

“When you know your name, you should hang on to it”: The Power of Names in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Names and the act of naming are an important part of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. Characters’ names are filled with meaning and are a crucial part of the characters’ personal and collective identity. The plot of the novel, spanning several decades, is largely told through flashbacks thus providing the story of many generations of the Dead family. This allows for the understanding of how names influence several generations of the same family as they can be representative of tradition and heritage but also trauma. This paper is divided in two parts: first, the origin of some names will be detailed with an explanation of its symbolism; then I will delve into the power that each name has within the plot and the narrative of the novel.

Keywords: American Literature; Toni Morrison; African American Traditions; Identity; Names

Resumo

Os nomes e o ato de nomear são uma parte importante do romance *Song of Solomon*, de Toni Morrison. Os nomes das personagens estão repletos de significado e são uma parte crucial da identidade pessoal e coletiva de cada personagem. O enredo do romance, que abrange várias décadas, é em grande parte contado através de flashbacks, fornecendo assim a história de muitas gerações da família Dead. Isto permite a compreensão de como os nomes influenciam várias gerações da mesma família, representando tradição e património, mas também trauma. Este artigo surge dividido em duas partes: primeiro detalha-se a origem de uma seleção de nomes, explicando o simbolismo que cada um contém e, em seguida, analisa-se o poder que os nomes das personagens detêm sobre o enredo e a narrativa do romance.

Palavras-chave: Literatura americana; Toni Morrison; Tradições Afro-Americanas; Identidade; Nomes

Introduction

“I slip my mother’s name on like a glove
and wonder if I will become like her
absolutely.
Years number the times I have worn her pain
as a child, as a teenager, as a woman—my
second skin—
or screamed her screams
as she sat, silver head bowed silent
hedging the storm.

. . .

I slip my mother’s name on
with wonder
and become like her
absolutely.”

-Irma Pearl McClaurin, *The Power Of Names*
in *Pearl’s Song* (1988)

“When you know your name, you should hang
on to it, for unless it is noted down and
remembered, it will die when you do.”

-Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977)

In the epilogue to her novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison writes that “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names”, a reference to the theme of heritage and history that carries through the novel, drawing attention to another important motif: the allegory of names. Indeed, characters in Morrison’s work often have unusual names that are at first glance jarring to the readers. However, as the plot progresses, the names start to make sense and in fact possess a deep meaning and weight to the characters and the story. Furthermore, through the characters’ storytelling and flashbacks, the reader is able to learn about several generations of the same family and their respective names, thus recognising their origin and power.

Names are usually given to new-borns by their parents and, although many aspects of ourselves can be used as identification - gender, race, nationality - our names become the most basic form of identification. Names indicate our connection to our families, our lineage, our tradition. Names are an essential part of our identity and often carry ties to a person’s culture and family, giving them a sense belonging.

In a 2015 interview, journalist Teri Gross asked Morrison about the importance of names in her fiction. Morrison responded as follows:

Well, there's a whole history, I think, in naming. In the beginning of black people being in this country, they lost their names, and they were given names by their masters. . . . You know, it's a very personal identification, trying to move away maybe from the history of having no name and then personalizing it on the one hand, to give you a name that's embarrassing in order to make you confront it, deal with it, now. And then later on, more charming names, moving away from humiliating names like Satchmo. (Gross, Morrison)

Characters in Morrison's fiction often present unusual names that easily distinguish them within their community. As Morrison mentions, names function as a basic form of identification and often have connection to culture and history. In her fiction, characters' names are reflective of their past, their family's history and of who they are. Milkman, Pilate, Macon Dead, all have past family stories associated with their names.

