

The Fiction of Toni Morrison

*Reading and Writing on Race, Culture,
and Identity*

EDITED BY

JAMI L. CARLACIO
Cornell University

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Teaching Song of Solomon: Exploring the LIST Paradigm

DURTHY A. WASHINGTON
USAF Academy

Over the past five years, I have taught *Song of Solomon* on several occasions as part of a sophomore English course titled Literature and Intermediate Composition. Consequently, I have explored various approaches to the novel: as *bildungsroman*, as quest narrative, as historical fiction, as an exploration of myth, music, and memory, and so on. However, the approach I have found most effective in terms of engaging student interest and eliciting creative, insightful papers is the LIST Paradigm, a culturally responsive framework for teaching multicultural texts I developed while searching for an innovative approach to teaching literature.

By incorporating race, culture, and ethnicity into the conventional study of literature, the LIST Paradigm offers an approach to critical reading that combines aspects of both *literary analysis* (exploring the elements of fiction, such as plot, setting, and character) and *literary criticism* (analyzing works from various perspectives, such as historical, psychological, and archetypal). Consequently, it encourages students to explore unique elements of multicultural literature often dismissed or discredited by “mainstream” scholars and critics.

The LIST Paradigm helps students access a text via four “keys to culture”—language, identity, space, and time—and prompts them to ask four significant questions designed to encourage criti-

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cal reading from multiple perspectives: (1) “How does the author contextualize linguistic signs and symbols?” (2) “Who are these people and what do they want?” (3) “How do characters navigate the text’s physical, psychological, and political landscapes?” and (4) “How does the author manipulate time?” Consequently, we use these four questions to guide our reading of *Song of Solomon*.

Language: “How does the author contextualize linguistic signs and signals?”

According to Morrison, “The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction [. . .] is its language—its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language” (“Un-speakable” 16). Since *Song of Solomon* celebrates oral tradition by weaving references and allusions to songs and stories—including myths, folktales, and fairy tales—throughout the narrative, we begin with an overview of these two areas.

To introduce the language of music and to illuminate the Biblical themes and stories that drive *Song of Solomon*, we read Psalm 137, a “song of praise” that ends with the poet’s poignant cry, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps. 137.4). We compare this “song” to Countee Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel,” in which the persona, after acknowledging God’s infinite wisdom, laments, “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing / *To make a poet black, and bid him sing!*” (13–14; emphasis added). To illustrate the power of having one’s own song and singing it even in the face of adversity and despair, my classes (comprising primarily conservative, middle-class white males), have also been known to sing the Black National Anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson. Using these supplementary texts as a springboard to *Song of Solomon*, we are prepared to explore the meaning of Solomon’s song and the image of Pilate as “the singing woman” who has the melody—which she hums as Mr. Smith embarks on his fatal “flight” from the roof of No Mercy Hospital—but needs Milkman to supply the lyrics. These examples generally provide an ideal segue to the

motif of music—with an emphasis on the blues—that resonates throughout the novel. In addition to numerous references and allusions to music and singing, these include names (Guitar Bains, Singing Bird, Crowell Byrd); repeated references to musical instruments (drums, trumpets, pianos) and musical terms (scales, notes); references to blues musicians (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Fats Waller, B. B. King); references to sounds (the humming Weimaraners, the screaming hounds, the shouting men); references to radios, records, and jukeboxes; and wordplay (such as *grooves* and *jam*).

To continue our discussion of songs and Biblical themes, we read the Old Testament story the Song of Solomon (Song of Songs). We note that in the Bible, Solomon’s song is essentially a passionate dialogue between two lovers (King Solomon and a Shulamite woman believed to be the Queen of Sheba), but in Morrison’s novel the song is essentially Ryna’s plea to her husband Solomon/Shalimar/Sugarman not to abandon her. It becomes Solomon’s song only after Solomon’s descendants, seeking to reconstruct their history through the stories of their ancestors, refer to it as such. Consequently, by retaining the *form* of the song but radically changing its *content*, Morrison not only demonstrates “the transforming power of language,” but she also highlights the sensuous and ambiguous language of this Biblical story, which—not unlike her novel—is often considered “problematic.”

To open our discussion of the power of myth, we note that the myths of oppressed people are often trivialized and reduced to simple folktales or superstitions by dominant cultures with different values. To illustrate this concept, we discuss Morrison’s allusions to both classic Greco-Roman myths (Daedalus and Icarus, Jason and the Argonauts) and Biblical myths (the return of the prodigal son, the raising of Lazarus). Consequently, students are compelled to consider that, depending on one’s perspective, the Bible can be viewed as either a divinely inspired spiritual and historical text, or as a collection of myths that attempt to explain the mystery of creation.

