances and deserts males without the slightest compunction as her whims

dictate her. Sula becomes a pariah in her community because of her unorthodox behaviors, but, ironically enough, she learns to be possessive when she falls in love with Ajax, also an unorthodox male in the community. Being a man who values his freedom above anything else, Ajax immediately becomes alarmed and walks out on Sula. At this point of the story, Sula is depicted as Semele, a one-time human mistress of Zeus and the mother to Dionysos, the God of intoxication and frenzy. According to the myth, Hella, the wife to Zeus, became jealous of Semele, and persuaded her mortal rival to ask Zeus to visit her in his divine glory. Zeus reluctantly complied with Semele's request, and she, on seeing her lover without disguises, was instantly consumed in a divine fire. Through this device, Morrison has shown us essential weaknesses shared by humans and immortals.

Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* is quite unique in that it makes the more extensive use of these literary traditions than her preceding works. As the title of the novel suggests, the author utilizes African American literary traditions, the Southern legend of the Flying Africans notably among them. Yet while such references give the novel the overall frame, there is much more conspicuous borrowing from European literary sources.

Toni Morrison continues to demonstrate her familiarity with Scandinavian mythology in her third novel. According to the myth, Odin, the chief god, has his two common ravens Huginn (Thought) and Muninn (Memory) fly over the world of mortals daily. The birds give the information on the world below to Odin so the god knows everything without ever leaving his throne in Valhalla⁽¹⁾. With an extraordinary twist of fancy, Morrison assigns the role of these ravens to Pilate and Reba, the aunt and the cousin to the protagonist Milkman, who is described as Odin:

...His (Milkman's) visits to the wine house seemed (before his talk with his father) as extension of the love that he had come to expect from his mother. Not that Pilate or Reba felt the possessive love for him that his mother did, but they had accepted him without question and with all the ease in the world. They took him seriously, too. Asked him questions and thought all his responses to things were important enough to laugh at or quarrel with him about. Everything he did at home was met with quiet understanding from his mother and his sisters (or indifference and criticism from his father). The women in the wine house were indifferent to nothing and understood nothing. Every sentence, every word, was new to them and they listened to what he said like bright-eyed ravens, trembling in their eagerness to catch and interpret every sound in the universe⁽²⁾.

Here, the novelist implies that the relationship between Milkman and his female relatives is

not healthy. Like the mythological ravens, the women of the Dead household are literally less than human. They spoil males in their acquaintance rotten. Milkman belongs to the long line of black men in the Morrison world whose names suggest their essential immaturity. BoyBoy, Eva's worthless husband in *Sula*, and Son, alias William Green in *Tar Baby* come to mind immediately. Morrison drives her point further in her litany of men's names in Chapter 15 of *Song of Solomon*. There, Milkman ponders about African American names for men such as Small Boy and Quack-Quack without realizing the sinister implications of such names. The choice of the names listed there is deliberate, and, in the fictional world of Toni Morrison, the names of the characters are not without significance⁽³⁾.

The relationship between son and mother, wife and husband, aunt and nephew is less than ideal in Morrison's novels. Males often enjoy perpetual boyhood there, and their women are frequently responsible for that state. For example, Macon Dead the Third is nicknamed Milkman by the family's janitor Freddie as a child because his mother Ruth breastfed him well past the period of weaning. The nickname was highly appropriate because, before his trip to the South, he was an egotistical youth who refused to grow up and to take up the adult responsibilities. His mother Ruth and his aunt made great sacrifices for him and he took these as granted. When he was conceived, the marriage between his parents had long deteriorated, and Milkman's father tried everything to get his wife miscarry. Pilate confronted Milkman's father and helped Ruth carry the baby to the terms. Further, Plate humiliated herself and played the part of an ignorant and superstitious black woman in front of sneering white police officers in order to salvage her nephew from a trouble. Milkman's older sisters accepted the priority placed on their brother in the household all their lives, and Milkman, completely unaware of this, despised their lonely lives as old maids.

This novel concerns itself mainly with the lives of black males and it is unique in this respect among Morrison's early works. A Northern middle-class man, Milkman knew nothing about his family history in the South. Initially embarking on a trip to his ancestral site in West Virginia because he had wrongly believed that there was a hidden treasure there, the trip transformed itself into a quest of self-knowledge and at the end of the trip, Milkman learned about his great-grandfather's proud life as a freed slave and with his knowledge about his roots came his confidence in himself. Thus, he attained maturity in the latter part of the story.