In his paper "Names, Identity, and Self", Kenneth L. Dion writes of the "notion that close connection exists between an individual's name and her/his personal identity and sense of self" (245), by trying to present direct evidence that relate names to personal identity:

Since the distinctiveness of names can be easily indexed in terms of their frequency relative to various reference groups, names are an obviously pertinent and potentially interesting dimension for advocates of the distinctiveness theory of self-perception. . . . [which] implies that our names are salient to ourselves and to others, especially when they are relatively infrequent and therefore distinctive in the context of groups of which we are members. (248-9)

Likewise, characters in Morrison's novels often have unusual and distinctive names. In *Song of Solomon*, it is evident that the names are not just peculiar to the reader. The other characters in the novel are also taken aback with the characters' names making them stand out in their community. But as the reader is given the details of these characters' lives, it becomes clear that the unusual names are tied to important moments in their lives.

I. The origin and symbolism of names: Milkman, Pilate and Macon Dead

The main character of the novel is named Macon Dead, just like his father and grandfather, but known in his community as Milkman. Both names, as is explored in the novel, are connected to Milkman's life and ancestry. Milkman's real name, Macon Dead, was passed on from his father but, as made clear by his father in Chapter 2, it was not always a family name. Macon Dead (the second) explains to his son (Macon Dead, the third) how his father, Milkman's grandfather (the first Macon Dead), ended up with that name.

In 1869, a young man, and recently freed slave, named Jake (which Milkman, and the reader, find out in the last chapters of the novel, is Macon Dead's real name) went to register himself with the Freedmen's Bureau. As Macon explains: "When freedom came. All the colored people in the state had to register with the Freedmen's Bureau" (Morrison 66). The men registering Jake was inebriated and wrote down his information in the wrong spaces, *Macon* actually being the city where he was born and *Dead*, his father's situation. Since Jake was illiterate, he was unaware of the mistake and was then registered as Macon Dead, only realising the mistake when he meets his future wife Sing who can read and who finally reads him his name.

Despite the inaccurate registration, Macon embraces the name, choosing to pass on this name to his first-born male, adopting the name and creating a family tradition. Macon tells Milkman that his father kept the name because his wife Sing, Macon's mother, liked it. She said that the name "was new and would wipe out the past" (Morrison 66). However, as the poem "The Power of Names", by Irma Pearl McClaurin, touches upon, names can carry a burden (12-3). By passing on a rather strange name to his son, who later passes on to his son, Macon Dead hands to a son the burden of such a name, which also carried the weight of his story and the reality of the oppression that African Americans faced even after the end of slavery. Milkman even asks his father: "He didn't have to keep the name, did he? He could have used his real name, couldn't he?" (Morrison 66). Since he adopted the name Macon Dead and abandoned the name Jake, his original name is unknown not only to the reader, but also to his family throughout most of the novel.

A few years after Macon Dead II is born, Sing dies giving birth to a baby girl. Illiterate and bereaved with the death of his wife, Macon chooses the name for his daughter by looking at the Bible, picking a name by the way the letters looked on the paper. Indeed, Macon "thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them

a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees” (Morrison 22), landing on the name Pilate.

In the Bible, Pilate is a Roman governor who presided at the trial of Jesus and gave the order for his crucifixion. The midwives who helped deliver Pilate were horrified with the choice of name, but Macon was determined to give his daughter the name Pilate:

“Pilate. You wrote down Pilate.”

“Like a riverboat pilot?”

“No. Not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate. You can’t get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that.” . . .

“. . . Baby name Pilate.”

“Jesus, have mercy.” (Morrison 22)

The name, or its connotation, do not fit the character as Pilate is a caring and thoughtful person who, throughout the novel, provides comfort and guidance to the different characters. Nevertheless, the name can also be seen as a homonym for “pilot”, which would seem more fitting for the character. As an influence for Milkman, she guides, or “pilots”, his journey through the south, where he follows his aunt’s “tracks” (Morrison 322). Furthermore, an important theme in the novel is the theme of flight. At the end of the novel, Milkman says of his aunt: “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (Morrison 419). Interestingly, there are other allusions to flight in characters’ names. Pilate and Macon’s family on their maternal side are all named Byrd - Sing Byrd, Heddy Byrd, Crowell Byrd and Susan Byrd. Susan Byrd tells Milkman: “Sing’s name was Singing Bird. And my father’s name was Crow at first. Later he changed it to Crowell Byrd” (Morrison 401).

