

RELIGION, MYTH, MAGIC, AND FOLKLORE IN *RABBIT,RUN* AND *SONG OF*

SOLOMON

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Religion, Myth, Magic, and Folklore in *Rabbit, Run* and *Song of Solomon*

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John Updike in *Rabbit, Run* and Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* extensively use religion and mythology as themes throughout their works, but in strikingly different ways. Updike was a practicing Christian and student of Christian theology all of his life. Two of his greatest influences were neo-Orthodox theologian Karl Barth and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, illustrated throughout the novel in the portrayals of the protagonist Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, and Reverend Fritz Kruppenbach, and contrasted sharply to the Reverend Jack Eccles. Updike uses mythology to contrast with the religious themes and overtones of the story.

Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* also uses Christian theology, but in a far subtler and different way. Morrison uses the influence of the black church in America on her character portrayals, particularly their names. But Morrison’s real focus is the African origins of the black church in America, as well as the magic and folklore of Africa.

Introduction

John Updike in *Rabbit, Run*, and Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* extensively use mythology and religion as themes throughout their works, but in strikingly different ways. Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom and Macon “Milkman” Dead, the protagonists of the novels, have more in common than simply being referred to by their nicknames; they are both in search of themselves. Rabbit is a former star high school basketball player married to his high school sweetheart. Rabbit’s background is that of a lower middle class blue collar white family. Rabbit works as someone who demonstrates a hand held kitchen gadget. Milkman, conversely, is the son of a self made man in a middle class black family. He works for his father collecting rents, successfully, but unhappily. Both young men are in search of something more to their lives. The way in which they conduct this search is dramatically different: Rabbit continually runs from himself, and Milkman, both knowingly and unknowingly, runs towards himself. Both novels employ themes of money and class in addition to the bildungsroman plot. In this paper, I will compare and contrast the ideologies and narrative techniques used by Updike and Morrison, particularly Updike’s use of irony in the narrative, and Morrison’s narrative of affirmation. The authors’ use of religion, myth, magic and folklore will also be explored.

Rabbit, Run

Rabbit, Run was Updike's fourth novel, and the first of what was to become the Rabbit tetralogy. Updike uses a third person omniscient narrative technique and employs numerous self introspections by the characters. The story advances in straight forward chronological order, although flashbacks are interspersed throughout the novel. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the protagonist, is introduced in the first paragraph of the novel, and Updike quickly provides the origin of his nickname: "So tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain his nickname, which was given to him when he too was a boy" (5). The "too" is significant in that it links Rabbit to the boys he encounters on his way home, and as we will see, implies that Rabbit has not developed much beyond adolescence himself. Robert Detweiler makes a few interesting points about the naming of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom; Rabbit's mother refers to him as "Hassy", which in German, *Hase* means rabbit. Detweiler also points out that Rabbit's last name begins with *angst*, a clear indication of what is to come (42). Rabbits are known to be quick, agile, fertile, and often prey for other animals, all implying Updike's attitude toward Rabbit. The selection of names will continue to be a significant aspect of the novel.

In chapter one, Rabbit sees the boys playing basketball, sheds his jacket, and joins in the game. Rabbit was a star basketball player in high school, retaining much of his quickness and agility. He outplays the young boys, who quickly tire of the thrashing they take at Rabbit's hands. The narrator observes that not only are Rabbit's prior athletic accomplishments forgotten, in this instance the boys are so young that "They've not

forgotten him: worse, they never heard of him” (7). Rabbit returns home, and Janice, his pregnant wife, is introduced. Janice is portrayed as a slovenly woman with a propensity to drink too much alcohol and smoke too many cigarettes, even while pregnant. Women drinking and smoking while pregnant is taboo today, but in the 1960’s when the novel takes place, it was commonplace behavior. Janice is watching the Mouseketeers, and Jimmie, the lead Mouseketeer, is talking about God wanting us to be ourselves; once again, something that would never happen in children’s programming today:

“Be yourself. God doesn’t want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to each of one of us a special talent.” Janice and Rabbit become unnaturally still; both are Christians. God’s name makes them feel guilty. “God wants some of us to become scientists, some of us to become artists... and He gives to each of us special talents to become these things, *provided we work to develop them*. We must *work*, boys and girls. So: Know Thyself. Learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them. That’s the way to be happy.” (10)

This scene illustrates a few key points in the story. Rabbit and Janice seem to suffer from arrested development in that they both sit mesmerized listening to a show geared to children. Jimmie’s words also reflect Rabbit’s main problem in life; his sense of value and self worth are found on the basketball court or in a disembodied television show. He cannot make a living playing basketball, and in an ironic twist, Rabbit’s job is demonstrating a kitchen gadget called the MagiPeel Peeler in five and dime stores in his hometown. The MagiPeel Peeler peels all of a rabbit’s favorite foods, including carrots, turnips, and potatoes. However, Rabbit actually seems fond of the gadget if not the job itself.

Kyle Pasewark focuses on the guilt aspect in Rabbit’s emotional makeup, so predominant in Christian thought which is alluded to in Jimmie’s speech:

Rabbit's guilt stems from his lack of a "special talent." He has lost touch with the "sacredness of achievement" (Run 62)...His despair is being nobody in a culture that provokes guilt exactly because it emphasizes limitless potential. Redemption is accomplishment; in a land that promises salvation in activity, sin is less a matter of egregious violation than of inaction. (3)

Pasewark also points out that "Rabbit's prolific scoring made him a "star" (a vertical and heavenly metaphor), elevating him above the crowd and granting him social glory" (4). The myth of success and the American dream is a theme running throughout the novel, and one that alludes Rabbit.

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton assess the episode in what will become a predominant theme throughout *Rabbit, Run*: Soren Kierkegaard, who writes, "'In the Christian tradition, consciousness of guilt is the first step in the direction of grace. Among pagans who have no consciousness of guilt,' says Kierkegaard, 'dread (angst) is not fully experienced'" (145). Two of Updike's greatest influences on both his life and work were philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, recognized as the precursor to existentialism, and neo-Orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Kierkegaard and Barth will be discussed at greater length as the novel unfolds.