Sometimes, Morrison toys with British traditional tales for children. Already in *Sula*, she depicts the hallucinations of Shadrack, the shell-shocked veteran from World War II, in the image of his hands and arms lawlessly elongating and entwisting themselves like the beanstalks in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, driving Shadrack into frenzy. The rare references to the same source are made in *Song of Solomon*, yet the author is not much interested in making any extended use of

this British tale. The tale is mentioned as a typical fantasy of an absurd adventure and is quickly dismissed by Morrison⁽⁴⁾.

Goldilocks and The Three Bears is put into much more meaningful use. Milkman's mother Ruth hears the rumor of her cousin Hagar that she is determined to kill her son because he flirted with Hagar for a long time and has heartlessly deserted her in favor of a mulatto girl with a middle-class background. Ruth decides to put a stop to any such attempt and hurries to Pilate's house in the poorer section of the city. Throughout the novel, Ruth is the one character who is consistently associated with children's tales. She is a woman devoted to infantile fantasies in order to escape the grim nature of her marriage.

She deems herself as a little woman constantly in need of the protective affection of her father. Her father was a light-skinned man who was successful enough as the only black doctor in the neighborhood to have a number of white patients. The doctor scorned Milkman's father Macon Dead the Second when he began to court Ruth because Macon was very dark-skinned and was on his way to become a slum landlord with an ambiguous background. ('I don't know anything about you,' the doctor said, 'other than your name, which I don't like, but I will abide by my daughter's preference.')

Because Milkman's father had never forgotten his humiliation in this experience, he began to imagine the relationship between Ruth and her father as incestuous. The text suggests this is a wrong idea on the part of Macon Dead the Second; it is a trick of his memory of the death-bed scene in which Ruth was kneeling in front of her father's corpse, kissing his fingers. Yet because Macon suspected his wife was sleeping with her dead father, he refused to make love to her ever since. For the sexually frustrated Ruth, Milkman was the only legacy of the fact that she had been loved, and she jealously watched over her son from that point. Thus, Ruth rushes to Pilate's house as soon as she hears of Hagar's murderous intent and enters into the house which seems deserted:

...The door was open but nobody was inside....Here was the chair she had collapsed in. [That was the last time when she came here, seeking help from Pilate because Ruth's husband was forcing her to abort the unwanted baby.] ...This house had been a haven then, and in spite of the cold anger she felt now, it still looked like an inn, a safe harbor.... Ruth looked into the bed-room and saw three little beds, and like Goldilocks, she walked over to the nearest one and sat down⁽⁶⁾.

The real Goldilocks had a good time inside the bears' house but she was scared away from there when the bears came home and found her. Unlike Goldilocks, Ruth became uncharacteris-

tically aggressive this one time, and confronted Hagar. Hagar promised Ruth to try to cease her murderous attempts and Ruth went home. Pilate's home where nothing was used for its original purpose was comforting to Ruth. Ruth's affluent house was suffocating to her. Therefore, the outcomes of Goldilocks' and Ruth's visit to a stranger's house are opposite. The author continues her efforts to depict Ruth (and to a lesser degree, Ruth's two daughters) in fairytales' imagery for two purposes.

First, the three light-skinned women in the Dead household resemble the fairytale princesses in that they are mainly valued for their appearances. (Here, the old association of light-skin with such desirable traits as finer sensibilities and keener intelligence is kept alive in this black community of the 1970's.) And these light-skinned women as the objects of male desire are tragic, because this tendency is the main reason why the ambitious Macon Senior married Ruth, and later, Porter, one of Macon's working-class tenants, courted First Corinthians Dead. At one point of the novel, First Corinthians' sister Magdalene compares the light-skinned women to whores, for they are shown off in front of the residents in the neighborhood just like prostitutes. This comparison is appropriate to this particular plight of the light-skinned women.