In the novel, the act of naming a child is sacred. Macon, besides starting the tradition of naming his son after himself, also named his daughter by choosing a name from the bible. Years later, when his children, Macon and Pilate, have a family of their own, they continue the tradition of naming the oldest male Macon Dead and the females of the family after biblical figures. “[Macon] had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male. And abided by whatever the finger pointed to, for he knew every configuration of the naming of his sister” (Morrison 22). By continuing the tradition, Macon and Pilate are honouring their father but they also pass on the burden of unusual names to their children. Not only do they have *Dead* as their last name, they also all have names that are out of the ordinary and therefore stand out in their community.

Pilate's daughter Reba (short for Rebecca) is likely after Rebecca, the wife of Isaac and the mother of Esau and Jacob. Reba names her daughter Hagar, also the name of a biblical woman. There are some similarities between biblical Hagar and the Hagar in the novel. In the Bible, Hagar was an Egyptian slave of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Hagar became Abraham's concubine, giving birth to his son Ismael. After the birth of Ismael, tensions arose between Sarah and Hagar and so Hagar and her son were thrown out. This way, Hagar becomes a symbol of the oppressed and the women abused by those with more power:

Hagar has long represented the plight of a foreigner, a slave, and a sexually abused woman. She has been the focal point for oppressed peoples. Her story resonates with sexual abuse survivors, the poor and vulnerable, and in the past half century with African American women. While race is not a meaningful term for the biblical period, Hagar's identity as an Egyptian woman has led some interpreters to see Hagar as African and dark-skinned. Some readers see in the relationship between Sarai and Hagar the story of the white female oppressor and the black slave woman. (Frymer-Kensky)

Just as Hagar in the bible was used and then discarded, Hagar in the novel was used by Macon (the third) and then abandoned when he felt he did not need her anymore. Framing her story and her characters with references to the Bible, the author allows for a more profound interpretation and understanding of the names chosen for the characters.

Just like Reba and Hagar, Macon's daughters are also named after Biblical women. First Corinthians is likely named after the First Epistle to the Corinthians, an epistle addressed by St. Paul the Apostle to the Christian community. Magdalene called Lena is named after Mary Magdalene, a woman who travelled with Jesus as one of his followers and was a witness to his crucifixion and resurrection.

If the story of the third Macon Dead's birth name stems from his father, the story of his nickname - Milkman - can be traced to his relationship with his mother, Ruth. Milkman's nickname originates from an incident when Freddie, one of Macon's employees, witnesses Ruth breastfeeding her son already as a grown child. Freddie coins the nickname Milkman and throughout the novel, only his family calls him Macon. Milkman's nickname derives from his mother's emotional problems and her inappropriate relationship with her son. Macon, unaware of the origin of the nickname, notes that: "He knew that wherever the name came from, it had something to do with his wife and was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her,

coated with disgust” (Morrison 19). Still, it is possibly true that Ruth feels more shame when hearing the name than her son, especially since he was not always aware of the origin of the name. When Milkman does recall the origin of his name, in Chapter III, he is horrified when he finally remembers what his mother used to make him do.

Thinking of his family’s names, their abnormality and the peculiarity of their origin, Macon believes that, surely,

he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn’t have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army. (Morrison 21)

Still, by keeping his name, Macon honours his father. Having witnessed his father lose everything he had worked hard for; he becomes relentless in his quest to become a successful businessman that black men fear and revere and white men respect. Macon believes that the way to pay tribute to his father is to accumulate what was taken from him (property). And so, there is at least one Macon Dead that became the proprietor of vast amounts of land and the owner of a vast amount of money.

On the other hand, Pilate honours her father by extending the love and affection that was given to her by her father and brother to her own family. Pilate embraces her name and the individuality of their family name and holds on to the piece of paper where her father wrote down her name, because it is a connection to someone she loved and lost. She understands the importance of heritage and values her family above all.