In the following chapter, Rabbit leaves the apartment, ostensibly to pick up his son Nelson from his parents' home and to get cigarettes for Janice: "Rabbit freezes, standing looking at the white door that leads to the hall, and senses he is in a trap" (15). Updike gives the indication that Rabbit is indeed getting ready to run: "Rabbit stealthily approaches his old home on the grass, hopping the little barberry hedge and the wire meant to keep kids on the pavement" (18). This narrative description brings to mind Peter Rabbit of Beatrix Potter fame, and Mr. McGregor's futile attempts to keep Peter out of his garden. It also sets up Rabbit's future movements; Rabbit does leave Janice, and after

driving around aimlessly, heading south, instead visits his old basketball coach Marty Tothero. Rabbit and Tothero go out on a double date, and Rabbit meets Ruth, an amateur call girl, and moves in with her. Ruth takes a secretarial job, and Rabbit takes a job with Mrs. Smith, an elderly widow, tending to her garden: “He loves folding the hoed ridge of crumbs of soil over the seeds. Sealed, they cease to be his” (117). Next to Rabbit’s glory days in high school, these are the happiest days of his life. The reader feels that Rabbit has finally found his niche. The rabbit animal imagery that Updike uses throughout the novel enhances each and every action taken by Rabbit. In addition, the role of nature, gardens, and seeds in particular are very strong biblical themes used throughout the novel as well. Tothero counterpoints this imagery through his subsequent behavior and debilitating stroke.

The character of Ruth, beginning with her name, also continues the religious symbolism employed in the novel. Ruth in Hebrew, means companion and friend; in English, compassion and pity. Ruth is a devoted friend to Naomi in the Bible: “Their loyal acts are all the more remarkable because they transcend not only self-interests but also cultural boundaries” (Lee 865). Ruth, in *Rabbit, Run*, devotes her life to Rabbit; she gives up her other boyfriends, takes the secretarial job, cooks and keeps house for Rabbit. She is everything Janice is not, and as Robert Detweiler points out, she nurtures Rabbit, bringing out the Oedipus in him. She becomes very much a mother figure to Rabbit (43). Critic Josephine Hendin puts it another way: “Updike puts life together as a sophisticated Oedipal knot in which a man is tied at both ends. His men fear being in control, in charge, but are equally afraid of being suffocated and controlled” (438). We will see this time and again with Rabbit in this story. One instance where Rabbit does take control of

Ruth is in his insistence of not using birth control, for which Ruth pays the price and gets pregnant. Both Ruth and Rabbit enjoy sex, so she is able to meet his animalistic needs.

Ruth's apartment is across the street from a church, and the ringing of church bells on Sunday morning draws Rabbit to the window. Looming above the church in the distance is Mt. Judge, a not so subtle religious symbol. Rabbit says a silent prayer, asking for forgiveness and blessings for Ruth, Janice, and the rest of his family and in-laws. Ruth does not believe in God, and Rabbit says: "Well, now if God doesn't exist, why does anything?, " to which Ruth replies: "Why? There's no why to it. Things just are" (79). Once again, Updike gives us insights into his own religious thoughts, this time alluding to Karl Barth, Soren Kierkegaard, and existentialism.

The Springers, Janice's parents, enlist the help of their Episcopalian minister Jack Eccles to persuade Rabbit to go back to Janice. It is interesting to note that the name of the "Springers" alludes once again to animal imagery and to springing a trap for Rabbit (Hamilton 141). Of critical importance is Updike's selection of the name "Eccles" for the minister. Eccles is short for Ecclesiastes, "The Preacher" in the Bible (Hamilton 146). Solomon is believed to be the author of Ecclesiastes. Augustus Gianto in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* provides an excellent analysis of Ecclesiastes that is relevant to the novel:

Ecclesiastes views any effort to see the rationality of existence as *hevel* (futility or vanity) simply because mortals have no real control over what happens in the world. Their destiny is not in their own hand, but in God's. And there is no way of knowing what the deity has in store for humanity. The only way to accept the portion (*kheleq*) given by God, not stoically, but serenely. Far from being insignificant or deprived of meaning, human existence is worth living despite the fact that it is beyond comprehension. (182)

Gianto goes on to explain that traditional wisdom cannot explain the absurdities of life.

The individual's experience will help him find freedom; God has reasons; therefore he must be just:

Ecclesiastes general world view rests on four positions: 1) all human achievements are impermanent; 2) the life of the human being is in the end uncertain, and wealth and social position are no guarantee of success; 3) human beings have no way to attain knowledge or insight into the workings of God in the world; and 4) considering all this, the goal of human endeavors should be to experience joy, which is a divine imperative. (183)

The significance of this summary of Ecclesiastes lies in the contradiction of terms in the form of Reverend Eccles. Eccles functions more as a social worker than a minister in his dealings with Rabbit. His actions in *Rabbit, Run* are in complete opposition to the very definition of his name, another ironic twist in Updike's narrative strategy. It may also reflect Updike's version of secularism in that life is absurd, yet we need to make the most of it.

Eccles sets up a golf game with Rabbit as a way of getting to know him, and here again, Updike subtly incorporates religious significance to these actions. Eccles first approaches Rabbit on Palm Sunday, and their first golf game takes place on Shrove Tuesday: "the day when sin should be judged, penitence declared, and absolution given after the imposition of penance" Hamilton (147-48). After their first meeting, Rabbit observes that "His day has been bothered by God: Ruth mocking, Eccles blinking..." (98).

As R.R. Cooper observes:

Like its hero, the novel itself is 'bothered by God,' persistently rummaging about for some sort of transcendent experience upon which to fasten its devotional urges... What Rabbit knows of God's grace, Updike suggests, he knows through his exploits on the court and on the golf course, where he approaches perfection, and his exploits in bed, where he touches bliss...(316)

Cooper also observes that: “There was considerable shrewdness in 1960, in a novelist’s taking God out of the church and putting Him on the golf course, where so many suburban men were already spending their Edenic Sundays” (316).

Rabbit goes to Eccles’s house for their first golf outing: “Number 61 is a big brick place with white wood trim, a little porch imitating a Greek temple, and a slate roof that shines like the scales of a big fish” (100). The use of the Greek temple imagery in describing the Eccles’ house introduces another subtle theme Updike utilizes in the novel, that of pagans and an aesthetic view of life. As Rabbit and Eccles play golf on that first day, “Down in the pagan groves and green alleys of the course Eccles is transformed. A brainless gaiety animates him” (112). Alice and Kenneth Hamilton point out that Eccles unwittingly encourages Rabbit to live life on an aesthetic level while also trying to get him to return home to his wife and child. They also cite several examples of Updike’s usage of the color orange to describe Janice’s pants, a waitress’s uniform, the orangeade Janice drinks in the hospital, and a smashed orange glass in the sink as representations of orange groves as pagan imagery, symbolizing fertility (151-54). Updike juxtaposes the pagan orange grove imagery with Christian imagery as Rabbit ponders the wonders of planting seeds in Mrs. Smith’s garden: “The simplicity. Getting rid of something by giving it to itself. God himself folded into the tiny adamant structure... (117). At this point, Rabbit almost succeeds in finding happiness and himself.

