

SPIRIT MATTER(S): POST-DUALISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF
SPIRITUALITY IN FICTION BY WALKER PERCY, TONI MORRISON,
AND GLORIA NAYLOR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iv
Chapter	
1 Dualistic Dilemmas	1
Challenging the Distant Spirit World: Existentialism and Theology of Liberation..	10
Spirituality as “Puzzlement” and Critique of Heroic Narratives	20
The Design of the Study.....	25
2 Revising Spiritual Dualism: The Critique of Material Prisons and Mythical Escapes	29
Solitary Quests.....	30
The Spiritual Haven on Earth: Lost or Isolated Places.....	51
A Wholly Material World.....	69
3 The Politics of Spirit.....	82
The Class of the Elect.....	84
Struggles in the Dark.....	98
Individual Responsibility.....	113
4 Ways of Spiritual Connection: Intersubjectivity and Communal Tradition.....	122
Intersubjectivity.....	126
Communal Traditions, Past Connections.....	140
5 Death’s Fading Appeal.....	164
Reconsidering Death as Sacrifice.....	167
Life and Life-Givers.....	180
Conclusion: Resisting <i>Telos</i>	193
Bibliography.....	198
Vita.....	208

ABSTRACT

My dissertation, Spirit Matter(s): Post-Dualistic Representations of Spirituality in Fiction by Walker Percy, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, examines the ways in which these authors have presented spirituality in *The Moviegoer*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Mama Day* respectively. In these works, spirituality is a need for connection among humans in this world, rather than a notion that points to dualistic views of the spiritual and the material as two different realms. Through this perspective on spirituality as a reality of the physical world, the political and socio-economic problems of the world are not—nor can they be—set aside in favor of the spiritual search. The solitary quest of the individual that overcomes distinctions of class, race, sex, etc. to gain enlightenment proves insufficient to explain modern spiritual concerns. Instead, the examined texts propose that problems such as injustice and exploitation, and the struggles that arise when people fight against them, are part of the human condition, and therefore of the human spirit as well. The ethical obligations that arise from connection with one another guide people to the ways in which spiritual awareness can become ethical praxis, and so spirituality leads to a concern with the problems of the political and socio-economic sphere rather than to an escape from them by “transcending” such concerns. Finally, a vision of spirituality as part of the physical world affirms life and valorizes struggle in it rather than sacrificial death.

CHAPTER 1: DUALISTIC DILEMMAS

American authors that wrote about spirituality in the decades between the sixties and the eighties responded to the changing cultural and ideological landscape of the decades and the effects of these changes on perceptions about what spirituality is: first, religion was losing its monopoly on spirituality and second, spirituality itself was becoming irrelevant for more and more people. The notion of a spiritual life came under attack both by political activism and by a lifestyle that extolled materialism and material gains as the gateway to human fulfillment, culminating in the glorification of free market capitalism of the eighties. These decades also saw the intense civil rights struggle of African Americans and the equal rights campaign of the feminist movement; ethnic minorities and women were both disenfranchised groups whose rights had been denied in the name of western religion's doctrines. Representatives of Christian churches would often advise oppressed groups to not expect any tangible improvement in this world but rather seek the spiritual rewards in another realm. Therefore, both the new emphasis on material gains in this life and the dismissal of promises of eternal joy were for many a positive change.

Robert Wuthnow argues how in the U.S., "in the 1950s, virtually the only accepted way of being spiritual was to participate in a congregation" and comments that "this is no longer the case. . . increasingly, people shop

for spirituality as they do for everything else” (200). Along the same lines, Thomas Reeves examines statistical data that illustrate how people’s spiritual identity is increasingly formed independent of any affiliation with a church or synagogue (210). Although the change did not happen within a year or two but is an ongoing process, religion’s gradual fading appeal allowed spirituality to surface as a concept similar to but different from religion—something that may seem accepted now but was not the established way of looking at spirituality even in the not-so-distant critical past. For example, Lynn Ross Bryant’s book titled *Imagination and the Life of the Spirit* is, as its subtitle indicates, a study of religion and literature, but the terms spirituality and religion are used as if they are interchangeable and without differentiation, and there is not much critical space for the possibility of spirituality outside religion.

The two concepts are not antithetical to one another, yet they are not identical. Although I do not claim definitive answers to questions about what is spirit (and spirituality) and what is religion, my working definition for this study is that religions involve a set of dogmas and practices organized around a worship or acceptance of a divine entity, often with that entity conceived as having representatives on earth that act as conduits for the divine truth. This is a much more complex and elaborate notion than the idea of the spirit, the breath (*spiritus* in Latin) that exists in matter and makes it come alive—at least that is its most basic etymological definition. Spirituality is, then, the beliefs, interests and acts that result from this

notion, and which may or may not be connected to any concept of the divine or any dogmas resulting from it. While the Jewish-Christian image of God breathing life into the newly-molded Adam is a dominant image in western tradition, there is nothing about the etymology of the word to suggest that matter becomes animate life with assistance that comes from outside the world matter inhabits.

However, the belief in the spirit is also based on faith rather than proof, just as religion is, only the faith here relates to the idea that organic matter is different from inorganic in essence or that humans are different from other animals. The spirit is also a construct, much like love and ethics, as impossible to verify as other constructs humans create about themselves, yet as real in its manifestations as those other constructs—no matter whether we believe in something true or untrue, the results are often the same. Any psychologist could argue this as well as Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, who explains that the mind creates and reacts to its own reality when she explains how she helped a man who feared he was going to fall into an abyss simply because he imagined it. Furthermore, while there have always been perspectives that distinguished between spirituality and religion, I believe that in the United States anyway, the change Wythnow mentions is what allowed for this distinction to come to greater attention than in previous times. Yet, what Wuthnow refers to as the end of religious monopoly did not necessarily mean an altogether different way of conceptualizing spirituality. One of the main elements of western religions

has been the split of the world in a supposed spiritual world, to which religions often claimed to hold the key, and a material world, which is what the physical world was baptized. Such a dualism of matter and spirit as belonging to different realms rather than as the two components of the physical world is not limited to religions but permeates many schemes of spirituality also. In fact, dualistic perspectives on the world, which support that the physical world is only material and that the spiritual belongs to another realm are so prevalent, that most people identify spirituality with this dualism and its consequences. This study, then, will examine works by American writers who revise this dualism and propose instead that spirituality is rooted in and exists in the physical world, and that the relationships humans have with one another are the sustenance of the spirit. In my study of novels by Walker Percy, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor I will show how these authors offer an alternative to dualistic spirituality by proposing the spiritual dimension of this world rather than replicating the dualistic viewpoints of the spiritual and material world as two separate realities in a hierarchical relationship of the superior spiritual and the inferior material.

In western thought, the foundation of such dualistic perspectives on spirituality dates to Plato, whose ideas about spirit and matter from works such as *Phaedrus* and “The Allegory of the Cave” were eventually incorporated in many western religions. Plato’s schema theorizes that our position in the world does not allow us to acknowledge our inherent

limitations when it comes to knowledge of the world's reality. Plato argues that we resemble people chained deep in a cave who see shadows reflected on the cave's walls. The people in the cave, unable to imagine any other possibility, assume that these reflected shadows are the actual world. He asserts that there is a Reality, a world of Ideas, but we are as unable to gain knowledge of it, as the people in the cave are unable to gain knowledge of their own reality. Thus, the world we can experience through our senses is for Platonic thought the world of the matter that reflects the Ideas. The Ideas are not a part of this world and thus the physical becomes merely material, devoid of spirit. Just like the prisoners in the cave, we only see the reflection of the Reality, never the reflected Reality itself.

Some approaches to literature and spirituality follow this Platonic doctrine, except that in the field of literary criticism, Reality is religion and the literary work reflects it. T.S Eliot argues, "moral judgments of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation, whether it lives according to that code or not" (223). Eliot concludes that in a society that is predominantly Christian, for instance, the Christian code will be the standard against which we measure literature. We may like works that do not follow this code, but for Eliot, "it is our business, as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business, as Christians, *as well as* readers of literature, to know what we ought to like" (233). Eliot's approach, which is hermeneutic, is *heteronomy*: the measure of judgment lies outside the work. Obviously, not many works

would satisfy Eliot's criteria, and certainly not the texts I will discuss in this study, since their writers often revise, critique or even reject key aspects of the prevalent moral code—specifically these aspects that help reproduce oppressive and reactionary attitudes among humans.

Paul Tillich proposes a different approach, *theonomy*, in his book *The Protestant Era*, and he suggests that any literary work is open to questions about spirituality and/or religion. Tillich asserts, “a theonomous culture expresses in its creations an ultimate concern and a transcending meaning not as something strange but as its own spiritual ground” (57). In a theonomous approach, “religion is the substance of culture” and therefore any literary work is a work about religion and about the spirit. Tillich's premise is one of good intentions but problematic in its all-inclusive scope. One can argue that we can discuss Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and its relation to spirituality even when there are no references to it in the text, but it will be a discussion that will not be carried out in terms of the text's own language, which I view as a necessary condition. I believe that for the purpose of this study, the most suitable approach is R.W.B. Lewis' concept of *autonomy*. Lewis cautions that one should submit “for a while to the actual ingredients and the inner movement and growth of a work to see what attitudes and insight, including religious attitude and insight, the work itself brings into being” (99). Lewis' New-Critical emphasis on the inner working of the text is an attempt to steer criticism away from viewing

literature that deals with religion and/or spirituality as the matter reflecting the light of a greater reality, and instead to examine the reality the work presents.

Although Lewis' approach implies, perhaps, an a-historical study of the work, I find his methodology useful and I follow it in this study, although I modify it by including the examination of socio-economic factors that shape the works. The three novels I chose to examine in this study span the three decades mentioned earlier, as well as fall between the end of one era of "worshipping" materialist prosperity and the height of another, with *The Moviegoer* appearing at the end of the Eisenhower era and *Mama Day* at the end of the Reagan presidency. Mary Thale writes that a novel published in 1961 is as much a reflection of the 1950s as of the beginning of the 1960s, and the trademark of the 1950s decade was "the enthusiastic citizen of the Eisenhower era, using his money and leisure to express his individuality" (85). While it is in *Song of Solomon*, written both more than a decade later and by a black female writer that we see the upheaval that is the sixties and seventies trademark, *The Moviegoer* is not without its own critique of materialist lifestyle.

Within the framework of these decades, then, significant political, economic and cultural changes shape a different landscape, calling attention to the dualistic split of spirit and matter, religion and politics, spirituality and activism that Geraldine Finn argues are binary pairs which define the language and ideology of spirituality. Finn asserts that the

language of spirituality is often the language of “other-worldliness” which “sets up an opposition, a separation, an hiatus between ‘spiritual and ‘material’ being, between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ and ‘soul’ and ‘body’ from which depend a whole series of autogenous binary oppositions” (117). Finn’s claims are valid, but their absolute nature is not, for while dualistic perspectives on spirituality promote those binary oppositions, Percy, Morrison and Naylor suggest that there are alternative ways of defining spirituality.

Stephen Kent examines the interrelation of political activism and spirituality in the Vietnam War era in *From Slogans to Mantras*, and his book demonstrates what notions of spirituality are the ones creating the effects Finn mentioned. Kent discusses the merging of drugs and transcendence that came to be either a key element or the trademark of the counterculture of the sixties and seventies, depending on how liberal or conservative one’s outlook is. Kent examines the Beat generation as the earliest manifestation of this phenomenon, and comments on Ginzberg’s “mystical quest.” One experience with mind-altering drugs led Ginzberg to believe that “his room filled with the booming voice of William Blake reciting poetry” and thus, for years after this incident, Ginzberg would take drugs in an effort “to regain the pristine consciousness of eternal connectedness that he felt he had glimpsed in such visionary moments” (8-9). Such beliefs are Platonic in nature: they focus on the individual and the moment of epiphany, in which the individual receives a glimpse of the Real

world, transcendent and eternal, turning the world we live in to a prison from which we should escape. The only thing different in the case Kent describes is the use of drugs as an experience that will allow the psyche to unfold its wings as it gains glimpses of the truth—the world of Ideas—which is the definitive moment in Plato’s description of the human soul in *Phaedrus*.

Kent describes how in the sixties and seventies there was a proliferation of groups that sought new ways to spirituality, through eastern religions, cults, drug use or a combination of the above. As the Vietnam War escalated, however, “critics questioned the value and indeed the appropriateness of these inner-directed experiences. . . in the face of the politically driven human tragedy that was unfolding” (7). At the same time, the civil rights movement also called attention to the need for engagement rather than for a withdrawal into the self and a preoccupation with the self’s improvement, spiritual or otherwise. Kent asserts that at some point “mystical apoliticism within the counterculture received the scorn of activists” (23), while many strands of this mystical apoliticism were under the influence of authoritarian figures, cult leaders who represented the opposite of the freedom and individuality that those on the personal spirituality path claimed they were after.

The critique that spirituality denotes an esoteric concern with the self and a withdrawal from the community is of course not peculiar to the time Kent describes. Decades earlier, Freud had claimed that spirituality is

but the desire for mysticism, and “the craving of mysticism is ineradicable, and it makes ceaseless efforts to win back for mysticism the territory it has been deprived of by *The Interpretation of Dreams*” (165). If that is what spirituality is—either a withdrawal to the self or the mystic’s illusory quest—then perhaps the rejection of it is not without good cause. Indeed, the novels examined here propose that there is a different perspective from such dualisms. While there is certainly no common theory from which the three novelists operate, each is influenced by certain traditions; nonetheless, all arrive at a representation of spirituality as originating in humans rather than outside them and being directed towards other humans rather than towards the self.

Challenging the Distant Spirit World: Existentialism and Theology of Liberation

Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* opens with an epigram by Kierkegaard, a reference to Percy’s philosophical debt to one of the pre-eminent existentialists. Both in *The Sickness Unto Death* from which Percy borrows the epigram and in the two previous books, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard develops his philosophy of existence preceding essence, which would become the basis of many forms of existentialism from Christian to atheistic, and which is a reversal of Platonic thought. According to Kierkegaard, the spirit is formed out of matter and as a result of experience rather than by implanting itself on the empty vessel and prison that the physical is in dualistic thought. Percy also looks at existentialism as revised by twentieth-century thinkers like

Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel. In *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Sartre introduced the idea of humans being able to escape whatever void they may be in ethically and spiritually and to become *engagé*, engaged specifically in social and political life. Through this engagement, Sartre proposes, people can find their own meaning and self-definition. This idea of engagement or commitment, as it has also been called, contains an element of advocacy which can be interpreted in a strict or loose sense. Critics usually assume that such a term applies only to writers like Arnold Wesker, Doris Lessing and any other who promotes a particular political agenda. If this is the case, Percy does not qualify as an engaged writer; yet, I believe that since Percy is critical of the capitalist system of his time and the individualistic attitude of the times, he certainly calls for commitment to change.

Furthermore, one of the philosophical foundations of existentialism, Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, is challenged by Percy as indeed the counter-culture of the sixties would later challenge both the Cartesian dogma and its implications: that humans can use reason to wholly understand and explain the world and that the single individual mind is the cornerstone of civilization, a mind unaffected by the surrounding environment. Mary Howland connects Percy's work and personal philosophy with the work of a particular existentialist thinker who also challenges the Cartesian principle, Gabriel Marcel. In her book *The Gift of the Other*, Howland explains how Marcel criticizes the Cartesian belief in reason and acquired knowledge

through detached observation because for Marcel being is not a problem but a mystery. The distinction between the two is that “a problem allows the questioner to stand outside the data he examines like a scientist working in the laboratory” (Howland 9) and, as Marcel declares in *Being and Having*, a problem is “before me in its entirety” while a mystery “is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety” (100). As Howland explains, in Marcel’s world-view “a mystery is not something that cannot be solved, but rather the whole configuration of people and situations in which a person is involved, and from which the person can never separate self” (9). There can be then no “thing in itself,” no Platonic Idea of who humans are and what their essence is, and certainly no such understanding outside their particular circumstances. While Plato declared that the polis has nothing to offer to the understanding of the human soul, of the spirit, Marcel replies that outside the environment of the human experience, outside the polis, there is no human spirit to be understood.

Yet even at a time when religion, and in the case of western society, Christianity, was losing its monopoly on spirituality, there were voices within Christianity that called for the religion to become involved—engaged—in the affairs of the world and take an interest in the problems of the here and now rather than be preoccupied with the transcendent and the transient. Perhaps in no community was this more evident than among African Americans. Gayraud S. Wilmore chronicles the long relationship

of religion and political struggle in his book *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, where he traces the connection between black (Christian) religion and black America through slavery and then segregation and includes the declaration from *The National Committee of Black Churchmen* that “Black Theology is a theology of black liberation” (262). Wilson Moses approaches the issue of Christian religion and the African American community from yet another aspect in his book *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*. Moses explains that Americans, as a nation, have often seen themselves as a redeemer nation, the new Israelites in a new promised land, and thus the cultural manipulation of Messianic myth by the African American community draws upon and is re-enforced by the greater culture’s ties to this myth. In the time of upheaval that was the sixties, Moses points to Martin Luther King to illustrate how the myth of the chosen people and the representative from God who will help the chosen meet their destiny is manifested in King’s dictum, “Let my people go.” King uses Egypt as a metaphor for the socially unjust state of southern segregation, and uses the Christian religion to critique white, western power structures of oppression.

King is also the focus for part of Cornel West’s book *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. West asserts that writers and leaders like DuBois and King are part of what he calls the second stage of theological development in “Theology of Liberation as Critique of Institutional Racism,” yet West states that the final stage—the

fifth in his scheme—is “Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization.” In this stage, he argues, theology seeks to dismantle all systems of oppression and “demystify present ideological distortions or misreadings of society to bring to light who possess power and wealth, why they do, how they acquired it, how they sustain and enlarge it” (122). The novels by Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison examined in this work indeed look at systems of oppression regarding not only race but also sex and class and in varying degrees examine the accumulation of power and wealth and the means through which the accumulation takes place. However, while both writers have benefited from the tradition of black theology of liberation West delineates, they do not strictly adhere to the interrelation of religion and culture he proposes, for such interrelations present several problematic aspects.

The first of these has to do with the methodological issues discussed earlier—the problems that appear when a work of literature is seen as interpreting, reinterpreting or, even as Moses puts it, “manipulating” religious themes and myths. Whereas the use and revision of myths is a common function of literary texts, religious myths often create the assumption Eliot expresses—that good literature is good Christian literature. Furthermore, religious myths are usually embedded in the same dualistic framework of matter and spirit that has so often led to a disregard for socio-economic conditions and politics. Moses is right in stating that cultures have to “manipulate” the Messianic myth, indirectly admitting that

the myth as is cannot be used to critique and explore the concerns of the material world. Moses also warns that this myth “has undoubtedly been of use; but, like all myths, it has the potential to incite ‘behavior grossly inappropriate to the given historical situation’” (xi). The Messianic myth, being dualistic in nature, allows for esoteric interpretations of spirituality and the adoption of stoic attitudes rather than engagement and advocacy, which Moses asserts is the case in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* where “Uncle Tom had been portrayed as dying for the sins of the South” (49).

Even if we overcome all these concerns and look at black liberation theology as the model for such an approach to spirituality and political concerns, we are still left with a set of principles that are rooted in a kind of dualism and are interpreted in the best possible light to include a call for engagement, social critique and social change. We thus allow the framework to remain dualistic and change the way it is utilized by the practitioners, which is again a Messianic model since it relies on charismatic leaders who will be able to put dualism to good use. Gayraud Wilmore discusses how after King’s assassination “a new tough-minded skepticism, self-interest and sense of survival ...[took over] Black America” (263), since King’s idealistic, nonviolent, and in a way Messianic approach to the civil rights movement had been crushed by the white capitalist establishment. The process Wilmore describes is portrayed in *Song of Solomon*, which is set in an earlier era, but nonetheless reflects the

time of its composition. Macon Dead turns away from his father's spiritual vision of life and human relationships and seeks refuge and safety in the acquisition of property.

Since Morrison and Naylor come after these traditions of manipulation of the messianic myth and of black theology of liberation, they have been influenced by it and the influences show in a variety of ways, from the critique of George Andrews' sacrificial death in *Mama Day* to the abundance of Biblical names and allusions in *Song of Solomon*. At the same time, however, these authors, like Walker Percy, build upon the tradition that preceded them and create their own interpretation of spirituality and its relation to matters of this world, and in doing so employ traditions other than those of the western religion of Christianity. In her book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, Dona Marimba Richards proposes that "soul is the essence of the human in the African view" and this is a concept that "western metaphysics is not equipped to discuss" (36). Richards' definition of spirituality avoids the dualism of matter and spirit, heaven and earth, transient and eternal: "spirituality in an African context does not mean distant or 'non-human' and it certainly does not mean 'saintly' or 'pristine.' Spirituality refers to spiritual being, to that which gives life, form, and meaning to physical realities. It is the breath of life" (43). Leonard Barrett gives a similar definition in *Soul Force: African American*

Heritage in Afro-American Religion when he asserts that the “soul signifies the moral and emotional fibers of the black man” in African-American cultural tradition (34).

Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor draw upon these notions of spirituality—as an outcome of human relationships and commitment to one another and as the definition of the human experience in the physical world. From this perspective, the spiritual is fused with “a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, without one taking precedence over the other,” as Toni Morrison states in an interview (342). Morrison and Naylor bring together the social engagement tradition of black theology of liberation with the African perspective of spirituality as this-worldly, as the distinguishing characteristic of humans, whose essence needs no divine source, but nonetheless dictates ethical obligations towards others as entities partaking in the same spiritual reality. Rather than an escape from the physical world, spirituality becomes the reason for action in it. Hence, both authors also denounce dualistic dilemmas and the esoteric, individualistic and stoic brand of spirituality that Moses describes as problematic in his book. Carlyle Stewart provides an example of this stoic approach to spirituality in an African American context in his book *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness* when he states that “African-American spirituality has enabled [African Americans] to adapt, transcend, and transform the absurdities of racism, oppression, and adverse human conditions” (xiii). Stewart exclaims, “To be exposed to the cruelest forms

of human denigration while maintaining personal dignity, optimism, and an unwavering love of God is a remarkable achievement.” More than remarkable, it is a heroic and perhaps utopian achievement, neither of which the examined texts condone.

Morrison and Naylor do not suggest that there are individuals of such extraordinary potential that they can always “transcend” the absurdities of racism and oppression—in fact quite the opposite. George Andrews in *Mama Day* and Macon and Guitar in *Song of Solomon* are crushed by the systems of exploitation and either become perverted representations of humanity wholly devoted to materialism—like Macon Dead—or end up incomplete and unable to overcome this alienation from African-American spiritual traditions, as happens to George Andrews. Because Morrison and Naylor propose that spirituality is both the breath of life in every human and the collective meaning we draw from connection with another, they also suggest that the various obstacles we face and the obstacles we raise towards some parts of the human community make spiritual connection extremely difficult or impossible, and in some cases make life altogether meaningless. Jacquelyn Grant argues, “The connectedness of people is the only hope of the oppressed. Western culture’s individualism must yield to the profound African understanding that says, ‘I am because we are.’ We are defined by our community, and if our community is negated, so are we” (206). People are defined by the injustices they suffer because of various systems of oppression, while those

who do not suffer but permit such suffering are also defined by their actions or lack thereof; since spirituality is not the result of a predetermined soul entering the human body, we collectively derive our own life's meaning, essence and breath by the conditions we create and perpetuate for every single member of society.

Besides the traditions already mentioned, many critics characterize the works by Morrison and Naylor examined here as examples of “magical realism.” While this particular aspect of their fiction is not part of this study's scope, I believe it is useful to address the manner in which the magical realism tradition amplifies the way the two novels present spirituality as connection among humans. Gabrielle Foreman asserts that “repossessing historical experience” is part of Morrison's work through the process of “rememory” (285). The term magical realism has been widely defined as fiction that includes elements that cannot be explained rationally; however, as Foreman explains it, these elements are not merely manifestations of the uncanny or of a fantastic realm, because magical realism “presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (286).

In Latin American fiction, where the term is frequently applied, there is often a thematic concern with the traditions and belief systems of a disenfranchised group whose culture has been almost obliterated by the colonizing forces of domination and oppression. Yet through those

unexplainable, fantastic elements present in the magical realism text, the culture and traditions of the oppressed subvert the dominant group's "reality" and prove to be enduring and a source of empowerment for the oppressed. Both *Song of Solomon* and *Mama Day* explore the ways in which African-American traditions and especially the belief systems about spirituality have been marginalized or negated by white middle-class America, often through the contribution of African-Americans themselves, as the Deads in *Song of Solomon* and Mrs. Jackson in *Mama Day* demonstrate. Yet, in both works the repressed system of beliefs confront the dominant ideology, and the challenge does not come simply in the form of some fantastic element (like Solomon's flight or Mama Day's conjure powers), but also in the spiritual emptiness that characters like Milkman and George experience. The ties to the historical past and its spiritual traditions prove strong enough to become a basis from which to question the forces that deny these traditions

Spirituality as "Puzzlement" and Critique of Heroic Narratives

While so far we have anticipated the ways in which representations of spirituality by Percy, Morrison and Naylor suggest that spirituality is attained through an engagement with the problems of the other and a rejection of individualism, there is still a basic query unanswered: what do such post-dualistic representations of spirituality offer to the physical world and our understanding and critique of it? The first reply here relates to the way the examined texts move past dualistic visions of truth and unity

in a world of ideas, which is the Platonic grand narrative. Spiritual systems of belief do not hold monopoly on Platonic dualism, a point Don Cupitt makes. Cupitt examines how political leaders adhere to Platonic visions of the world and he observes that they frequently present themselves as the individual who “has everything at his or her fingertips: the vision, the grasp of detail, the clear convictions and the unwavering sense of purpose . . . they have to fulfill fantasies of far-sightedness and rocklike strength” (149). Cupitt asserts that while in actuality political leaders are “trimmers, fixers, and compromisers. . . everything that Plato despised” (150), they often create a heroic image and narrative of themselves and the political process promoting the conviction that “life can be rationalized and events can be managed.”

One consequence of accepting the assumption that life and spirit are derived from ourselves and one another is that we cannot expect that there *is* a realm with all the answers. Nor can we anticipate that the world we live in is always coherent and rationally explained because it is a reflection of a perfect world of ideas or of a divine creator’s mind. Since we are the ones who create meaning in it, the world is bound to reflect our own imperfection and frequent incoherence. However, people are not comfortable with accepting incomplete visions of their reality, as Cupitt notes when he writes that as we become highly reflective, “we become vividly and ironically aware of the machinery by which we sustain the fictions we need in order to live, and the ironical awareness of our own

self-manipulation imposes a certain strain on us” (151). When Freud called religion an illusion, he did not refer as much to the illusion of the creator as to the illusion that because of a creator every action and event have an explainable cause and eventually benevolent consequence.

Since we are prone to construct such narratives of perfection and causality about our everyday reality, the examined texts use spirituality to provide a sense of puzzlement, the term Terry Eagleton uses. In his discussion of Brecht’s plays, Eagleton asserts that narratives of perfection and causality form each culture’s ideology, the characteristic of which, Eagleton argues, is that it presents itself as a granted reality and attempts to hide its artificiality which is the “Mimesis ...[that] preceded and encircles meaning” (470). This artificiality is often translated into statements about what is “self-evident” in this world whether this is a theological or a political system of thought. Children, the argument goes, can still detect the artificiality not because they are, Rousseau-like, purer at heart, but because they have not yet been indoctrinated well enough to accept mimesis as “reality.” In adult life, however, where such indoctrination has taken place, we cannot easily see the artifice and so artists use certain techniques to help us see. Morrison states that in *Song of Solomon* she uses spirituality to “keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while [the reader is] being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world” (“Unspeakable” 32). Her statement indicates that spirituality can be such a technique—a way for the

reader to question the idea of “reality,” to doubt that what we know is pure knowledge rather than a mixture of assumptions, prejudices and information from various sources with their own ideological stamps. Thus, the representations of spirituality in the examined texts not only provide suggestions about what it means that humans are spiritual beings and the consequent ethical obligations of such a belief, but also challenge established and uncritical preconceptions about how humans live their lives in a given society in a specific era. The spiritual is part of the physical world and therefore it can be used and is used to critique and effect change in it.