II. The Power of Names

By accidentally being given a new name, Macon Dead I was able to start anew and create his own family tradition, leaving behind a name that connected him to a past of slavery. Similarly, many enslaved people “adopted their own last names before emancipation in order to evade capture or to establish their own family connections independent of their enslavers” (Craven). With his new name and married to Sing, he acquires land and hopes to start a new family and a prosperous harvest and business. For Macon a new name was a fresh start and an escape from his past as a slave and he was not alone in his quest for a new identity:

[Herbert Gutman, writer of *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925*] denies that slavery completely shattered the “Negro” family, arguing instead that despite the oppressive nature of slavery and discrimination, enslaved and freed Africans sought ways to preserve and establish a culture among themselves; and one of the ways in which they did so, was through naming. . . . It is this resiliency that enabled the enslaved population to survive and create a life and culture of their own, despite the oppressive and restrictive conditions prescribed for them under slavery. (Fitzpatrick 7)

In *Song of Solomon*, names hold power and importance and have a key role in the concluding chapters. Once the significance and the origin of the names are understood, the readers are able to understand the control and influence names hold over the characters’ lives and, ultimately, how they contribute to the ending of the novel. Names hold the power of history and heritage and allow for the possibility of discovery. Names function as the record of the past and the lack of knowledge of these names leads to misunderstandings throughout the novel and hinder Milkman’s journey in the south. As Milkman pieces together the truth about his family, he finally understands the power of history and the importance of knowing someone’s name.

When Milkman first arrives in the south looking for Pilate’s gold, he is helped by men and women who knew his father and grandfather. They help Milkman on his quest upon learning of his kinship to the great Macon Dead. Discovering that for the people of Danville, the name Macon Dead was regarded with awe and admiration, Milkman is less ashamed of his name, as it connects him to his grandfather, Macon Dead Senior, “the farmer they wanted to be” (Morrison 293), a man who had nothing and who built himself a prosperous business, a man Milkman is proud to be related to.

All throughout his life, Milkman had been embarrassed of his name and had never found any comfort in the history of the family name. Still, visiting the town where his father grew up and interacting with the men and women who knew his family, Milkman feels a sense of pride. By mentioning Macon Dead Senior, Macon Dead and Pilate, Milkman receives a warm welcome. He is treated kindly by Reverend Cooper, who provides him with the information he wants and tells stories of his grandfather and Macon and Pilate, and he meets Circe who embraces him seeing his resemblance to his father. The men in the town “remembered both Macon Deads as extraordinary men” (Morrison 292) and for the first time in the novel, thinking about his family, Milkman “grew fierce with pride” (Morrison 294). These moments in the novel mark a change in Milkman. Discovering and connecting with the town where his

father grew up, where his grandfather was a hero and where his father was once happy, Milkman feels a new affection for his family:

Milkman's search for identity does involve racial conflict, social transitions, and community values. However, on the most basic level, his search for identity is intertwined with family and domestic values. . . . [H]e begins his journey towards a self knowledge that will be earned through an understanding of family, relationships and his heritage. (Cooper 145-6)

What Milkman finds in the south is not the gold that he was so desperately looking for but a closer connection with his family and his ancestors. Simply by mentioning the names of his relatives he is welcomed and taken care of by strangers. Not even in his hometown was he treated with such kindness and helpfulness. "In Danville, he had felt like a hero, for he had heard marvelous stories about his family, and he had survived his solo adventure" (Cooper 153). Milkman feels connected to people he had never met before and to a place he had never visited previously:

He was curious about these people. He didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody. . . . But there was something he felt now—here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville—that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house. (Morrison 365)