Rabbit rings the doorbell to the Eccles home, and Lucy Eccles, the minister’s wife, answers the door. Lucy is not your typical minister’s wife. In discussing her children with Rabbit, Lucy tells him that she would like to have a boy as she and the girls do not get along as they are too much alike. She tells Rabbit: “Sexual antagonism begins

practically at birth...I expect you're a primitive father. I think Freud is like God; you make it true" (102). Robert Detweiler describes Lucy as "committed to a life of social respectability as a pastor's wife, she is actually a disciple of Freud who believes more in the power of instinctive sexuality than in transcendent divinity" (43). Alice and Kenneth Hamilton remark that "Lucy is a Freudian who thinks that Christianity is 'a neurotic religion involving him in a daily retreat from reality'" (146). Throughout the novel, Lucy is indeed atypical of a minister's wife, portrayed as a flirt through Rabbit's eyes. Lucy's characterization reinforces the narrator's or Updike's judgement that Lucy is a pragmatist whose worldview is in direct opposition to that of her husband.

Water is another predominant image used throughout *Rabbit, Run*, both with a subtle religious connotation and playing an integral part of the plot and theme. Rabbit and Ruth go swimming in a pool one day: "The air sparkled with the scent of chlorine. Clean, clean; it came to him what clean was. It was nothing touching you that is not your element. Ruth in water; him in grass and air. He is not a water animal. Having dunked he prefers to sit on the tiled edge..." (123). Updike's use of "dunking" may also be a renewed ironic commentary on basketball. The scene also brings to mind baptisms and the ceremonial anointing of the child's head in water, or as in Jewish conversion ceremonies or Christian rebirths, the total immersion of the body in water. Updike also foreshadows what is to come with the accidental drowning of baby Rebecca at the hands of Janice. Kyle Pasewark makes the following observation: "In Christian theology, baptism signals and accomplishes a new creation. But the condition for the new creation is that the old person must be put to death" (22). In a tragic twist, Updike not only inverts this axiom, he puts the infant to death at the hands of her mother (22). Updike also

employs water imagery in an unusual way during a meeting between Reverend Eccles and Mrs. Springer after Eccles has made several unsuccessful attempts to convince Rabbit to return home. Mrs. Springer has leg trouble, and asks Reverend Eccles to place a stool under her feet: “He places the stool under the heels, his bending, with its echo of religious-pamphlet paintings of Christ washing the feet of beggars, fits his body to receive a new flow of force” (133).

Reverend Eccles then goes to see the Angstroms. The narrator observes that “I don’t know who’s supposed to have the brains. God I suppose” (138).

Eccles smiles, wondering if the Lutheran church gives everyone such ideas. Luther himself was a little like this, perhaps-overstating half-truths in a kind of comic wrath. The whole black Protestant, paradox thumping maybe begins there. Helpless, predestined man, the King of Creation. Utterly fallen: a hubris in shoving the particular aside. Maybe: he’s forgotten most of the theology they made him absorb. It occurs to him that he should see the Angstrom’s pastor. (138-9)

This is perhaps the narrator’s, or Updike’s, most devastating ironic commentary.

According to Luther, Eccles has forgotten his faith.

From a religious analysis of the novel, the ensuing scene between the two pastors, Eccles, the Episcopalian, and Kruppenbach, the Lutheran, is the most significant aspect of the novel. Kruppenbach, as a Lutheran, believes in:

“Justification through grace by faith alone, apart from works of law,” echoing Paul in his letter to the Romans (3:28), forms the core of Lutheranism. A person is right with god (i.e., “justified”) by completely trusting the work of Christ (i.e., by “faith”) and not by making any human effort to appease God (i.e., “apart from works of law”). (Gritsch 61)

Kruppenbach, by the very nature of his faith, will be opposed to any effort on the part of Eccles to interfere in the lives of Rabbit and Janice. The somber mood of the meeting is immediately set by Eccles sitting in “an oak-backed chair pew left over from some

renovation” (144). Eccles looks out of the window in the direction of the golf course, and thinks that by defeating Harry at golf he will be able to convince Harry to return home. Kruppenbach is outside mowing the grass, and is annoyed about having his chores interrupted. He is dressed in an undershirt and proceeds to give Eccles “the stripped down essentials” of his beliefs (Hamilton 147). Kruppenbach refuses to sit down as he is drenched in sweat, preferring to stand over Eccles who feels as though he is in “a petitionary position, sitting on the bench like a choirboy” (145). Updike confirms the lack of communication between religious positions here.

When Eccles proceeds to explain all the efforts he has made to reunite Harry (Eccles only refers to him as Harry) with his family, Kruppenbach loses his patience. He tells Eccles that as pastors, their role is not to meddle in the lives of others:

There is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of the faith. There is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there, stirring the bucket. There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil's work. (147)

Mrs. Kruppenbach calls her husband to dinner, and Kruppenbach asks Eccles: “Will you kneel a moment with me and pray to Christ to come into this room?” Eccles refuses, saying that he is too angry and that it would be hypocritical to do so, to which Kruppenbach retorts: “‘Hypocrisy,’ he says mildly. ‘You have no seriousness. Don’t you believe in damnation? Didn’t you know that when you put that collar on, what you risked?’” He leaves the room before Eccles can respond: “His shame and failure hang down in him heavy but fruitless” (147). R. R. Cooper points out:

Theological assistance appears in the figure of Kruppenbach, a grim neo-orthodox Lutheran minister who, in contemptuously dismissing Eccles’ hands-on,

humanistic counseling of Rabbit, echoes the hard Christian message Updike himself has been drawn to in the writings of Karl Barth. “(O)n Sunday morning, when we go before their faces, we must walk up not worn out with misery, but full of Christ, on *fire*: burn them with the force of our belief.” (316)

Updike himself frequently commented on the influence Barth and Kierkegaard had on his work. In a 2004 talk at St. Bartholomew’s Church in New York City, Updike discussed both men:

As a young man studying at Oxford in the 1950’s, Updike said he devoured new translations of Soren Kierkegaard at Blackwell’s bookstore, discovering “so positive and fierce and strikingly intelligent, like finding an older brother I didn’t know I had”. He pointed to his classic character Harry Angstrom, of the Rabbit tetralogy, as an example of the Danish philosopher’s influence. The Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth informed another character of the first book of the series, the Lutheran minister Fritz Kruppenbach, who faces off with an Episcopal priest in a scene Updike chose to read. Upon going to Kruppenbach’s house to discuss Rabbit’s desertion of his family, Rev. Eccles is treated to a diatribe against meddling in other’s affairs. Kruppenbach sounds like a stand in for Barth himself. (Cipolla 1)

