Song Of Solomon as A Bildungsroman

Toni Morrison, two Nobel peace prize award winner's 1977 novel, Song of Solomon, demonstrates bitter themes experienced in American life during the 20th century, such as: reliving and revisiting your roots, nourishment, empowerment, subverting white power structure and the motivation to overcome this. In particular, Song of Solomon is a novel of migration, an ascent novel, preserving the roots of knowledge, and adapting the roots into contemporary beliefs, so that they are fused into modernity. A sense of adaptation and escapism are juxtaposed, illustrating the idea of travelling northward, to symbolise freedom but also travelling southward, to regain contact with ancestral forces. The prime conflict in this novel is regarding a black man, Macon 'Milkman' Dead III, and his journey of transforming from an ego-centric and isolated personality to an unwitting search for identity and an understanding of his African American roots. His devotion to greed and the linear notion of time, are moulded by the legacy that he obtains from his father, Macon Dead. Nevertheless, during a journey to his ancestral home, learns to connect with his roots and appreciates the lessons he has experienced. This essay will entail: the importance of pastoral values, the concept and effect of travelling between Shalimar and Mercy and the lesson and experiences gained, through the character of Milkman and his journey.

The protagonist obtains the nickname 'Milkman' when the janitor, Freddie, realises that Milkman's mother, Ruth, breastfed him much longer than one commends. "A milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. Lookout, women's. Here he comes. Huh!". Morrison states the measure of Ruth's breastfeeding as "two secret indulgences… 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" (13). The two significant connotations presented in this passage are the fact that breastfeeding is a female-oriented act, connecting a mother and child, reimbursing the idea of Milkman's need for females in his life, despite the misogynistic and male chauvinistic traits he displays; alternatively, it could be interpreted as a connection to a Southern, lineal past. "We find that her novel is cohesive, following the clear pattern of birth and youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration common to mythic heroes" (A. Leslie Harris, 70) This foreshadows the protagonist's discovery of his roots, the beginning, that is linked with contemporary and embarking his journey of self-achievement. It all began with a woman; his mother, who was his source to live. It dramatizes Morrison's use of a community concept through Freddie the janitor, and the prolonging of breastfeeding, a community element that she vigorously endorses.

The inescapable irony in the novel is to establish the oral primary. The political irony is transcribed between the protagonist, Milkman and his father, Macon Dead II. Materialism, individualism and account books are what interest Milkman's father; they are his touchdown for success. Macon says to his son "boy you got better things to do… I'm going to teach you how" (56). The regard with contempt upon Pilate is highlighted through Morrison's choice of lexis, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one". We are aware that Pilate is unable to read and has no school knowledge, but this signifies the belittling and irrelevancy Macon associates with Pilate's knowledge. The disparage Macon holds upon Pilate is passed on, invisibly and inevitably, upon Milkman. He emulates his father and he is taught to ignore the wisdom of women, blinding and deafening him from Pilate's

advice. This can be seen as an excuse for Milkman’s lack of moral rectitude and his objectivity from family.

At one point Milkman is reduced to a state of worthlessness, as none of his materialistic belongings has any significance nor can they help him in this situation. He experiences a sense of isolation and deviation from society, providing him with an educative lesson as he develops feelings of sympathy and understanding of the human basis. Morrison describes it as “finding one’s roots”. “Clearly, for Morrison, black female psychic health cannot be achieved without the cooperative participation of both females and males in its creation and nurturance. Indeed, male participation helps to provide the novice female with a sense of 'balance' between 'the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male' without which gendered and tribal health is, for Morrison, quite unlikely” (Michael Awkward, 489). Milkman, towards the end, learns valuable lessons of pastoral- his understanding and commitment to others, self-acceptance and connection to Shalimar, the natural world. Awkward’s statement illustrates the importance of an equalised equilibrium, between both males and females. From his venture on his journey, the lessons and experiences, he adapts and acquires the status of respecting women, as well as having them in your life.

Pilate efforts to teach Macon and Milkman that taking a dead man’s gold is wrong, fails, as he is celebrating the goal of “life, safety, and luxury” (170) consequential from the gold. By a tendency to do nothing and remain unchanged, he analyses his father’s outlook on women, retaining them in the back of his head, yet they belong at the front and core, as they are his source of life. Milkman acts upon his sister advice, as she tries to stimulate his hidden feelings through her attack on his disregard for his sisters’ independent input for his health and happiness. Thus, Milkman leaves town to obtain the gold he believes is his inheritance, as a character sculpted by the effects of his father. “He sets out seeking gold, his father's concern but ends up seeking family” (Susan L. Blake, 78). This foreshadows how the ‘real gold’, is his family and new identity that he will gain through the freedom of experience and expression; his expression and language does, however, get him into complications. Milkman ignores Macon’s plan and decides that “I don’t want to be my old man’s office boy no more” (220) therefore displaying his slight change and independence to find the inheritance solely, as an act of freedom and subsequently, his identity, roots and self-awareness. The juxtaposition of city and country in pastoral literature is established through the encounter of Milkman with the young men in Solomon's general store. It is separated by violence, proposing the difference between the two worlds of the novel, and Milkman, who has effectively suppressed doubt and racial exclusion, must now advance to his own education.

Milkman’s quest to Shalimar embodies the responsibilities he accomplishes through asking Reverend Cooper regarding his family and accepting an invitation to hunt, by a group of men. Milkman’s primary encounter of transformation begins with his new and improved listening skills, as he says “What were they saying?”, “Over here?” and “the dogs, the men – none was just hollering […] the dogs understood and executed” (277-278). Morrison’s brilliance in creating characters who develop, change and gradually gain knowledge is the definition of a bildungsroman, a novel surfacing growth, education, progress and self-awareness through wider knowledge.