More conspicuously, Morrison relies on the various Grimm stories in her early works. In *Sula*, for example, Shadrack plays the role of the pied piper in his community; tormented by the memory of his unspeakable experiences on the battlefield, he seeks to give a manageable shape to his perception of the world as chaos. One such effort is the creation and celebration of the National Suicide Day. On one particular day, Shadrack parades through the street of the Bottom, the black neighborhood of the Ohio city where he lives by himself, ringing a cowbell and showing a hangman's rope to remind his neighbors of the imminence of death. He calls to his neighbors to commit suicide so that they can be liberated from the fear of death. Predictably, nobody responds to his call. But, on this early spring day soon after Sula's death, the black people are so exhilarated by the death of the hated pariah Sula that many join Shadrack's solitary parade. The participants follow Shadrack to the construction site of a city tunnel from which the black males were denied their offer of labor by the city's white authority. The tunnel collapse with people entrapped inside and Shadrack, like the legendary piper, continues to ring the cowbell outside as if to commemorate the unwitting mass-suicide. Through this episode, Morrison is saying that black people were united in their hatred of Sula who had challenged their unthinking acceptance of conventions. Their solidity fell apart as soon as Sula died and Sula's inquiring mind might have been a needed stimulation to such acquiescence.

The story of *Hansel and Gretel* is utilized at the beginning of Chapter 10 of *Song of Solomon*. The protagonist Milkman has just embarked on his trip to the South in search of his ancestral abode. A materialist through and through, Milkman looks for Circe, the black midwife and

housemaid to an influential white family in Danville, Pennsylvania. The males in the Butlers, that white family, were the very people who had killed Milkman's grandfather, Macon Dead the First, to seize his fertile farmland. On finding the Butler mansion in the woods, Milkman is another Hansel coming across the witch's house in the woods:

When Hansel and Gretel stood in the forest and saw the house in the clearing before them, the little hairs at the nape of their necks must have shivered. Their knees must have felt so weak that blinding hunger alone could have propelled them forward. No one was there to warn or hold them; their parents, chastened and grieving, were far away. So they ran as fast as they could to the house where a woman older than death lived, and they ignored the shivering nape hair and the softness in their knees. A grown man can also be energized by hunger, and any weakness in his knees or irregularity in his heartbeat will disappear if he thinks his hunger is about to be assuaged. Especially if the object of his craving is not ginger-bread or chewy gumdrops, but gold⁽⁷⁾.

Morrison seems to use this tale in its later version; in the first version, it was the mother of the children who decided to abandon them in the forest so that the parents could survive in a famine-struck land. She persuaded her reluctant husband to dispose the children in this way. It has been suggested in the interpretations of the story that the mother is really the witch residing in the gingerbread house; the children killed the cannibal witch and returned to their house with the witch's treasures, only to find the cruel mother had died during their absence.

Morrison emphasizes the ambiguities of the witch living in a deep forest. A forest, we remember, is a place at once menacing and enticing; charged with erotic energy. The forest, for example, in which Hester Prynne ran into Arthur Dimmesdale was a typical forest common to American literature. There, Hester unties her hair severely confined in her hat during the daytime in her Puritan community. She urges her one-time lover to ignore all appearances and to elope with her and their daughter so that they can find happiness together. Wanton sexuality represented by Hester's unconfined hair is at once alluring and threatening to Arthur. This kind of seduction scene is appropriately enacted against the backdrop of the ambiguous forest. Likewise, a little later in the same Chapter 10, Milkman remembers how a witch in traditional folklore had been a source of fascination and dread to him when he was a young child:

He had had dreams as a child, dreams every child had, of the witch who chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape. Witches in black dresses and red under-skirts; witches with pink eyes and green lips, tiny

witches, long rangy witches, frowning witches, smiling witches, screaming witches and laughing witches, witches that flew...and some that merely glided on the ground. So when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands,...her mouth gaping open for him, her eyes devouring him....Her head came to his chest and the feel of that hair under his chin,...made him dizzy, but he knew that always, always at the very instant of the pounce or the gummy embrace he would wake with a scream and an erection. Now he had only the erection⁽⁸⁾.

True to the tradition of folklores, witches are seductresses, the Earth Mother Goddess who gives birth as well as takes life. Circe is one with such opposite qualities — she was a midwife who had helped Pilate's mother deliver her daughter and later, when the Macon siblings became orphans, she took them to her employer's mansion to take care of them. At the same time, Circe was a being overpowering her white employers simply by outliving them and witnessing their downfall was her way of enacting an revenge over the crime they had committed toward black people. When Milkman saw her in Danville, she was the sole survivor of the Butler household and now she was eagerly waiting for her own death and being devoured by a pack of German dogs owned by her white employers.