Karl Barth’s theology is complex and well beyond the scope of this paper, but several basic tenants will be examined as they relate to Updike. Barth believed in “the otherness of God,” God chooses who will be saved and who will be damned based on divine will, thus it is impossible for us to know why some are saved or damned and not others. The Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary also quotes Updike:

Karl Barth’s insistence upon the otherness of God seemed to free him to be exceptionally (for a theologian) appreciative and indulgent of this world, the world at hand. His humor and love of combat, his capacity for friendship even with his ideological opponents, his fondness for his tobacco and other physical comforts, his tastes in art and entertainment were heartily worldly, worldly not in the fashion of those who accept this life as a way-station and testing-ground but of those who embrace it as a piece of God’s creation. (1)

James Torrance discusses Barth and how he “stands as a prophetic voice in the

tradition of Athanaseus, Augustine, and Calvin, calling the Christian church back to the Bible and to its foundation in Jesus Christ...The revelation of God in Jesus Christ, attested in holy scripture, as the criterion of truth” (68). Torrance goes on to express Barth’s belief that “only by listening to the word of God and recognizing God’s proper righteousness can we regain a proper foundation for culture, morality, state, and church” (69). Barth believed that all theology should be based on “the reality of the word of God in Jesus Christ” (70).

Bernard Schopen takes the thoughts of Barth and Updike a step further, differentiating between faith and morality in a fascinating article entitled “Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike.” In the article, Schopen states: “But the existence of God, Barth and Updike jointly assert, cannot be proved. So the question becomes not ‘Does God exist?’ but rather ‘Do I believe God exists?’ To Updike, an affirmative answer to this question makes one a Christian” (525). Updike’s Christianity is based on The Apostle’s Creed, and as such “it contains no inherent moral system” (525). Morality and ethics remain a human enterprise. Religious questions are between God and man; moral questions between men:

The absolute qualitative difference between man and God, and consequently between ethics and faith, is the sine quo non of his theology. And there is no question that for Updike the problems of human morality are subordinate to that of faith. The problem of faith, though difficult, is simple and absolute; those of morality are relative, ambiguous, and “basically insoluble.” (526)

Clearly Kruppenbach reflects Barth’s position of the word of God and Christ being the center of Christianity. And in *Rabbit*, as the story continues to unfold, we see the distinctive separation between faith, morality, and ethics in his character. Rabbit clearly believes in God, yet his morality and in turn his ethics are separate entities. Rabbit

vacillates between his wife and Ruth; Jack Eccles' morality dictates that Rabbit return to his wife. Kruppenbach admonishes Eccles to stay out of Rabbit's affairs as it has nothing to do with God's judgement and Rabbit's inner "moral compass" steers him towards Ruth (Schopen 527).

Yet Rabbit does in fact return to Janice after she gives birth to Rebecca June; however, something evil is in the air. Rabbit goes to work for his father-in-law selling used cars. Janice has no interest in sex, and Rebecca June is a challenging baby. Rabbit does go to Eccle's church at the reverend's request "because he considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks" (201). Eccle's sermon "concerns the forty days in the wilderness and Christ's conversation with the Devil" (203). He asks his congregation "Does this story have any relevance to *us*, here now?" (203); clearly it does as Rabbit is away from home and "living in sin." Eccles goes on to discuss the hardships encountered in the wilderness were necessary trials for Christ's followers. Rabbit has trouble with "the *going through* quality of it" (203), which is in stark contrast to Eccles view. This juxtaposition also reflects Rabbit's/Barth's view of theology in that believing in God and the word of Christ is enough for salvation.

After the service, Rabbit walks home with Lucy Eccles and cannot decide "if she's a conscious or unconscious flirt" (206). She asks him in for coffee, but he declines "because I've got this wife now" (207). Lucy is offended at his jumping to conclusions and slams the door in his face. Rabbit returns home and very much wants to make love to Janice, but the baby is fussing and Janice's milk has dried up. Thus begins a chain of inexplicably horrifying events. Rabbit, knowing that Janice has a drinking problem, actually encourages her to have a drink to relax: "But, as amid the stacked dishes on the

sink, under the warm and humid furniture, and in the coffin-like hollow of the painted crib...” (210). Updike’s use of the crib as a coffin is a striking metaphor for what is to transpire. The images of disorder within Rabbit and Janice’s home also enforce this sense of doom. Janice refuses Rabbit’s repeated sexual advances, so Rabbit does what he always does when things do not go his way—he runs. Janice has several drinks and cannot get the baby to sleep. Her mother calls to ask where Harry is as he has not shown up for work, senses he is not there and that something is amiss, and says she is coming over. Janice tries to give the baby a bath before her mother arrives, and in a dreadful scene accidentally, so we are led to believe, drowns the baby in the bathtub. Updike again uses water imagery in that what was once baptismal, saving water, drowns baby Rebecca June. Updike asks us to accept a Barthian view of the tragedy in that we must accept the horrors of life, find a way to cope with them, and then get on with life. In another Barthian twist, Updike never gives any indication that the drowning was anything but accidental.

Upon hearing of the drowning, Reverend Eccles and his wife have a heated exchange wherein Lucy Eccles holds Rabbit responsible for the drowning: “Christian. If he’s a Christian thank God I’m not one. Christian. Kills his baby and that’s what you call him” (228). Eccles continues to defend Rabbit: “He didn’t kill the baby. He wasn’t there, it was an accident” (228). Rabbit calls Eccles after trying to call the apartment, sensing something must be wrong, and Eccles tells Rabbit about the baby’s drowning. On his way to the Springer house, Rabbit reflects on the closed in feeling that made him run away, not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time:

He had gone to church and brought back this little flame and had nowhere to put

it on the dark damp walls of the apartment, so it had flickered and gone out. And he realized that he wouldn't always be able to produce this flame. What held him back all day was the feeling that somewhere there was something better for him than listening to babies cry and cheating people in used car lots. (232)

Robert Detweiler likens Rabbit's continual search for himself to that of the noble knight's search for the Holy Grail. Rabbit begins his journey in his aborted run south "a modern knight roaming the countryside" (39). Rabbit, like the knight, believes himself to be pure and blameless in his actions:

Only the pure in heart have hope of finding the elusive Grail. Rabbit, for all his perversity, incredibly sees himself in terms of that purity, for he has been duped by the hero reflex into believing his instincts, and they tell him consistently that what he feels good in doing must be good (39).