At the same time, the texts I study challenge the monomyth of the hero with mythic potential who will fulfill his or her destiny and restore cosmic order, the hero of both spiritual quest and political leadership grand narratives. In her book *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*, Sharon D. Welch asks what we do “when the myths of heroes and grand causes no longer incite us or evoke passion and energy” (4). Welch argues that while political activism and advocacy evoke passion for struggle, there is a difference between “the pure energy of unrelenting and uncompromising critique of unjust structures” and “the more complex task of shaping institutions” (27). Moreover, while grand narratives of bringing peace and prosperity for all are utopian, often the goals of political struggle are short-term and tangible, and create an impression that conflict can be resolved to a satisfactory outcome once and

for all. Derrick Bell notes how “society implemented its commitment to ending racial segregation—only to replace it with more effective, if less obvious, forms of white dominance. The new techniques, unlike the vanquished Jim Crow practices, were immune to legal attack” (12). This indictment is repeated in different words in *Mama Day* by Zora Neale Hurston, who laments that at least when segregation was legal, discrimination based on race was easier to identify than in current times.

Welch suggests that it is counter-productive, in the long-term, to seek to end conflict, since conflicting interests will always exist among different categories of people. Welch suggests that instead of seeking to eliminate conflict, we should learn to use it, and I believe that to be the function of the works analyzed here. All three works include versions of heroic quests or pilgrimages that prove unproductive, from Binx’s intellectual quest for spirituality to Milkman’s desire to fly like Solomon to Cocoa’s flight to New York to escape her legacy, and in all three the individualistic path of the hero is shown not to be able to provide any mythic solutions. Although in these works by Percy, Morrison and Naylor the self can find its potential and meaning—its spirit—through commitment to and participation in the community, all three subvert the expectation of an ending that provides easy answers and none of them provide a conclusion in the sense of a resolution of the conflicts present in the text. Because they dramatize conflict rather than seek to resolve it, each work, rather than suggesting a mythic end, points to the positive outcome from a

particular cycle of struggle in which humans as spiritual beings participate while anticipating the next. In this sense the framing of the three works by two eras of American materialistic pursuit is yet another manifestation of this pattern of cyclic conflict.

The Design of the Study

Building on the above mentioned common elements, I intend to examine *The Moviegoer*, *Song of Solomon* and *Mama Day* as narratives which propose ways humans gain an awareness of self, of purpose, and of their place in the overall human drama through their connection to one another and the world in which they live. At the same time, and in varying degrees, the texts explore the obstacles to attaining such a spiritual awareness as well as our obligations that result from this spiritual awareness.

Chapter Two, titled “Revising Spiritual Dualism: The Critique of Material Prisons and Mythical Escapes,” demonstrates how these three novels reject two key dichotomies of spiritual dualism: that of the hero and the community and that of matter and spirit. In the first case, the hero is supposed to be the chosen and privileged member of a community to which he or she needs to bring enlightenment. In the second, the material and earthly world is perceived to be what weighs people down and hinders them from reaching for the transcendent. The monomyth as described by Rank and Campbell is perceived to be inadequate to describe non-dualistic spirituality and the protagonists move away from this view of themselves

as Promethean, bringing fire to the primitives. The perspective the protagonists eventually adopt is that of individuals who gain an awareness that their self-definition comes from the network of relationships they belong to, and through this network their own meaning and their own spiritual being becomes a reality. At the same time, the spirituality of the physical world is distinguished from materialism and views of the physical as merely material, and thus the matter/spirit split proves to be a pseudo-dilemma.

In Chapter Three, “The Politics of Spirit,” I discuss how the texts negotiate the relationship between the socio-economic reality of the characters and the possibility and potential for spiritual connection. Since the texts do not promote the idea of the hero who can overcome any difficulty and transcend any obstacle of everyday life, we discover how certain characters have the potential for understanding themselves and their lives as meaningful in the network of human relations and thus can gain a sense of the spiritual. Yet, their potential is not realized precisely because certain conditions hinder them. At the same time, the novels examined also explore the relationship between perspectives on spirituality and larger ideological assumptions—for instance, how Binx’s rejection of religion in *The Moviegoer* is also related to his uncertain status in the middle class and how in *Mama Day* George’s rejection of the spiritual is also a commitment to white middle-class ideas.

Chapter Four, “Ways of Spiritual Connection: Intersubjectivity and Communal Tradition,” focuses on the manner in which the notions of engagement with and commitment to the other as ways of attaining spirituality are explored from the perspectives of a white and black middle-class protagonist. Both *The Moviegoer* and *Song of Solomon* have protagonists who come to accept that transcending self-centeredness and taking an active interest in the problems of those around them is a way for their sense of self to become meaningful, and for them to attain a sense of a spiritual link with others. Yet, an examination of the two works also shows how the sphere of the commitment differs and how the difference is not simply a matter of character but of the tradition of the communities they belong to. Their differences also apply to the way they examine their actions up to the point of commitment, with Binx choosing not to revisit previous experiences and Milkman understanding how much revisiting these experiences is pivotal to his new sense of self and spirituality. Finally, the different fates of each character also reveal how the sphere of the other varies for each novel. Milkman’s story needs to include those like Guitar who have been marginalized and rendered unable to achieve what Milkman has, while Binx’s sphere includes the interpersonal but finally does not escape the white middle-class to which he ideologically belongs.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “Death’s Fading Appeal,” I examine how post-dualistic representations of spirituality revisit the relationship between life and death in the lives of the protagonists. While in dualistic

perspectives life is transient and therefore only a preparation for the eternal and thus more valuable life, the three novels revise that notion and propose that sacrificial death or service through death is not superior to life and the ways in which we should try to help others. Since both life and the breath of life that is the spirit are created and sustained in this life, there is no dichotomy between the eternal and the transient. Furthermore, the chapter explores how dualistic spirituality associates women with life, and thus the transient, while the deconstruction of the matter and spirit binary pair also allows for resulting binary pairs like male and female to be re-evaluated. As a result, their respective contributions to human life and spirituality are valued as equally significant.

CHAPTER 2:

REVISING SPIRITUAL DUALISM: THE CRITIQUE OF MATERIAL PRISONS AND MYTHICAL ESCAPES

Myths of heroes entice readers, and perhaps for good reason. Otto Rank proposes that the pattern of the monomyth is one that we culturally pass on to each generation, while Joseph Campbell elaborates on Rank's premise that the monomyth is archetypal. In his works, such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*, Campbell illustrates the wide variety of cultures in which Rank's monomyth appears. Thus, both Rank and Campbell provide us with the notion of powerful, charismatic individuals that are destined to change the world around them.

Furthermore, the assurances that these patterns are archetypal allow for any area and era to produce such an individual. In the case of spiritual quests, the mythical protagonists discover that they are the ones who can escape the spiritual void their world experiences and can find enlightenment. These heroes can then help their community because they are the ones who left the Platonic cave and understood that there is another reality beyond sense-reality. In addition, at times the community is the greater humanity rather than a particular social, ethnic or geographical group. Joyce's Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* best exemplifies this spiritual quest pattern in literature. At the end of the novel, Stephen has an epiphany that helps him understand how his destiny is far greater than the one that his spiritually empty family life has to offer.

Even his country, Ireland, does not represent the boundaries of Stephen's potential. As the allusion of his last name indicates, for Stephen the sky is the limit, and earth is most certainly not.

The moment of epiphany is a pivotal one in such a quest as it offers the hero a glimpse of the world of Ideas in the Platonic schema. Therefore, such quests are inevitably based on a dualistic split of matter and spirit and the hero is the one who, as Campbell notes, becomes master of the two worlds. In their novels, Percy, Morrison, and Naylor revise both the individualistic spiritual quest and the view of the physical world as purely material. *The Moviegoer*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Mama Day* revisit these two elements of dualistic spirituality and expose the limits of such a perspective. The first element critiqued is the supposition that only the chosen individual can help the supposed material world and only by leaving the community behind as he or she embarks on a solitary path to spirituality. The second element denounced is the assumption that the physical world is purely material and that the spiritual can only come as an epiphany from its own separate realm.

Solitary Quests

The hero of the monomyth has little or nothing to learn from his or her immediate environment, which is perceived as restrictive and devoid of potential to instruct and enrich the spiritual horizon of the protagonist. The community is often in abject darkness and needs to be enlightened by the Prometheus-like individual who will bring the fire of choice after many

trials lead to the epiphany. These illuminating experiences are the trip or odyssey of the hero, and they distinguish him or her from the community that has been left behind in order for him or her to gain new knowledge. As in the parable of the cave, the hero is the one who leaves the cave and recognizes that the others are mistaking shadows of things for the essence of things. Leaving the less insightful behind as one escapes the shackles that bind humans to spiritual ignorance is the defining moment for the solitary spiritual quest. In *The Moviegoer* and *Song of Solomon*, Walker Percy and Toni Morrison use elements of the monomyth, but rather than affirming its relevance to their protagonists' lives, both writers expose the monomyth's inefficiency to express any vision other than an individualistic one. Whether the protagonist is on an intellectual quest like Binx or on a search for his family's myth like Milkman, the texts reveal the limitations of such solitary endeavors.

The works by Percy and Morrison examined in this study have already been connected with the monomyth of the hero and the quest. Lewis Lawson finds that Binx's vertical and horizontal searches are a quest in the sense of a pilgrimage ("Pilgrim" 56) while Charles De Arman sees Milkman as the archetypal hero in the article of the same name. However, such perspectives focus on "the hero's quest" elements of the narratives without taking notice of the subversion of the monomyth world-view in which both works engage. I see Percy and Morrison commenting on and reworking both the quest pattern and the mystical path to spirituality, both

equally individualistic notions that call for the protagonist to abandon the community and embark on a journey within, out of which a new understanding of the world and its two separate realms emerges. In fact, both texts provide their protagonists with clues that reveal how there was no need to distance themselves from the community they lived in, and that participation in the community's life would have been enough to provide them with spiritual insights. While neither of the two protagonists is a mystic in the strict sense of the word, both Binx and Milkman adopt a key feature of the mystical perception of spirituality, which is the solitary path. Evelyn Underhill asserts that those who embark on this esoteric spiritual journey have in common "a type which refuses to be satisfied with that which other men call experience, and is inclined, in the words of its enemies, to 'deny the world in order that it may find reality'" (3). Underhill also notes that for these individuals "their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain and intangible quest" which she defines as the quest for "absolute truth." Both Binx and Milkman seem consumed with desire to reach this absolute truth even as they constantly ignore opportunities to find truths about themselves.

As already mentioned, *Song of Solomon* has often been discussed in terms of the hero's quest, and Morrison has said in interviews that she seeks to include in her novels those old stories and myths that used to be passed on from generation to generation through folklore. She writes, "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't

sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel” (“Rootedness” 339). In the above quote Morrison redefines the cultural transmission of myth Campbell talks about: those archetypal stories are not passed on unaltered, but include new information—and new information is shaped by the specific historical situation within which this cultural transmission takes place. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes historicizes the question of myth and argues that “it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (129). Still, Barthes notes, “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it things lose the memory that once they were made” (142). Morrison’s statement about new information and her assertion that *Song of Solomon* is about “rememory” show that what is remembered is not simply the myth but also the conditions of its historical production. And through this attention to history, the myth is judged against the current historical reality. Indeed, *Song of Solomon* appears to follow Rank’s blueprint closely, yet a careful examination shows that the process is not mere reproduction. Morrison exposes the monomyth as irrelevant to the socio-economic reality of her characters and suggests that for the African American the heroic quest pattern can only exist as a

parody rather than as eternal truth. Such an individualistic schema cannot describe the communal sense of spirituality that the African American experience entails.

The first part of Rank's monomyth identifies the hero as a person of the highest status: "the hero is a child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king" (57). In *Song of Solomon*, the affluent Dead family is the local community's version of the mythical royalty, with Milkman the prince, but they reside in a house that is "more prison than palace" (10). Every characteristic of the Dead family corresponds to Rank's description at the same time as it is subverts it by mocking it. Milkman's grandfather was "the biggest Negro in the city" in that he was "the most respected." Macon informs his son, "Negroes in this town worshipped him. He didn't give a damn about them, though" (71). Macon himself is the richest black man in town, but his interactions with his tenants and his threat to evict Guitar and his family show that he too does not care about the black people of his community (22). Even Solomon, the ultimate progenitor of Milkman's family line, will turn out to be a great mythical figure, the flying African, but also a man who deserted and did not care for other people in his community. Each distinguishing characteristic of Milkman's lineage finally adds up to indifference rather than nobility. At the end of his path towards Solomon lies a story of desertion, not one of spiritual epiphany. Gerry Brenner has demonstrated how in a way the novel fulfills most of Rank's requirements, from the origin that is preceded by

difficulties to the rescue by animals or apparently insignificant people as “Milkman is repeatedly saved by lowly women: Pilate, Ruth, Circe, Sweet, and Susan Byrd” (14-15). My interest, however, lies in the contrast between what is supposed to be at the end of Milkman’s quest and what he indeed finds. Milkman recovers his family’s narrative and the myth of the flying African, but, when he does, he also recognizes that Pilate already kept alive that tradition and embodied the myth of flying in her life rather than in escape fantasies.

The quest itself exemplifies the dualism of matter and spirit that is a characteristic of the monomyth; ironically, Milkman’s quest is both material and spiritual. Macon sends his son to find a mythic treasure, the gold of the man that he killed in the cave, while Milkman believes that through the search he will find freedom and some sense of self which he lacks—some meaning in his empty life. Milkman leaves after he has abandoned Hagar and has received a severe tongue-lashing by Lena for damaging Corinthians’ chance for a relationship with Porter. So, although he does not acknowledge such a desire, we know that Milkman runs away from his obligations and his mistakes; he does not run towards his destiny. After all, he always wanted to fly. The one thing which makes Milkman stand out in the story, given his unimpressive personality, is his fascination with flight, a fascination the text connects at first with the circumstances of his birth, another part of Rank’s formula, the “surrender to the water” which as Brenner notes is substituted with surrender to the air. Milkman,

we are told, is the first “colored baby ...born inside Mercy” (9) although this is by coincidence and not because the hospital changed policy just for him. At the time of his birth, Mr. Smith commits suicide by putting on two silk wings and attempting to fly. We learn that “the blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself” (9). Milkman becomes a dull boy without imagination because of that discovery, so rather than showing Milkman’s mythic potential, the initial connection with flight becomes crippling. The family car rides every Sunday, which had become rituals “too important for Macon to enjoy,” are a “burden” for the young boy (31), who could not sit on his mother’s lap per Macon’s dictum and was always riding backwards, which “made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him” (32). Morrison likes toying with our myth-based expectations: we expect that Milkman will one day have an epiphany and “fly,” leaving behind the oppressive and limiting world of his father, like another Stephen Daedalus.

Instead, Morrison shows how much Milkman is like his family and his father in some aspects, even as a child. Milkman is troubled by looking at “where he had been” and his rejection of things passed mirrors his family’s rejection of the past. This rejection dates back to Milkman’s grandfather who was given the last name Dead by a drunk white man and decided to keep it since his wife liked it, “said it was new and would wipe

out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). It did just that for Macon and his family, except that one with no past is also without a future—dead as the name fittingly suggests. The subversion of the spiritual quest pattern, however, is not simply in affirming and mocking every element of the pattern but in challenging the very notion that the quest is the moral imperative of the individual and that if enlightenment is to be reached, then the hero must undertake the quest. Morrison uses Milkman to critique the individualistic conception of spirituality by suggesting that all he has to do is look around and notice how Pilate flies without ever leaving the ground, which is Milkman’s final recognition. As Dorothea Mbali asserts, “Milkman flies despite his new awareness that true flight for humanity in general and the African in particular is the ability to fly without ever leaving the ground” (137). This ability Milkman has experienced as early as adolescence when he visits Pilate, and the visit is “the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy” (47). We find that the odyssey to the south that Milkman eventually undertakes will not yield more to Milkman’s spiritual quest than what his simple trip to the other side of the town reveals. There he experiences a different way of life, one that sees the spiritual being a result of the connections among humans in the physical world. Pilate and her family enjoy life as they enjoy each other. All Milkman has to do is look at this situation, but he is so self-absorbed he refuses to take notice. Pilate has even kept the memory of the family myth alive in the song about Solomon/Sugarman she often sings, but

that also does not interest Milkman. Harry Reed writes that “most of the lessons of Pilate’s pride, freedom, strength, humanity and native intelligence are lost on [Milkman]” and while “Morrison does not blindly celebrate the old way,” she does imply that “it offers freedom and is relatively easy to acquire” (83).

Therefore, the experiences Milkman has in the beginning of the novel are not substantially different from the end in terms of the lessons communicated about human life and its intrinsic value. The kind of spiritual awareness and connection to the female gender Milkman attains with Sweet at Shalimar was his to achieve even in Pilate’s wine house. There, early in his life, Milkman finds himself among three women with “a guileless look about them,” who “seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud” (47)—a far cry from his house. There is, within proximity, an alternative to Macon Dead’s household where Macon has established a lifestyle that strips its inhabitants of the possibility to enjoy life. Macon’s house is “quiet ...not peaceful, for it was preceded by and would soon be terminated by the presence of Macon Dead” (10). In Pilate’s house Milkman witnesses also the contrast to Macon’s (and his own) insensitivity for others’ needs, since here Hagar’s declaration that she had hungry days produces profound sorrow and despair (49). However, what prevents him from acknowledging what these women offer him is not the outside circumstances, the world, but his own selfishness. While his relationship with his friend Guitar is one where Milkman appreciates Guitar’s wisdom,

kindness and fearlessness, with Pilate's family he gets pleasure from the women's enjoyment of him rather than his enjoyment of their company—a much more self-centered feeling. Milkman always expects others will offer him themselves while he will give nothing of himself in return. His mother will give him a love “he didn't even have to earn or deserve,” a love which “seemed to him natural,” while the women in the wine house offer a love which “seemed ... an extension of the love he had come to expect from his mother” (79). Patrick Bjork writes that Milkman uses Pilate's house as an escape from his father's house and “is not anymore committed to Pilate's world than to his parents” (93).

As Milkman grows up, his lack of interest in others and sole focus on himself grows, although his self is, by his own admission, unimpressive. Again, rather than the need for the hero to leave the community to find himself, Morrison shows that Milkman needs to find himself in his commitment to the community and in caring for the people around him, which he never does. While looking at his image, Milkman finds it a combination of good-looking parts which “taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self” (69). Milkman finds that his own self becomes less and less interesting to him. Only gradually will he come to realize what Pilate already knows: without connection with others, a human is not that impressive. Milkman's lack of concern for others, his unwillingness to engage in their lives and partake in them leaves him hollow, spiritually

empty and self-centered. He is nothing like his friend Guitar, who exhibits an interest in the plight of those around him and is the one who understands Hagar's pain when Milkman refuses to care. Guitar cares even for those he does not know personally, as in the case of Emmett Till, when Guitar is shocked about the injustice he hears on the radio, but Milkman—always believing the world was meant to revolve around him and his needs—exclaims: “Yeah, well, fuck Till. I’m the one in trouble” (88). Faced with the social reality of gross racial injustice, Milkman as the solitary hero refuses to engage in that reality and thus demonstrates that the myth of the hero is as indifferent to this reality as Milkman is.

In one instance after another, Milkman is offered opportunities to see life as meaningful and link the incoherent parts of his self by linking himself to the interests and problems of people around him, and he rejects every one, proving with each such rejection that the individualistic path is a dead-end. Ruth tells Milkman that her father, Dr. Foster was “not a good man ... arrogant, and often a foolish and destructive one” (124), but he cared for whether and how Ruth lived, emphasizing that nobody else ever did or does now, so she knows Milkman does not care for her. Doreatha Mbalia argues, “Milkman is emotionally estranged from Ruth Dead as he is from all women with whom he interacts. As his nickname suggests, he milks women, pilfering their love and giving nothing in return” (52), which is exactly the opposite of what we expect a hero to be—a giver to the community. Milkman is the quintessential taker. He does not go on a quest

because he wants to find himself and his sense of spirit but because he wants to escape from both. Thus, through Milkman the text comments on the individualistic endeavors the monomyth suggests: the denial of the world in order to find reality is revised and becomes a denial of the reality of the world. The protagonist of the individualistic spiritual quest does not seek the truth about himself or herself but rather runs away from it. Even at the end of the novel, Milkman does not experience some epiphany whose message he will transmit to others, but rather comes to understand how much he has been a taker. He acknowledges how much he has refused to value what people—especially women—in his life have offered him, and how ungrateful towards them and indifferent to their problems he has been. Campbell writes that the final stage of the hero's quest has the hero receiving some life elixir, but the last act in Milkman's quest is Hagar's death, which is connected to his abandonment of his responsibilities towards others, followed by Pilate's death who is shot because of the quest for gold in which he involved Guitar. Only at the end does he realize that lessons about life and life's value were to be learned through others and not away from them.

A critique of a different type of individualistic spiritual quest takes place in *The Moviegoer*. Binx, the protagonist of the novel, is not involved in any heroic tasks nor does he have any destiny to fulfill, but he shuns experience and the community he lives in, believing that he can attain spirituality and define a meaning for his life through solitary intellectual

endeavors. As critics have noted, Binx takes on the role of the pilgrim in the city. He exhibits a disdain for empiricism, which is the disdain of the Platonic seeker who has to bypass the particular to see the Idea. Binx remembers one summer when he was supposed to do laboratory research, but, he explains, "then a peculiar thing happened. I became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory. . . . I became bewitched by the presence of the building; for minutes at a stretch I sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight" (52). The scene shows Binx being drawn to a mystical view of life. He believes his viewpoint superior to that of Harry, the student he was working with in the laboratory: "I do not envy him. I would not change places with him if he discovered the cure of cancer," and the reason is, Binx adds, "He is no more aware of the mystery that surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water he swims in" (52). The "mystery" could allude to the way Marcel uses the word, when he defines life to be a mystery rather than a problem in that not all of it can be observed from the outside as if we are mere observers to the phenomenon of life and not participants in it (*Being and Having* 100). Yet, Binx's actions do not show this understanding of mystery, but rather a sense of the unexplainable, the mystical experience. His profound revelation of the mystery leads him to the "quest of the spirit of summer" and "the company of an attractive and confused girl from Bennington who fancied herself a poet." Thus, the experience in the laboratory does not lead him to the spiritual but to the spirit of the summer,

which is whatever spiritual awareness confused girls who fancy themselves poets can offer to a seeker of the type Binx represents in this passage..

Binx attempts to fulfill his quest by not allowing the world around him to inhibit that quest, so that he can undertake an intellectual, Platonic in nature, search, his “vertical search” through which he believes he will find the fundamental truths about human nature. Such an attitude reflects Evelyn Underhill’s description of mysticism, whose “aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe” (81). Binx also does not care about improving anything in the universe around him and thus he can scorn those like Harry who take such an interest. Instead, Binx informs us that “until recent years [he] read only ‘fundamental’ books, that is key books on key subjects.” His examples are “*War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, the solution of the problem of time; Schroedinger’s *What is Life?*, Einstein’s *The Universe as I See It*, and such,” since he adds, “During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere” (69). He would not literally discover these fundamental truths. Nevertheless, by reading the key works of each discipline, he claims that he sought to unify and uncover the basic connection of all these key works. Lewis Lawson writes, “Binx. . . successfully completes his ‘vertical search,’ that is, reaches the top of Plato’s Divided Line, at which point one gazes upon the Forms, the Idea” (“Cave” 14). When Binx discusses the

vertical search with Kate, he informs her, “There is excitement to the search. . . because as you get deeper and deeper into the search, you unify. You understand more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae. There is the excitement” (82).

The text does not validate Binx’s statement, however. Earlier the mystery of these summer rays ended up with him reducing the spirit of summer to being with that “confused” girl, and now his encounters with the key works in each field are not described with excitement. Quite the opposite, in fact. Gradually these fewer and fewer formulae he needed to understand became not formulae but stereotypes, and he began seeing everyone as dead, his aunt’s campaigns as pointless and self-defeating, and the only joy being in irony, besides that other joy of making money. More and more Binx understood less and less in his trip towards unification of all these theories, and his “search” itself became itself an everydayness, a routine which prevented him from any actual search. Kate alludes to the ineffectiveness of his “search” when she says: “It is possible, you know, that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you fell over it” (83). Binx is unable to even fathom what that could be, caught in the everydayness of his artificial search. However, he admits that when he was finished with these works, the main goals of the search “were reached or were in principle reachable.” “The only difficulty,” he goes on to say, “was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over” (70). There is no success on Binx’s

part in this type of search, but rather a dead-end. He has sought to understand the experience of human life not through experience but in the abstract, and has sought to understand the experience of one particular man (himself) through universals, archetypes, and other theories applying to any human in general, but perhaps not really to anyone in particular. Binx describes that his agony was far from over: “There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next” (70). The solitary quest proves as problematic to him as it does to Milkman.

After that failed search he undertakes his next one, which he calls the “horizontal search,” that has led him to movie-going as part of the search although he says that “the movies are onto the search but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair” (13). Lewis Lawson has compared Binx’s movie-going to the allegory of the cave, and that is indeed how Binx would like to view his experience. However, the movies are yet another escape from the world rather than a revelation about it, and thus they end up in despair because the experience is one that isolates him. Much as Milkman cannot see a coherent whole when he looks at himself because he lacks spiritual connection with his community, Binx’s search ends up in despair instead of a meaningful answer to his quest because his quest also puts him in isolation from his community. Simone Vauthier writes that the title of the work itself points to “the screen world against the private experience of the individual who goes to the cinema.” Thus, we

can “imagine the key to the context to be the relationship between the character—whom we presume to be more or less an escapist—and the world of cinematographic illusion” (220). As he did with his vertical search earlier, Binx believes that his search should never be a direct involvement with experience, with the life of the community he lives in. The middle-class ideals of individualism and self-reliance, the vision of the successful man or woman that can advance on his or her own, would not be served with a method that would require spiritual connection with other human beings in understanding both the world and ourselves. His search for the spiritual was at first intellectual and then turns aesthetic, but it is still a search from a distance.

The reason critics like Lawson see a connection between the allegory of the cave and movie-going has to do with Binx’s strict adherence to the Platonic allegory’s tenets: he feels that there is a Reality out there, and that earthly experience is the same experience as being chained and looking at the shadows on the cave’s wall. Much as the ideology of capitalism insists that professional success, social status, affluence and so forth are there for those with the drive and stamina to reach them, Binx believes that Reality is out there for the one who desires to look at it. The individual has but to break free from the chains of the cave and come out into the sun of Reality. Thus, due to these Platonic, dualistic beliefs of a spirituality which is a reflection of another world on this one, Binx also sees the meaning of this world reflected upon it from another, and in the absence of religious beliefs

he escapes to another sort of reflection, that of the projected movie image. Of course Binx does not believe that movies themselves are the Platonic Ideal, but he believes that they are a better way to his search than what is outside the theater. He will go so far as to have a conversation with those in the vicinity—usually the cashiers—but he will not take an active interest in the lives of the rest of the people, unless it is to pass ironic commentary on them and their lives.

The most important way in which the text suggests that the movies cannot offer Binx anything unless he gets involved and engaged in others' lives is his inability to see the parallelism between his life and the first movie he recalls, right after he remembers Scotty's death. In that movie, a man has an accident, loses his memory and, after losing friends and family, he finds himself a stranger in a strange city. Although seemingly a tragedy, the movie portrays the man eventually making a whole new life for himself: he has no family but gets a house, a career, and a beautiful girlfriend. The man could of course be the characteristic post-WWII American male. Because of the increased mobility offered by the extensive highway network and expansive American capitalism, modern man drops all ties to his birthplace and community and goes on to make a fresh new start. He then creates the unit of a nuclear family, with older generations, old friends and birthplace traditions tossed aside.

Binx has been living the movie's script, with a twist: he has proved equally capable of being unconnected to a place and family even while

staying in the same area, as the novel later demonstrates. His aunt at one point asks him to go back to doing “whatever it was you did before you walked out on us,” indicating that Binx walked out on both a possibility for a satisfying career and on his close ties with his family. Granted, his aunt cannot have been much of a family connection, soldiering on in life as she does, but we see that he does have a relationship of mutual understanding with Kate, and even though he has not moved to another city, he is really only involved with Kate when she is in some danger. Commenting on this movie, Binx misses the degree to which he has turned his life into a reflection of it; he mentions how that character “in two weeks time. . . is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead” (13). Phillip Simmons notes that while for Binx the movies “have become a more significant source of experience than have the books that they displace. . . with the pleasures of the moviegoer’s life comes the threat of . . . sinking into the ‘everydayness’ of the repetitive, massified life” (612). The movie plays on the screen in front of Binx much as the children repeat the song about Solomon/Sugarman in front of Milkman, but since Binx believes he can find the answers to his questions about his life anywhere except in a critical examination of his life, the movie’s hints do not alert him to its relevance to his life.