Beginning with this basic definition of myth as “creation story,” we discuss the powerful myth that inspired *Song of Solomon*: the Myth of the Flying African (often referred to as a Yorùbá “folktale”), which tells the story of enslaved Africans

who, with the help of a witch doctor (or “conjure man”) escape the brutalities of slavery by flying back to Africa. This background material not only prompts students to consider myths as conduits for the transmission of cultural values and to question why some myths—such as the Hamitic myth (Gen. 9.20–29) traditionally used to justify the enslavement and dehumanization of blacks—have become ingrained in U.S. culture; it also prepares them to explore some of the *cultural* myths that inform *Song of Solomon*, such as the Myth of the American Dream, the Myth of White Supremacy, the Myth of Education and Empowerment, and the Myth of Romantic Love. Since Morrison’s novel includes numerous references and allusions to fairy tales, we also discuss fairy tales as cultural “touchstones.” To illuminate this concept, I introduce students to Morrison’s Nobel lecture, in which she embarks on a discourse on living versus dead language with the familiar phrase, “Once upon a time” (9).

To further emphasize the power and poetry of Morrison’s language, we sometimes do dramatic readings of selected “scenes.” I also assign short writings in which students respond to key passages. One that inevitably generates provocative papers is Guitar’s advice to Milkman: “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (*Song* 179).

Identity: “Who are these people and what do they want?”

In a 1992 interview, Morrison explained that “The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write” (qtd. in Micucci 278). I generally use Morrison’s statement to introduce the search for identity as a key theme in *Song of Solomon*, noting that the novel focuses on a sprawling cast of characters not only struggling to establish their *individual identities* but also striving to come to terms with their *dual identities* as both black and American, and their *group identities* as members of various communities and organizations.

To highlight the significance of names as an integral part of identity formation and identity politics, we discuss how various characters got their names and why Milkman, embarrassed and stigmatized by his name, longs for “some ancestor [. . .] who had

a name that was real. [. . .] A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name” (*Song* 17–18). We note that names are especially important in the novel’s chaotic opening scene, in which characters remain unnamed—underscoring their role as members of an unnamed Michigan community—until the narrator identifies them in terms of their role within the community: “The dead doctor’s daughter,” “the gold-toothed man,” “the cat-eyed boy,” and so on. We also note that the loss of one’s name—and, by extension, one’s identity—is a devastating legacy of slavery. As Morrison points out, “If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar” (qtd. in LeClair 126).

Finally, we note that the random ways characters receive their names reflect the way names—Negro, colored, minority—have been arbitrarily imposed on black Americans. Conversely, we note that once Milkman discovers his heritage—which includes the origin of his name and the words to Solomon’s Song—he takes pride in his given name, which links him to his “people.”

To analyze how the roles and relationships of various characters affect their status as members of various racial, cultural, and economic groups—and to investigate W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “masking” (or “double-consciousness”) as a distinctive characteristic of black people in the white United States—we also explore the motives that prompt several characters to “mask” their identities. Examples include Milkman, who adopts an affected “cock walk” to hide his “defect”; Pilate, who humiliates herself by performing a degrading “Aunt Jemima” act to protect Guitar and Milkman; and First Corinthians, who describes herself as an “amanuensis” to hide the fact that she is working as a maid. (An excellent introduction to this topic is Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask.”)

To further explore the concept of double consciousness, we note that throughout the text, Morrison examines the complex nature of identity, emphasizing that identity encompasses both *mutable characteristics* (such as education, occupation, residence, and social/political/religious affiliations) and *immutable characteristics* (such as race, gender, age, and ethnicity). Within that

framework, she also examines the complex issues unique to African American identity, such as color consciousness among black people and the dilemma of those who choose to “pass” for white in a desperate attempt to escape prejudice and racism. Moreover, Morrison consistently stresses that race is a socially constructed concept and that, biologically, we are all members of the human race. Consequently, she presents us with characters (such as Milkman and Guitar) who could be described as representing seemingly opposite sides of the black male stereotype: the affluent, upper-class black eager to distance himself from his racial heritage in order to reap the benefits of white society (also known as “the sellout”), and the black militant, eager to assert his black identity through violence.

Morrison also underscores each character’s dual identity with a voice that echoes the voice of his double. Among the most striking examples of this duality are the numerous allusions to Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., two prominent human rights activists generally perceived as polar opposites because of their radically different views on how best to achieve equal rights for black Americans. Since Malcolm X was generally viewed as extremist whereas Dr. King enjoyed the reputation of the pacifist dedicated to nonviolence, students are often surprised to discover that in Chapter 6, during the heated debate between Milkman and Guitar concerning the Seven Days (a black vigilante group that has decided to take the law into its own hands by avenging the murders of blacks with the random killing of whites), Guitar, generally voicing the philosophy of Malcolm X, emerges as the “extremist”; however, it was Dr. King (in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail”) who wrote, “The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists will we be” (92). Therefore, the inclination to identify Milkman with Dr. King and Guitar with Malcolm X is complicated by the irony that much of Guitar’s rhetoric echoes the writings of Dr. King.