Detweiler goes on to discuss Rabbit and his instincts guiding all of his actions:

Eccles says: "You don't care about right or wrong: you worship nothing but your own worst instincts." Rabbit does worship-at least trusts in-his own instincts; but such worship is a reaction to a dominant Puritanism that dictated his religious training and that still controls his environment (39).

Rabbit does feel remorse for his misdeeds, but the remorse quickly fades into the background as his instincts, which he believes are good, take back command (39).

Updike presents Rabbit's search for self even in this time of terrible grief as we see during Rabbit's meeting with Eccles to finalize plans for the baby's funeral. Eccles tells Rabbit to "Be a good husband. A good father. Love what you have left," to which Rabbit replies "And that's enough?" It is not enough for Rabbit-he wants to find "The thing behind everything." But Eccles persists: "I think marriage is a sacrament, and that this tragedy, terrible as it is, has at last united you and Janice in a sacred way" (241). Rabbit tries to believe this, but cannot.

Rabbit clearly feels guilty about the baby's death, as evidenced in a conversation with his father-in-law after the coroner's inquest. Mr. Springer tells Rabbit that the

drowning was ruled an accident, but Harry asks him, “Why don’t they just lock me up?” A little further on, Rabbit thinks to himself: “It disgusts him to feel the net of the law slither from him. They just won’t do it for you, they just won’t take you off the hook” (246). Kyle Pasewark makes the observation that, “The guilt of failing to shine is but one of Rabbit’s forms of guilt; he senses the inevitability of guilt in all living and refuses to submerge the crisis of guilt” (18). But for Rabbit, guilt and responsibility are two different entities. In a tremendously painful scene at Rebecca June’s funeral, Rabbit actually says to Janice and the other mourners: “‘Don’t look at me,’ he says. ‘I didn’t kill her.’” But he does not stop there: “‘Hey, it’s ok,’ he tells her. You didn’t mean to” (252). The utter callousness and insensitivity is shocking to the reader, yet totally in character for Rabbit. Donald J. Greiner observes that “Rabbit senses the true believer in God need feel no guilt. He need only ‘cast every care on thee,’ which is exactly what Harry does.” Harry views himself as the only mourner worthy of forgiveness (48).

However, guilt has its limits, and Rabbit then does what Rabbit always does when things get tough or uncomfortable—he runs; in this instance, back to Ruth. But Ruth does what no one else in the story is capable of doing; she stands up for herself and up to Rabbit. She tells Rabbit that she is pregnant, and that she will marry him if he divorces Janice. Rabbit is reluctant to do so, and the ensuing exchange is one of the most insightful in the novel. Ruth says: “Why can’t you make up your mind what you want to *do?*,” to which Rabbit replies: “Can’t I? I don’t know” (261). Ruth tells Rabbit he will never see her or the baby again, and Rabbit is shocked and repelled by her actions. The narrator observes that Rabbit “doesn’t like people who manage things. He likes things to happen

of themselves” (262). Rabbit tells Ruth he will go to the delicatessen and come right back, but as the story concludes, he runs.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the novel is the juxtaposition of religion, ethics, and morality throughout the story. Kyle Pasewark points out that:

Harry is less moral than others because he is *more* religious, not less. Only he, not Eccle’s mainline Protestantism which pours claying syrup over life’s bitterness, kicks against meaninglessness and death; only he has the insight to recognize the terror of life and the courage to confront it. The others are less objectionable because they are less. They remain biologically alive but spiritually numb. (18)

The juxtaposition between religion and morality, between Harry and Eccles, is very much a characterization of both Kierkegaard and Barth’s existential view of life.

Bernard A. Schopen also discusses morality in several of Updike’s works:

For Updike, then, religious questions are those arising from the relationship between man and God. Moral questions are those which concern man’s intercourse with his fellow man. The absolute qualitative difference between man and god, and consequently between ethics and faith, is the sine quo non of his theology. And there is no question that for Updike the problems of human morality are subordinate to that of faith. The problem of faith, though difficult, is simple and absolute; those of morality are relative, ambiguous, and “basically insoluble.” Thus, insofar as it treats moral problems, Updike’s fiction must be ambiguous and essentially static. (526)

Schopen goes on to discuss how Updike’s characters judge each other, but as their creator he will not; Updike’s world is “morally ambiguous” (526). Schopen alludes to another influence of Updike briefly mentioned above; that of Soren Kierkegaard, philosopher and precursor to existentialism: “There is an additional reason for the inertia of these characters: each experience what is clearly an existential and religious crisis” (533).

According to Mark C. Taylor, Kierkegaard was also a devout Christian: “The overriding goal of his work is nothing less than ‘the reintroduction of Christianity into Christendom.’” The struggle to lead a Christian life involves the realization of selfhood.

Kierkegaard believes people should have the chance to solve their own problems, exercising their own free will in the process. Taylor summarizes Kierkegaard's three stages of existence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious:

The aesthetic stage is characterized by the absence of genuine decision...From the ethical point of view, the self has an obligation to become itself through free activity...Faith is the free activity of self-relation in which the self becomes itself by simultaneously differentiating and synthesizing the opposites that make up its being. (300)

Taylor concludes that faith is the end result of the synthesis of all of the forces in opposition within us, resulting in our eternal identity in the face of the "wholly other God" (300).

William McDonald continues this discussion of faith:

Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity.
What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we chose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact we must believe by *virtue of the absurd*. (1)

Rabbit, as defined by Updike himself, reflects a Kierkegaardian approach to life. His steadfast belief in God is what keeps him going through all his trials and tribulations, which for the most part, he has brought upon himself. In this regard, he has certainly utilized his free will, and has begun to experience the three stages described above.