Circe in this novel is more intimately connected to her namesake in *Odyssey* than to the witches in *Grimm's Tales*. According to the epic, Circe was a witch residing in the Island of Aiaie. She entertained sailors who visited her island and turned them into pigs afterwards. After the Trojan War, Odysseus the king of Ithaca began a long voyage to his homeland and arrived at Circe's island. Circe turned most of his crew into pigs with the magical power of the Moon. (The Moon is a traditional symbol of women.)⁽⁹⁾ The pigs are typically associated with lust. Odysseus came to his crews' rescue and Circe fell for the hero and turned the pigs into humans⁽¹⁰⁾. Roughly faithful to this myth, Circe in *Song of Solomon* is depicted as a kind of witch, even though she does not have any supernatural abilities as a sorceress. Still Circe is surrounded by beasts and seems to be full of guiles to outwit hostile white people. When Macon the Second and Pilate became fatherless, Circe took them as her protégées and took good care of them. Just like many women accused of witchcraft in the Middle Age, Circe used to be a midwife. And when Milkman found the old Circe, she was a solitary woman who lived in the marginal space in the community with animals as the sole companions. Again, these qualities were often those of medieval women designated as witches⁽¹¹⁾.

Thus, the black Circe has a witch's qualification even without the powers of witches. (In contrast, Pilate was a conjure woman and seems to have supernatural powers.) Milkman, at this stage of the work, is the opposite of a hero. Born and raised in a comfortable middle-class family,

he is a rather unpleasant materialistic youth, completely wrapped up with himself. In spite of his wandering, he has no status of an Odysseus. Perhaps this ironic contrast is one of the reasons why Morrison named his benefactor as Circe; to draw the readers' attention to the differences between the epic hero and Milkman by evoking the Circe episode of the Greek myth. Yet the two protagonists have common streaks of brutality; Odysseus heartlessly deserts Circe after one year's stay on her island and goes back to his wife. Similarly, Milkman heartlessly throws away Hagar, his mistress of a long standing when she had lost all charms for him. This callousness to women's plights is a weakness shared by them and is not condoned by the author.

Morrison utilizes one more Greek myth. Milkman's elder sister First Corinthians comes home early in the morning after she spent the night with Porter and unexpectedly finds her father and her brother talking in the kitchen, a women's sanctuary. This reminds her of the mythic episode of Kadmos the king of Thebas. In order to dedicate a burnt offering to Athena, the Goddess of war, as the legend goes, Kadmos sent his servants for buckets of water to a fountain consecrated for Ares, the God of war. Ares had put a dragon to guard the fountain and the dragon slaughtered all the servants. Kadmos killed the dragon in retribution and saw its teeth on the ground. Immediately numerous armed men grew from the ground and began to kill one another. First Corinthians is a woman educated at Bryn Mawr, an exclusive white college for women. Her familiarity with Greek and Roman myths should come as no surprise:

...Men's voices. Corinthians blinked. She had just come from a house in which men sat in a lit kitchen talking in loud excited voices, only to meet an identical scene at home. She wondered if this part of the night, a part she was unfamiliar with, belonged, had always belonged, to men. If perhaps it was a secret hour in which men rose like giants from dragon's teeth and, while the women slept, clustered in their kitchens⁽¹²⁾.

When we consider the murderous tendency of mythical soldiers, this reference to the particular episode can be an early foreboder of the closing scene of the novel where Guitar, a lifetime best friend of Milkman but dedicated to the cause of the Seven Days, a secret organization of assassins who kill white people indiscriminately whenever white people kill black people in revenge, tries to kill Milkman because Guitar believes his friend betrayed him. The scene in question, however, like many of Morrison's ending scenes, is very ambiguous:

"Over here, brother man! Can you see me?" Milkman cupped his mouth with one hand and waved the other over his head.

"Here I am!"

“You want me? Huh? You want my life?”

Squatting on the edge of the other flat-headed rock...Guitar smiled over the barrel of his rifle.

“My man,” he murmured to himself. “My main man.” He put the rifle on the ground and stood up.

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes...“You want my life?”...“You need it? Here.” 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⁽¹³⁾.