In short, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses her fictional world to illustrate a critical point she makes explicitly in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*: “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (47).

Space: “How do characters navigate the text’s physical, psychological, and political landscapes?”

To analyze the concept of space, we examine the symbolic significance of the physical and psychological spaces in *Song of Solomon*. For example, to explore the significance of *physical space*, we discuss the novel’s Midwest setting which, according to Morrison, “offers an escape from stereotyped black settings [since] [i]t is neither plantation nor ghetto” (Tate 158). We note that as Milkman sets out on a quest for his “inheritance,” the setting shifts from the industrial North to the rural South, which reverses the traditional “freedom trail” of enslaved Africans depicted in the slave narratives. We also note references to *public spaces* (such as bars and beauty salons, drug stores and department stores, and segregated graveyards and communities) and *private spaces* (such as Pilate’s cottage, Circe’s mansion, Hunter’s Cave, Lincoln’s Heaven, and the Dead family’s mansion, depicted as “a prison,” “a castle,” and “a lighthouse”).

To explore the concept of *psychological space*, we discuss some of the characters’ dreams and visions, which help them unravel the mysteries surrounding their lives. We also consider the movement of characters through psychological space, such as First Corinthians’ journey to self-awareness and Hagar’s journey to self-destruction. And we note that the novel’s *cultural landscape*—which ranges from Accra, Ghana (known for its notorious role in the Atlantic slave trade) to the fictional town of Shalimar, Virginia—traces the historic journey of enslaved Africans and underscores the notion that members of racial and ethnic groups share a common cultural history, regardless of their physical or geographic location.

Time: “How does the author manipulate time?”

To explore the concept of time, we note that although the action of the novel spans approximately thirty-two years, the narration spans over a hundred years, documenting the Dead family’s history over three generations. Thus it encompasses two major historical eras: Emancipation and Reconstruction (1865 to 1877)

and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (1955 to 1970s). We also note that the novel begins in 1931 and ends around 1963. Thus it also encompasses two major literary movements: the Harlem Renaissance (1919 to 1940) and the Black Arts/Black Power Movement (1960 to 1970).

In addition to marking the births of Milkman and Toni Morrison (and the death of Robert Smith), 1931 marks the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of the "New Negro," an articulate, sophisticated "bourgeois" class of intellectual blacks immersed in cultural and aesthetic pursuits, convinced that their literary and artistic achievements would elevate their social and political status in American society. But, as Langston Hughes observed, "The ordinary Negroes [such as Macon Dead] hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any" (228).

Similarly, 1963, which marks the deaths of Pilate and Hagar, also marks a milestone in black history: "The 100th year of black emancipation and the first year of the Black Revolution" (Bennett 386). Within this context, we discuss Morrison's manipulation of time via flashback and foreshadowing coupled with the dreams, visions, stories, and memories of various characters, and underscored by a plethora of historical allusions, which offer a panoramic view of history from a black perspective.

Finally, we note that throughout the novel Morrison explores time from a cultural perspective: She challenges the conventional Eurocentric concept of history as a progressive series of "significant events" that document the accomplishments of "heroes," and compels us to consider the Afrocentric perspective on history as a series of individual and collective stories that record the accomplishments of everyday people.

Essay Prompts

Students in this class are required to write several short (2- to 3-page) papers. As noted above, they may choose to explore a key passage from the text or to respond to questions such as the following:

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Language: Note the various types of language used in *Song of Solomon* (the language of domination and subjugation, the language of humor, the language of music, sermonic language, black vernacular speech, the language of proverbs and folk sayings, the language of consumerism, and so on). Select one type and explore how Morrison uses this type of language to advance one of the novel's key themes.

Identity: The importance of names is a prevalent theme in *Song of Solomon*. In a short (2- to 3-page) essay, explore the significance of one of the characters' names (e.g., Milkman, Pilate, Guitar, Macon Dead, Empire State, Hospital Tommy). If a character has more than one name, consider the impact of this "dual identity" on his or her self-image as well as on his or her public image/identity.

Space: Morrison draws numerous comparisons between black and white communities and between the traditional and contemporary lifestyles and values of black communities. How does she set up comparisons between Southside (the black community) and Fairfield (the white community)? Between Southside and Honoré? Between Milkman's nameless hometown in Michigan and the mythical town of Shalimar, Virginia?

Time: *Song of Solomon* includes numerous references or allusions to historical events, institutions, people, and documents: black pilots (the Tuskegee Airmen); Father Divine; Malcolm X; Charles Drew ("the Blood Bank"); Robert Smalls ("A riverboat pilot?"); the Freedmen's Bureau; the Emancipation Proclamation; the Birmingham church bombing; the murder of Emmett Till; and so on. Select one of these references or allusions, trace its origins, and explore it further. (Is it recorded in your history textbook? If so, how is it presented? If not, why do you think it was excluded? Why is it significant to U.S. history? To world history?)

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