The existentialists took Barth and Kierkegaard's theories quite a bit further, and their views are germane to the discussion of Rabbit as well. The existentialists believe "that humans can be understood neither as substances with fixed properties, nor as subjects interacting with a world of objects" (Crowell 1). Humans cannot be understood in terms of physics, biology, etc. New categories need to be considered such as:

Intention, blame, responsibility, character, duty, virtue and the like do capture important aspects of the human condition, but neither moral thinking (governed by the norms of the good and the right) nor scientific thinking (governed by the norm of truth suffices. (Crowell 1)

At first glance this view might be seen as contradictory to Updike's view of the world but in fact, it is complimentary to his view. The additional categories of human understanding are just that; categories for understanding the behavior of humans. They do not supplant the importance of believing in God. Amylya Kishore Purohit examines Rabbit in light of Abraham Maslow, the existential psychologist, who points out that "A self-actualized person is one whose human potential has been fully developed. He says that human needs are hierarchal. When a man's need for bread and safety are satisfied, he feels the need for belonging, self-esteem, and then, self-actualization" (230). Rabbit's self-actualization comes from his athletic and sexual prowess, both aesthetic pursuits. Purohit views Rabbit as blameless in the death of the baby: "Here he is able to see the truth when others around him cannot-the truth that he is guiltless." She goes on to say that "Every choice of Rabbit's is a 'growth' choice, which makes him an existential personality" (232). While I agree with Purohit's assessment of Rabbit as an existential personality, I do not agree with her assessment that Rabbit is guiltless. Rabbit, for reasons unknown, started Janice on the downward spiral of drinking knowing full well that she had a drinking problem; blameless perhaps, guiltless, no. It seems that Rabbit does not successfully solve his ethical dilemmas.

Updike's selection of a quote from Pascal's *Pensees* 507 at the beginning of the novel is significant as well: "The motion of Grace, the hardness of heart; external circumstances." This describes Rabbit brilliantly and succinctly. Pascal's belief systems very much follow those of Updike, Barth, and Kierkegaard. Pascal believed that faith was

a gift from God and that reason alone is not enough. He believed that “Those who are given the gift of genuine religious faith are expected not only to accept things that are uncertain, but, especially, to accede to realities that are incomprehensible” (Clarke 1).

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton discuss Pascal as well in their analysis of *Rabbit, Run*

“Pascal strenuously opposed the notion of self-knowledge as a path to truth. For him, nothing except a realization of our need of grace and forgiveness could put us in touch with reality” (145).

Updike, via *Rabbit*, conveys a wealth of religious and philosophical thoughts, ideas, and beliefs in what at first glance, appears to be a story of former high school star who turns into an indecisive, dismal failure of an individual; but indeed, *Rabbit* represents far more than that. In Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, we again encounter a young man who is in search of selfhood and ethical understanding.

Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon, like *Rabbit Run*, contains elements of existential philosophy through the development of the protagonist Macon “Milkman” Dead and his quest for self identity via the trials and tribulations he encounters in doing so. *Song of Solomon* was written by Toni Morrison in 1977, although it takes place in the 1950’s and 60’s as does *Rabbit, Run*. Updike and Morrison share the ability to weave the actual current events of the time into their stories to make them more realistic. Like Updike’s story that follows a straight forward chronological order, Morrison employs a linear program that also extensively uses flashbacks and storytelling to advance the plot. Morrison wastes no time in capturing the reader’s attention with the very first line of the story: “The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o’clock” (3). Robert Smith, the insurance agent, leaps to his death from Mercy Hospital, a whites-only hospital in the segregated south. Smith, as we later learn, was a key member of the Seven Days; a group of black men formed to seek retribution for the numerous killings of southern blacks during this time. Morrison introduces the theme of flying in this brief sentence; a theme which takes several different forms throughout the novel. In her introduction to the 2004 edition of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison makes several pertinent points regarding this novel. First, she points out that the name of the insurance company is that of a prominent black-owned company handling black clients. Second, she points out that Smith’s “flight” mimics the path from North Carolina, in the south, to Lake Superior, in the north; the same path that many blacks took to escape slavery and oppression in the South. In this way, Morrison connects the 1960’s events with slavery and the flight from slavery. “Milkman” Dead also goes on

a journey, seeking lost treasure and tradition by travelling from the north to the south, and in so doing, actually discovers himself. Morrison comments on the significance of the words “fly” and “mercy”: “Both terms are central to the narrative: flight as escape or confrontation; mercy the unspoken wish of the novel’s population” (xiii).

As Smith prepares to jump, a woman sings one of several songs in the novel that refer to flying:

O Sugarman done fly away
 Sugarman done gone
 Sugarman cut across the sky
 Sugarman gone home... (6)

The reader’s initial impression is that the song is biblical in nature, the assumption stemming from the title of the book *Song of Solomon*. Song of Solomon, also referred to as Song of Songs, is the 22nd book of the Bible and widely attributed to the authorship of Solomon. It is a series of love poems, either between a man and a woman, or between God and the people of Israel. First century Jewish scholars took the approach that the book “was an allegory for God’s love for his people, Israel” (Brians 1). Early Christian scholars followed this thought process, but modified it to reflect first Christ’s love for the Church, and later God’s love for the Virgin Mary (Brians 1). Chapter 1 is entitled “Colloquy of Bride and Friends”, and verse 5 begins “I am black and beautiful,” then continues to explain that her exposure to the sun while tending vineyards has made her complexion dark. Brians comments the woman in the poem may have been alluding to equal property rights for women or metaphorically looking to control her own body (2). As *Song of Solomon* unfolds, the reader sees that Morrison employs the technique of double entendre in that nothing in her work is as it first appears; *Song of Solomon* refers

to both biblical allegory and to Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon, and the folklore of the flying Africans which will be discussed at greater length.

As in *Rabbit, Run*, names are significant in *Song of Solomon*. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison speaks of the significance of naming as a theme in the novel. Black history is a critical aspect of her work, and in this instance Morrison points out that slaves once leaving Africa not only lost their names, but their families and tribes as well, referring to this situation as "cultural orphanage." Former slaves often rejected their names given while enslaved, choosing new names for themselves when freed. In fact, Morrison selects biblical names for many characters in the novel, "to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes" (375).

Macon "Milkman" Dead is given the unflattering nickname by Freddie, a janitor, who sees Milkman's mother nursing him at the advanced age of five. Milkman's father is the only one who did not know the origins of the nickname, but sensed that it is distasteful in some sort of way. The Dead family name was acquired in 1869, when all blacks had to register with the Freedman's Bureau after the abolition of slavery. The clerk registering Milkman's grandfather was drunk; when asked where he was born, he said Macon. He was then asked who his father was, to which Macon replied that his father was dead. The clerk filled in the form with the name of Macon Dead; a name passed down to each subsequent first born male. According to Barbara Christian, "Nonetheless, this black family retains their dreaded name, for it paradoxically embodies their vitality as well as their oppression. And they perfect it by starting their own tradition of naming by randomly selecting the first name of their children out of the Bible" (5).