Is Milkman desperate enough to let Guitar kill him because he knows Guitar, a professional assassin, does not fail to shoot him and there is no way to avoid death? Considering the fact that Guitar put his rifle down, he may have no intention to kill Milkman. Or, is Milkman deranged enough to believe himself capable of flying just as his great-grandfather Shalimar who was said to have fled back to Africa when he grew weary of American slavery? Will Milkman awake from his delusion on the moment of a startled clash on the ground? The passages are full of images which evoke hope — the bird that has flown away with Pilate's box earrings that contained items associated with her family history, the lodestar is the traditional symbol of hope in African American culture because it was the star that guided fugitive slaves to the free North. The interpretation of this scene is left to each reader. I am inclined to take this as a scene of hope; Guitar must have realized that his friend is willing to jump from the cliff rather than to make Guitar his murderer. Milkman's jump is not an act of despair, but a deliberate act of altruism. Rather than to continue to live in fear and hatred, Milkman opts for a joyful leap done in the moment of reconciliation with his best friend. The ending scene resembles the opening scene in which another man chooses to kill himself so that he needs not to keep killing white people as a member of the Seven Days. That insurance agent has realized his organization's mistake and has refused to be engulfed by hatred. I would argue that the two scenes reflect the similarity of the two men's state of mind. The Kadmos episode is thus made a twisted use. In Toni Morrison's version, the men come to a mutual understanding and they successfully avoid the brother-killing.

Another tale from Grimm brothers figures prominently in the early part of the novel. Milkman's mother was sexually deprived because of her conflict with her husband and she seeks a compensation in the form of her too long nursing of her son. When there was nobody else in the house but her son and herself, Ruth indulged in this pleasure in a humid room with only few pieces of furniture. The room is tinged green because its window is covered almost completely

by evergreen. The conspicuous items in the room are a dress form and a sewing machine, both of which strongly suggest femininity. The enclosed, primordial image of the room evokes the image of the womb. During the nursing:

She felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter — the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle⁽¹⁴⁾.

The son Milkman is depicted as a courteous lover. The fairytale imagery is used, for one thing, to suggest the essential infantilism of this mother. A grown woman who wanted to prolong her daddy's little girl stage forever. Deprived of her sexual fulfillment because of Macon's rebuff, Ruth craves some form of erotic tingling and thus has turned her house into a house of perversion. *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Cinderella*, and *Hansel and Gretel* — this novel is full of fairytale references. And the members of the Dead household are mainly engaged in this mode of thought.

After the first three novels, Morrison seems to have grown out of Western folktales and legends. Even when she makes use of Western literary traditions, such instances are rare and more indirect in later works. One such example is the passage in *Beloved* in which the novelist describes how the fugitive slave Sethe met Amy, an offspring of the white trash and Amy helped Sethe deliver a baby girl on a boat on the Mississippi River. This episode vividly evokes a similar episode in another novel, *the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That work also has a scene in which an offspring of white trash, also running from his native place, helps a fugitive slave attain his freedom.

Strangely enough, Toni Morrison rarely relies on *the Bible* in her novel world. True, there are characters like Rebecca(Reba), Pilate, Ruth, Magdalene, and First Corinthians in her works. But Morrison uses such biblical names not to evoke any biblical episodes: the blind selecting of names from the Bible is a tradition of the Dead household which the illiterate Jake had begun and the succeeding generation adopted in order to show their family solidarity. It was also the traditional way of naming in the Morrison household.

I have tried to show several of the literary traditions Morrison falls back on in her works. She uses a variety of imagery from many genres. In *The Bluest Eye*, she scatters motifs and images taken from Hollywood movies in order to show how black women's concept of beauty has been influenced in a negative way by a society which emphasizes the white superiority in the

standard of beauty. Children's songs, games, and tales predominate in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. As obvious from the title, black music features predominantly in *Jazz*. Commercial products are placed on the foreground in *Paradise* and *Tar Baby*, both of which deal with economy-permeated African American consciousness in contemporary America. And, of course, throughout the works by Morrison, black folk traditions, American, African, and Caribbean, are extensively used. This richness of her resources is one proof of the fact that Toni Morrison is an author of constant change and growth.

Notes

- (1) Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable*, trans. Yaeko Nogami (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998)414.
- (2) Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004)79.
- (3) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 330.
- (4) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 180.
- (5) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 23.
- (6) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 135.
- (7) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 219.
- (8) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 239.
- (9) Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, trans. Keiichiro Yamashita et al. (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1992)436.
- (10) Harushige Takatsu, *Girisha Roma Shinwa Jiten* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996)110-111.
- (11) Tsuneo Morishima, *Majogari* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2012)11-12.
- (12) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 201.
- (13) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 337.
- (14) Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 13-14.

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