However, the different clues offered to their protagonists by Morrison and Percy comment on the more alienated state of European Americans compared to African Americans. Part of the Dead family’s

lineage from the mythical Solomon survives in a song children sing, and so the link to the tradition has weakened but is still present. Milkman can pay attention to it, ask Pilate about it, and recover some of this narrative, if he so chooses. Binx, on the other hand, is called to look at the screen and a mass culture product to see how it comments on his life. His sense of the South as a place that could be any place, with no particular history, combines with his Aunt Emily's adoption of a cosmopolitan view of life to offer a hero that, even if he were to somehow succeed in his quest, would have no community to which he could offer his new insights. Morrison's critique focuses on the inadequacy of the hero's quest to suggest how one can help the community attain spiritual awareness, but Percy doubts that European Americans have salvaged any sense of community to which they can contribute. Binx does not simply want to escape from a particular place as Milkman does; he ends up wanting to escape from human time altogether.

Thus, Binx wants to grasp the enduring moment, which is what he attempts to do with his repetitions. "A repetition," he explains, "is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle" (80). As an instance of such an experiment, he gives us the experience of seeing in a German-language weekly "an advertisement for Nivea Crème, showing a woman with a grainy face turned up to the sun,"

and he mentions how he had seen the same advertisement with the same woman twenty years ago “in a magazine on my father’s desk.” As a result, “the events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized. . . there remained only time itself, like a yard of smooth peanut brittle.” His conclusion from such instances or from experiments of seeing the same movie fourteen years later is that “the enduring is something which must be accounted for. One cannot simply shrug it off” (80). Here lies Binx’s most basic adherence to the mystical path, the moment of epiphany. In *Season of Youth*, Jerome Buckley writes about the hero in the Bildungsroman who experiences “flushes of sudden insight, ‘spots of time,’ scattered throughout existence” (4), these spots of time being “each. . . a true ‘epiphany’” (5). Binx, as a character, has been trying through his searches—vertical, horizontal, intellectual, aesthetic et al.—to create a narrative of spiritual growth, a process where through epiphany his transformation from ordinary to heroic will take place. So Binx seeks comfort in movies, which offer a guaranteed resolution and closure, and he seeks comfort in repetitions that will make him acquire a sense of “the enduring.” Events, and by implication life, are for Binx what clog time like peanuts in brittle, yet when he wants to talk about these fourteen years of elapsed time he has no actual answer: “as usual, it eluded me.”

Like the Deads, Binx avoids the human narrative of past and present, but he is just as unsuccessful in escaping his past; he talks about how “at night the years come back and perch around my bed like ghosts” (144).

Kate remarks that his “gaiety and good spirits have the same death house quality” (193), because he has chosen to follow paths away from participating in this life but has rather sought the answers in other realms, in dualistic models where meaning and spirituality are not in the every day life. Until the moment when Binx abandons the script of the spiritual seeker, he remains a mere viewer of his own life.

The Spiritual Haven on Earth: Lost or Isolated Places

As mentioned earlier, the hero can become a master of two worlds if there are indeed two separate worlds, and one of them is the world we live in, deemed merely material in dualistic perspectives of spirituality. The texts I study explore three ways in which the physical world is depicted as merely material. The first is the closest one to the Platonic schema: here the soul lives imprisoned in the material world but remembers, occasionally, a world of spiritual bliss it once inhabited. Macon in *Song of Solomon* subscribes to such a perspective, as he views the material being the only choice left for him after losing the spiritual haven that was his father’s farm. Macon considers the spiritual reality of the farm as dead as his murdered father, and thus seeks to compensate the loss of the farm and the fulfilling life it represented with the acquisition of as much property as possible. Cocoa in *Mama Day* also sees a sacred land of spiritual connection and a land of mere matter in Willow Springs and mainland America respectively. Nevertheless, since Cocoa has not lost her ties to

communal tradition as Macon has, she believes she can visit her sacred land once a year and spend the rest of the time in a self-exile in New York.

Binx in *The Moviegoer* sees himself in a different, more general state of exile and represents the second dualistic perspective on the world. It is similar to the first in its Platonic principle, but it does not acknowledge any place of spiritual connection in the physical world. All the world is despair as Binx exemplifies the suburban consumer of the white middle class, whose only traditions left are shopping and making money. Thus, the world can offer no epiphanies as it has surrendered to capitalism and commodification of life. Because of his class, Binx sees material wealth as no challenge and because of his own loss of history and tradition, he sees the entire world as an equally empty exile. The only escape from this exile is, for Binx, an intellectual one, which is what he attempts in his “searches” with books and movies. Finally, the third perspective is exemplified by George Andrews in *Mama Day*. George is the one who does not lament some lost connection to the spiritual world but instead sees the physical world as the only one available to humans and purely material. People can become skilled in manipulating the material, and through free enterprise, they can help satisfy everyone’s basic human needs like food and shelter. George thus adopts a belief in some benevolent form of market laws that can transform the material world in ways that allow capitalism to be used for the general good. George’s adherence to such an Anglo-Saxon capitalist work ethic, together with his admiration of Anglo-Saxon

literature, comments on the degree to which social environment is as important as race in how one develops his or her perception of spirituality.

Song of Solomon begins with the introduction of the spiritual wasteland that the family of the Dead inhabits. Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, has grown up and lives in his father's version of the world, where the only dreams are proprietary and mercantile, and where black Americans are cut-off from their past and their community's traditions. Patrick Bjork writes that Macon "lives in and espouses the American dream myth [and] promulgates the belief that the introjection of white capitalism's competitive, success-oriented motivations and actions are the only viable alternatives for the fulfillment and advancement of the black race" (84). As a result, for Macon "the American dream has replaced the memory of a black cultural heritage" and the most striking evidence to that lies in the family life Milkman experiences—a direct result of Macon's world-view. Since the family is the smallest and immediate community, one would expect it to be a haven from life's hardships, yet family life offers small comfort to Milkman. From a young age, Milkman exhibits a fascination with and desire for flight, which constitutes an urge to escape Macon's materialistic prison. If events were to follow the mythical pattern, Milkman would escape, attain spiritual illumination, and fly, becoming himself a legend representing transcendence over the material shackles.

As we have discussed though, the text doubts the usefulness of such solitary flights and proposes that since some prisons are human

constructions, commitment to change can be the way to leave the spiritless confines one inhabits. Macon's world, in which Milkman has spent three decades of his life, is that of the materialist who seeks financial dominion over others and defines property and acquisition as the purpose of human existence. Macon's goals, misguided as they are, are his life's devotion rather than a mere way to financial security. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos writes that "Macon's desire for property as dominion is almost impossible for a Black man to accomplish anyway" (91), but Macon has charted out his dominion, and while he knows he has to move within the parameters of racism and discrimination by white society, he finds opportunities to pursue his goals within these parameters. However, his pursuits are purely acquisitive, arising out of his dualistic perspective and his own conclusions about how one should act within such a framework.

We begin to understand Macon's materialism, the inferior part of a dualistic binary pair, only after we come to know his view of spiritual life. Even though Macon seeks to project only the identity of the successful apartment complex owner and estate manager and to erase all other elements of his personality, he proves incapable of silencing all references to his life with his father and his sister Pilate. When Macon talks to Milkman about his experiences as a boy in Lincoln's Heaven, their farm, "his voice sounded different to Milkman. Less hard, and his speech was different. More southern and comfortable and soft"(53). As Macon remembers this previous life, he looks like Pilate (70), as if the

remembrance itself is enough to bring to life out of Macon Dead the Macon who, Pilate testifies, was “a nice boy and awful good to me” (40). Macon’s previous self cannot be erased from memory, any more than Doctor Street can take the name the white authorities want to give it. Pilate laments that Milkman did not know his father as he was at that time because he “would have been a real friend to you too, like he was to me,” and she asserts that Macon saved her life twice, being a good brother and friend. The validity of her statement is verified in this resurfacing of the Macon of old through his narration of that period of his life.

Yet, Macon’s vision of Lincoln’s Heaven is as much a part of his dualistic perspective as his vision of his life in Michigan is, and the two actually complete the spirit-matter dichotomy he subscribes to and which he reproduces in his life. For Macon his father’s farm is a literal paradise, an idyllic world of spirit where, according to Wilfred D. Samuels, Macon received the “Emersonian and Thoreauvian lessons of nature” (11). Samuels’ assertion appeals to the transcendentalist, Platonic vision that Macon associates with Lincoln’s Heaven, because in Emerson’s view, “the moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to its circumference. . . . What is a farm but a mute gospel?” (“Nature” 39). The gospel of the farm and the moral law, which is communicated through nature unmediated by language, are experiences that connect humans with the world of Ideas, giving them the Platonic glimpse of that world. Denise Heinze argues that Macon’s father “attempts to create a private paradise” and his philosophy is

“a mix of the African view of his role as custodian of the land and the American view of ownership and exploitation” (*Dilemma* 132). When Jake is murdered, Macon acknowledges “the necessity for owning land, but not the necessity for community and tradition” (133).

When we consider the difference between Pilate and Macon, both of whom lived on the farm as children, we see that Pilate was able to focus on the kindness of Macon back then and use that kindness as the basis of her personal philosophy towards others. Thus, the value of the farm lies in the people’s connection to it and to one another rather than in the ownership of the land, so Pilate can reproduce this connection in other locations.

Macon’s emphasis on the place makes it a utopia, but once a crime is committed in the utopia, Macon’s belief in it vanishes. As the Butlers murder Jake, they destroy Macon’s heaven and thus he believes that the only alternative is to turn to the material world and, out of fear of losing his grasp on that too, adopt materialism as his new religion. Therefore we see the problem with splitting the world into two different realms, matter and spirit, with one superior and radiating truth and the other inferior and a mere reflection of the spiritual: we leave ourselves vulnerable to the possibility of being stuck in this material, spiritually empty world.

Morrison uses Macon to show how dangerous his interpretation of his life with Jake was: since he operated from a principle of dualism, when the sacred land lost its sanctity, he lost access to the spiritual and thus could do nothing but surrender to the material. Macon is determined not to

let himself be taken advantage of like his father, whose farm was taken from him because he could not read or write and was made to sign over his property rights (53). But while illiteracy was his father's problem, Macon proposes property as the solution, and he actually has no appreciation for education and respect for college graduates (69). Equating property with power and power with the ability to withstand white injustice, Macon creates a personal philosophy that he summarizes when inviting his son to come work with him: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Macon views the farm as a lost Eden from which he was expelled through no fault of his own, and thus believes that he now has to make sure that he prospers in the world left for him, the material one. Since the white upper class, with its property and its exploitation of black Americans, proved enough to destroy the spiritual haven of the farm, Macon seeks to protect himself from future injustices by becoming a property owner himself. But as Brooks Bouson notes, Macon "assumes a white-identified role as he actively exploits poor blacks in the Southside area of town" and "in his opportunistic materialism and class elitism, he identifies with the hated white aggressor" (81). Macon has not really beaten the white aggressors in their game but rather joined them in that game, and in doing so provides justification for the very murder of his father: in the name of more property, perhaps all is fair.

Such a view of the physical world as devoid of spirit means that everything in it—whether objects or humans—has a utilitarian value, and

Macon makes sure to find out the value of every item and person in his life. The people in his community and his family are also mere objects, with no spirit and no possibility of offering any meaning-producing relationship to him, and thus Macon treats them accordingly. Denise Heinze asserts that Macon “cannot establish relationships because [his] values are obscured by the passion for ownership” (134), and so every passion is subjugated to the desire for ownership. As Macon objectifies everything and everyone, he ends up with an obsession for objects as status of property and material prosperity. Such is the case with the two keys he believes got him his wife Ruth in the first place, as well as later in their marriage, when they have no physical contact anymore and all he misses from their previous sexual encounters is her underwear. Ruth is a trophy wife in any case, “a figure of apparent middle-class respectability” (Bouson 81), and is only valuable as a symbol, not as a person. Thus one symbol can help him acquire another: the keys can open the door to the status symbol that Dr. Foster’s daughter is for the black community. By the time Macon meets Ruth, he has embarked on his “drive for wealth” (28). But since he is still at an early stage, he “had only two keys in his pocket then. . . each. . . represent[ing] a house which he owned at the time.” Thus, “it was because of those keys that he could dare . . . approach the most important Negro in the city” (22), who was Ruth’s father.

The keys may signify to Macon social mobility, but the status he hopes to reach in his upward movement is not one of real dignity. Ruth’s

father used his medical degree to elevate himself above the others in the black community, in his desire to think himself superior to them. Marianne Hirsch writes that Dr. Foster was “arrogant and disdainful of his patients” and in the end, “he flies off in his own way through his self-destructive and escapist dependence on drugs” (148-49). The entrance to such a fake elevated status may indeed be achieved with the two house keys. Thus, Macon uses the keys to get Ruth and hopes Ruth herself will be the key to “something else,” something Macon admits he cannot quite put his finger on (72). Milkman speculates the unnamed something may very well have been the old man’s money, which he had saved in four different banks; and while money was certainly a consideration, Macon’s deepest desire was the recognition of his upward social mobility, the acquisition of a status no other black American in the area had. If one has lost heaven, they may do well to replace it with the highest status they can achieve on earth.

The one “thing” that in and of itself Macon did not seem to have much interest in was Ruth. Macon confesses he did not love Ruth, yet he justifies himself, saying that many people did not marry for love then, and he recalls the time when “Ruth wore lovely complicated underwear that he deliberately took a long time to undo” (16). The text offers an extended account of his undressing Ruth, an act characterized as “all of his foreplay” then. The scene offers images of Macon “untying, unclasping, unbuckling the snaps and strings” of Ruth’s underwear and evokes both the idea of Macon being the one with the patriarchal authority to release Ruth’s

sexuality and his view of her as a package. Ruth is yet another material object, a present—and actually his present to himself—which he bought with the two keys, and he can take all the time to open it because he owns it. She is not a human being and therefore someone to connect with and derive meaning from a relationship with. Since Macon gets all this sexual excitement from his fetishism of the underwear in which Ruth is wrapped, we are not surprised that after the almost twenty years of no intimacy “he missed only the underwear.” He does not accept the possibility of approaching Ruth as a husband would a wife but only as proprietor and property; consequently there is no reason to miss much more.

Cocoa in *Mama Day* also envisions a split between a sacred place and the rest of the world, which is deemed wholly material. Willow Springs, where Cocoa grew up, is a close-knit community of African-Americans with common heritage and traditions. The island’s inhabitants experience a continuity of past, present, and future; they have lived in the same area for generations, and thanks to the particular conditions of the ownership deed, the situation can continue unchanged. As they share problems and joys and live on the land their ancestors cultivated and in which these ancestors are buried, the people of Willow Springs share a network of meaningful relationships. The island’s community experiences what Donna Richards defines as spirituality in an African context: not distant and non-human, but referring “to spiritual being, to that which gives life, form and meaning to physical realities. [Spirituality] is the

breath of life” (43). The people of the island provide this breath of life for one another through their commitment to the community and to the land. The conditions which Gloria Naylor gives the island’s existence support its perception as a kind of black spiritual utopia, similar to Lincoln’s Heaven but on a community scale. Susan Meisenhelder writes that the island is “a place in no state, on no map. . . not even, in a strict historical sense, American” (113). She refers to the characters of the African-born Sapphira and Norway-descendant Bascombe Wade, and the fact that “it was the 18 & 23’ing that went down between them two that put deeds in our hands” (5). Bascombe took Sapphira as his wife, freed her and all the other slaves, and gave them the deeds to the land; according to the terms of his will, the land is always owned by the (yet unborn) grandchildren of each family member. Thus the dead, the living, and the yet-unborn are part of the family and the family’s rituals, which is what Donna Richards states is the African worldview of the family (7).

Since Sapphira Wade was able to secure for her people freedom from slavery and a land of their own, there exists a danger in Willow Springs being seen as the promised land—ultimately mythical in the same tradition of promised lands and messiahs Jeremiah Moses examines in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*. Moses asserts that there is a strong tradition of the American people perceiving themselves as the new Israelites, and that the Black messianic tradition draws from this perception and proposes that since the African Americans were the enslaved people away from their

land, they are the ones more closely resembling the enslaved people of Israel. But if Willow Springs is a promised land, a “what might have been” if African-Americans never had to deal with segregation and racism, then it is a parallel reality to the one of New York—not a reality that can interact, influence and be influenced by the American mainland. Whatever spiritual life its inhabitants have achieved remains bound within the fuzzy geographical location of the island. Cocoa, Mama Day’s grandniece, certainly interprets the island’s situation as such an alternate reality. Willow Springs is the sacred land, New York the materialist exile; in New York and in her relationship with her eventual husband George, she is Ophelia, the name alluding ironically to a heroine from Anglo-Saxon literature. In Willow Springs she is Cocoa, the pet name that refers to her light skin in contrast to the other people on the island. In New York, she is the lower middle-class black woman who wants to “make it.” In Willow Springs, she is the grandniece of a conjure woman, a member of the family of Days, matriarchs of the island.

As a result of Cocoa’s dualistic perspective and her own dual identity, she feels that New York is devoid of the spiritual and that the kinds of bonds people of Willow Springs experience cannot be part of the lives of people on this other island. Thus, she spends her days in New York as if her life in Willow Springs is irrelevant except for her August visits. As Amy Levin writes, Cocoa “has left Willow Springs for another island, Manhattan, where she has been quick to acquire a false polish, an odd

dialect, and a disregard for family traditions” (79). Until the two worlds, the two realities are bridged and perceived as interrelated, Cocoa’s two “selves” remain isolated and without a future. Perhaps more important is the conclusion that until Cocoa sees the spiritual power her grandmother possesses as power stemming from connection with people rather than from mere lineage, Cocoa will not see her own capacity for such connection either in Willow Springs or in New York City.

Cocoa’s life in New York has been a life in a city that at one point she characterizes as “cold and unfriendly” (122). Although the phrase is uttered after she has just had another fight with George, it is not far from the way she experiences New York. Whereas everyone in Willow Springs is a person for Cocoa, everyone in New York seems to be a stereotype she has adopted and uses to classify and dismiss people based on certain types of behavior. When she talks about the way she pigeonholes the people who read the classifieds, she says: “By that August I had it down to a science, although the folks here would say that I was gifted with a bit of Mama Day’s second sight” (14). First, she is wrong about her own second sight since she is quick to judge and not eager to see what is actually there, as we observe later. But more important is the fact that she is wrong about the basic source of Mama Day’s ability to understand people. That second sight Mama Day possesses when it comes to people is directly related to her willingness to “listen, really listen,” just as the reader is invited to do in the prologue. When she watches a woman on TV talking about UFOs, she

observes “the slight twitch around her [the woman’s] mouth,” and thinks “her husband beats her. . . and that’s what she wants explained” (40).

Mama Day believes that there is a real, individual story behind the people, and even if she makes fun of those “white folk” who go on the show, she can see a different story and motivation behind each one of them. Thus she comes to the conclusion that New York is “no worse or better than other places Baby Girl could have chosen to live in,” which she will repeat in the end when she says that “any city is the people” (305).

Mama Day’s ability to connect with the people, their spirit, and the land is contrasted with Reema’s boy in the beginning of the novel. The man, who is never given a name and is always defined in relation to his mother, demonstrating the matriarchy of the island, has gone to the mainland and returned to study the island’s culture. The communal narrator explains that the island and the community trace their historical beginnings to a “slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words.” However, Reema’s boy conducts ethnographic, socio-linguistic and cultural studies to determine that the all-signifying colloquialism used on the island, “18 & 23,” is nothing but an inversion of “the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map” (8). The narrator informs us that all Reema’s boy had to do was ask someone and she would tell him what he needed to know. Understanding people is what leads to an understanding of the realities of people’s lives. Virginia Fowler writes, “Mama Day’s connection to a rich African American tradition of

healing and conjuring is given symbolic expression in the novel through the emphasis on ‘the gifted hands’” (119). This emphasis also focuses on the hands as the part of the body that extends to meet others, greet them and acknowledge their presence and contribution to our lives. Hands pass on the gift to those Mama Day helps, but they are also the symbol of where this strength and healing power comes from: the link to other people.

However, Cocoa does not see the degree to which Mama Day’s understanding of people comes from these relationships and from a life spent listening to them and their needs rather than merely from lineage from the great conjure woman Sapphira Wade. As George points out in a conversation, people are for Cocoa “fudge sticks, kumquats, bagels, zucchinis,” a “litany [that] has turned the people in this city into material for a garbage disposal” (62). When he tells her she sounds like a bigot, she admits she may sound like one and she gives her reasons: “I guess it’s because deep down I’m as frightened as change and difference as they are” (63). The lifestyle she witnesses in New York is so materialistic that she draws the conclusion the people there are biological material rather than individual personalities. The only spiritual place is Willow Springs, where what she calls “the whole of me” resides (176).

Cocoa assumes that the spiritual island and the materialistic mainland are so separated that the only connection between the two places is herself, even if Mama Day asks her to mail a letter to George (50) which, with its yellow powder, reminds him of Cocoa and of his attraction to her

(54). Cocoa is so adamant to deny any connection and interaction between the two places, that after George (unbeknownst to her) finds her another job at a firm which manages the accounts of George's firm, she calls her grandmother to let her know "how wrong she was" about sending him that note. She does not exhibit any of that second sight Mama Day has after all, because all Cocoa can see is herself losing the job George was considering her for. She is arrogant to believe that she knows the city much better than Mama Day who knows it only from watching Phil Donahue shows, even if Mama Day does not see New York in the stereotypical way of Manhattan as Cutthroat Island. Instead, she believes that whether on that island or on the island of Willow Springs, people are the same—spiritual beings in both. The connection between Willow Springs and New York is what Cocoa cannot perceive. Yet, this link is what prevents Willow Springs from becoming a mythical state rather than an actual part of reality. Neither New York nor Willow Springs turns out to be as insular in relation to the other as Cocoa perceives them to be, and the events that take place when George and Cocoa visit the island undermine any view of Willow Springs as a mythical place where nothing devastating or evil can exist. In fact, Larry Andrews writes that Cocoa is so out of touch with the whole picture of both New York and Willow Springs that she "scoffs at Miranda's power to get her the New York job" and is not alert to "the evil represented. . . by

Ruby's jealousy" (297). Her view of the world—split into matter and spirit—and of the two islands as irrelevant to one another renders her unable to fully understand either.

If the New York Cocoa describes is a spiritually empty place, a cold city where no connection is attainable, George sees it as a city with warmth, resembling in this sense Mama Day's view of the city, although George refuses to acknowledge the spiritual as part of the New York reality. When he and Cocoa go on a date, he experiences how prejudiced she is towards New York and how little she actually knows a place she has lived in for so many years. Cocoa, for instance, claims that "no one walked in New York" when George broaches the subject of their taking a walk. Her declaration is the beginning in a series of statements that convince George she is presumptuous enough to believe she can talk about the city with authority, even when she has tried so little to learn about it. George complains, "As you went on and on, telling me about my city, I could see that you understood nothing" (60). Concluding that Cocoa, being superficial, is unable to see that "New York wasn't on those Manhattan sidewalks, just the New Yorkers" (61), George speaks of a city that "was a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs" (61). Gary Storhoff observes that "George is alert to the human drama played out beneath the surface Cocoa only notices" (169), and so George—no doubt because he is dead—is able in his narrative to compare New York and Willow Springs and acknowledge that they are not two mutually

exclusive worlds after all. As one of many examples where there are details in people's lives which one must care for and take an interest to know, otherwise all one will know will be his or her prejudices, George tells Cocoa about the florist "who carried yellow roses even though they didn't move well, but it was his dead wife's favorite color." Discussing the various ethnic parts of New York, he speaks of "walking past a synagogue on Fort Washington Avenue and hearing a cantor sing" as a memorable experience, and the contrast is sharp with Cocoa's reflection on the Jews whom she simply sees as having a "clannish" nature—which is actually in tune with her own.

Through George's and Mama Day's observations about New York and through the events that take place in Willow Springs when George and Cocoa visit, the novel disproves Cocoa's belief that the two islands she has lived in on are distinct realities. Willow Springs proves to be special because of its relationships, just as Lincoln's Heaven was spiritual for the same reason in Pilate's eyes. The main difference with Lincoln's Heaven is that the island, a communal rather than a family reality, is protected from the kind of exploitation the Deads met through its special geographical position and ownership status. There is a strong message here, I believe, about the importance of a group that is united in the face of prejudice and injustice and the greater possibilities for resistance to both that African-Americans have when they use their communal tradition to stand up to western society's individualistic approach of divide and conquer. At the

same time, the text acknowledges that Cocoa's perception of Willow Springs as a singular phenomenon is exaggerated; yet, it is clear that the people on the mainland operate within a framework of solitary pursuits and material advancement. Quite clearly, there is not going to be an influx of African-American traditions to sweep New York and the United States as a whole to miraculously change this framework. When Mama Day says that it is now up to the next generation, Cocoa's, to find the new secrets of the "other place," she states that each generation faces the task of integrating the traditions of African spirituality with the dualistic and materialistic perspective of the white European tradition. The bridge between the two worlds is constantly destroyed and rebuilt, much as the bridge that connects the island and the mainland is, and it can never be a permanent one; there will be a struggle and a renewed effort for every generation.

A Wholly Material World

While both Macon and Cocoa have found, at some point, a place that represents a spiritual haven, Binx in *The Moviegoer* never believes in such a possibility. Binx demonstrates an indifference to the physical world rather than a desire to possess it as Macon does, but shares, to a degree, Macon's objectification of women. The difference is that Binx's behavior towards women relates to his inclination to turn them into abstractions and images from movies, much as he wants to turn his own life into an abstraction. Since Binx is on what he calls "the search," and the search involves reading and trying to understand the world from a distance, the

physical world is necessarily distant and irrelevant to his search, often even an obstacle. Unlike Macon, Binx does not feel that he was exiled from some state of Emersonian bliss but rather that he is cursed, as all humans are, to live in the material prison that the world is. There is no sacred place in Binx's view of the physical world and thus any place is as good or as indifferent as the next. He tries to find meaning by attempting to catch a glimpse of the Platonic Idea, to have an epiphany. Thus, the physical world around him can at best be ignored and at worst be seen as a hindrance. An example is the suburb he lives in, Gentilly. In an interview, Lewis Lawson asked Walker Percy why he picked Gentilly as the locus of action for *The Moviegoer*, rather than some more famous part of New Orleans. Percy replied, "Gentilly looks like any other place. All the alienated writers say it's anonymous. Well, that's what my main character, Binx Bolling, liked about it" ("Pilgrim" 26). Gentilly, a suburban sector of New Orleans, does not offer any distraction to Binx since it is similar to every other suburb in America and thus the particularities of place and time—New Orleans, the American south, the sixties—will not distract from his Platonic search for the spiritual.

Binx's idea of the essence of the physical world is similar to Macon's in that they both see it as spiritually empty. However, while Macon seeks to compensate for exile from a perceived idyllic state with possessions, Binx wants an escape from the world. If such an escape is not possible, then he attempts at least to set the world aside. Thus, he can be

involved in his “search” without interference from daily life. Binx himself informs us that he lives in a part of New Orleans which except “for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans.” He is, in fact, attracted to this quality: “But this is what I like about it,” he adds (6), admitting that he likes living in a part of the city that has no distinct identity. Binx’s desire to keep the material from being an obstruction goes beyond the faceless suburb to his apartment, which he keeps as “impersonal as a motel room” (78). Binx admits that his “wallet is full of identity cards,” but does not mention much else about them. However, his subsequent description of his subscription to *Consumer Reports* and of the “first-class” items he owns as a result of the magazine’s advice provides a clue to his true identity, as well as the identity of everyone around him: he is a consumer. The world is made up of a plethora of products to be used and then be discarded. This view of the world as material and ephemeral is also the world-view of the material as a product. In “The Loss of the Creature,” Walker Percy writes that a problem for modern civilization is the culture that presents experience as a product for consumption (*Message in the Bottle* 58). Even human work is meaningless and a product, as Binx’s dismissal of the possibility of a personally fulfilling career shows. He confesses that once he considered some other profession, maybe even “doing something great,” but eventually yields to the notion that “there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most

ordinary life imaginable” (9), which he does with great success, and finally “discover[s]” his “sole discernible talent: the trick of making money” (30).