One of the most significant named characters in the novel is Milkman's aunt Pilate. Pilate's mother died in childbirth, and Pilate's father could not read, so when he randomly selected Pilate's name he did so because "it seemed to him strong and handsome" (18). The midwife pointed out that Pilate was the name of Christ's killer, therefore inappropriate, but Macon said he prayed to no avail for his wife to live, so Pilate it was to be. The naming of Pilate and the circumstances of her birth are critical aspects to understanding the novel. Pilate and pilot are homophones, so Morrison ties Pilate's name back into the flying theme introduced early in the novel. Pilate has magical/mystical qualities about her; she was born without a navel, and as such, viewed as a freak and ostracized by others: "Pilate learns how important, though misleading, appearances are to people. Thus she learns to rely on inner qualities rather than outward manifestations. Yet paradoxically, her understanding of the spiritual is based on her appreciation of the land of her origins" (Christian 8). Valerie Smith notes that "Pilate delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society, since those who know of her condition shun her" (280). Here, Morrison gives human qualities to the abstract idea of flight and spiritual freedom.

Pilate's brother Macon had lost interest in his wife Ruth, so Pilate gives Ruth a potion to slip to Macon; Macon's interest in his wife inexplicably returns, and Ruth gets pregnant, much to Macon's displeasure. He wants Ruth to abort the baby, but Pilate and Ruth stand up to him, and the baby, Macon "Milkman" Dead, is born. Pilate not only helps create Milkman, she saves his life as well. As the story unfolds, Pilate continues to function as Milkman's pilot, helping him to find himself and giving her life for him in the end. Pilate seems to be the exact opposite of her brother Macon; Pilate lives a primitive

life close to nature, whereas Macon is fixated with the accumulation of property and wealth. In so doing, Morrison highlights the Dead family's distance from the authentic African American community and its roots. Like Updike, Morrison creates an ironic twist in that it is Macon's greed in wanting to steal what he thinks is a bag of gold from Pilate that inadvertently results in Milkman's discovery of himself and his roots.

Morrison, like Updike in *Rabbit, Run* chooses the name of Ruth for Macon's wife, a somewhat sympathetic character in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman's sisters are named Magdalene, called Lena, after Mary Magdalene, mother of Jesus, and First Corinthians, called Corinthians. First Corinthians is a fascinating choice of name for Morrison to use; it refers to the seventh book of the New Testament, and is a letter written by Paul around 50 C.E. to the citizens of Corinth. Upon leaving the church that he founded there, Paul receives word that the Corinthians are reverting back to their debauched pagan ways. Corinth was a thriving seaport metropolis, containing many brothels and pagan temples. The city was composed of a few wealthy families, but most of the citizenry were freedmen and artisans. Gordon Fee's view is that these freedmen were viewed only slightly ahead of slaves in the social order (4). Anthony Thiselton points out that social stratification in Corinth was very apparent: "The status of slaves could vary dramatically from that of a trusted manager of a business or estate to the status of mere 'property' (Latin: a thing with no human rights)" (739). Once again, Morrison carefully selects a name with several levels of meaning. It is also interesting to note that Corinthians tells her family that she is an amanuensis (Greek: a scribe) to Michael-Mary Graham, when in fact she is her maid. Corinthians attended Bryn Mawr College, studied in France, yet her education actually makes it more difficult for her to find a job or a

husband in the black community; in short, she is overqualified. In the novel, Corinthians meets Henry Porter, another member of the Seven Days, and when Milkman informs his parents of their relationship, she quits her job and moves in with him. Like Updike, Morrison employs allusion, emplotment, and characterization to suggest the paradoxes of both post biblical and post slavery existence.

Milkman's friend Guitar Bains is another interesting choice of names. While not biblical in nature, Guitar is "instrumental" in developing Milkman's character and cultural awareness (Dixon 133). Guitar, like Robert Jones and Henry Porter, is a member of the Seven Days; the connotation being that God created the world in seven days. However, Morrison leaves room to question why evil in various forms is personified in these men.

Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter and longtime love of Milkman's, is a tragic figure in the story. Hagar reflects both the bible and the legacy of slavery, as well as the subservient role of women in both instances. Milkman tires of her and breaks off the relationship. Hagar makes several feeble attempts to kill Milkman, and eventually goes mad and dies. The choice of Hagar's name is particularly striking, as she appears twice, in Genesis 16 and 21; Genesis 16 being the relevant passage. Hagar is Sarai's Egyptian maid. Sarai is barren, so Sarai gives Hagar to her husband Abram as a second wife, in the hope that she will give him a son, which she does (Ishmael). Hagar's status is now elevated, and she looks at Sarai "with contempt." Sarai complains to Abram, who tells her that Hagar is still her maid, she may do with her what she wants, so Sarai puts her back as a maid and treats her harshly; as a result Hagar flees into the wilderness, becoming the first runaway slave in recorded history (Ngan 714).

Circe is another character with a most notable name, introducing Morrison's use of Western classical mythology into the novel. In the *Odyssey*, Circe is a temptress who lures sailors into her clutches, turning them into swine; yet in *Song of Solomon*, Circe saves lives. "Old" Macon Dead, father of Macon and Pilate, is a successful farmer. He is shot dead in front of his children by the white landowner next door. Circe, who has worked for the landowner's family, hides Macon and Pilate in the very house of the murderer at great peril to herself, saving their lives. Milkman, in his quest for the lost gold, finds Circe living in that same formerly grand house now in total disrepair, surrounded by her Weimaraners. The choice of the Weimaraner as Circe's dog companions is an interesting one. They are bird dogs, and as such, bred to retrieve killed prey, and they are German, bringing to mind Hitler and his quest to create a superior race by selectively killing off political rivals and minorities. Circe tells Milkman about his great-grandmother Sing, and the story behind his grandfather's bones being hidden in a cave. The story now comes full circle in that the bag of what was thought to be gold hanging in Pilate's house actually contains the bones of her father. Most importantly, Circe gives Milkman key information that leads him to discover his family roots.

Ghosts and the supernatural are also elements of *Song of Solomon*. Early in the story, Freddie tells Milkman: "You better believe boy. They're here" (109). Pilate tells Milkman of being in the woods after her father has been shot: "But papa came back one day" (40). The supernatural elements of the novel continue in the flying imagery throughout the story, blending the past with the present, making it hard for characters inside the novel and readers to differentiate the real from the unreal. As Phillip Page states: "Jake's shallow burial, which led to the dumping of his bones in the cave,

symbolize that the past itself needs to be rediscovered and reintegrated into the present” (102). Once again, Morrison weaves the existential theme into the novel.