Deciding to follow Pilate's "tracks" (Morrison 322) he leaves behind his materialistic, greedy self and begins his spiritual journey, following Pilate physically but also spiritually. In Shalimar, Milkman meets Susan Byrd, a woman "who looked to be about his mother's age" (Morrison 358). Milkman learns from her stories that they are likely related through Milkman's grandmother's side. Miss Byrd's father was the brother of Milkman's grandmother Sing. Susan's grandmother Heddy Byrd is Milkman's great-grandmother. Curious about Milkman's inquiries, she asks him: "It's important to you, is it, to find your people?"; to which Milkman replies: "No. Not really. I was just passing through, and it was just—just an idea. It's not important" (Morrison 364). But later Milkman proclaims: "It wasn't true what he'd said to Susan Byrd: that it wasn't important to find his people. Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing" (Morrison 365).

The fact that Milkman is unaware of his ancestors' real names complicates his search. Pilate did not even know her mother's name or that the song that she sings is

about her family. As soon as Milkman starts discovering his family's real names and the information that was unknown to his family, he can start to shape the real story of his family. From speaking to Circe, he discovers that his grandfather's name was Jake and, from speaking to Susan Byrd, he discovers that his grandmother's name is Singing Byrd. This information is key as it connects to something Pilate had told Milkman. In Pilate's visions of her father, he tells her "Sing", which she takes as an instruction to continue to sing. In fact, he was calling for his wife:

And why did the ghost tell Pilate to sing? Milkman chuckled to himself. That wasn't what he was telling her at all; maybe the ghost was just repeating his wife's name, Sing, and Pilate didn't know it because she never knew her mother's name. After she died Macon Dead wouldn't let anybody say it aloud. That was funny. He wouldn't speak it after she died, and after he died that's all he ever said—her name. (Morrison 366)

Milkman's ultimate triumph occurs when he listens to a group of children in Shalimar sing a familiar song; "his spirit is renewed" (Cooper 154-5) when he realises the song is about his own family:

*Jake the only son of Solomon . . .
Whirled about and touched the sun . . .
Left that baby in a white man's house . . .
Heddy took him to a red man's house . . .
Black lady fell down on the ground . . .
Threw her body all around . . .
Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!
O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me
Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (Morrison 378)*

Piecing together the information he has learned from his father, Pilate, Reverend Cooper, Circe and Susan Byrd, Milkman is able to understand that the song the children sing in Shalimar, the song that Pilate had been singing, was "a story about his

own people!” (Morrison 379). The song is about Solomon’s flight to Africa, leaving his wife and children behind. Jake is his grandfather, Solomon his great-grandfather, Ryna his great-grandmother, and her twenty-one children:

When Pilate sings the old blues song “Sugarman, Don’t Leave Me Here,” she sings with an understanding of loss and sorrow, separation and love. No matter where she has travelled or where she sets up her household, Pilate carries the family’s heritage with her. She keeps the name her father gave her in a brass earring and the story of her family in her heart. (Cooper 147)

Milkman searches for his family’s history and for any more potential relatives. The young man who was so desperate to find gold and free himself from his family understands the importance of storytelling, developing an enthusiasm for the value of family.

Conclusion

The names of Toni Morrison’s protagonists, perhaps jarring to its readers, allow for the creation of memorable characters. From the biblical connections to a morbid last name, to an unfortunate nickname, names in the novel are powerful within themselves. By understanding the significance of names, we are able to understand the influence that names have on the characters that hold them as well. All in all, names have the power to oppress but also to liberate and most importantly, names hold history, tell stories, and connect us to our families. Remembering the names, passing them on to the following generations and sharing the stories of a family enable continuous remembering of our loved ones even after they are gone.

In the final chapter of *Song of Solomon*, after making his discoveries about his ancestors, Milkman reflects on what he has learnt and thinks about the power of names: how names already forgotten represented men and women who were also forgotten; how names recorded incorrectly, like his grandfather’s, hid the real names of people and places; how a forgotten or mistaken name meant erasing the history and the past of a culture. In fact, the biggest obstacle to Milkman’s quest where the unknown and forgotten names of his relatives. Milkman realised how important it was to remember “[n]ames that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (Morrison 410).

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