Binx can see no materialistic goal worth pursuing, no quest for possession as Macon does, because possessions and capital accumulation are indeed tricks, although the trick is to be a middle-class white man with connections—and Macon knows that he has no such ease. The socio-economic realities of the two novels are similar enough that one comments on the other. In *The Moviegoer*, we have in Eddie Lovell the example of someone with materialism as a goal, similar to Macon. Binx observes Eddie Lovell and describes him with disdain as “he talks. . . taking note of the slightest movement. A green truck turns down Bourbon street; the eye sizes it up, flags it down, demands credentials, waves it on.” Binx concludes that Eddie is someone who “understands everything out there and everything out there is something to be understood” (18-19). His ironic tone indicates that Eddie is wrong: he does understand everything out there in the material world, but that means Eddie sees “no mystery” (19). Eddie does not grasp the world of the spirit that Binx seeks, and Binx scorns the vision Eddie and Macon are committed to in their lives. While both Eddie and Binx are engaged in the workings of capitalism, Binx knows that such pursuits are no challenge for members of the white middle class in the same way they are a challenge for Macon. When Guitar’s grandmother, Mrs. Bains, is faced with Macon’s indifference to the possibility that she and her grandchildren may end up homeless if he does not give them some leeway

on the rent, she comments, “A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see” (22). Her indictment of Macon implies two premises: one is that Macon has rejected the community-oriented African-American values in favor of individualistic success. In order to become successful in a white-dominated capitalist society, he must act white. The other premise is that Mrs. Bains expects more from Macon, because of his race, than she would expect from a white landlord. Her double standard indicates how much Macon’s position is ambivalent in terms of socio-economic status; thus if he is to maintain it, he must indeed try harder than Eddie Lovell, whose capitalist success presents no challenge. Even the loss of his father’s land, a turning point for Macon’s view of the world, is for Binx an opportunity to combine flirting with Sharon and making money. He is both quick and glad to sell his inheritance and to make a trip out of the experience with yet another secretary.

Binx refers to his secretaries as “Marcia or Linda,” an admission that the personality is not as important as the simple fact that they are women, and as secretaries they are women within his reach. His blueprint of the many affairs he has with his secretaries is always the same, because in the end he and his “Lindas” are “sick of each other” and “delighted to say good-by” (8). The silences on the phone, he realizes, are a sign that “love is over.” Thus, his affairs can offer no long-lasting joy other than momentary—ephemeral—pleasure. Binx treats women as actresses he casts in the movies of his life. Richard Pindell comments that Binx’s secretaries

“resemble money” with “their names interchangeable [and]. . . like money, sheerly and irredeemably representative” (222). Like money too, they “are valued for their promise of something whose reality is always in doubt and therefore open to the wildest kinds of speculation” (“Basking” 222-23). Thus, connection with them is as impossible as connection with money, and the possibility of finding meaning in a physical relationship with another human being is negated for Binx. Women become another sign of the spiritless, meaningless world Binx believes humans inhabit.

Binx’s negation of human connection extends to friendships, since he admits he has no friends and even when he socializes with other men as in the instance of Walter, Binx cannot bring himself to say that sex with women and drinking with the guys “is really it” (41). So although when he sees a beautiful girl on the bus he is thinking of “what good times we could have” (12), meaning dances and sex and superficial dates, the “good times” that come to mind are not possibilities in his life but memories of movies he has seen. After all, his memories are more occupied by movie images than by encounters with people, monuments, or nature:

Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*. (7)

A man whose reference is memories of movies seems destined to follow their script. Lewis Lawson writes that “as a moviegoer, Binx is aware that he must employ the appropriate gestures. . . he assumes the role expected of him on any occasion” (“Moviegoing”32), and one such occasion is his quasi-affair with Sharon. His own romance script follows the pattern of Hollywood’s movies as he declares: “I am in love with Sharon Kincaid. She knows nothing of this” (67). Eventually this affair will also end in despair, which seems to be all that the physical world can offer Binx.

In Macon, we have an illustration of how the world is seen when the perceived sacred place of spiritual bliss is destroyed and, as a result, the material and dominion over it are the only choices left. Binx, on the other hand, represents the view that this world could never offer any solace and thus pre-occupation with it can only be impersonal, mechanical, and eventually always meaningless and ending in despair. Nonetheless, within dualistic perspectives there is another way of looking at the world we live in, and that lies in not lamenting the spiritual emptiness, but doubting that there is any. Perhaps the material is all there is, and we should best make use of it and prosper without believing that there ever was or can be anything beyond this reality. George Andrews, as a disciple of Mrs. Jackson, exemplifies this perspective in *Mama Day*, and it seems to avoid the dualistic altogether. Mrs. Jackson instructs the children in her orphanage to focus on the now and now alone, because “only the present has potential” (23). No belief in anything beyond the tangible and material

is allowed, and George as her obedient student does not even buy lottery tickets because such daydreaming is not practical. He ends up an engineer, a job he defines as taking care of people's basic needs: "water supply, heating, air conditioning, transportation" (60).

Despite being black, George's character represents a distinctively white system, entrepreneurial capitalism, although George views capitalism in the best possible light. As far as we know from the text, George has been successful without being callous to human suffering as Macon has been, and George enjoys his life in New York rather than being plagued by the malaise like Binx. While even Macon sometimes feels some emptiness, when at night "the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer" (27), no such affliction affects George. However, whereas George has never hurt anyone in his community, he has never helped anyone either, except for those who become part of his personal life, as is the case with Cocoa. In addition, even in these close relationships, he does not count on others for assistance. Thus, he is not prepared to live any life other than the one he believes in. Rita Mae Brown writes, "George's power comes from his logical western mind. He is an engineer and values precision" (14). His vision ends up excluding him from communities like Willow Springs, where people pursue lives of mutual assistance, cooperation and caring, none of which George has ever experienced. When Cocoa falls ill, and Mama Day informs him that he must now help Cocoa because when they

married she “bound more than flesh” with him (294), he is unable to understand. The kind of pragmatism Mrs. Jackson advocates and George practices proves to be focused on the individual and not the interpersonal network of relationships that constitute the human reality.

As George is not used to receiving anything non-material, he proves incapable of giving anything of that nature either, and ends up sacrificing his life when all he needed to offer was belief in the spiritual bond he and Cocoa shared. Susan Meisenhelder asserts that George, like Binx, also imitates white scripts. When Cocoa is in danger, “like Prince Charming. . . he kisses her [Cocoa] to bring her out of her deathly sleep” (117), while earlier after an argument he carries Cocoa to his bed where she “belonged,” as he tells her—which Meisenhelder notes is like a scene from Hollywood romantic movies. George’s white scenarios prove inadequate in dealing with the island’s African American life experience, and his type of materialism proves as problematic as the other two. Finally, George’s admission about the many dreams of things he never had and of his mother’s constantly changing face in his dreams proves that even he could not live within these purely materialistic parameters. He rejected the possibility of a spirit because he taught himself not to allow for it, yet parts of him fought it. Like the memories of Lincoln’s Heaven that bring out a different Macon, memories of his mother bring out a different

George, and finally the kind of materialism he experiences has more to do with emotional trauma—not unlike Macon’s—than with a belief that nothing spiritual exists.

In their own novels, Percy and Morrison also expose as inadequate their characters’ views on the physical world, no matter whether their characters see this isolation as a trade-off or as reason for despair, which is how Macon and Binx see it respectively. Binx himself eventually changes his perspective through his interactions with Kate, and to a lesser degree Lonnie, and this change will be discussed in chapter four, but I believe that Pilate in *Song of Solomon* serves to subvert both Macon’s and Binx’s brands of dualism and their perception of the physical world as devoid of spirit. When Macon leaves Porter, his tenant who tried to kill himself, he finds himself wandering outside his sister’s house and being transfixed by the singing of Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba’s daughter, Hagar. As he heads home that night, Macon sees that he is walking toward “a part of the road where the music could not follow.” At his house, he will find “his wife’s narrow, unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning; his son, to whom he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism” (28). Macon realizes how “there was no music there, and tonight he wanted just a bit of music—from the person who had been his first caring for.” Within these few lines we have the situation Macon lives in as well as the reason for it, which is Macon himself. His view of the physical world as meaningless and a mere possession has made

it impossible for him to derive any real pleasure from it and to communicate with his own family. Pilate's singing, in the same town as Macon lives, and Macon's longing for it comment on how his dualistic belief of the physical world as merely material is not accurate and is in fact self-defeating, for he is the one who condemns himself to this kind of exile of emptiness. Cedric Bryant notices that Pilate provides a clear alternative to Macon's world, "through her ability to inspire others to affirm life over death, family over self-interests, love and forgiveness over hate and vengeance" (108).

The text leaves no doubt that Macon's vision of the world as purely material is not validated even by him. Once outside Pilate's house, he is immediately flooded with memories, such as the one of Pilate chewing pine needles and smelling like a forest. This earth-mother image is combined with knowledge that Pilate has taught her daughter and granddaughter to follow her example and eat "like children. Whatever they had a taste for" (29). Macon is infuriated by Pilate's life, since it is a simple life where food is not something to struggle for but a pleasure. Food in Pilate's house is related to a desire of the senses to be satisfied, whereas in Macon's house it is just another purchase. Considering how Macon's wife Ruth makes "her meals nauseating" even without trying to (11), Macon resents the pleasure these women receive from as fundamental a human function as eating. Even such a basic satisfaction is inaccessible to him in the world he has created. Macon knows that there is another way of life, but his

obsession with property does not allow him to consider that the simple but meaningful daily experiences Pilate's family enjoys, like pleasing food and singing, are also within his reach if he chooses. Instead, his answer to such longings is to hate Pilate for enjoying what he does not, for reminding him there is a different way, and for living that way. Pilate's life is similar to the life Macon had in Lincoln's Heaven, thus he knows firsthand what exists in both choices. Yet, Macon refuses to see that the bliss he and Pilate had on the farm came from their connection to one another and their father, and instead considers it unique to that location and lost when his father was murdered. That period is Macon's age of innocence, a kind of Wordsworthian childhood where the child is closer to the world of Ideas and knows about the Platonic world of the spirit, but experience—in the form of white injustice and murder—thrusts the child into the mold of the materialistic man that Macon becomes.

Pilate demonstrates that the physical can and should be enjoyed by humans, and they should not allow themselves to be trapped in materialistic perspectives. Pilate throws away "every assumption that she had ever learned" and instead asks herself, "When am I happy and when am I sad and what's the difference" (149). At Pilate's house "no meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering on the table" (29). As Wilfred Samuels notes, "it is the 'economy' of life rather than the economics of life that interests Pilate" (13). She is able to treat the physical world in such a way because she finds life's value in her "deep

concern for and about human relationships” (149). When Pilate dies, she tells Milkman that she wished she had known more people because she would have loved them all (336). Since she locates life’s meaning in the spiritual connection with other people, she does not see this world which humans inhabit as empty the way Binx, Macon and George do. Pilate’s view is of a *spiritual* physical world whose pleasures can be enjoyed and shared with other humans. In *The Moviegoer*, there is a theater in Gentilly with a sign that reads “Where Happiness Costs So Little,” which all but sums up the capitalist dream: Happiness can be bought as a commodity like the TV sets rated in *Consumer Reports*, and it can be purchased at a good price, too. Pilate’s example demonstrates that although human fulfillment is not a commodity, it does indeed cost “so little”—the real cost being to overcome dualistic notions of spirituality and accept the fact that human connections provide life’s most essential meaning. The world becomes a spiritual void, an earthly prison, only if we chose to see it as such and become its willing prisoners.

CHAPTER 3:
THE POLITICS OF SPIRIT

Robert Wuthnow argues that in the U.S., “the monopoly of spirituality by the religion industry has been broken. . . increasingly, people shop for spirituality as they do for everything else” (200), and his statement indicates that he believes such “shopping” for spirituality to be a new phenomenon. While I agree with him that religion has lost its monopoly in America, even in the past people were able to choose religions, just as we can now choose between religious and non-religious approaches. We are often born into one religion but just as often we convert to a different one or simply abandon our own in favor of agnosticism or atheism, which still constitute choices when it comes to how we perceive and deal with the question of spirituality. However, the spiritual practices or beliefs we choose to align ourselves with never apply only to a single area of our lives. Even if we subscribe to a compartmentalized view of the human experience, with the spiritual life being one such compartment and the socio-economic another and so on, human life is a dynamic whole. The human experience can be best described in terms of chaos theory, as a complex dynamic system in which every influence in one area, even the most infinitesimal, can have serious consequences for the whole system.

Indeed, dualistic views of spirituality favor the compartmentalized view of human life. Geraldine Finn talks about such perspectives, in which spirituality is often expressed in the language of “other-worldliness” which “sets up an opposition, a separation, an hiatus between ‘spiritual and ‘material’ being, between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ and ‘soul’ and ‘body’ from which depend a whole series of autogenous binary oppositions” (117). The projected antithesis between the political and the spiritual that Finn refers to is but a construct. The novels included in this study demonstrate that while dualistic views of spirituality propose a gap between how we view the spiritual part of our lives and how we view the economic and political workings of our world, in actuality the former is directly related to the latter: The way we see the spiritual signifies ideological assumptions about the socio-economic realities of the world. Characters like George Andrews in *Mama Day* and Binx Bolling and Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* demonstrate the implications of viewing the spiritual as the privilege of some elect individuals. George’s and Binx’s actions and outlooks on spirituality place them in allegiance with particular classes and lifestyles—the white middle-class lifestyle of entrepreneurial capitalism in the case of George, and the southern aristocracy lifestyle in the case of Binx. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison attacks the perception of spirituality and social reality as unconnected through the case of Guitar, since the system of white injustice Guitar experiences finally defines him. As he grows up in a world that devalues life, he cannot engage in any process through which to

approach the question of life's meaning and purpose as questions that can have a valid answer. However, Morrison also critiques the Seven Days' vigilante way of seeking justice, since such practices distance people from African American spiritual and communal traditions. Finally, both Morrison and Naylor caution against presenting individuals as having no agency and no responsibility in how they deal with other humans and how they interact within the framework of spiritual links of human life. While social conditions can and do hinder one's potential for such connections with others, so can attitudes that deny our obligation to perceive humans as spiritual beings and human life as intrinsically valuable.

The Class of the Elect

In *Mama Day*, George Andrews has spent his childhood and adolescence learning that for a young black American in his position, counting on somebody else for survival is a mistake. George lives in an orphanage, and the woman running the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys, Mrs. Jackson, drills into the boys' heads the idea that "only the present has potential" (23). Mrs. Jackson gives the boys their "daily list of facts" (24) when she wants to make a point, and all the facts are about the harsh reality of "the now" and the grim prospects these boys will have if they dare make any dreams about the future. Mrs. Jackson's philosophy is grounded on the conviction that for these boys a belief in anything but themselves is dangerous, and thus she asserts that only the present matters because "the present is you" (26). These boys have no family to care for

them, and she makes it abundantly clear that she is not there as a family member either—only as a paid employee (26). Mrs. Jackson does care for their physical welfare, however. Even though, for instance, corporal punishment is a method of discipline at the shelter, she never uses it on “the ones—regardless of their behavior—who had come to Wallace P. Andrews with fractured arms or cigarette burns on their groins” (23). George is impressed with Mrs. Jackson’s system, which did not produce drug addicts, petty thieves or derelicts (26), even as he is aware that she “erred on the side of caution” and curtailed their imagination, turning potential painters to draftsmen and musicians to piano tuners (27). Mrs. Jackson’s teachings focus on survival, since even that is uncertain for children at the shelter when they grow up. The problem with her worldview is not this focus on survival, however, but the lack of focus on anything past that goal. She does not accompany the emphasis on satisfying material needs with any guidance as to what happens after people meet this objective. Since the boys in her shelter learn to emphasize the satisfaction of material needs alone and to have no other ambitions, the philosophy Mrs. Jackson represents guarantees two results: First, George and others like him will see material prosperity as the only worthwhile pursuit in their lives. Furthermore, the emphasis on survival and material prosperity, both individualistic goals, also means a lack of interest for the larger socio-economic environment in which the individual survives and prospers.

The second outcome is then that these shelter boys, as grown-ups, will not aim to change the conditions of the lives of those like them, and the shelter will always be full of children in such a situation.

Mrs. Jackson illustrates the non-critical approach to life, since the lessons on survival she delivers to the boys also promote the survival of the *status quo*. We learn that she does not care about the boys' rage, their "hurts or disappointment over what life had done to [them]" (24). In short, she does not care about the past and the conditions that brought them to her shelter, and such a conscious burial of the past fosters a denial of the causes that produced the current situation for children like these in the shelter. Nonetheless, this philosophy exposes its own contradictions as it denies the past which created the inequalities of the present, yet it recognizes the limited opportunities of African Americans in the present, and calls on them to forgo using their imagination in favor of putting their potential to utilitarian use. George becomes a very good student of hers, incorporating in his beliefs a focus on "now" alone, together with indifference for the past. Mrs. Jackson urges him not to think of the future either, and punishes him harder when she finds out he is worried about the end of the term (26), because such a worry indicates one who dreams and sets goals beyond the horizon of the now. George understands that without a belief or interest in the future, there is no belief in fate, predestination (22) and any sense of connection with the past. Mrs. Jackson has helped him collapse the continuum of past, present, and future into the singularity

of the now. Nonetheless, the present *is* as harsh as Mrs. Jackson paints it to be. George himself needs look no further than his own life to see that her words are true: the present is himself alone, and to depend on someone else would be perhaps detrimental to his survival. The shelter's world-view does not produce drug addicts, petty thieves and derelicts, but the greater societal system does. The system of injustice, racial discrimination and marginalization of people in George's position is what Cocoa comments on, when she declares that the situation she experiences as a young African American looking for work is just like segregation, only covered-up. Thus, Cocoa mockingly suggests that it would be easier for an African American if it were possible "to bring the clarity about it back" (19). For someone like George, then, prioritizing the satisfaction of basic material needs makes sense, and that is what he does even in his career as an engineer where he seeks "to redesign the structures that take care of our basic needs: water supply, heating, air conditioning, transportation" (60). James Saunders writes that George is "quite simply the mechanical man who is as detached from the spiritual realm as a person can get" (57) since George does not merely prioritize basic material needs but assumes such needs are the only ones in human life.

From such a perspective, the world is simply material for the humans to use and improve as large-scale engineers, even if the improvement is mere rearrangement and not real change. Such a philosophy can find fertile ground in the minds of people like George only when they are alienated

from spirituality and, in particular, African spirituality. In *Black Spirituality and Black Consciousness*, Carlyle Stewart writes:

A formative function of African-American spirituality, then, is its capacity to empower black people to form alternative consciousness, community, and culture, which intrinsically establishes itself by refuting all attempts by the larger and inner culture at psychological devaluation and infantilization. By inner culture, I mean those blacks who have been adversely affected by dehumanization and have bought into and supported the devaluation and subrogation of their own people. Black spirituality positively reinforces the value, sanctity, and worth of black life for all time. (30)

The inner culture of devaluation that Mrs. Jackson espouses is evident in its results on George, who has formed no alternative consciousness as an African American, and has instead chosen to act following white scripts of behavior.

George experiences a lifestyle that denies him any connection with the rich spiritual tradition of the African American community, as he adopts Anglo-Saxon culture as his own, while his views of African-American culture are summed up in the phrase he uses to respond to Mama Day: “mumbo jumbo.” During her dates with George, Cocoa frequently mentions the ridiculousness of some of their interactions which take place with either Mary Tyler Moore-like invitations or Shakespearean quotes, and she even comments that “Shakespeare didn’t have a bit of a soul” (64), alluding to George’s fascination with *King Lear*. Peter Erikson notes, “George’s adoption of Shakespeare serves as a badge of his upward mobility. His successive editions of *King Lear* mark the increasing value of the play as a material object and cultural status. . . .” (242). However,

Cocoa's comment is about soul and follows a phrase she recalls from her high school Shakespeare, "surely, he jests." As she ponders this phrase, she thinks that she does not care "if he [Shakespeare] did write *Othello*, *Cleopatra*, and about some slave on a Caribbean island. If he had been in touch with our culture, he would have written somewhere, 'Nigger, are you out of your mind?'" (64). The reference to *The Tempest* communicates the irony of George's fascination with the culture that turns non-whites into social castaways, and the dubious success he enjoys as a black entrepreneur.

As I mentioned, George is not the heartless profiteer Macon is, and the stories he shares about people in New York show he has the potential to look at people as revealing meaning in their experiences, in spite of Mrs. Jackson's dictum to focus on himself alone. Nevertheless, his potential to draw meaning from such relationships, much like any artistic potential, must be suppressed since he is an engineer, one who manipulates the material and is indifferent to the spiritual. Yet, while usually the self-made individual is supposed to be a strong, hardened person, Naylor counters that stereotype by giving George a weak heart. An orphan black American can focus on survival and seemingly succeed as a capitalist, but the story is not one that proves how the system can work for anyone regardless of class, race, or sex. George's weak heart points to the strength that he demonstrates externally and to the pain he carries internally, together with the extreme care with which he must cater to this pain—the

weak heart. The emphasis is not on the weakness, since he takes walks and enjoys a healthy and active life, but on the strain on the heart that learns to feel alone and unconnected. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead traded the spiritual life at Lincoln's Heaven for avarice and materialism, a trade that he decided on when greedy white men shot Jake. George is not materialistic and he did not experience an initial state of communion with other human beings and nature as Macon did, but his weak heart points to the same type of trade-off. His emotional under-nourishment weakened a heart that had the potential to connect spiritually with people and to view life as extending beyond the confines of the present.

Thus, Mrs. Jackson's teachings, no matter her good intentions, constitute a philosophy that regards people like George as members of a working class, or rather caste. The caste's members need to focus on manipulating the material and leave the spiritual to those better equipped or perhaps who simply have better fortunes—in both meanings of the word as fate and estate. Such a belief system views the spirit as a luxury certain categories of people these children cannot afford, while it assigns blame for this dire situation to the victim rather than to the perpetrator of the socio-economic crime. The children in Mrs. Jackson's shelter cannot afford to use their imagination, be artists, or care about more than mere survival since a combination of racist and capitalist values has deprived them of these opportunities. Yet, Mrs. Jackson does not care about these injustices, which she summarily dismisses as “the past.” The text recognizes the

conditions in which children like George find themselves, and does not propose that if only George and others like him had the will power, they would transcend these problems. Nevertheless, Naylor challenges the solution Mrs. Jackson gives to these problems and exposes its lack of reflection and potential for change, as it condemns people to spiritual emptiness.

Percy's *The Moviegoer* explores the same connection between ideological beliefs about class and views of spirituality from the perspective of the white protagonist. The novel demonstrates that while Binx seeks to believe that all his decisions about spirituality stem from philosophical principles, socio-economic factors are included in his actions as much as they are included in Mrs. Jackson's teachings. Gregory Baum argues the connection between capitalist focus on the successful individual and "the emphasis on personal salvation," which he characterizes as the "spiritual counterpart" of middle-class individualism. Through this emphasis, "earthly life is. . . a testing ground where individuals demonstrate their fidelity to God and then graduate to the realm of heaven. Man's historical existence and mission are wholly relativised" (20). Baum's observations apply to spiritual searches, like Binx's, that emphasize the solitary approach to spirituality and apply to the spirituality the entrepreneur middle-class ideology George Andrews has adopted. The person that wants to attain enlightenment shall do so, on his or her own and

without assistance or hindrance from the social environment, as the personal will triumphs over the social surroundings of the individual.

In the novel we see Binx engaged in solitary intellectual monologues which he sees as “searches.” Through all of these searches, Binx remains alienated from his surroundings. Tony Tanner defines alienation as “a state of mind resulting from an inability to participate in the available patterns of experience, and an uncertainty as to whether the single self can generate its own patterns” (461), and Barbara Filippidis finds that this definition aptly describes Binx. Yet, while I agree with this assertion, Filippidis proceeds to the conclusion that “Binx struggles to create new patterns which may replace inadequate or defunct ones” (10). Even though Binx does indeed struggle to do so, his failure is guaranteed by the way he goes about creating such new patterns, since these cannot be individual. Human experience is never isolated from society, even if one wills to view it as such.

Binx has early on rejected his mother’s way of approaching religion, and in his mind, this decision signifies rejection of empty ritual and commitment to a personal search for the spiritual. However, Binx’s condemnation of Anna’s approach is not merely a philosophical position but also a socio-economic one. Through his choice, Binx demonstrates his aversion to petty bourgeoisie and his desire to affirm his belonging to the upper middle class. Binx’s status within the New Orleans social elite is not as secured as his Aunt Emily’s is, even though his father did come from

southern aristocracy, as Aunt Emily seems to believe, and “he had the pick of New Orleans.” Nonetheless, as Binx suspects, Aunt Emily is disappointed, since while Binx’s father had so many choices for a bride, he “picked Anna Castagne” (56), who was only a nurse. Furthermore, from Anna’s current dwellings we can infer that her second marriage deprived her of any gains in social mobility that her marriage to Binx’s father may have offered, and therefore Binx’s family from his mother side is in the lower middle class. For Binx, the working class is the people who go to church as a group every Sunday without caring for the meaning of the ritual, but only for the mechanical participation in it. By contrast, Aunt Emily is “Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice” (23). As Janet Hobbs writes, “these declared affinities are for Emily “roles she puts on” and “the artificiality of the phrasing alone establishes that Aunt Emily specializes in inauthentic transformations” (43). Some critics have interpreted the reference to Christian, Classical Greek, and Far East cultures as ecumenical, but it seems rather cosmopolitan. Aunt Emily represents the consumer society’s approach to spirituality and ethics, where one picks and chooses as Wuthnow argues. While Binx’s mother is stuck in a parochial church, as unable to dissociate from it as from her lower class status, Aunt Emily demonstrates that her social position allows her the financial ability to buy herself the kinds of spirituality she desires, much as it has allowed her to buy the education she values in herself.

Therefore, Binx's approach to spirituality as an individual intellectual endeavor of the man of letters follows Aunt Emily's tradition somewhat, and secures for him a place with her and his father's social class. Binx defines the search as "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (13), which is, however, no definition at all. Yet it *is* a definition of a social class, for who can afford not to be sunk in the everydayness of his or her own life but someone who has at least assured the everydayness of his or her existence? George Andrews and Mrs. Jackson over-emphasize the importance of basic material needs but Binx minimizes it, and in doing so establishes himself as belonging to the opposite end of the spectrum from the children in the shelter. He and Aunt Emily are the spiritual elite, those who do not engage in mere manipulation of the material but have interests of a higher, nobler nature. Binx glosses over the amazing amount of free time he seems to have in order to indulge in those searches of his, both reading and moviegoing. During the course of the novel, we do not simply see him working at a profitable career but also selling the land he has inherited from his father and changing cars based on their "malaise" emissions. Some cars can keep away the "malaise" he feels, Binx informs us.

Yet, Binx does not examine the conditions that allow him to do so, and which would not allow the same endeavor for someone like Mercer. Robert Coles asserts that Mercer, Emily's butler, is "spared nothing by Binx, even as rich, white businessmen aren't" (154), and Coles emphasizes

the fact that Binx describes how “my aunt brought him from Feliciana, but he has changed much since then. Not only is he a city man now; he is also Mrs. Cutler’s butler and as such presides over a shifting ménage of New Orleans Negresses, Jamaicans and lately Hondurians” (22). Of course Binx is also Mrs. Cutler’s nephew now, as he talks about Cato and Euripides and Jean-Christophe all of whom, by his own admission, his aunt discovered for him (55). Therefore, Binx ignores both race and class in explaining why he deems his own posturing as justified and Mercer’s as unjustified, and the only explanation he allows is that Mercer does not always succeed “in seeing himself” (24).

In an interview, Percy stated, “When any writer in the South pretends he can write a novel and ignore the social issue of the Negro, something is wrong” (*Conversations* 17). I believe that even though at first glance *The Moviegoer* seems to avoid the issue, Percy is true to his own dictum. Farrell O’ Gorman writes that in the novel Emily objectifies Mercer by turning him into a memento of a bygone era, while Binx at least takes some fleeting interest in him (76). What comes out of this brief interest is important, however. Binx finds on Mercer’s bed “a well-thumbed volume put out by the Rosicrucians called *How to Harness Your Secret Powers*,” and pities Mercer, calling him “the poor bastard” (24). Yet, if one should feel sorry for Mercer, it may not be for the reasons Binx thinks. Mercer’s study of a book that takes an esoteric, occultist path to spirituality is not that different from Binx’s searches, which are also of a solitary, mystical

kind. Binx, therefore, scorns Mercer's mystical choice not for its association with the occult, but for the occult's association with a particular economic and educational status. Mercer will not improve his position by such an association anymore than Binx would through an association with Anna's religious routine. Mercer, like George, has alienated himself from the struggles and issues of the African American community, and he has engaged in the characteristically white ways of self-improvement and individualistic soul-searching. He is another person that rejects the African-American tradition of attaining spirituality through the relationships within the community and incorporates the inner culture Stewart mentions, which views such notions as inferior. His desire to preside over others and claim superior status based on his employer's social status shows he reproduces the ideological assumptions of the stoic southern aristocracy Emily represents.