The theme of flying, omnipresent throughout the novel, surfaces again in Milkman’s conversation with Susan Byrd and his discovery that Jake, his grandfather, was married to Sing Byrd. Again, we have the homophone/metaphor of bird and Byrd, singing and flying. This leads to Milkman’s discovery that the childrens’ song about Solomon that he has heard all of his life is actually a song about his grandfather Jake and his great-grandfather Solomon:

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303)*

Susan Byrd tells Milkman of:

“Some old folks’ lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon or Shalimar-I never knew which was right.” (322)

She then goes on to tell Milkman that Solomon had Jake in his arms but dropped him as he flew away, watched by Solomon’s wife Ryna and several of her other 21 children.

Milkman naturally assumes that Susan means flew off as in running away, and Susan says no, she means flew: “He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the middle of the field one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from” (323).

Solomon’s wife was named Ryna, and Ryna lost her mind and died after Solomon left, just as Hagar did upon losing Milkman. Once again, Morrison has history repeating itself.

The children are the ones who created the song to keep the story alive. Wendy W.

Walters discusses how woman and children are the unsung heroes in these tales of male

heroism and self-discovery: “Since it is almost always only those slaves born in Africa who can fly, there are usually some American born slaves left behind-often children”

(19). This point is underscored by Ryna’s and Hagar’s bitter disappointment.

Morrison herself discusses flight and the myths of flight in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

Let me give you an example: the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*. If it means Icarus to some readers, fine: I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere-people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and the gospels. Perhaps it was without thinking-escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*. (371-72)

Icarus, against his father’s advice, flies too close to the sun with his wings of feathers and wax, and falls to his death; conversely, Milkman, who follows his father’s advice to find the gold he thinks Pilate stole, actually finds himself and his roots in the process. This false quest leads to revelation and self discovery.

Lavolerie King looks at the myth of the flying Africans in an interesting light:

The basic tale of the flying Africans-a tale of spiritual transcendence-concerns Africans victimized by New World slavery who take wing and fly back to Africa. variations of the story include accounts of Africans leaping over the sides of slave ships during the Middle passage, and tales of a group of Ibos walking back across the Atlantic to Africa. (761)

Allen Alexander observes that Morrison’s fiction reflects both Christian belief African and African tradition. According to Alexander, Morrison’s fiction has four faces: the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of Western theology, but also a fourth face. He says the fourth face “is an explanation for all those things-the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and the just-that seem so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God” (1). He goes on to describe

African storytellers giving God a human face by putting him in a greater context than does traditional Western theology. Africans believe that God is more of “an active participant or a willing spectator in the tragedies that befall human beings” (5).

Traditional African religions believe that tragedy happens regardless of the actions of human beings. Many Africans believe that “evil not only derives its power from God but is allowed to flourish by God” (5). Evil is simply a reality with which one must deal (5). This view is strikingly similar to the views expressed by Updike, Barth, and Kierkegaard. Evil, whether in the form of murder, rape, genocide, or slavery is a part of the human condition with which we must learn to deal. Morrison effectively mixes traditional Western theology with African myths and folklore to create Milkman’s story.

Ashley Tidey weaves Freud into the interpretive mix along with flying in an article analyzing Milkman’s limp, pronounced at the beginning of the story, but which disappears towards the end. Tidey says the limp can be interpreted in two different ways:

For a Freudian reader, Milkman’s lifelong limp would symbolize the difficulties the protagonist encounters in any attempt to *progress*; such a reader would argue that the hopeful image of Milkman’s healed limp, occurring toward the end of the novel, is undercut by his fall-indeed, by his suicidal leap. For an Afrocentric reader, however, the miraculous healing of Milkman’s limp and his transcendent flight from Solomon’s Leap would signify the protagonist’s spiritual rebirth and connection to his ancestral past. (50-51)

Tidey also points out that “The crucial philosophical conception in Africa of ‘ancestor communion’-the interdependence between the living and the dead, matter and spirit, earth and heaven-is achieved through rituals ensuring their connectedness” (52). Pilate illustrates this tie to her African history in several ways; her use of potions, wearing an oversized earring that contains her name written on a piece of paper by her illiterate father, and in keeping the bones of the man she and Macon killed in self-defense (which

turn out to be her father's bones) when fleeing Circe's care after the murder of their father.

In *Song of Solomon*, the flight imagery is a metaphor for Milkman's journey to find himself, yet it also represents flight from the oppression of slavery and its aftermath segregation:

Inasmuch as flying is a metaphor in this folktale for death as a *freeing* of the spirit to "go back"-back to Africa and to one's roots-the folktale resonates with the African cultural tradition of connecting to ancestors as a way of "revitalizing" the spirit and collective life of a community." (Tidley 60)

Tidley does a remarkable job tying in the limp and its Freudian implications to flying and its tradition in African folklore. The suggestion is that Milkman's healed limp is a result of his escape from the repression and suppression suffered at the hands of his parents, particularly his father, and the discovery of his family roots.

The conclusion of *Song of Solomon* is anything but conclusive, much like the ending to *Rabbit, Run*. Milkman pieces the Song of Solomon together, realizing that it recounts his great-grandfather's mythical/magical flight back to Africa. Pilate and Milkman return to Virginia to bury his grandfather Jake's bones; in spite of her name being Pilate "she wouldn't set foot on an airplane, so he drove" (334). Guitar, believing that Milkman had found the gold and was holding out on him, inadvertently shoots Pilate as she stands back up from touching the grave. Once again, Pilate saves Milkman's life, but this time sacrificing her own life to do so. Pilate joins Ruth and Hagar in self sacrifice, a role reserved for Jesus in the Christian tradition. Pilate has become more of a mother to Milkman than his actual mother: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Milkman asks Guitar; "You want me? You want my life?" Guitar puts the rifle down and stands back up. Milkman, through his tears,

says: “You need it? Here-” and leaps into the air towards Guitar. “...and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). Did Milkman survive or not?

Both Updike and Morrison leave us hanging (in disbelief) at the end of their novels; Morrison more so than Updike because we do not know whether Milkman survives his leap towards Guitar. *Rabbit, Run* is the first in the Rabbit tetralogy, so we know that Rabbit does return to Janice and continue his life. But there is no sequel to *Song of Solomon*. As the presence of African magic and folklore figures so predominantly in the story, I prefer to think that Milkman and Guitar both survive their conflict. Nonetheless, Milkman’s tale is uplifting to the spirit in more ways than one, and sets the scene as a comment on the cultural roots of the black struggle for civil rights in 1960’s America.

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