The Journey Within

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Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* tells the story of Milkman Dead through his and his family’s eyes. Centering around race and socioeconomic class with the backdrop of a 1900’s United States, this tale follows the arduous journey taken by Milkman in search of self-identity, assuming that it is out there somewhere for him to capture. However, Morrison puts this into question and contemplates what the origin of identity is in the first place. Is self-identity something that is found, or rather is it something that is earned and willed into existence by oneself? The story ends with Milkman jumping off of Solomon’s Leap, surrendering to the air and choosing to “ride it” (Morrison 337). It is interesting, and important, that Morrison chooses to end the story in such an ambiguous way, leaving one to question whether or not Milkman ended up fulfilling his historic destiny and flying away. While this ending leaves much up for interpretation, it poses an interesting discussion topic over the fate of Milkman and how he gets to that point. What is the main cause of his situation leading to the end of his journey? And was this journey predetermined by Milkman’s history or was his self-identity found in this journey created from within? These issues of theme are hinted at through Morrison’s diction and figurative language throughout the text. Even though, at first, I saw that Milkman’s journey for self-identity was something that was entirely rooted in the past and predetermined, I have since concluded that Morrison may actually want readers to believe that identity is constructed from within and cannot be found in the outside world.
On the surface, it is easy for a reader to assume that all of the events that lead up to the cumulation of Milkman’s identity are external. Most notably, the actual Song of Solomon, which reveals to Milkman the history of his family and the significant gift of flight he may possess. However, constant introspection and his striving for independence directly contrast with this idea. In fact, this introspection is seen literally when “Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face.” (Morrison 69). As he continually looks over his features, undercutting the positive aspects that he was born with, Milkman is first starting to question his identity as part of the Dead family. Looking at the physical features of his face could be a way of the author trying to hint that Milkman is putting a focus on his genetic background, and how he, in the literal sense, is a combination of both of his parents personified. By questioning the makeup of his appearance and undercutting it, it is easy to infer that Milkman felt lost in his own bloodline at this time, and was motivated now to venture to want to be his own person. The mirror reveals to him that his outside body is a representation of the Dead bloodline, and, within himself, is his own identity, however, it cannot be seen with his own eyes. He even goes onto say that his face, in his eyes, “lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self” (Morrison 69). Coherence is an important word here, especially because he feels like he has none in this representation of the Dead family bloodline. Milkman sees the past of his family as incoherent, and lacking structure, so it makes sense to assume that he would want to escape this situation, venture out as an independent, and discover who he is on the inside.

There is a constant reflection seen throughout The Jilting of Granny Weatherall by Katherine Anne Porter, which is similar to Milkman’s introspection. In this story, the ideas of self-identification seem to be more due to external causes compared to the other two stories.
The story of Granny Weatherall shows a very direct influence of the outside world on her self-identity, like being left at the altar. One instance of debate, however, would be how “the pillow rose about her shoulders and pressed against her heart and the memory was being squeezed out of it” (Porter). While this may be interpreted as the effect that this memory, which she previously mentioned, had on her about gardening and leaving nothing unturned, it could also be a sign of her conscience choosing to forge her identity from within. By squeezing out the memories of the past, Granny is retrospectively looking at her life and shaping who her person is.

Milkman’s quest to discover his identity from within could also stem heavily from his motivation to escape his socioeconomic and racial identities, however, in some cases, these are both external forces pushing him towards his journey for identity. When Milkman and Guitar are discussing the murder of Emmett Till, a very racially charged crime, Milkman talks about how he would want to get away from Montgomery, Alabama, and, if it came to him, he would “buy a plane ticket” (Morrison 104). The location of Montgomery is a symbol of African-American togetherness and how the crime committed there both simultaneously brought the race of African-Americans closer together and farther apart. This binary of thought can be seen with Guitar and Milkman, with Guitar wanting to take pride in his heritage and fight and Milkman wanting to find himself in his own way. Montgomery could be interpreted as a force that pushes him away from identifying with his race, something with which he was born. However, Morrison, with the use of the historical crime of Emmett Till, could also be insinuating that Milkman’s identity is not at all affiliated with race or his past, by having him directly oppose Guitar’s motivations tied to the death of Emmett Till. This is especially evident when Guitar calls Milkman “not a serious person” (Morrison 104). This prompts him to list all the people in his family, calling them all “serious.” In this sense, it
seems like Milkman takes offense to the suggestion that he is at all like his family, but instead, he sees himself as his own person with his own traits and own identity. This internal thought process about his family contrasting with himself shows that his heritage is not something that affects his identity, and his identity is one that is completely separate from the Dead family bloodline. However, some could interpret that as his family being an external force on his quest for identity, because he is actively trying to become something that his family is not. Both points are equally fair to argue, as Morrison leaves one with a sense of uncertainty about how much his family directly affects his formation of self-identity. However, Morrison’s figurative language does provide some helpful insight on Milkman’s inner evolution throughout his journey.