Emily views herself, her class, and her race as superior to any other and admits that she neither is "ashamed to use the word class," nor unwilling to accept the charge "that people belonging to my class think they're better than other people. You're damn right we're better," she informs Binx (223). All of Emily's Episcopalian, Greek and Buddhist influences finally amount to "the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women—the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life" (224). Binx has no

reason to look anywhere else for the answer to what is the essence of human life, for Emily has clearly announced that the southern heritage of her class is, ultimately, what defines the best of the human spirit. Moreover, this heritage is without a doubt the heritage of the white race. Binx observes how at the time of Emily's lecture, "Cothard, the last of the chimney sweeps, an outlandish blueblack Negro," passes by. At that time, Emily has just pointed to the street, declaring, "If he out yonder is your prize exhibit for the progress of the human race in the past three thousand years, then all I can say is that I am content to be fading out of the picture" (224). As John Edward Hardy notes, the text ridicules Emily's claim of superiority. When we first see Mercer, he holds a coalscuttle, and now we have the black chimneysweeper, another association with ashes that links both to the black man Binx sees outside the church at the end of the novel. Binx sees this third black man on Ash Wednesday, and for the first time he does not pretend to know what the other person thinks. Instead, he wonders whether the man has been to church for spiritual reasons or out of habit, like Anna, and declares, "it is impossible to say" (235). In this man, Binx sees life and spirit as mysteries in Gabriel Marcel's sense, experiences that cannot be fully analyzed by the Cartesian mind or through Platonic searches. The man is coming out of a Catholic church that Ralph Wood notes, "in 1961, was the only racially integrated church in New Orleans" (173). Hardy argues that this man completes the image the three black men comprise, an image of "fire and ashes, serving to remind the white man of

his own mortality and of the impending demise of his civilization” (41). O’Gorman adds that this image is also a call for the white class’ “need for penance” (78), but above all I believe it to be a statement against the supposed spiritual superiority of a particular race and class that Emily and Mrs. Jackson seek to maintain.

Struggles in the Dark

Toni Morrison has stated that she wanted to include in the beginning of the novel “the information that *Song of Solomon* both centers on and radiates from” (“Presence” 224). The first line of the novel is “The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o’clock” (1), and Morrison has indeed encapsulated the main issues of the novel in this one sentence. The key words for this discussion are “mutual life.” Spirituality in *Song of Solomon* is a result of mutual life, meaning life where each person cares for and enjoys life with others, as is the case of Pilate throughout the novel. Yet, among the male characters, Guitar shows more promise of living within a framework of mutuality of life than Milkman does. As a young boy, we see Guitar as clever and sensitive, and even as an adult, he retains some of his capacity for empathy. Guitar can feel Hagar’s suffering after she loses Milkman, and when Milkman tells him how he hit Macon who was violent towards Ruth, Guitar thinks Milkman’s action is that of the son protecting the mother, even though eventually Milkman admits he did it to challenge Macon’s power. Based on personality alone then, Guitar should

have been the one to attain a spiritual connection with others, as well as with the African American community's past. Instead, Guitar ends up almost insane, having committed himself to serving an abstract idea of community but being unable to commit to anyone in the community in particular. Potential alone is not sufficient for people to develop a sense of spiritual connection, Morrison tells us. The ideology Mrs. Jackson, Emily, and even Binx (for part of the novel) promote, the belief in some class or race as superior, becomes a reality for Guitar who witnesses, at an early age, the effects of this ideology for the African American. Guitar's example proposes that before one sets out to accept the importance of spiritual connection with other humans, a person needs to believe in the possibility of such a connection. Instead, Guitar discovers through his experiences that when social injustice, racism and materialism devalue human life, any idea of connection and mutual life becomes meaningless.

Guitar's experiences lead him to shut down his capacity for love in favor of an equal capacity to hate, much as Macon's experience of injustice at Lincoln's Heaven led him to seek a materialist haven in property. Even though Macon and Guitar take different paths and each has distinctly different characteristics from the other, their stories are similar both about the kind of event that triggered their change and about the conditions surrounding that impetus. Guitar sees the death of his father, an African American man, trivialized, and the value of his father's life diminished. Similarly, Macon sees his father and his father's murderers go unpunished

because they are white and the victim is an illiterate African American man. Guitar remembers hunting in the woods and his memory brings back the boy who experienced a connection to the land there, much as Macon does when he talks about the farm.

The different paths in life Macon and Guitar take, however, illustrate how racial inequality and social injustice are not merely an issue of whiteness as much as an issue of the white race's money-hungry lifestyle. Guitar learns that lesson early in life, when he is introduced to Macon's callousness, since Macon rejects Mrs. Baines' plea that her grandchildren need both food and shelter. Guitar's grandmother, as we noted, sighs that "[a] nigger in business is a terrible thing to see" and at the hearing of these words both Guitar's and his brother's lips "were parted as though they had heard something important" (22). The important lesson is about the possibility of an African American man being cruel and indifferent to the needs of others in the black community, not about the existence of cruelty and indifference, since Guitar had experienced both first-hand when his father was killed in a work-related accident. He shares with Milkman the story of how he came to associate sugar with dead people, "and white people," after the day his father got sliced up in a sawmill and his father's boss "came by and gave us kids some candy. Divinity"(61). Hardly an accidental choice of candy, divinity symbolizes how dualistic spirituality has often been used to minimize the importance of injustice on the "material" realm by promising great rewards on the eternal "spiritual"

realm. Donna Richards talks about how spirituality in an African context is “the breath of life” (43), but that is not the brand of spirituality the divinity candy represents for Guitar. The candy is supposed to compensate for the emotional and spiritual emptiness, even though its failure to do so in Guitar’s case is obvious, since at the mere recollection of the event, he starts sweating, steps aside, and then re-emerges with “his eyes. . . teary from the effort of dry heaving” (62).

Guitar’s narration of his father’s death concludes years later, when he is by then a member of the Seven Days, and he and Milkman have just been released from jail through Pilate’s intervention. As Milkman asks him if he had ever seen anyone who “went down for us, clowned and crawled for us” as Pilate did, Guitar remembers his mother who “smiled when the white man handed her the four ten-dollar bills” (224). Both the instance of Macon threatening to evict Guitar and his family as well as his mother’s smile at the dollar bills establish for young Guitar that oppression and exploitation go hand in hand with capitalism. The second instance, however, confirms his aversion to a “forgive and forget” attitude based on love for everyone, regardless of issues of justice and oppression. Unlike Mrs. Jackson who did not care about the rage the past creates, Guitar eventually comes to see his whole life and purpose in it defined by the rage of his own past and the past of racism. He comes to view dualistic spirituality to be as empty a promise as divinity, and thus those who can be placated by a few dollar bills rather than be outraged at the meaning of the

gesture are representatives of this kind of spirituality. What Guitar is most repulsed by is his mother's "willingness to love the man who was responsible for dividing his father up throughout eternity," and her acceptance of giving them "instead of life insurance. . . forty dollars" with which he hoped to "tide [her]...and them kids over" (225). Guitar rejects his mother and the principle behind her actions—the cowering before the white man's power and the acceptance of any crumbs offered, as well as the dualistic perspective on matter and spirit it represents. The focus on his father divided "throughout eternity" rather than restored, as a soul, in the spirit world shows his refusal to subscribe to such a dualistic vision that draws attention away from this world, but also demonstrates his inability to fathom a different interpretation of spirituality, one that *would* care for the events in the physical world.

In *Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Brooks Bouson notes that "in linking Guitar's aversion to candy to his aversion to white people, the narrative sends out the covert and countershaming message that white people make Guitar vomit: that is, they disgust him" (91). Guitar will never subscribe to the illusion that human pain can be soothed with a material possession like the "big peppermint stick" his mother buys him the day of the funeral, which Guitar carries like an albatross "at the graveside, at the funeral supper, all the sleepless night," unable to "eat it or throw it away" (225). In fact, his image of the world turns negative, as he finally drops the stick "into the earth's stinking hole"

(225), having no esteem for either part of the spirit/matter split as he has witnessed it. Nonetheless, when we first hear Guitar expressing his interest in justice for the black community, the picture we get is one of a committed fighter, contrasted with the apathetic and disinterested Milkman.

Guitar directly tells his friend that their interests are different, since there are things that interest Guitar like racial and social injustice which do not interest Milkman. To the latter's protests about whether Guitar can actually know what interests him, Guitar replies: "I know you. Been knowing you," referring both to Milkman's middle class life in Honore Island and his exploitation of "a Southside bitch," Hagar. Guitar also remembers the earlier incident, when Emmett Till was murdered, which Milkman saw as insignificant compared to his own personal complaints at the time. Guitar read that "fuck Till" (88) Milkman uttered not as simply uncaring but as fucking Till and every other black man and woman Milkman could fuck, use and exploit for his own enjoyment and self-indulgence, lessons learned at Macon's side. Milkman is bored with Guitar's political interests: "Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all" (108). For Milkman, these problems are some form of diversion for the black community, and at times he wonders "what they would do if they didn't have black and white problems to talk about." Racial problems are thus trivialized and ignored by him, much as class status is ignored by Milkman but emphasized by Guitar, who tells him how the two may be

friends and African Americans, yet they do not live in the same social environment. Guitar calls attention to the memory of Macon “kicking us out of our house,” and informs Milkman, “That was a difference right there between you and me,” pointing to the obvious class difference. Milkman cares only about his own personal reality, so he acts surprised when Guitar brings up social status.

Furthermore, Guitar tells Milkman how he doesn’t “live nowhere,” has no commitment to either “Not Doctor Street or Southside,” which contrasts with Guitar’s decided commitment to the Seven Days. When Guitar asks his friend what he would do “if this turned out to be another Montgomery?” he replies that he would “buy a plane ticket” (104), making Guitar’s point for him: Milkman is someone who will never fight for his people. He is someone who will escape the situation, fly away from responsibilities and the reality of black life, and this possibility of escape is because of his purchasing power of the airplane ticket, the money he has through his family. Guitar can never be the one to run away since it was his own mother who “just ran away” when his father died (307), and he condemns such cowardice. Instead, he has made the decision to stay and fight, because that is who he is but also because in his social position he has no possibility of escape. Jan Furman argues that Milkman, Macon and Guitar represent three different ways of dealing with white oppression and white hatred: “Some, like Milkman, convinced themselves that. . . it did not concern them. Others, like Macon Dead, turned white hatred into self-

hatred and in turn directed that hatred toward their own people” (201), and finally, according to Furman, “Guitar and the Seven Days, enraged by the lynchings, the burnings, the murder, respond in kind.” However, Guitar’s commitment turns out to be not to the actual people of the community but to the abstract idea of it. The community turns out to be as removed an ideal from the actual people who belong in it, as the spirit world is a removed reality from the material in dualistic perspectives. Therefore, Guitar does not deconstruct the dualism he has experienced as socially and racially unjust; instead, he tries to model it so that it serves the black community. Not surprisingly, he ends up reproducing the oppressors’ logic much as he reproduces their system.

Right after Guitar takes Hagar back home, Milkman and Guitar have a semi-confessional discussion, which we learn has become a rare occurrence for them. Milkman tells him that although they have been friends for a long time, he can tell Guitar “anything. . . but for some time now it’s been a one-way street” (153), expressing his uneasiness with his friend’s secretiveness. Of course, as Dorothea Mbalia writes, “Milkman, blinded to all people and all things except himself, created the one-way street. In point of fact, this occasion marks the first in which he has asked his friend questions that have not concerned the Dead family (57). After Hagar’s attempt has temporarily shaken his self-centeredness, Milkman tries to get to know more about Guitar’s world, and he discovers that Guitar has become a political vigilante, killing “not people. White people”

(155). In Guitar's and the Seven Days' scheme of things, it is impossible to try to prevent murders by white people, because the latter are by nature murderers, and one can only balance a murder by killing any white in exchange, since "each and every one of them could do it." Dehumanizing the Other, here the white people, in exactly the same way white people have dehumanized Guitar's own race, he sees "the balance," keeping things "on an even keel" as the only way to deal with injustice. In a distorted way, he is Macon's true son, having internalized the very white qualities he abhors and having turned to bookkeeping as the way to solve problems. Guitar's connection to the past or future is not spiritual but mathematical: people are numbers and the meaning is in the score.

As Cedric Bryant writes, "the Seven Days' philosophy is predicated on cold, calculated revenge—a life for a life without benefit or due process or regard to questions of innocence or guilt" (104). Guitar's sense of balance is literally a balance of terror, which he came to seek after both his personal life experiences and the observance of the life of black people in general taught him that often "their law and their courses" do nothing to bring balance and justice, or to avenge the deaths of the black people killed. Guitar has gone from caring for people of his race to hating everyone in the white race. When he offers his rationale, he speaks not simply of the need to vindicate murders of African Americans by random murders of European Americans, but also of the depravity of the white race as a whole, a race for which, according to Guitar, "Hitler's the most natural

white man in the world,” a race of people who “are unnatural” (156). Guitar believes that he can find justification for seeing white people as non-human in their “writers and artists. . . telling them they are unnatural . . . telling them they’re depraved. They call it tragedy” (157). Guitar’s rejection of the white race as a whole parallels Aunt Emily’s scorn of the black race, since he believes he justifies his acts by believing that he, as a black man, is by nature superior to white people in terms of ethics but also in terms of reason. When Milkman points out that the Seven Days do “what the worst of them [white people] do,” Guitar replies: “Yes, but I am reasonable.”

At first, Guitar is able to justify his actions to himself and keep them within the boundaries of his philosophy by creating an exclusionary definition of community. Yet as Milkman fears, “young dudes are subject to change the laws” (161), and the exclusionary nature of Guitar’s definition of community starts drifting toward an expansion of those excluded, while its guiding principle slides from a professed love to an expressed hatred. When Milkman finds out that the members of the Seven Days cannot marry or have children, he comments “There’s no love in it.” Guitar retorts that his work is not “about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love” (159). The discussion about love is of course academic for both parties. Milkman has seen his father with a family and children and yet without love in his life, just like a Seven Days member. It is even more academic for Guitar, who simply

baptizes as love what is clearly hatred, believing that proclaiming it love is enough to make it so. Milkman fears this rationale when he wonders if Guitar will one day “off” him (161), to which Guitar replies: “We don’t off Negroes” (161).

Because Guitar no longer situates himself in the community and can get no sense of identity from his participation in it, he is left with a single viewpoint of the world around him, which is the one he acquired as a little boy after his father’s death. His move away from spirituality and affirmation of life to nihilism and commitment to death also includes a distance from other people. Milkman catches on to the idealization of Negro and worries, because Guitar said, “Negroes. Not Milkman.” Even though he has never given serious thought to such issues, Milkman is able to understand the danger of seeing people as symbols, as ideas, rather than as individuals. In addition, since he has just witnessed Guitar defining people as “not white,” he is aware that the definition of Negroes may one day leave Milkman or whomever Guitar decides outside the definitions’ boundaries. Guitar, by the end of the novel, cares about nobody in particular and although he claims to love all black men, he ends up wanting to kill one, his best friend, and for the same (assumed to exist) gold which Macon, too, valued more than the life of a black man.

Guitar’s world is an off-balance one, but his insanity traces back to the insanity of the suggestion that peppermint sticks and a few dollars can substitute for a human life. Macon’s indifference to Guitar and his

grandmother, Milkman's indifference to anyone but himself, and the greater white society's indifference to the lynching and murder of innocent African Americans all have made life meaningless for Guitar, and have pushed him to connect to humans in death rather than in life. For Guitar, his murders will help the people in the African American community more than mutuality, commitment, and connection with them would. He has been unable to prevent the death, oppression and injustice he has witnessed from making him reject life, but he is an outcome of both personal circumstances and greater societal influences. If the focus had been just on the trauma of his father's death, then the emphasis would have been on the deficiencies that make Guitar unable to even try to reconnect spiritually with others and find some meaning in his life after the early tragedy he experiences. But as he tells Hagar, everyone he ever loved in his life left him (307), while those left in his life taught him what he communicates to Milkman: everyone wants the life of a black man. Thus, his commitment to death demonstrates an insane rationale that mirrors the social environment's insane rationale of racism, injustice, greed and disregard for human life.

Ralph Story writes that Morrison's "unique, omniscient sense of the black community of the urban North is conveyed in her precise and exact rendering of the male figures in the Seven Days. . . . Morrison has focused on the community and its men" (93). Yet, the males of the Seven Days are men apart from the community, and as they themselves can never have

children, they have upset the sought-after balance of races. Nevertheless, even without focusing on arithmetic, the desperation of somebody like Smith or Porter shows the strains participation in the Seven Days imposes on its members, and the alienation from the community they claim to serve. The seemingly inexplicable events of the first chapters of the novel, Smith's suicidal flight and Porter's nervous breakdown, are explained when we find out that they were members of the Seven Days. Guitar glosses over the importance of these events and the lessons they impart, choosing to focus on Smith's choice to "do that rather than crack and tell somebody" (158), with "that" referring to Smith's act of insane desperation, while for Porter Guitar declares that "he just needed a rest and he's okay now" (159). Earlier in the novel we have found out, however, that on the day mentioned Porter "was very specific about whom he wanted to kill—himself" (25). His screams reveal more than this act, as he shouts, "I love ya! I love ya! . . . Don't you see I love ya? I'd die for ya, kill for ya. I'm saying I love ya" (26). As someone who has lost his faith in the 'hate is love' credo of the Seven Days, Porter gets drunk and explodes with both the secret and the revelation of the philosophy that has driven him to insanity.

Porter is desperate in his realization that the community does not see the Seven Days actions as acts of love, since he himself no longer believes that is the case. In fact, through his affair with First Corinthians, we come to see that Porter needs love, knows what love is, and knows it has nothing to do with the brand of murderous hatred that passes for love in the group

to which he belongs. First Corinthians herself acknowledges that Porter wanted something more than just sex when he dropped the greeting card on her lap in the bus (196), and his behavior towards her shows that he needs more than “to fuck” as he was shouting on the rooftop. Porter is able to avoid Smith’s fate not because he needed a rest and is now fine, as Guitar simplistically states, but because he broke the rules of the Seven Days. After falling in love with a woman, he was able to continue, drawing strength from the connection with a particular member of the community, not with being committed to an abstract idea of it as Guitar finally ends up doing.

Morrison acknowledges the obstacles someone like Guitar can face in life, and which can make spiritual connection with others difficult or impossible, yet she also recognizes that without an appreciation of life and a commitment to helping others in life rather than in death, little hope exists. The vigilantism of the Seven Days is bound to effect as much change as Mrs. Jackson’s focus on the now, and the former will be as ineffective in preventing harm to other Guitars as the latter will be in preventing children from finding themselves in the same position as George. Milkman scoffs at Guitar’s interest in politics and tells him to change his name to Guitar X, to “let white people know you don’t accept your white name,” but Guitar responds, “I don’t give a shit what white people know or even think” (160). Since he eventually states that white people are not even people, his statement is consistent with his philosophy,

but that philosophy keeps issues of justice in the dark and offers no hope for large-scale changes. Kate Ellis argues that the internal chronology of the novel, which is around the time of the civil rights movement marches in 1963, comments on the absence of the characters from such engagement. Macon does not care and Milkman cannot bring himself to care, but Guitar chooses to hide in the dark. Ellis writes, “Political struggle in the open, with others as well as on behalf of them, is an option that the characters in this novel literally cannot see, though an aware reader knows that it is going on at unprecedented levels around them” (38).

What is missing from the *Seven Days* world-view is the engagement in the political with the horizon of the future that spiritual connection offers. I acknowledge the seeming paradox of this conclusion: the novel accepts Guitar’s difficulty in seeing humans as spiritual beings, even as it insists that without such a vision no new situation can emerge. First, this is a novel of paradox, as we see in the ambiguous ending where multiple outcomes for Milkman’s last action are possible. Second, Guitar’s situation as a boy has to do with the past, and the past cannot be ignored, as Mrs. Jackson and others like her would want. However, the critique of the *Seven Days* focuses on their lack of perspective about the future, since theirs is a philosophy that reproduces white systems of oppression. The lone individual who seeks revenge and is cut-off from the community is as problematic as the solitary hero who leaves the community to seek

enlightenment is. In both cases, a commitment to life and other humans with whom we share life is necessary to provide courses of action that promise change in the physical world.

Individual Responsibility

While the case of Guitar in *Song of Solomon* shows that a sense of the physical world as spiritual proves problematic when human life is devalued, Morrison uses Hagar to demonstrate that there is room and need for individual agency, and that growing up around people who do actively pursue a connection to others is no guarantee that one will partake in this connection through no effort of one's own. Both Hagar and Cocoa in *Mama Day* illustrate that tradition is not passively received by the younger generations, nor is it hereditary, which is what Cocoa seems to believe. When she is in New York, Cocoa refuses to acknowledge the part of her identity that connects her to the traditions of the island, so she also rejects the applicability of Mama Day's powers to New York. Therefore, in her flirtation with George she goes along with "attempts to develop their relationship according to a white script," as Susan Meisenhelder observes (116). Since she accepts white scenarios, Cocoa shares responsibility in promoting the inner culture that denies the value of African American traditions, and her share may be even greater than George's, as her situations are different. Unlike George, Cocoa does have some family and a guarantee of survival because of the land the family owns. Land means safety and connection with the place of ancestors, which is what affords

people on Willow Springs not simply a connection with their past but also a hope for the future. They can thus believe in the continuity of human experience beyond the present, a belief characteristic of the kind of spirituality portrayed in the examined texts. While land alone is not a sufficient condition for this sense of spiritual connection, it offers Cocoa both a place where she knows her ancestors lie and a promise of a future, since the land will always belong to future descendants. New York has not given George a place to connect to the past other than Bailey's café, which he connects to his mother and her supposed past as a prostitute.

However, Cocoa does not even talk to George about the island and the communal ties there, or even about the powers Mama Day has as a spiritual healer and conjure woman, being the matriarch of the island. Cocoa considers Willow Springs hers and not his as well, part of that family inheritance of the Days she will come to through no actions of her own, and so George cannot have it. When they are having dinner at Mama Day's house, Ruby points out how George is now linked to the island through his marriage to Cocoa, a linkage that is apparently the norm in Willow Springs matriarchy, and she declares, "You're one of us' cause you married one of us" (181). Nonetheless, Cocoa does not expect George to fit in. Because, as Charles Wilson writes, she has to marry the two worlds she lives in (90), Cocoa expects that her own inability to do so must translate to an inability in her marriage to be valid in both places. George is not one of the people of Willow Springs because he is not married to one

of them after all. He married Ophelia, and Cocoa is the one who is “one of us.” Her proprietary attitude towards the island’s traditions demonstrates how little she actually understands them.

Nonetheless, the events that lead to George’s death show that the world of Willow Springs and the world of New York are connected. Mama Day tells George that Cocoa “bound more than her flesh” with him (294), and therefore George has to help Mama Day: “I can’t do a thing without you,” she informs him. Of course George has internalized the belief that his ways are the ways of all people on the mainland, not of a certain class of white people. Susan Meisenhelder notes, “His failure to enter the world of Willow Springs. . . results from his inability to abandon his white cultural baggage” (117). Mama Day calls him to accept that the ways of Willow Springs can and are his ways as well, which is what neither he nor Cocoa seems able to believe. Cocoa believes herself to be a part of the elect, those blessed with the gift of spiritual awareness, and until she rejects such elitist attitudes, she remains as trapped in materialistic and white middle-class scenarios as all the people on the mainland—whom she deems inferior—are.

On the other hand, one can simply choose those scenarios despite the traditions in which she grows up, which is what happens with Hagar. Pilate’s granddaughter has different desires than those of Pilate and Reba, and Pilate’s decision to seek and live in the same city as Macon are related to Hagar who “needed family, people, a life very different from what she

and Reba could offer, and if she remembered anything about Macon, he would be different” (151). Pilate sees that Macon is “prosperous, conventional, more like the things and people Hagar seemed to admire.” Hagar, we find out, “was prissy. She hated, even as a two year old, dirt and disorganization” whereas we know that Pilate “gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (149). Hagar is the one in Pilate’s household who does not feel safe without some planning for her needs, and when the three women meet Milkman and Guitar, Hagar states that if Reba had not won some money the previous winter, they would “have starved” (48). Pilate attempts to refute her, stating that since Hagar had never starved they would certainly have managed even without Reba’s winnings, to which Hagar replies, “Some of my days were hungry ones” (48). Her grandmother finally realizes Hagar talks about something beside food, and we can assume that Hagar refers to hungers and desires the other two women do not have, such as the hunger for material possessions. Refusing to propose that human experience is universal, the narrative presents us with two black women, Pilate and Hagar, of the same social environment who are, however, very different in character. Even at a young age, Hagar prefers things that Pilate has rejected, and while Pilate and Reba pamper and eventually spoil her, she never contributes anything to her relationships with either of them. Hagar may not be as self-centered as

Milkman is, yet she is certainly as content to simply receive, to milk Pilate and Reba for all the love and comforts they give her without questioning whether she, too, must offer the same to them.

Jane Bakerman argues that Pilate should have guided Hagar more than she did, and states, “the failure of Pilate’s life foreshadows Hagar’s tragedy” (556). Pilate’s life is hardly a failure, however, and I believe that she is a spiritual guide, a pilot as the name suggests, to those who wish to be guided on the path she herself has chosen. While the women in the novel are more restricted than men in their options and possible outcomes of their lives, I do not think that one who lives the spiritual life Pilate does should force her philosophy on others, so that she will not be accused of insufficient guidance. Pilate does value African American traditions and beliefs about spirituality, and she extends her concern to every human being within her reach. If she were to claim superiority of her way of life and seek to impose it on others, she would be reproducing the power hierarchies of inferior and superior to which she herself has fallen victim. Pilate *is* responsible for pampering Hagar, and Milkman *is* responsible for his cruel treatment of Hagar, but Hagar too is responsible for the way she treats herself, which is also the way she treats human life in general. She is not, for instance, in the same situation as Guitar, and race or class cannot be defined as factors that deny any personal responsibility.

Even the first time we are introduced to Hagar, we find that she is “braiding her hair” (29), which is also the last concern Hagar has in life,

when she wonders why Milkman does not like her hair. Bertram D. Ashe sees behind this last concern Hagar's certainty that "Milkman is only attracted to women with distinct European features" (177). If we consider how Milkman and the Deads in general have tried to erase their African American identity and past and have tried to fit into a black version of the white middle-class, Ashe's assertion helps us see yet another way in which this search for an African version of the European model is manifested. Moreover, Ashe asserts that there are "specific black-male expectations where black female hairstyles are concerned" (178), and Hagar tries to conform to them, just as Pilate refuses to conform to any male expectations by having her hair cut short. Hagar does not merely conform to bourgeois expectations about hair or, by extension, female beauty but adopts the egocentrism of the bourgeois value system as well, along with the inherent premise that everything, including human emotions and passions, are governed by the market law of supply and demand. As the consumer *par excellence* in the household she lives in, Hagar believes that if Milkman no longer desires her, her desirability is diminished, and since Milkman is "the man for whom she believed she had been born into the world" (127), she goes insane with desperation after he discards her like used and undesirable goods.

Accustomed as she is to her desires being satisfied by those around her, Hagar is unable to deal with the first actual rejection in her life. When Milkman thinks of Hagar the evening he is waiting for her final murder

attempt, he remembers how Reba and Pilate's generosity "was so wholehearted it looked like carelessness, and they did their best to satisfy every whim Hagar had" (92). As he thinks back to their first sexual experience together, he initially remembers that "he first took her in his arms," but soon corrects himself and recalls that "in truth it was she who called him back into the bedroom and stood smiling while she unbuttoned her blouse" (92). Hagar, at that time almost a woman, has control over her relationship with Milkman, a control which eventually diminishes; and when he sends her the insensitive "thank you" note, she realizes that she can no longer have Milkman if she wants him—a realization which shakes her inner core of instant gratification. Like Macon, she derives meaning from her possessions. Thus, just as Macon thinks that the most important part of life in Lincolns' Heaven was the land rather than the relationship with his father and sister, Hagar believes that the most important thing in Pilate's household is not the love they show one another but the satisfaction of every whim Hagar has. Thus, when she loses the one possession she once had the most control of, she is unable to survive. Her life dissolves when her control over Milkman dissolves.

So, rather than merely illustrating an imperative to model herself after European models of beauty, Hagar's final act of trying to reach "a beauty that would dazzle him" is the desperate act of a woman who believes packaging herself more desirably will create a demand, a commodity Milkman will be interested in. Because she has never

internalized Pilate's selfless giving, all she knows is the taking of what they have given her. Therefore, she can only attempt to escape her situation by giving Milkman a new version of herself, and hope he will take her. Furthermore, since she has never been able to assert an identity through her participation in the community, she is doomed like Macon to compensate by extreme dependence on the perception of others. Just as Macon cares about public opinion, Hagar cares about what others see. When she looks at herself in the mirror she starts muttering, "No wonder," as if the truth has finally been revealed to her—as if only by looking at what others can see is she also able to view her own self: "I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (308), she keeps chanting, with a determination to change herself by changing the image she thinks others have of her. So even that last act is self-centered, an attempt to manipulate the perception of the community, not to join it, learn from and give to it. Pilate cries at Hagar's funeral "she was loved"—a tragic and touching plea, yet Morrison warns us that besides having being loved by others, Hagar had to have loved and valued her own life as well.

As we see, an examination of the conditions in life such as sex, class, and race which are part of life's framework is not a look into success or failure stories, but a study of the reasons the stories differ. We see that there are individuals like Pilate or Mama Day who are so exceptional that nothing can prevent them from forming meaningful relationships with others, but we need to keep in mind that they are exceptional. The rest of

us are not, but we should not assume that the conclusion of these novels is that some conditions guarantee spirituality, or that we cannot even think of attaining a spiritual connection with others before we have achieved some material comfort. Rather, the point is this: Injustice, inequality, racial discrimination, and lack of respect for human life—the agenda of political struggle—are also the conditions that hinder or destroy our potential to see one another as spiritual beings. What harms life, harms the spirit and vice versa, and the sooner we overcome artificial dichotomies like political life and spiritual life, the sooner we can work on preventing further harm.

CHAPTER 4:

WAYS OF SPIRITUAL CONNECTION: INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND COMMUNAL TRADITION

In a 1992 interview, Gloria Naylor talks about having grown up in a family of Jehovah's witnesses, and how this experience made her see Christmas in a different way. She explains that even after she left that religion, she was still aware that the overwhelming importance of Christmas as the ultimate family and commercial holiday was a fiction. As a result, Naylor explains that now on Christmas she does not "have to go on a frantic search to fill up the spaces of time with anybody doing anything to avoid what is not" ("Hers" Dec. 20, 1992). The experience Naylor describes is both valuable and rare; it is valuable because it is the experience of an individual transported from one set of assumptions to a totally different one; it is rare because we do not often get to live in such sharply different situations as those Naylor describes, situations that alter our concept of everyday reality. We encounter all those other perspectives daily—we are aware that in our social surroundings social norms, codes, conventions, and expectations differ from one group of people to another. But people have known of different religions, cultures, systems of government, etc., for millennia—it is not a shocking discovery for there is always the ideological safety net which distinguishes between all those other conventions and our own which are not really seen as such. Alternatively, even when one admits that these are also conventions, they

are somehow, someway more comfortable because they are our own. As long as we feel that our own self is invested in those conventions, any challenge to them becomes a challenge to the self, and therefore the different is categorized as abnormal, deviant, strange, whereas the ideology we perpetuate is normal, comforting, workable, perhaps even superior.

One of the functions of literature is often to challenge the comfort of such ideological assumptions and strip them of their status as norm. Terry Eagleton argues that literature often offers such a challenge by providing puzzlement. Eagleton asserts that ideology presents itself as a granted reality and attempts to hide its artificiality which is the “mimesis ...[that] preceded and encircles meaning” (470). Besides the investment of the self, what we come to view as norm is then habit, what Aristotle called our “second nature.” In fact, while ethics has become synonymous with morality in today’s thought, its ancient Greek etymology from *ethos*, a word originally meaning habit, reinforces Eagleton’s argument. This ideological force of habit then produces statements about what is “self-evident” in this world, even if these statements’ claim to truth may have nothing to do with what we know to be valid but simply with what we know vs. the unknown and therefore uncomfortable. Toni Morrison discusses how writers can use the spiritual to provide puzzlement, when she explains that she uses spirituality to “keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while [the reader is] being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world” (“Unspeakable” 32). Gabrielle

Foreman confirms the correctness of Morrison's approach when she asserts, "For U.S. readers, explicit politics in the novel may suggest 'gauche' reenactments of the protest novel, the potential compromising of aesthetics for 'mere' polemics" (296). We must ask, however, why Morrison believes it is easier to preoccupy the reader with the spirit world if the spiritual can be a technique for challenging the ideological structure. I believe Morrison is aware that historically, spirituality has been a means of supplying us with a steady diet of a dualistic vision. In such a vision, the premise is that there exists an all-encompassing community in another realm; based on this premise, we have to conclude that such should be the case in the material realm as well. We are all brothers and sisters in the eyes of whatever deity or divine notion—the racist and the victim of racism, the third world country worker and the first world employer who takes advantage of workers and their labor are all spiritual siblings in a realm where these conflicts do not matter. And when one looks closely at the present state of affairs and concludes that exploitation, intolerance and hate are not brotherly or sisterly feelings, the answer from a dualistic standpoint is not that the model fails to see reality but that the material reality is not as important as the spiritual one. The novels examined illustrate that a concern for the physical can be served through a sense of spirituality that focuses on humans and their world, as well as their ethical obligations in it, rather than on other plains of existence. Furthermore, the political is not by definition impervious to idealization, as we see when communities are

defined solely on one characteristic—they tend to be exclusionary and as idealized as the world of the spiritual, and the idealized community of women does not recognize race, for instance, as bell hooks observes in *Talking back : Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Similarly, race can be idealized so that class is not recognized, and so forth.

Morrison, Percy and Naylor know that spirituality has often been used to re-enforce rather than challenge the ideological status quo; thus, they emphasize what the ethical praxis should be for those people who attain spirituality rather than on metaphysical questions about spirituality. The incredible spirit world is not another world, of course, any more than the political world is; they are both different aspects of the physical world. And the experiences the characters in these novels go through are similar to the experience Naylor described, the experience of no longer living in the world of your previous assumptions. I propose that spirituality can and is used as a tool to show how for these characters the world they know becomes alien, strange, uncomfortable and therefore subject to challenge and questioning. I have focused on *Song of Solomon* and *The Moviegoer* here, since these two texts feature the protagonists who seem to embark on solitary quests even if events ultimately subvert these expectations. Both texts suggest that the characters need to overcome self-centeredness in order to gain a better understanding of the world but also of themselves, even if the two texts suggest different ways in which such a process takes place. Yet both Gabriel Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity which Percy

offers as his solution and Morrison's proposal of communal narrative as a means for attaining spiritual awareness have particular limitations, resulting from the assumptions of the proposals. However, a look at both approaches brings to light more than their respective weaknesses: it suggests how each can complement the other as well.

Intersubjectivity

Since spirituality in the examined works is a sense of connection between the self and the others, a realization through which characters get to acknowledge not only their connection but also their ethical obligations to the others, the first step in this process is the challenge to self-centeredness and the creation of conditions that will allow acknowledging this connection. In *The Gift of the Other* Mary Deems Howland discusses how Gabriel Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity is present in Percy's novels, including *The Moviegoer*. In an interview with Bradley R. Dewey, Walker Percy expresses this critique of Kierkegaard regarding the latter's emphasis on subjectivity:

Kierkegaard seemed to set up subjectivity as the only alternative [to Hegel's objectivity]. That has always bothered me, because I think he is falling into the trap of emotion, inwardness, and so forth, yet never makes any provisions, as far as I can tell, for understanding or an explanation of intersubjectivity—caring for the other person, or how to know other people. (*Conversations* 119)

As the above quote shows, Percy was aware that the element of caring to find out *about* and caring *for* other people was necessary to avoid both

inwardness and the kind of vague connection to “all” which is often associated with the mystical approaches to spirituality.

Evelyn Underhill writes that mysticism is “non-individualistic” only in the sense that “it is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate reality” (71). Mysticism, Underhill insists, is characterized by “an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love” (71). I do not see this as “non-individualistic” or as escaping the sphere of the egotistical self; rather, I interpret such a view as expressing a need for that sphere to expand to the maximum degree, seeking to encompass all reality in it, to trap the world into the world of the individual self. Thus, what such a theory calls transcending the sense-world, the praxis translates into ignoring the sense-world. Moreover, while Underhill makes these assertions about mysticism, I believe that such tendencies are inherent in most approaches to spirituality where the individual is called to unite himself or herself to the transcendent reality and to look at the world as the material part of a dualistic reality. Furthermore, as Binx finds out, such a procedure entails the danger he describes, “that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over” (70). At the end of such surrender to the “ultimate reality,” the self becomes unreal, without a place in the world.

Such an approach of the “I” in relation to the abstract, transcendent world is what *The Moviegoer* shows as problematic, and therefore Howland correctly asserts that Percy is indebted to Marcel and the need for “restoring a sense of community and participation with others” that Marcel advocates in his work (3). Marcel’s notion of intersubjectivity “allows persons perceived as an ‘I’ and ‘thou’ to share and affirm the world” (3), so that rather than an “I” which seeks to have a union with the transcendent unmediated by others, there is an “I” which can only find its position in the world through a “thou.” The “I” is viewed as limited and limiting in and of itself, and in *The Mystery of Being* Marcel writes that his opposition to the “I” as the basis of metaphysics is really an opposition to the Cartesian “I”: “It is not enough to say that it is a metaphysics of being; it is a metaphysics of we are as opposed to a metaphysics of I think.” Binx’s vertical search is the search of the Cartesian mind which can come to know and understand the world on its own, using the mind’s abilities for categorization, analysis, and unification into ever-greater wholes, totalizing and abstracting facts into forms. He tells Kate, “There is excitement to the search. . . because as you get deeper and deeper into the search, you unify. You understand more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae” (82). Yet at the end the Cartesian mind, alone and unconnected, states that the world is within its comprehension, but the “I” is alone in the world it has comprehended.

In the novel, we see Binx's lack of connection with the people around him, be it neighbors or landlords or secretaries he flirts with and from this lack of connection, the unconnected self sees no life but mere existence, and views others as lifeless. Binx informs us that "for some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead" (99); John Hardy comments that Binx falls in the category of the unreliable narrator (39), yet even if Binx's impressions of others may not reveal much about the objects of his observation, they reveal a lot about the observing subject. Binx sees life as empty, people as dead, both as a result of him having no connection with any of them. He has sought to find a meaning beyond mere existence in his searches, but his failure has left him at a position that is no better than that of his parents. As Binx examines the choices his parents made, on the one hand he sees his dead father pointing to a life full of that lethal dose of romanticism that "killed the English soul" as Binx frequently mentions. On the other hand, he sees his mother who cannot handle any sort of discussion that deals with issues of spirituality. Even though in her case the encounter with the issue is religion, Binx believes she has managed to reduce her own and her family's participation in matters of religion to an empty ritual, a kind of habit as Eagleton notes.

Binx has accepted neither of these choices, yet in his vertical searches for the transcendent he shows an inclination for his father's escapism to abstraction, while in the materialistic lifestyle to which he has

abandoned himself we see parts of his mother's way, or what he believes his mother's way to be, anyway. In both cases, Binx is more critical than either of his parents was or is, but this battle of parental influences seems a replication of the spirit and matter dualism of Platonic thought. These are different approaches to the same issue, the "problem" of matter and spirit, idealism and pragmatism. However, to accept the possibility of another perspective is to accept that there may be a different type of a problem, or a different way of problematizing the question of how one achieves spiritual connection and what one's ethical choices in life should be because of that connection. The dualism that his parents' choices present works in an extreme set of either/or; one choice eliminates the other, so that the question becomes one of choosing the better of two limiting choices.

The first time we see Binx understanding that there should be some other way of approaching the issue of creating meaning out of experience is when he discusses his idea of rotation, "the experience of the new beyond the expectation of the experience of the new" (144). Yet the emphasis on newness shows that "rotation," together with "repetition," the "malaise," and the "search," is part of Binx's Platonic endeavor, a desire to encounter something new and different rather than to see as new and different what is already there. As Richard Pindell writes, "the very gusto of Binx's naming shows how easy it is to feel problems with the satisfaction of a solution. Naming. . . is a recognition that can easily constitute a dismissal" (221).

Kate is the one who brings attention to Binx's tendency to theorize as a mechanism for refusing real involvement in life, when she says that his games have the color of "death house pranks" (193).

While Kate herself never indicates—to the degree that Binx's narration allows her—a preoccupation with spirituality, her actions show that she is engaged in what is the basis of spirituality in these novels, which is the human connection. Kate feels the need to leave the self's seclusion and have a meaningful relationship with another human being, even though she is aware that she is trapped not only by her self but also by the image of her self that others project. She informs Binx of the one time when she did not feel that pressure, right after the accident in which Lyell was killed: she felt that there was no pressure, no expectations to fulfill, while "at the time of the wreck people were so kind and helpful and solid" (81). Kate explains to Binx that she is at "her best" with doctors because she is "fine when sick." Robert Coles writes, "Kate is fine when she is talking to the doctor, and fine when there is a tangible difficulty to face. Her despair comes in response to those interludes between emergencies" (159). Because she has not come to know of any other way to connect with people, she feels close to them only when she is in need of psychiatric treatment or during disasters, when people rush to her rescue. But momentary concern does not connection with another human make, so Kate is destined to go through the cycle of despair and emergency many times.

Kate sees as real the problem that Binx sees as theoretical, the problem of the lack of purpose and meaning, of the unconnected human who lives for himself or herself and can only be shocked out of self-involvement or can shock others in the same way through a disaster. Yet Binx will only come to see it in such terms through Kate and the events of the eight days in the novel; Kate is the way through which Binx arrives at intersubjectivity and a new understanding of spirituality not because of her need for help, but because in Kate's needs and anxieties Binx finally acknowledges his own. Binx already has someone in his life he has a connection to, Lonnie, but he has made sure to minimize his exposure to Lonnie—when he visits him, Binx informs us that he has not been there in six months (138). As soon as Lonnie sees him, he goes “into a fit of excitement” (137), yet the excitement is not one-sided, and Binx admits that Lonnie is his “favorite.” For a man like Binx who has only talked, ironically, about the joy of making money, the joy of being around Lonnie is clearly important.

Coles observes, “Only when he is with Lonnie does Binx's guard come down” (165). Lonnie is someone Binx feels a connection to, and this bond is not based on pity; Binx says he does not feel sorry for him, but even without the statement his reaction shows that he is as changed around Lonnie as the other way around. Binx goes with his half-brother to the movies and they both enjoy the experience as “moviegoers,” driving around and joking with one another, to the point that even Binx's mother wonders

how it is possible for these two to behave like children in this manner: “Now aren’t these two a case?” she asks Sharon. While Binx’s erotic confessions to secretaries-turned-lovers are rehearsed, patterned after movie dialogues, he finds that both he and Lonnie express emotion with an honesty that is uncharacteristic of himself. Furthermore, he observes that “Lonnie’s monotonous speech gives him an advantage. . . his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out: do you love me? and it is possible to tap back: yes, I love you” (162). Through Lonnie, Binx is able to believe that he expresses an emotion he feels rather than one he copies from a movie or one he is expected to provide as a standard reply. And when he does express the emotion, it is subdued: “Quite a bit” is Binx’s answer to the question Lonnie asks about how much Binx loves him—gone are the grandiose movie-star-like declarations of exuberant emotions.

Coles argues that “when Binx leaves Lonnie and is back in New Orleans he is more sarcastic and cynical than ever before—a clue perhaps: he is lonelier than ever, because he has left someone he really touches and is touched by” (166). Yet to focus on Binx’s loneliness is not enough, for he feels more devastated than that, empty and more desperate than before—unless by loneliness we understand isolation, the isolation of the self that is unconnected and has no sense of a meaningful existence, no sense of spirituality. When Binx is around Lonnie, he does not need to be on his searches; in their interactions they both find in one another the “I” and

“Thou,” which Marcel argues affirm each other and share and affirm the world. When he and Lonnie have one of their intellectual arguments, Binx advises him to concentrate on the Eucharist rather than on capital sin, to which Lonnie remarks that the “Eucharist is the sacrament of the living” (164). While nowhere in the text does Binx ever express faith in the tenets of Catholicism, his advice is of crucial importance for he suggests an emphasis on a symbol of life rather than on death, which contrasts with his death-filled speech and observations about the world in the rest of the novel. Life becomes meaningful and valuable as a choice for Binx through his connection with Lonnie, and he feels the need to communicate his changed attitude in their conversation.

Yet, while Lonnie can bring out Binx’s capacity for connection, Binx has made sure to keep Lonnie and that capacity out of his life, in as much as Lonnie’s terminal condition does not allow Binx hope that this one connection will last. Thus Kate becomes instrumental in effecting in Binx a willingness to achieve and sustain such a bond with others besides Lonnie, to prove that such spiritual connection with another human being is neither a unique situation with Lonnie nor doomed to die as soon as his half-brother does. Kate actually demonstrates that a leap of faith is at times necessary to have such a relationship with another human being; she asks Binx to tell her what to do and tells him, “I believe in you and I will do what you tell me” (197). Binx is quick to reply “sure,” showing the same frivolity and lack of commitment to others he excels at, and later he

tells her he loves her but she cuts him off: “None of that, bucko” (198). She will not allow him to play a role with her and so he has no tricks and ready-made speeches and moves to use. When they have sex, Binx says that they “did very badly and almost did not do at all. Flesh poor flesh failed us” (200). Unable to behave in a routine, empty way, Binx is forced to try to be a real person and fails, while he also begins to understand that the physical, the body, is not at all apart from the spiritual as his dualistic perspective had him believe and “there is very little sin in the depths of the malaise” (200).

The almost-successful sexual act awakens Binx to the indifference with which he has treated the corporeal through his previous affairs, where he has been separating his sexual encounters with women from the possibility of connecting with them only because it suited him to believe so. Binx can begin to look past his habit, his mimesis, and look into his refusal to connect; he can also begin to accept his actions as having consequences, as he remembers being in Chicago with his father after his brother’s death and recalls “seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life; I, through a child’s cool perversity or some atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I knew I could not give” (204). Through the recollection Binx justifies his refusal to give something he “knew” he could not give, while he also understands the despair of a man who seeks the very reason for his life in another human being; Kate’s faith in him and her

request to be given directions by him now acquire the almost terminal despair he had refused to take seriously earlier when she made the request, so that she is the catalyst for a memory which produces an insight about her as well. Binx only now begins to see that the lack of connection is the very source of the despair his father felt, that Kate feels, and that he has been feeling as well all those years. In his search for a transcendent spirituality he ignored and was indifferent to the spirituality achieved among humans, the meaning-producing relationships through which humans come to view themselves as spiritual entities and not mere biological units, so despair engulfed him and desensitized him even to the existence of his need for real human relationships. Lewis Lawson writes that on the train back to Chicago Binx observes a man who is a romantic, a moviegoer who does not go to the movies and “has excluded himself from the world by his very way of looking at it” (“Moviegoing”39). However, Binx too has excluded himself from spirituality by the very way of his looking at it as something to be reached individually rather than something to be achieved through relationships with others.

When he returns, his aunt is severely critical of him and tells him that he is “not capable of caring for anyone” (221) while she also informs him that Kate “was suicidal” (225) when he took her to Chicago without informing anyone. Just as Binx has been given Kate’s trust and has began to feel a willingness to help and be helped by Kate, his aunt informs him that he endangered Kate, and so shatters his newly acquired confidence.

Binx is ready to give up once again and surrender to nothingness, so he looks for Sharon and he even tries to impress her roommate Joyce when he cannot locate Sharon. As Lawson asserts, “at that moment, on the verge of falling back into his most alienated form, he spies Kate, who has not betrayed him after all” (40). Looking at Kate, Binx wonders whether it is possible that “it is not too late” (231), that he indeed has the possibility of having a meaningful relationship with her even after all that has happened. She has trusted him and has connected with him; she has become a “Thou” to his “I,” an escape from the isolation of the self and a way to experience that his self is not hollow but has that capacity to connect, to act in meaningful ways. As a child he was unable to validate his father, to satisfy the demand that he be the purpose of his existence; he could not provide the breath that the word “spirit” alludes to etymologically, the feeling of a meaningful content in human existence which spirituality is at its most basic form. As an adult, he initially fails to see that Kate’s request for directions is also a request to help her find that same breath, and only after the experience on the train and Kate’s continuous belief in him and them does he realize the seriousness of the request she has made, as well as his change in attitude towards that request. Binx accepts responsibility for another human being at the same time that he accepts himself as someone capable of such responsibility, and in Kate’s despair and desire for connection he finally acknowledges his own.

After he accepts an ethical responsibility towards Kate, the new image of the world is not one of dead people who are automatons of capitalism, but of individuals who are each one of them a mystery as interesting and as worthy of inquiry as Binx's earlier searches. This time, however, he looks for spirituality in people rather than away from them. Right after he has declared his intent to be with Kate and help her, he sees a black man coming out of the church with his forehead "an ambiguous sienna color and pined: it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes" (235). Even after Binx imagines possible identities and purposes for the man's visit to the church, he still has to admit, "It is impossible to say." His new focus on people evidenced in this instance is also what convinces Binx to change his life to what he says is the one thing he can do: "listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along" (233). Binx has been searching for spirituality in terms of the meaning of human existence and has not been able to find a satisfying answer; through his experience with Kate, he finally frames a different question and sees the connection to others not as the consequence of but as the source of spirituality, the source of what makes human life something greater than mere existence.

The epilogue of the novel, set a year after these events, has appeared problematic even to those critics who would like to accept that Binx has developed not only his sense of connection and ethical responsibilities but also a commitment to religion. When Lonnie is near death, his young

siblings ask Binx about the resurrection and whether Lonnie will be in a wheelchair then. Binx assures them that Lonnie will indeed be walking like them, and this assurance has been seen as an affirmation of Catholic dogma. However, Kieran Quinlan in his book *Walker Percy : The Last Catholic Novelist* finds that if such a pilgrimage to Catholicism has taken place, “the final stage of the pilgrimage remains unspoken in the actual text of *The Moviegoer*” and is only “reasserted and brought to light in Percy’s subsequent comments on his first successful work” (98). However, those interviews are another text. I believe that Binx’s words of consolation to Lonnie’s siblings can be seen as part of his new attitude towards others, an attitude of connection and desire to help. In fact, if we compare his words of comfort to his aunt’s “be a soldier” when Binx’s brother Scott died, we see a man who sees comfort as not a simple task of ceremony and duty but as an act which creates meaning out of an event—a spiritual act.

What I find problematic in the novel is that Binx’s newfound ability to connect spiritually with others does not also lead to a reflection on his previous situation after the spiritual connection. The alienation he has described, the culture of materialism and commodity, the racially divided South, Aunt Emily and those clinging to a past no longer relevant, are all still there when the novel ends, but Binx no longer looks at them and does not address them as the specific conditions which had contributed to his and Kate’s alienation. Whereas he and Kate have found an “I” and “Thou” to share and affirm the world, and his commitment to a career of helping

people shows promise, the world they are going to share and affirm remains unexplored at the end of the novel. Binx has connected to others in his commitment to them, yet he has gained neither a sense of his self in the past and the present nor an ability to critically examine the two. He no longer merely exists, and he is a man with that meaningful breath of purpose in life, but his personal past has remained breathless, and as spiritually dead as when the narration started. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* illustrates that while the one part of a spiritual connection is the intersubjectivity approach of knowing and caring for the other, the connection to the past and the knowledge of the self's course in life is another equally vital part.

Communal Traditions, Past Connections

The self and the other are not general terms; they refer to particular people who look for a way to establish a meaning-creating relationship with specific human beings in their immediate surroundings. Thus, while spirituality may be seen as always operating on the same principle of human connection, the ways in which this principle demonstrates itself is dependent upon the people examined and their socioeconomic and political situation. In *The Moviegoer*, the socioeconomic background was present but not prominent: the problems of the US South dealing with its history and sense of purpose are present in Aunt Emily and to a degree Binx, and the commodification of culture is one of the symptoms of alienation Binx experiences. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison clearly illustrates the

paramount influence of race and the socio-economics of racism in relation to the human need for spiritual connection, and so the following section examines how this spiritual connection is framed by the particulars of race.

Just as *The Moviegoer* has been at times discussed in terms of (Christian) religion, *Song of Solomon* has been examined both under the prism of religious and mythical allusions and as a possible proposal of a religion of its own, a religion which, however, maintains close resemblance to established religions. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos refers to Railroad Tommy and Empire State as “the male prophets of this novel” who “deliver a doom liturgy to the small boys Guitar and Milkman on the series of things that Black men will never have” (48). We do not have to look far to see prophets, or to look at the epic, Homeric qualities of Circe; furthermore, the trip Milkman undertakes to meet her resembles the *Odyssey*’s narrative of Odysseus’ visit to the world of the dead. Yet, the similarity in elements does not constitute a similarity in function, and even though Toni Morrison incorporates religious and mythical motifs in her novel, it is an incorporation through which she critiques and often deconstructs mythical motifs as she introduces them in *Song of Solomon*.

Even the staunchest believers in the mythical pattern of the novel concede that the adoption of the patterns is, at best, problematic. Charles De Arman who sees “Milkman as the Archetypal Hero” in the essay of the same name, interprets Macon’s attempt to kill Milkman as fitting the mythical pattern but concedes that the attempt takes place “while still in

the womb” and thus “goes against the pattern” (57). Michael Awkward writes that Morrison is concerned with the “employment of the myth [for] . . . the inscription of the ‘new’” (97) and uses Morrison’s assertion that the myth in a modern novel is “revitalized by a new grounding in the concrete particularities of a specific time and place.” In *Song of Solomon* the “new” inscribed is that an individual does not embark on a heroic search for spirituality, for communion with the transcendent, by leaving the community behind. Instead, the self achieves some grasp of its coherence by accepting the responsibilities to the others in the community, and by learning about spirituality and human aspiration from the community’s narratives, so it is that Milkman finally learns about the narrative of Solomon’s flight but, more importantly, about the consequences of that flight and about his own family’s flight from the South.

In Milkman, we see the same thematic concern as with Binx in *The Moviegoer*: how does one connect the self with others and with the greater meaning-creating relationships of humans when the self is too absorbed in the ego to know even its own reality? When Milkman looks in the mirror, he observes about his self-image how “taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self” (69). Milkman lacks self-definition in the same degree that his actions lack motivation; he works for Macon but does not share his desire for material possessions. He has a relationship with Hagar, but “after more than a dozen years, he was getting tired of her” (91), and

his friendship with Guitar is no more than an occasional conversation since Milkman does not share Guitar's political interests. What Milkman cares about is what he "deserves," and until his trip to the South "he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted" (277). There is no sense of individual agency in Milkman; there is no role he sees himself as fulfilling—all actions operate from one direction only, that of others offering to him. Therefore the various parts of his self which are fulfilled by others never come together to some active role and the only thing others cannot offer Milkman—self-coherence—is the one thing he lacks. Joel Kovel in *History and Spirituality* argues that spirituality is "the desire for being" (133), but Milkman has no desire to be anything; he exists by default and owes even his very life to somebody else's action—Pilate's—whose action he repays by trying to steal from her. As he undertakes the search for the treasure that Macon is sure still lies in the cave, Milkman desires to be nothing in particular; he is motivated by a desire to have independence from his father. His search is a materialistic one, but it happens at a point where he has at least become aware of the spiritual emptiness in his life, even if he appears unwilling to act in any way that would fill this emptiness.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see the search as Charles De Arman argues, with Shalimar "the location of 'the crucial struggle': the place where Milkman experiences a succession of trials before he attains, what Frye calls, 'the exaltation of the hero'" (58). Viewed from such a

perspective, the end of the novel presents Pilate “in her death ascend[ing] into the sky. . . and Milkman becomes master of the world of man and of Gods, for he soars beyond his individual destiny to become a symbol of one who is transfigured as Guitar looks on” (De Arman 59). It is possible to read Milkman’s search as a self-initiated adventure; but Milkman did not embark on an adventure as a seeker in spiritual terms. Instead, his trip starts after his encounter with his sister and that encounter cannot be discounted: Milkman runs away from a truth he will eventually accept, the truth his sister conveys to him the night before he leaves. Lena shows him a dead bush that he “peed” on as a little boy and tells him that he “peed” on her too that day, but she was willing to let it pass as long as that maple was alive. Now, however, the maple is dying and Milkman has damaged First Corinthians’ chance for a relationship with Porter, after Milkman informed their father of it, so Lena sees that “there are all kinds of ways to pee on people” (214). Lena tells Milkman that he has been “using us, ordering us, and judging us,” referring to herself, Corinthians and their mother Ruth, and informs him that he is exactly like his father; when Milkman hit Macon, he was “taking over” and “letting us know you had the right to tell her [their mother] and all of us what to do” (216). She also informs Milkman that the “hog’s gut that hangs down between [his] legs” does not give him that right; as Patrick Bryce Bjork writes, “Lena reveals to her brother that he has no legitimate right, particularly in light of his uncaring, noncommittal behavior, to assume a patriarchal role” (101).