Milkman’s inner construction of identity can most clearly be seen reflected through his constant visuals and interpretations of water. This symbolism is something that evolves with Milkman throughout the story. When Milkman references water through the lens of his childhood self, he describes the bathtub, which was something that he felt as if he “could almost swim in it” (Morrison 209). As a child, he saw the bathtub as almost limitless, so large that he could freely swim in it and splash around. The bathtub here could be Morrison trying to imply to the reader that Milkman used to be reliant on others, because, as a child, when using the bathtub, it is common to be accompanied by an adult to help bathe and wash. However, as a grown-up, he describes the bathtub as “uncomfortable, too short for him to stretch out” (Morrison 209). The dependence on family boggs Milkman down and does not allow him to fully extend himself, both literally and metaphorically. This shows his lack of dependence for his identity search, and how he felt like he needed to escape the confines of his heritage to find his true identity from within. The motif of the bathtub is repeated later on in Milkman’s quest, when he is swimming with Sweet in a river. He speaks with contempt
about a “bath! You think I’d put myself in that tight little porcelain box?” (Morrison 326). Morrison uses this description of this past location in his life to give the sensation of a cold, heartless feeling about the bath. The space is confining, he is unable to spread out and fully be free. In fact, after this, he says that he needs “the sea. The whole goddamn sea!” (Morrison 326). The sea, a seemingly endless body of water at the human perspective, could be a symbol for his aspirations, as Morrison contrasts it with the limits of the bathtub. Because of the limitlessness of the ocean, it also provides a sense of loneliness. The visual of Milkman surrounded by nothing but water could be Morrison attempting to convey a sense of isolation. However, in this case, I see it as the author painting a picture of Milkman’s independence from others. In the ocean, survival is entirely in his control. He is the one to make the choices to swim or float above the constant threat of drowning. His quest for identification is only his own, and the only person keeping himself “afloat” in his journey for identity is himself.

Another form of figurative language that is ever-present in Morrison’s work is flight, which is a strong symbol of independence, whether that be of thought or of physical location. The flight at the end of the story in which Milkman submits to the wind is the final step in his quest for identification, however not the only flight taken in the novel. When looking at the beginning of the story, Mr. Smith, who stands tall with “blue silk wings” atop Mercy Hospital, attempts to free himself from the world by flying over the water. However, his flight is unsuccessful and results in his suicide (Morrison 9). The blue, silk description of the wings provides an image of soft comfort, as if the flight will cushion Mr. Smith. Silk, something pleasant to the touch, is a binary with the result of his flight: the hard, crushing pavement. Morrison potentially uses his flight as a form of an unsuccessful attempt of the final step towards identity, because it is a mirror of the final moments with Milkman and his flight. On the other hand, the wings in the story A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A
Tale for Children by Gabriel Garcia Marquez are what represent flight for the fallen angel, and are used as the defining characteristic of this supernatural creature. Even though he is supernatural, “his huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked” are described as somewhat mortal or human (Marquez 1). To the old man, contrary to Milkman, the external forces are seemingly what shape his identity more than anything, as the external force of time has weathered his body and wings, leaving them filthy and destroyed. A buzzard, which is usually associated with scavenging, is what the man was first described as at the start of the journey. After being identified with the scrappy creature, he flies away over the water. Water in Song of Solomon, as mentioned previously, is a potential symbol of aspirations. In the case of the old man, flight is what frees him from his past and finally propels him to fulfill his personal aspirations. It could be argued that the selfhood of the angel is found from within, as he “took no part in his own act” (Marquez 2). By remaining passive in most of the events in the story, it also could be inferred that the angel shaped himself from within, rather than letting others have an effect on his person. The fact that the author omits any sort of inner monologue from the angel does put this into question, and leaves one wondering how exactly the angel sees his own self-identity. Milkman’s inner monologue, on the other hand, provides a prominent evidence to define his identity.

An important thing to note about Milkman’s identity is that the outcome is left ambiguous through the ending of the novel. Morrison intentionally leaves the reader to decide what the fate of Milkman is, making one question if his creation of his own identity was successful or even justified. Despite this, due to the actions taken by Milkman in the end, it is clear that the author wants readers to know that Milkman’s identity is something that the character fully believed in and committed to. Jumping into Solomon’s Leap is his and only his decision. It is the final one he makes and is the time in which he exerts his identity to the
outside world, freeing himself from the conventional chains of his past, and accepting who he is: his own person formed from within.