Bjork asserts, “Lena identifies Milkman’s disconnection from self and place”; in fact, her comments shed light on the lack of coherence that Milkman has observed every time he looks in the mirror: he sees nothing in that mirror to reflect a man who has given of himself to anyone, who has sought to understand nobody’s position but his own. The closest of the possible other human beings—his mother and his sisters—are irrelevant to him, creatures with no desires and needs of their own, being there just to satisfy him and his every whim. Milkman sees them as raw human material to be used in the same way Macon sees everything as material to be used, but as a result Milkman himself is defined by the emptiness which characterizes his interaction with others. He values human life so little in the face of Ruth, Lena and Corinthians that the devaluation is necessarily reflected on him who is not only flesh of Ruth’s flesh but also a creation of those women he sees as worthless. Since they have catered to his needs and have collectively raised him, with the sisters’ childhood spent on him like “a found nickel” as Lena states, Milkman is a product of these women, and his lack of appreciation for them is a lack of appreciation for their work—him. As he rejects any spiritual connection or ethical obligations to the women in his life, Milkman rejects the possibility of himself being able to attain such a spiritual connection—to such a degree that even the parts of his own self do not connect to a meaningful whole, to something more than raw material.

So Milkman escapes, literally flying away (on a plane) from a truth about himself and his spiritual emptiness which, as Lena points out, is related to his own choices; Milkman was born a son of Macon Dead, but as an adult he developed a disregard for others' needs. Lena however assures Milkman that he has not even shown the limited commitment to family that Macon has shown, so he really cannot expect to be the successor to Macon. When he takes off on his trip, Milkman has chosen to ignore Lena's observations and to use them as an opportunity to reflect on himself, and instead expects to find in the material, in gold, a new sense of self-definition rather than to seek this through connecting with other human beings. When he reaches Danville, he hears people asking him about whether any of his people lived there, and understands that "people" means "links" (229), which is a truth he had not pondered on until then. Yet, people are not only links to a past or a sense of ancestral identity, but also links to the self and the capability of the self to connect to others and to create meaningful patterns out of disparate, seemingly incompatible experiences and perspectives. Philip Page argues that in *Song of Solomon* there is a "pattern of differentiating various characters' orientations toward a value such as love. . . [which] suggests the limitations of any single character's approach" (95).

When the self sees reality in a dualistic view of "I" and "the world," the world is alien and the "I" has no equal, no other "I" to connect to, since every other person is part of the alien world that is "not I." Sharon Welch

discusses the relation of the self to the world and the possibilities of the self to see change in relation to Lillian Smith's critique of the American South. Welch writes that in Smith's work racism is not considered unacceptable compared with a standard of an ideal society; rather, through moments of respect and admiration for her African American nurse, Smith has "fragmentary experiences of racial equality, moments of respect and interaction that then serve as the basis for social critique and transformation" (66). According to Welch, we see possibilities for change because we see within our society ruptures, fragments that reveal a different alternative. Yet, for the self to see such ruptures there has to be openness to the possibility for an alternative. Other people are links, then, in that they represent links to such fragmentary experiences, to a spiritual connection that allows one to see the self as belonging and having ethical obligations to a community. Such is Milkman's experience in the South, a plethora of fragmentary experiences that reveal alternatives he had not considered or had not chosen to consider before.

One such perspective Milkman had not considered before is that his family has already been, figuratively, in Montgomery. When in a conversation with Guitar Milkman is called to answer what he would do "if this turned out to be another Montgomery?" Milkman replies that he would "buy a plane ticket" (104), as if to state that he would fly, escape social injustice of the kind Guitar talks about when he discusses his own experiences in Montgomery. Of course, Guitar has experienced injustice in

Southside too, with Macon Dead being the one perpetrating it. Yet, Milkman has allowed himself to believe that money buys him escape from a world where racial injustice would harm a black man. He finds out that his grandfather was a victim of such injustice however, and that his grandfather, Macon, and Pilate “had a fine place. Mighty fine. Some white folks own it now. Course that’s what they wanted. That’s why they shot him” (230). Milkman has heard parts of this story before, but he admits that up to that moment, when he heard it from people who knew and admired his father and grandfather, he “only half listened to it” (231).

Milkman considers why this story has such an impact on him now, and he realizes that “hearing Pilate talk about caves and woods and earrings. . .seemed exotic, something from another world and age, and maybe not even true. Here in the parsonage, sitting in a cane-bottomed chair near an upright piano and drinking homemade whiskey poured from a mayonnaise jar, it was real” (231). The stories have no impact when heard in a different setting because they seem to belong to a world which, however fascinating, has no relevance to the one Milkman experiences. Therefore, rather than gaining any spiritual insight from them, he gains only the fascination of the exotic, the fantastic but in the mode of the unreal. And there is a difference between the use of the spiritual as Morrison suggests it can be used, grounded “in the concrete particularities of a specific time and place” and the fantastic, which has no boundaries. Gabrielle Foreman writes that “the fantastic and the uncanny posit an

individual who experiences a world beyond the community's parameters" (286), and for Foreman *Song of Solomon* proves the experience to be within the community's parameters, indeed part of the communal history.

Yet, for Milkman it is impossible to access this dimension of communal narrative, connection, and spirituality; instead, he sees the stories as something that might as well have happened to anyone, anywhere or might even not have happened at all. However, Milkman's alienation from his family's past is a symptom, an instance of the alienation African Americans face as they move away from the past that the South represents. Brooks Bouson argues that *Song of Solomon* deals "with issues that African Americans find painful and embarrassing, such as the slavery origins of black American culture" (77). Both the stories of Macon's days at Lincoln's Heaven and of Solomon flying back to Africa are tales that deal with the bigotry and slavery that make all of the past a kind of Montgomery for black America; thus the elements of connection that Macon's story has or of spiritual triumph over the most adverse of circumstances are intertwined with a communal history that the Deads and those like them repress and seek, as Jake did, to "wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (54). Milkman has thus subscribed to his father's policy of black assimilation into white middle class values; Pilate, while presenting a clear alternative to Macon's world-view, is ostracized in Southside. In his trips, Milkman comes to experience a whole community where the past is present in all its dimensions, both the trauma and the spiritual greatness. In Danville, he

hears that the people remember both the injustice done to his grandfather and the way his grandfather was proud of his work with the land; he also understands that when Macon talked of working alongside his father, “right alongside him” he was not “boasting of his manliness as a child. Now he knew he had been saying something else. That he loved his father; had an intimate relationship with him” (234). When Macon speaks of that time, he remembers the spiritual connection that made Macon feel he belonged to a meaningful whole, and that knowledge guided him both in his love for the land and his love for his sister Pilate. And as Milkman understands the connection his father had, he begins to understand the lack of it and emptiness that has been the main characteristic of his life: “the more the old men talked. . . the more he missed something in his life” (234).

Milkman finds out that the life his grandfather and father led sent out to the others in the community a message about what they could accomplish and the message that “we live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else. . . Grab this land!. . . build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!” (235). This message encapsulates the principle of finding meaning in the life we live in this world and in the specific place where we live. Jake’s example illustrated for the people who knew him the greatness anyone can achieve, but its particular reality was also indicative of the greatness an African American can achieve; so they viewed his life as an instance of triumph and of a life where the self connects with others and can build on this relationship to

establish an organic relationship with the immediate surroundings and the prospect of the future. Yet Jake's story is also a moment of recognition of the hostile racist environment an African American faces, for immediately after the description of that envied life he led, we are informed, "they shot the top of his head and ate his fine Georgia peaches" (235). Milkman for the first time accepts that there is a spiritual link with his grandfather and with the people in the community; and while up to that point he did not even care about someone murdered like Emmett Till, he now extends his caring to those he feels connected to. Doreatha Mbalia writes that when Milkman asks furiously why "nobody did anything?" his anger "is aroused on this occasion because of his heightened awareness of himself in connection with other African people" (*Class Consciousness* 59).

Gradually, Milkman realizes that his family is spiritually dead because they lost all their ties to the past and the community they belonged to, but as he re-establishes this connection, he also experiences the pain and injustice that were his father's reasons for severing those ties in the first place. The Dead family's isolation from communal sources, folklore, and narratives that constitute their spiritual legacy is an isolation that has been sought in order to gain access to the materialistic world of white middle-class as well as to deny the consequences of racism and social injustice the family has suffered. Milkman contends that the Butlers were "dumb enough to believe that if they killed one man his whole line died" (236), which is the same rationale Guitar gives for the Seven Days' way of

killing a random white individual: each dead black death represents a dead black family line. Nevertheless, Milkman fails to see in his own words the degree to which the Butlers succeeded in killing the line of Jake in the sense that his son and grandson were not his spiritual descendants, were not connected to him in any way other than the biological. I believe that this story, of Jake and Macon and Pilate and the injustice they faced, is ultimately the story which Milkman keeps revisiting and reinterpreting after every new narrative he comes across, from Circe's story to Solomon's flight: the story of his family becoming alienated from its rich cultural traditions out of fear and a desire to escape, to leave behind the dead weight of commitment to other human beings. When he looks at Circe, he sees not merely a "witch," a magical figure, but also a woman who was a "healer, deliverer, [and] in another world she would have been the head nurse at Mercy. Instead she tended Weimaraners and had just one selfish wish: that when she died somebody would find her before the dogs ate her" (246). Circe's presence is not just an allusion to an episode of the *Odyssey*—the visit to the world of the dead. Rather, it is a way for the spiritual to make the real world strange and unreal, the process Eagleton discusses as necessary in order to see ideology as such and not reality. Milkman can no longer accept the single reality he has lived in, where people live on Not Doctor Street or in Southside and both seem acceptable alternatives based on capitalist notions of monetary and human value. In Circe he sees a woman of great capacity and moral strength living a life

which cannot be justified or rationalized within his earlier framework. Circe also comments that Milkman has lived most of his life not listening to people: “Your ear is on your head, but it’s not connected to your brain” she tells him as she explains that Mrs. Butler died when she could no longer afford to have servants and had to live like them, “died rather than live like me. Now, what do you suppose she thought I was!” (247) she asks Milkman, showing him that for a white racist like her boss, death was preferable to the life of an African American working-class woman—the ultimate rejection of the value of life, the ultimate embrace of spiritual and literal death that the Deads have fallen into.

John Brenkan writes that critics often focus on the “magical romance” element of the novel and bypass its “tragic realism” (79-80); yet the function of the magical romance, the supernatural element cannot be only to entice the reader into a mythical narrative—this is not the way to ground myth in the specifics of time and place Morrison talks about. In her essay, “Rootedness,” Morrison writes that in *Song of Solomon* she incorporates “the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, without one taking precedence over the other” (342). In fact, the supernatural element of the novel works to reinterpret the real world, and Milkman is called to see the circumstances under which his family abandoned the spiritual connection with its history to prosper in a materialist capacity. When he first travels to the South, he idealizes the area, and is amazed how “all that business about southern

hospitality was for real. He wondered why black people ever left the South” (260) only to see later in black people’s eyes the “hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken” (266). The monetary prosperity Milkman enjoys because of Macon is something he has taken for granted until he sees in others’ eyes that such prosperity is unusual for a black American—as rare to them as the sense of community they have is rare to him. The process comes full circle for Milkman, who first begins to appreciate the spiritual connection he never had experienced and then the uniqueness of his family’s material wealth. In order to criticize and reject the absolute devotion to material possessions Macon represents, Milkman needs to know that one has to fight even for material possessions, and in the eyes of those people, he finally understands that as well. As to his question about why black people would ever leave the South, we are told, “his manner, his clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either” (266). The South these people know is different from his first impression of an idyllic, hospitable black utopia.

One of the main critiques of spirituality as a theme is that it minimizes or ignores the importance of basic material needs, that it ignores divisions such as sex, race and class and extols the importance of finding meaning and purpose in life, even when simply sustaining any life is a struggle. Through the stories about Lincoln’s Heaven, Milkman sees that race is a key factor in being able to enjoy the kind of spiritual connection

that his father, Pilate and his grandfather enjoyed. And he finally sees in the eyes of the black Americans in the South the luxury his father's fortune affords him to travel in search of either gold or links to his family's past—the luxury his class affords him. Of course he does not need to be an upper middle-class black male to attain the kind of spiritual connection with others that Pilate has always sought and had, even while being a lower working class black woman herself. However, he now begins to understand that his insistence on what he deserved “sounded old. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others” (276). Brooks Bouson argues that here “the narrative describes his sudden questioning of his middle class—and narcissistic—sense of entitlement” (97).

As he goes hunting with the people of Shalimar, a hunting trip he believes may be yet another attempt on his life, Milkman re-examines his distance and indifference to his family and Hagar; and, as Brooks asserts, in doing so “Milkman recognizes that he has selfishly refused to be responsible for the pain of others or to share their unhappiness” (98). In light of the potential he has now recognized he has had due to his sex and social status, he sees his lack of contribution and commitment, his refusal to leave his self-centeredness and choose to connect as not merely egotistical but pathetic and wasteful. Under the weight of this realization and “under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the

cocoon that was ‘personality’—gave way” (277). In light of the earlier observation that Milkman would look at himself in the mirror and find no coherent whole, the cocoon that gives way here is “personality” as a combination of actions and needs, not a self that sees itself as entailing its own motivation and purpose, its own meaning. The discovery is not simply that an individual with no connection to others and to the past does not exhibit that spiritual dimension of self that allows the self to imagine extending and belonging to a union greater than the individual. Rather, without such connections the self cannot even imagine its own parts connecting, acquiring coherence, and so it is but a cocoon that gives way when pressured to find its place in a network of human relationships. As James Baldwin writes in *Notes of a Native Son*, “the past is all that makes the present coherent” (4). Wilfried D. Samuels notes that “Milkman’s experiences in the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shalimar allow him to finally divest his fostered self, the life that has become a burden; like the peacock’s vanity, it had weighed him down” (18). Significantly, after this moment Guitar attacks Milkman, and as Milkman thinks he is about to die the image that comes to his mind is of “Hagar bending over him in perfect love” (279); while the last time he thought he was about to face death it was Hagar who would kill him and he seemed not to care to avoid death, this time as he thinks he is about to die, Hagar comes to his mind through the love she had given him and Milkman is “filled. . . with such sadness to be dying, leaving the world at the fingertips of his friend” (279). He

values both life and love now—the love Hagar had given him and the love Guitar no longer gives him. Milkman escapes and he jokes to the others that he was “scared to death” (280), but he has actually been scared out of death and the Dead. He is now not only physically but also spiritually alive and cherishes the contributions of the people in his life, contributions he had taken for granted and devalued during his life-in-death.

His life is no longer a burden but a treasure, more important than the one he was supposed to find; however, Samuels’ reference to Milkman’s former self weighing him down is related to the motif of flying, a motif central to the novel, but one whose ramifications for Milkman and the novel’s proposal about his fate have been interpreted through a variety of critical perspectives. In one such perspective, Milkman is on a mythical quest and a quest to solve a puzzle, much as a hero of detective fiction would solve a mystery. He deciphers the meaning of the song the children sing, compares it to Pilate’s version and corrects it, realizes he is the descendant of the flying African and that Sing Byrd was the name of Pilate’s mother—thus her father’s last word was calling out to his wife, not an invitation for Pilate to sing always. As Charles De Arman writes, Milkman learns to ride the air by surrendering to it, and at the end of the novel “Pilate in her death ascends into the sky and Milkman. . . becomes master of the world of man and of the Gods, for he soars beyond his individual destiny to become a symbol of one who is transfigured as Guitar looks on” (59). Similarly, Stephanie Dematrakopoulos does not focus on

Milkman flying, but on his relationship with Guitar, which she sees as a battle: “[Milkman] leaps to wrestle his own shadow, the nihilism and narcissism of Guitar. He has already won” (99). The text allows for such interpretations, and while such views focus on one side of Milkman’s development, ignoring his new examination into his relationship with women, any interpretation is bound to favor certain aspects over others. What I find troubling is the implications of such perspectives for what a connection with the past and its spiritual potential amounts to.

James C. Hall writes in *Mercy, Mercy Me* that for the post-World War II African American, a main element of “intellectual and cultural life has been the increasing, if not obsessive, attention to the problem of the cultural significance of historical memory” (187). For Hall, such a preoccupation with the past usually takes one of two forms, that of “the cliché about not repeating mistakes,” which however “has relevance,” and that of the “more compelling. . . assertion that through the past one achieves, often at some significant cost, a kind of moral illumination,” (187) which, nonetheless, “may melt into thin air. . . [if] such a confidence may be shown to be mostly narcissistic projection” (187). A reading of Milkman as flying into heroic status and becoming master of both worlds following the Campbell/Otto Rank paradigm of the monomyth accomplishes neither objective: Milkman learns about the past not to avoid the mistakes of the past or to learn about the present, but merely to repeat it, to fly away as Solomon did. This is not spirituality preoccupied with human connection

in the world we live in or spirituality grounded in the specifics of time and place, but rather a version of the same myth with a different protagonist.

Furthermore, it is an uncritical incorporation of myth, which goes contrary to the function of myth in the text. As Michael Awkward writes, “myths are implicitly ideological in their conveyance and advocacy of their culture’s belief systems in symbolic forms” (99). On the subject of the myth’s ideology, Rachel DuPlessis argues that, “when a woman writer chooses myth as her subject, she is faced with material that is indifferent or, more often, actively hostile to historical considerations of gender, claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural or even archetypal status” (106). Besides the myth of the flying African escaping slavery that Morrison uses, the myth of Icarus also resonates in the image of Solomon flying. In her poem “Waiting for Icarus,” Myriel Rukeiser presents the theme of the flight from the perspective of the woman waiting for Icarus, the young man who, like all men, seeks flight and escape and does not think of those waiting for him on earth, of the void his escape/flight/death will leave. Therefore, Morrison’s text could be another critique of myth from a similar perspective. Yet, as Patrick Bjork notes, “the flights of Smith, Milkman and Solomon are not, like Icarus’, the result of hubris and the desire for an impossible kind of freedom. Instead, each character has ‘flown’ to escape a particular brand of oppression” (107). So, Morrison “has reconstructed the myth to reveal its inherent limitations within black culture and has shown the essential conflict it presents for both individual

and community” (107). Thus, while Morrison’s male protagonist learns of a mythical African male who flew to freedom, the knowledge is accompanied and interpreted through the central question the character of Sweet introduces, the question of “who did he [Solomon] leave behind?”

Susan Byrd tells Milkman about how Solomon “disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children,” and Solomon’s wife Ryna was “supposed to have screamed out loud for days” (323). After Hagar dies, Sweet’s question colors every aspect of Solomon’s story, which becomes a story of horror: “Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children” Milkman exclaims as he thinks of how “he dreamt of flying” while Hagar was dying (332). And his final vision of flying, of the human spirit being triumphant over adversity, is not that of Solomon but of Pilate who “without ever leaving the ground, could fly” and whose last words are her regret that she had not known more people: “If I’d knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). As Gurleen Grewal writes, “Morrison offers a critique of the flying African myth even as she inscribes it. Escape routes are not the same as routes to liberty” (73). Pilate has not gained her spiritual strength and sense of self from escaping, but from flying without ever leaving the ground, from liberating herself from conventions and expectations that would not allow her to connect with people; for she identifies love as the source of her strength and spiritual power, as the essence of her existence. Milkman’s dream of flying as well as the consequences of Solomon’s flying show that such a dream and desire are,

ultimately, escapes from the community and the very ethical obligations toward one another that define humans as spiritual beings.

The other point I find problematic in the perspectives that support an ending with Milkman's flight and triumph, which I mentioned earlier, is the prism under which the relationship of Guitar and Milkman is interpreted in order to arrive at this conclusion. If Milkman triumphs, and in his triumph he masters the material and the spiritual, then he also triumphs over the concerns Guitar represents, the concerns of political involvement and rage against racism and exploitation. And it is a triumph of silence and negation, a triumph of "transcending" these problems by pointing to the big picture that is the spiritual—again the very reason spirituality has become synonymous with being an ideological tool for advocates of keeping the *status quo*. But Guitar is not an antagonist to Milkman, an opposite who causes his demise as Milkman "plunges, in darkness, to the earth" (Bowman 13). Rather, Milkman and Guitar are two sides of the same problem, what Peter Bruck identifies as "the alienation of black man from himself and his people" (300). Guitar has been unable to prevent the death, oppression and injustice he has witnessed from making him reject life and the life-affirming spiritual connections humans make; instead, Guitar has committed himself to death and an idealized sense of community rather than the actual members of it. He has also experienced losing anyone he ever loved in his life (307). Yet Milkman has also been unable to understand the consequences of the very oppression and injustice Guitar

and even Milkman's family have experienced, and only in the woods does he understand both what Guitar had missed about the South and that "something had maimed him [Guitar]. . . . He felt a sudden rush of affection and. . . he thought he understood Guitar" (282). Thus, in the end Milkman does not fly away from this world and over Guitar—he returns to Shalimar with "a box of Hagar's hair" (334) after all, a sign that he is not escaping his mistakes and responsibilities anymore. Milkman flies right into his friend's killing arms, a symbolic fusion of the two parts that Milkman and Guitar represent.

Therefore, the new spiritual awareness Milkman has acquired and represents at the end cannot help establish human connections in this world until it also accepts the specific problems in this world that threaten life to such a degree as to render it meaningless—which is the side Guitar represents. While *Song of Solomon* deals with the specific reality within which humans bond spiritually in ways that *The Moviegoer* does not, for both novels the end is not a neat resolution of conflicts within the novel but rather a proposal that there might be a way for humans to connect and through that connection there can be ways of looking at life and our position in it that are meaningful, positive and conducive to our awareness of ourselves as spiritual beings. Yet this process is not something achieved despite the conflicts, problems and crises of the real world, but through working out these conflicts and crises. Furthermore, to strive for such a connection is not to put conflict aside, for that would be putting aside the

very world that creates the conflict and that is the same world in which humans are born, live, and interact with one another. As Sharon Welch writes, “the point is not to make conflict go away but to make it work for, rather than against, life” (46). After all, spirituality is not an end in itself: after we understand the ways in which we are meaningfully defined by our relationship with the past and with one other, we still have to understand and act on the ethical consequences that such a spiritual connection with others signifies. The end of the search for spiritual connection is a point of departure for such questions rather than a point of closure.

CHAPTER 5:
DEATH'S FADING APPEAL

In *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida examines Plato's *Phaedrus* as the work that both first articulates logocentrism in western thought and demonstrates western thought's desire to trace human origin not to the world we know but to the world of ideas—to embark on a metaphysical quest for an answer to the question of human life's essence. Derrida uses Plato's work to demonstrate how even Plato cannot maintain his own hierarchical preferences of speech over writing, and ultimately to deconstruct those hierarchies. Any binary pair such as writing and speech, light and dark, body and soul always contains a value judgment about the superior and inferior part of the pair, and thus the matter and spirit opposition is no exception. Not that it is difficult to verify this empirically as well; even a simple examination of the works of authors who embrace dualistic perspectives of spirituality show that spirit is considered superior to matter. What follows as a consequence, though, is that in a dualistic vision of spirituality, death is ultimately superior to life because death brings the passage to another world, the after-life or what other designation that world has, which is eternal, as opposed to earthly life that is transient. In discussing her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," for instance, Flannery O'Connor writes that both the encounter of the grandmother with the Misfit and the grandmother's death are meaningful because "the

characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity” and we will do best to “see it as something more than an account of a family murdered on the way to Florida” (“Unreasonable” 114).

The split between spiritual and material is also articulated in *Phaedrus*, where Plato claims for the spiritual a separate birth from the physical. In Plato’s schema the soul is born in heaven and drinks from the fountain of forgetfulness, *lethe*, then enters the body and is not only incorporated—fused into the corpus—but actually incarcerated in the body; life on earth is but a prison and has no contribution to the nourishment of spirit. Occasionally, the soul gets momentary glimpses, epiphanies, of the world of ideas it once inhabited and its wings unfold, longing to be free of corporeal strictures. After death, it is released again. Lawrence Rosenfield, in comparing Sophist and Platonic thought, comments how “Plato denied what was for Sophism the very foundation of man’s humanness, his impulse to associate with his fellows within the social institution of the polis.” Rosenfield notes how Plato “claimed that social intercourse necessarily destroys the philosophic act. Hence, solitude became a precondition for thought as he would have it understood” (68). Plato’s doctrines have been the basis of dualistic spirituality that sees the *polis* as at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to spirituality, but also the basis for life’s association with the corporal and thus inferior to the spiritual. In Platonic thought, the only way to achieve transcendence is to die.

Platonism has not permeated thinking about spirituality alone, since Plato was also one of the first theorists of literature. Through Plato's ideological preference for epiphanies, glimpses of the overarching meaning of earthly events, death is not merely the end of life but also the *telos*, the end in the sense of purpose, or destination. Death, end, *telos* are meaningful in many modern perspectives on economies of plot that follow Platonic lines. Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* and Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* provide insights into the power of the ending. A plot's ending does not simply offer closure, but also a retroactive interpretation of all preceding events as the chain of causality through which the end is not simply expected but desired so that what precedes will make sense. Brooks uses a Freudian framework to ascribe to the readers' desire for plot an identity of *eros*, while in the desire for the ending there is the death drive, with both desires feeding off and antagonizing one another much as *eros* and the death drive do in Freud's scheme. As already mentioned, dualistic views of spirituality privilege the ending because it is a revelation of the spiritual realm and because, as Gregory Baum argues, in such perspectives human "historical existence and mission are wholly relativised" (20). Death becomes synonymous with *telos*—the destination, the ending, the point of revelation—and life is not simply relativised but can also be easily sacrificed since it is devalued. Death is the meaningful experience, and sacrificial death is the ultimate meaning-producing choice available in this world for humans.

In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell claims that in sacrifice “you die to the flesh and are born into the your spirit. You identify yourself with the consciousness and life of which your body is but the vehicle. You die to the vehicle and become identified in your consciousness with that of which the vehicle is the carrier” (134). Since the three novels examined focus on spirituality as a connection among humans in the physical world, they subvert both the idea that death is the gate to the eternal and that sacrificial death is the ultimate offering from humans to one another and the best means for attaining spirituality. Instead, they offer life and struggle in life as alternatives.

Reconsidering Death as Sacrifice

Lonnie, Binx’s half-brother in *The Moviegoer*, believes “that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men’s indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ” (137); Binx counter-proposes that Lonnie “concentrate on the Eucharist” (164). Lonnie understands that Binx emphasizes life over sacrificial death and replies, “Eucharist is a sacrament of the living.” Although Lonnie suffers from a terminal illness and his early death is a certainty rather than a probability, Binx urges Lonnie not to focus on death as the way he can offer service to other people, but instead to concentrate on life, especially considering how much Binx himself is able to benefit from his interactions with Lonnie. The child or child-like character that dies and through his death offers illumination and salvation may be the ideal Lonnie seeks to conform to, but Binx has already been through his

brother Scott's death and knows that there was no knowledge or atonement to be gained from the experience, and all he received was Aunt Emily's advice to act like a soldier.

Similarly, in *Song of Solomon* Guitar thinks that he can serve others by death—specifically by killing white people to avenge the death of members of his race, and by offering his own isolated life as a sacrifice to the community, both of which prove destructive choices. The novel actually begins with the fate of another man committed to death, the insurance agent Robert Smith's suicide as he flies to his death, an act that by-standers wonder if it was "one of those things that racial-uplift groups were always organizing" (6). Ralph Story declares Smith's act to be "revolutionary suicide" (85), and "a ritualistic hara-kiri decision" (87), interpreting the act as equivalent to the Japanese suicide ritual. In that case, Smith hoped to offer some message through his suicide and thus sacrificed his life in order to deliver the revolutionary message that Story argues exists in the action. However, it is hard to discern the revolutionary message of a man and a group shrouded in secrecy and keeping its actions hidden and thus any possible messages undeliverable. More likely, Smith's suicide reveals his admission of guilt, as Dorothea Mbalia suggests: he leaves a note of forgiveness because he chooses to fly away and escape responsibility (137). Smith's flight is as much an escape as Solomon's flight is, which is why during Smith's death Pilate evokes the mythic flight of Solomon through her song "O Sugarman done fly / O Sugarman done

gone...” (9); the second line interprets the first: Smith is going away, leaving others behind, escaping, and his futile attempt will not deliver any message other than that of death, the message First Corinthians receives when she connects the velvet flowers with death through Smith’s doomed flight.

Among the three novels, *Mama Day* offers a direct contrast between two kinds of sacrifice in the cases of George and Miranda: one is the traditional sacrificial death and the other a sacrifice of certain options in order to help others in life. Suzanne Juhasz argues, “*Mama Day* is a fiction of the good mother that includes the daughter’s romance with a man” (130), even though Miranda is not a biological mother and, apparently, did not even have much of an opportunity to be a daughter. Since Miranda’s mother grieves for a dead child and is unable to care for herself or her children, Miranda spends her time “being there for Mama and child. . . for sister and child.” Eventually, she gives up hope of having a child of her own by “being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. . . and [she has] had—Lord, can’t count ’em—into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now” (88-89). As midwife and as spiritual healer and leader, Miranda has “birthed” generations and generations of the island’s inhabitants and she is everybody’s mother, a matriarch through her service to and guidance of the community of Willow Springs. *Mama Day* did not sacrifice her life in the sense that she gave it up; instead, she sacrificed certain desires or possibilities in order to help other people, first in her

immediate family and then in the larger community. She served by helping create life and so her actions do not devalue life but rather extol it.

Miranda does not think that there is any greater gift than life, and in order to serve life she is willing to make certain sacrifices for it. The communal narrator comments that “Miranda rocks and thinks of the things she can make grow. The joy she got from any kind of life. Can’t nothing be wrong in bringing on life. . .”(262). Life is meaningful and joyful in and of itself without it being some sort of preparation or test for another, eternal life that lies in other realms, as dualistic perspectives of spirituality propose.

Mama Day’s actions are not limited simply to delivering children, of course, but also to enhancing opportunities for women to conceive and bring life to the world, which is what she does with Bernice. Bernice has been trying to conceive, but even the medication she took on her own has not helped her chances and in fact endangers any possibility of a future pregnancy; Bernice tried to increase her chances of conception through medicine produced in mass quantities for everyone, even though her particular constitution does not allow her to use it. Her impatience leads her to acts that will actually put her and her chances of any conception at risk. Mama Day helps her conceive, but first she asks Bernice to perform a series of everyday tasks and finally takes her to the “other place,” after which Bernice is able to get pregnant. Gloria Naylor, in an interview, has commented on the way in which this process can be seen as Mama Day’s “relaxing” Bernice: “some women have no physical reasons barring them

from conception, there are indeed emotional reasons. The first thing any specialist will tell you is to just relax and forget about it” (162). Naylor also states that she took “straight out of a textbook” the foods Mama Day gives Bernice, and “those are foods that build up the blood, and foods that are meant to relax you.” Naylor insists that it is up to the reader to decide what happens at the “other place,” but Mama Day in her own words states that she did not perform any miracle: “She wasn’t changing the natural course of nothing. She couldn’t if she tried. Just using what’s there” (139). At the “other place,” she is described as having “ancient fingers” which guide and help Bernice, but again there is no invocation of any otherworldly realities. Even the “other place” proves to be literally another place, the previous place of residence of the Days, yet still a location on the island, even though its name suggests something otherworldly. The “other place” is filled with painful memories and trauma that Abigail and Miranda would rather keep away from, but it continues to be a part of their lives and of the world they inhabit.

While Mama Day is able to use her spiritual connection with the past and with others to help people in this life through life-enhancing acts, George ends up subscribing to the notion that life cannot be helped through such acts but rather through a sacrifice that leads to death. The affirmation of life that Mama Day demonstrates in her actions is a result of a spiritual connection to the island and its people; through a life spent helping, guiding, and being offered help by the people of the island, Mama Day has

come to receive joy from life as the narrator informs us, and to see life as so valuable that preserving and nurturing it becomes her own life's purpose. Furthermore, she is not alone in her view, since the common island culture celebrates "Candle Walk," a day when they commemorate their common heritage by offering one another gifts as an acknowledgement of what each person has offered to the others' lives. Reverend Hooper, we find out, "couldn't stop Candle Walk night," nor can anyone "call it Christmas" because "any fool knows Christmas is December twenty-fifth—that ain't never caught on too much here. And Candle Walk is always the night of the twenty-second" (108).

Bharati Mukherjee argues in her review of *Mama Day* that the inhabitants of Willow Springs "believe in a pre-Christian, pre-rational society" (20), focusing on "Candle Walk" being celebrated on the night of winter solstice, the night when, in pre-Christian times, druids or other pagan religious groups celebrated the longest night of the year. But the text offers an explanation tied to the island's own history: Candle Walk started out as a way "of getting help without feeling obliged" when "Willow Springs was mostly cotton and farming" and since "by the end of the year it was common knowledge who done turned a profit and who didn't. . . winter could be mighty tight for some" (110). The gifts offered now still had to have come "from the earth and the work of your own hands," but the action is symbolic, and the emphasis is not on what the hands produced but on the spirit of helping one another that the gesture

reveals. People on the island understand the symbolic significance of the act of offering rather than the tangible object offered, but George, as an outsider, will not be able to see past the symbolism and will not be able to escape the demand that his hands offer something tangible when Mama Day asks for his assistance in helping Cocoa. Moreover, when he can find nothing material to offer, he offers the only “material” he thinks he has left, his life.

The idea that any life should be sacrificed does not belong to the Willow Springs way of thinking, but Mama Day knows it is part of the mentality George brings with him to the island. Susan Meisenhelder writes that George’s “constant attempts to accommodate Willow Springs to white cultural myths make it impossible for him to understand its more complex reality” (117). George knows the reality he has constructed, the reality of the engineer whose job is “to redesign the structures that take care of our basic needs: water supply, heating, air conditioning, transportation” (60). Anything tangible and material George can accept, but whatever is neither tangible nor belonging to his category of basic needs is incomprehensible. Mama Day explains to George that with Cocoa’s mental health in danger, there are two ways to help her, “two ways anybody can go when they come to certain roads in life—ain’t about a right way or a wrong way—just two ways. And here we getting down to my way or yours” (295). Mama Day says that George needs to go to Miranda’s house, search the nest under Clarissa—the old red hen—and “come straight back here with whatever you

find,” which George immediately dismisses as “mumbo-jumbo” (295). Furious, he screams at Miranda that there is nothing she can give Cocoa even though he asks for her help, and Miranda replies: “There’s nothing I can give her” (296).

Mama Day emphasizes that George is the one who can offer Cocoa help, but he can choose to give her help either by accepting the spiritual reality of the island or by acting within the parameters of his own worldview, in which case he can only offer a life for a life, which corresponds both to the sacrificial principle of dualistic spirituality and the bartering principle of capitalism. Furthermore, George’s characterization of Mama Day’s suggestion as “mumbo jumbo” illustrates that he cannot escape the strictures of Mrs. Jackson’s teaching and the limits of middle-class ideology, which reject spirituality and difference respectively. George declares that he will act no differently than any other man—white man—would in this case, by finding a rational solution to the problem. Any belief in humans possessing spiritual qualities and suffering from problems relating to their spiritual nature is “mumbo jumbo.” Similarly, the island’s culture is also incomprehensible and unacceptable, as the term George uses indicates.

Earlier in the novel, George has had a dream which involved Mama Day and the Sound, and both the dream and the circumstances immediately before it signify George’s potential and his rejection of it. George says that he could not sleep that night and so he does something he “hadn’t done

since a child,” which is to close his eyes and tell himself “over and over again, I can’t find it because it’s in my dreams” (183). George explains that the “‘it’ could be anything. . . a new bicycle, a good test score—my mother’s constantly changing face.” Contrary to the account of his life and beliefs George had given so far, we now see that not all of him has been limited wholly within the material, devoid of dreams; instead, his dreams were suppressed, with the one mentioned last being the dream of his mother’s face, and the reference to it being “ever-changing,” communicating that this has been a recurring dream. While Mrs. Jackson’s school has promoted preoccupation with the now and the present alone, George’s dreams engage him in possibilities of his past, his heritage. His dream is an escape from the merely material to the spiritual but also a way to look for his life’s origins not in a theoretical sense but in the specific: his mother. In his dream George swims across The Sound and hears Cocoa calling him, however the more he tries to swim near her the further away he gets, “the water heavier, and the shore farther and farther away” until Mama Day’s voice “like thunder” tells him to “Get Up and Walk” (184). George dismisses the suggestion, yet he is surprised to find himself “standing up in the middle of The Sound” (184).

Mama Day’s voice in his dream gives him the same kind of advice that she does in real life: not to believe in “mumbo jumbo,” but to acknowledge that the ideology he subscribes to is but one way of interpreting the world. Mama Day’s invitation to get up and walk rather

than swim, since swimming does not help, is an invitation for George to try alternative venues and actions when the ones he has already tried do not produce the desired result. Similarly, when she asks him to bring whatever he finds under the old hen, she asks him to stop looking for tangible, concrete ways to help Cocoa but instead to focus on the love he and Cocoa share. Since Cocoa has “bound more than her flesh” with him (294), George can use the love he has for his wife to help her spirit. He already has what he needs, which is a loving connection with Cocoa and a willingness to help her. His empty hands when he will find nothing under Clarissa will symbolize that there is no more material this engineer needs. No bridge will be built between Cocoa’s condition and a cure, between sanity and insanity—not a material bridge anyway, which is what George focuses on after the bridge that unites the mainland and Willow Springs collapses. Yet, George cannot accept the way Miranda suggests as a solution, and in fact states that he hated himself “for the weakness that had taken [him] into those back woods” (296), so he perceives even this momentary opening of his mind to other possibilities as a weakness.

The “weakness” can also refer to the weakness George perceives exists in asking an old, uneducated woman for help when he is an educated man, an engineer. George does not share in the life-affirming culture of the island’s black community because he is a middle-class city man, but also because his own link to life, his mother, is one that brings him pain. Mama Day asks George to go look under the hen, in a nest where there should be

eggs, and eggs—besides their own nature as symbols of life and procreation—have been connected through Bernice to the process of birth and creation of life. Significantly, George has a fear of hens, although he tries not to allow others to see that and even agrees to help restore Mama Day's coop. Helen Levy writes that the only "mother" George has known is Mrs. Jackson:

The perfect mother of the abandoned children of the bureaucratic society; she offers fairness and promises control as long as her children follow the rules. Although harsh, her punishments for misdeeds are dispassionate; emotional reaction and personal relationship will only hinder her charges in the city outside. (280-81)

Levy argues that "George's lonely life represents the emotional costs to men as well as women of their mother's loss," but I believe the cost is also significant in relation to George's limited understanding and acceptance of spiritual connection among people. We see how George is unable to understand women and keeps reading books about them, books that are as helpful as Mrs. Jackson's biology charts, which reduce procreation to the biological function. His view of sex and female behavior as merely biological complements his view of himself and men as the builders and providers of all things material, so that life, both in its creation and sustenance, is devoid of anything spiritual in his world-view. Therefore he cannot offer what he does not believe exists when Mama Day asks him to offer something he cannot see or touch but only feel, and that is his bond with Cocoa.

George's act of sacrifice then is the act of a man who sees life as limited to the material, and thus his sacrifice signifies the commodity culture he subscribes to: he will give up his life in hope that his death will give Cocoa her own life back. George's sacrifice is Christ-like, but takes place on an island that celebrates Candle Walk instead of Christmas and does not celebrate anything death-related, like Easter. Even funerals are "standing forth" ceremonies, beginning with the remembrance of the first time those present met the person that has just died, and also occasions of joy, joy that comes from all the memories shared about the person honored. There are no mourners, only participants in the creation of a collection of memories, the strongest demonstration of the spiritual bond the island's inhabitants share in life as well as death, but George is unable to accept this world-view. What he offers in its place is death but also violence. When he is attacked by Clarissa, Mama Day's hen, he uses the cane Miranda has given him to slash the hen and smash its skull, and in doing so he "incarnates all the mindless male violence" and turns into "a savage male" (140-41), as Suzanne Juhasz argues. George uses Miranda's cane to cause the death of a symbol of life and an animal that both in itself and in its old age is connected to Miranda, so he does not simply reject Miranda's way, but violently asserts the correctness of his own male, white middle-class, mainland way.

However, in his rejection of the validity of Miranda's way he has been willing to delude himself and ignore the very knowledge he has

always taken pride in. Miranda spreads her silver “lightning” power outside Ruby’s house and then the house is struck by lightning, an event that even George notices. But while the community discusses the significance of the lightning that strikes Ruby’s house twice, George says that if someone “purposely electrifies the ground with materials that hold both negative and positive charges to increase the potential of a target hit” (274), then the outcome could be what he just witnessed. Yet, he adds that “no one was running around with that kind of knowledge in Willow Springs, and it was highly improbable that it would happen naturally.” Called to choose between the naturally improbable and the possibility of someone like Mama Day having the knowledge he has, George violates his scientific world’s basic principles and chooses to believe the improbable.

George’s death and his actions, then, are not without implications about the kind of agenda he has always believed in and chooses to believe to the very end. He adopts the mainland’s snobbism toward black Americans who have not been social climbers like himself. Even his habit of reading literature can be measured within such a scale of social mobility, as we see from the copies of *King Lear* that he offers Cocoa. Peter Erickson notes that George’s “successive editions of *King Lear* both mark the increasing value of the play as a material object and cultural status symbol and measure the progress of his relationship with Cocoa” (242). The first copy George gives Cocoa is a “worn copy” and ends with “the calfskin and gold-leafed copy” that he gets as a birthday present from

her. Thus, as a social climber, George refuses to admit the possibility that Mama Day would know about electric charges or about saving her own grand-niece. It may look as if George finds death on the island, but he really brings his own death with him, as the cultural baggage he refuses to leave behind.

In a dualistic spirit/matter, life/afterlife view, his sacrifice would have been an atonement necessary to bring Cocoa back to health, the kind of atonement Lonnie mentions in *The Moviegoer*, and that ultimately sees life not as simply being offered for another life, but as being offered back to its creator. Yet apparently when spirituality, the breath of life, is as earth-bound and earth-oriented as life itself, there is no creator to offer it back to since both life and spirituality are the result of human actions and ways of living with one another. George's actions end up privileging death not only because he has no spiritual connection and cannot see life as spiritual, but also because he subscribes to a system that views those who are symbolically associated with life—women—as inferior, and therefore life, spiritual or not, ends up being viewed as inferior. Dualistic spirituality welcomes the sacrifice of life and physical death as the process that will bring about a spiritual birth into an after-life whose origins are not indebted to any woman.

Life and Life-Givers

Indeed, the three male characters (Binx, Milkman, George) share more than their encounter with ways of spiritual connection that suggest

alternatives to dualistic perspectives of a material and a spiritual realm. In varying degrees, all three characters have problematic relationships with females, from Binx's escapades with his secretaries to Milkman's exploitation of Hagar and George's inability to understand the female world when his biology lessons, charts, etc., do not provide a "scientific way" of reaching conclusions about women. Yet, their problematic relationships with women are also linked to their inability to accept connections among humans as meaningful, as well as to their view of human life as merely material. First, I should clarify that it is not within this study's scope to examine spirituality as it may differ along sex and gender lines, although it is certain that just as class and race are important factors in the spiritual equation, so are sex and gender. In fact, studies in this area show that such an examination covers so many aspects that it would need to be handled in a separate work. Cynthia Eller, in *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*, examines the variety of beliefs and practices that are included under the feminist spirituality umbrella term, but she notes that they share a focus as empowerment being "both the goal and the reward of feminist spiritual practice" (3). Eller's work is an ethnographic study of many of these practices, a significant number of which deal with recovering "the Goddess" as a feminist alternative to father-centered and male-centered spirituality, an alternative in the sense not of reversing the hierarchical structure of male-centered religions, but rather of subverting the need for

one in a context of worship. Other critics have focused on oppression as presented and reproduced by patriarchal religions, as in the case of Mary Daly's work *The Church and the Second Sex* that examines Judeo-Christianity's ways of both privileging the male and marginalizing the female. All three novels are open to such examinations—*Mama Day*, for example, is both a critique of Christianity's sacrificial dogma and an alternative of a female-centered set of spiritual practices, which has developed around the family of Days from Sapphira down to Miranda.

Yet, while the critique of sacrificial death is present in the story of *Mama Day*, the critique of the Christian myth is evident only when we examine the story about George's background that Naylor offers in *Bailey's Café*. In that novel, we find out that the story George has been told about his mother is wrong. George's mother, who is called both Mariam and Mary through the novel, was an Ethiopian Jew who claimed to have gotten pregnant without ever having been with a man. Mary has to flee Ethiopia because many there did not believe her story, even though at an early age she had to undergo a rite of passage of female circumcision that resulted in genital mutilation. Consequently, when Mary would sleep with a man others would hear her screams, so her having sex undetected was unlikely. Mary finds refuge in a boardinghouse run by Eve, right next to Bailey's café. While initially Eve and the others who hear Mary's story are skeptical about her "immaculate conception," once they get to know Mary they believe her. Mary seeks asylum in Israel but is denied entrance, and ends

up giving birth to George at Bailey's café, then dies soon afterwards. The baby is given to the shelter run by an acquaintance of Bailey's, Mrs. Jackson. One of the characters comments on George's birth that "maybe it's meant for this baby to bring in a whole new era. Maybe when it gets here, it'll be like an explosion of new hope or something," (160) setting expectations for George as a new Messiah. In *Mama Day* we see that George never fulfills these expectations: the hero, even the Messiah, cannot flourish, become a spiritual leader and usher in a new era of hope in an environment that does not even guarantee the physical well-being of a black child. As Bailey gives George to Irene Jackson, he notes that the boy will not know the story of his birth or his mother; like Milkman, George is also unaware of his mythical past. My interest, however, is in the ways spiritual connections develop among humans in the physical world, so I have chosen to discuss the relationship between spirituality as the "breath of life" and women as creators and nurturers of life, a motif that runs through all three novels.

The least obvious example among the women in these novels is Binx's mother; while critics have discussed both Kate's contribution to Binx's change and her weakness as a character, the contributions of Binx's mother have been ignored by criticism just as they have seem to be ignored by Binx. Timothy Nixon writes how "by being stuck in the everyday, she [Anna] dissuades her son from transcending," while in the scene when Binx looks at and compares Sharon and his mother in the kitchen, Nixon asserts

that “in Binx’s comparison of the two women in the kitchen. . . women are assigned a position in the temporal” (55). Perhaps the association exists through the obvious connection of the kitchen to physical sustenance as opposed to spiritual nourishment, which supposedly neither woman can provide. Sharon has been connected to the sensual and thus to the temptation to ignore the spiritual earlier, when Binx describes how “now and then she raises her hands to her head as if she were placing a crown and combs back her hair with the last two fingers. The green water foams at her knees and sucks out ankle deep and swirling with sand” (130). Lewis Lawson identifies the description as that of Aphrodite, and comments, “Sharon plays her role to perfection” (18) when she tempts Binx: “Come on, Son. I’m going to give you some beer” (131).

However, while these material/spiritual dichotomies are part of Binx’s perspective, they are not the text’s, as we have already discussed in Binx’s admission that his Platonic search for ideas has left him in an empty world. Binx may see his mother as belonging to a merely material world, yet a story she shares with him about his father shows a different side of her, a possibility in the everyday to be connected with the larger questions of meaning, purpose, and spirit. Anna remembers how her husband at some point stopped eating because “he thought eating was not—important enough” (153); she then proceeds to explain how for Binx’s father “everything, every second had to be” and unable to declare precisely what it was to be, she simply names it “something.” Apparently Binx’s father

was also trying to give his life some content, the meaningful breath of life his son will later yearn for, but it is his wife who helps him overcome this problem by reading to him while he eats. That the combination of reading with dinner was enough to take Binx's father out of his own malaise says perhaps a lot about the self-centeredness of the man: he did not seek to find how his life is connected to and affected by others, but rather refused to sustain it since he was bored with it. But Binx's mother is the one who finds a way to help him, in a practical manner but without the practicality of the solution undermining both the motive and the result: she wanted to help her husband live and she wanted to provide for him some content to the empty existence he saw his life to be. Of his two parents, she proves to be the one who sees life as worth fighting for, while his father finally escapes through the war and his death "in Crete. And in the wine dark sea" (25). Binx's insistence on the Homeric epithet shows both his understanding that his father chose such a death as an escape and Binx's envy that such a poetic escape was successfully carried out.

Since his mother does not label her action as spiritually significant and because she avoids any discussion of religion and has turned church attendance into a habit, Binx refuses to acknowledge that his mother's actions were those of someone who escaped her self's limits to help someone else find existence meaningful. In fact, when Binx describes his mother, he says she is "as wary of good fortune as she is immured against the bad, and sometimes I seem to catch sight of it in her eyes, this radical

mistrust: an old knowledgeable gleam, as old and sly as Eve herself” (142). First, Binx is not wrong in assessing his mother as someone devoted to the ordinary—at least that is what we can see through his narration. But his choice of imagery, both the connection to Eve and the characterization of such knowledge as old and sly, comes right before he acknowledges that this devotion to the ordinary was established after losing Duvall: “no more heart’s desire for her, thank you.” The old, sly knowledge Eve has is the knowledge of life as cyclical, of good and bad fortune, birth and death, alternating within the course of human time. Binx’s mother has not only lost her favorite son but also takes care of another son who is terminally ill, so her resignation to a life without extremes is not without justification. She is, after all, the one who is left behind and who will not die in the “wine dark sea” or who needs anyone to provide her with a reason to consume food.

I do not wish to elevate Binx’s mother to a spiritual leader of her community here, of the same ranks as Mama Day and Pilate. On the other hand, her actions, when compared to his father’s, are actions that affirm the value of life; and her wisdom, old and sly as Eve’s, is not perhaps to be discarded. In fact, Binx’s ties to his mother are stronger than he realizes; Lawson comments how Binx wants to have sex with Sharon at his mother’s place: “The pull of his mother’s fishing camp as a locus of aesthetic repetition is so great that he still means to seduce her there. . . . He will return to the womb on his mother’s place, if not in her place” (18). Binx

comments how his mother “veers away from intimacy” (149) and when they first meet she embraces his head “with her wrist as if her hands were still wet” (137). His mother has been emotionally unavailable to him, perhaps a behavior connected to the change Binx mentions happening after Duvall’s death, and Binx becomes unavailable to other women and dismisses his mother as too material to matter. His father’s escape sounds more interesting than his mother’s ordinariness, even as she has been telling him for years that he will be happy with Kate, another instance of that old, sly wisdom of Eve. She knows more about life and what makes life meaningful than Binx gives her credit for, unable as he is to see in her emotional seclusion the same sort he has withdrawn into in his adult life.

Just as Binx is fascinated with his father’s escape in death into the “wine dark sea,” Milkman is intrigued by Solomon’s flight until he is forced to look into the consequences of such an escape for those left behind. Yet, Milkman himself has caused such a death already, since he has left Hagar “behind” in his life and is directly responsible for her death. Hagar’s own actions and way of looking at her relationship with Milkman also contribute to her fate of course, but Milkman recognizes that the way he ended the relationship was not simply insensitive but inhumane, refusing to credit Hagar’s feelings and indeed her life with any value and meaning, so that his failure becomes a denial of the importance of the connection between humans. Milkman’s disregard for human life is not unlike Macon’s, as is evident in his attempts to make Ruth lose the baby she

carries. When Milkman finally recovers the story of his heritage, he remembers the person who had been singing the narrative's song all along, Pilate, and he becomes "homesick for her, for her house, for the very people he had been hell-bent to leave. His mother's quiet, crooked, apologetic smile"(300). He realizes the kind of life his mother had, the indifference for her pain he has shown as well as the indifference and exploitation of Pilate and Hagar that his actions demonstrate. Milkman also goes back to Lena's calling his penis a "hog's gut" and remembers how he has used Hagar for his sexual gratification as he has used every female for his gratification in one way or another. The acknowledgement, then, of the spiritual connection among humans leads to an awareness of the value of each human life and of the obligations we have towards one another, obligations at which Milkman has failed miserably since he never even tried to fulfill them.

When Hagar dies, Pilate shouts at the sky, "And she was loved" (319), which epitomizes how Hagar was treated by Pilate and Reba and also contrasts with the way she was treated by Milkman, and the way women in general have been treated by men in the novel. Life, and women from whom life comes, are exploited and devalued even while, paradoxically, the woman who has no sign of womanly origin—Pilate—is marginalized and seen as abnormal. Denise Heinze argues that Pilate is "alienated from society because she lacks a navel," but attributes Pilate's marginalization to "the guilt she harbors [which] retards reintegration into society until just

before her death when she is confronted with the knowledge that Macon did not kill the white man after all” (165). For Heinze, this obstacle to reintegration, together with Hagar and Corinthians’ stories contrasts “the relative ease of Milkman’s transcendence to the near impossibility for most women in the novel of achieving a similar transformation” (165). Yet while her argument about the contrast and the difficulty of the women in duplicating Milkman’s story is valid, the emphasis on guilt takes away from the more important reason for Pilate’s marginalization, namely her identification with maternity, life, and spirituality that has its origins in life.

In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marriane Hirsch discusses the “areas of avoidance and discomfort” with the maternal in feminist rhetoric, where “the perception that motherhood remains a patriarchal construction and that the mother is an empty function connects the figure of the mother with continued bondage to men and patriarchy” (165). In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth is certainly bound to motherhood both symbolically and physically, when she seeks to draw from her son’s birth a renewed emotional relationship to Macon and, when that fails, she seeks to draw from her son’s existence the physical pleasure her husband no longer gives her. Not only is Pilate a mother and grandmother herself, she also helps Ruth conceive, and when Macon tries to kill Milkman, Pilate is the one that saves the unborn baby’s life. But as Patrick Bjork writes, Ruth has “lived her life in service to the patriarchal order” of her father and then Macon (88), so she gradually

comes to accept the male fixation on death which turns into her attachment and visits to her dead father. Yet birth is part of that old, sly knowledge women know since Eve's time as Binx admits, the knowledge that brings life and death together in a continuity rather than in a hierarchical order of death over life, of "eternal" over "transient" life. Pilate's lack of a navel is the result of a process that indicates life on this earth is what comes after death: she is born as her mother has just died. With death being the domain of male/spirit in dualistic perspectives, Pilate's very existence proves the inadequacy of the matter/spirit, life/afterlife model, and her presence communicates "the terror of having been in the company of something God never made" (144).

Pilate is shunned by patriarchal society while she in turn refuses to be bound to any man or any societal demands, and "she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her" (149). She gave up interest "in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). As she moves away from male order and death, she spiritually connects with other humans and with the greater environment that sustains life, becoming an earth mother who smells like trees and embodies, in her love of song and her habit of eating whenever and whatever she feels like, the kind of joy that is associated with daily activities of life. The physical becomes as alive and spiritual in her world as it becomes dead and materialistic in Macon's. However, even her association with the image of the earth mother brings to

mind how even earth as a mother has been subjected to the male world of death. In Pilate's recollection of Jake's death, we see how earth is also forced to submit to patriarchy when the white Butler family kills Jake and takes his land away from him, the land with which he, Macon and Pilate had a spiritual connection. Pilate cannot escape the death that the males around her bring, first as she loses Hagar to the death Milkman causes and then as she dies by a bullet Guitar intends for Milkman, motivated as the former is by the pursuit of the gold Macon believes she carried: all three men kill her.

While Milkman, Macon, Guitar and Porter are associated with death and spiritual death, the women repeatedly choose life and seek ways to escape the life-in-death that an empty existence is. Besides Pilate, Corinthians thinks of how she has spent her life making the red velvet flowers, the same velvet flowers that she remembers seeing all around when Smith died, instead of blood. She remembers that "the only red in view was in their own hands and in the basket" and so from that moment on roses "spoke to her of death" (198), symbolizing the dead, isolated life to which Macon has condemned his daughters. The night after the argument with Porter she decides to escape the dead life she has been confined to, and going to Porter's car door she bangs "her knuckles until they ached to get the attention of the living flesh behind the glass" because "if Porter did not turn his head and lean toward her door to open it for her, Corinthians believed she would surely die" (198). In doing so, she not only saves

herself from spiritual death but also Porter, who avoids the insanity path of Smith and Guitar through his relationship with Corinthians.

However, I do not suggest that women merely side with life and provide the breath of life, thus reducing the female to a function similar to domesticating the violent, death-driven male. Perhaps the best examples of the complexity inherent in suggesting how the female represents life are Miranda and Sapphira in *Mama Day*, both of whom are life-giving forces while also containing the potential for destructive acts. When Ruby poisons Cocoa, Mama Day kneels and prays “to the Father and the Son as she’d been taught,” but she “falls asleep murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (280). Miranda has been trying to remember the name of the great black woman who established both the genealogy of the family and the island’s status as land of African American sovereignty. An African slave woman bought by Bascombe Wade and brought to the island in 1823, Sapphira Wade’s is tied to images of slavery, emancipation, broken hearts and murder rumors, all communicated through the years in a mix of fact and legend. The people of the island do not know if she drowned in The Sound or rode the wind back to Africa, and if Bascombe remained behind and died out of his grief for losing his love or was murdered by her before she left. That both stories seem plausible to the people of Willow Springs signifies Sapphira’s status as the source and symbol of life in its creative and destructive nature. Mama Day is a descendant of Sapphira in that she too can help people with her knowledge

and provide spiritual guidance, as much as she can sprinkle her powder and cause lightning to strike Ruby's house. Mama Day has warned Ruby already about hurting Cocoa, and she causes harm to Ruby only as a response to Ruby's actions, but she responds nonetheless. She is not violent in that she would rather not do anything destructive, but as she represents life and as a descendant of Sapphira she is not passive either: she is capable of taking any actions necessary to stop those whose own actions demonstrate a disregard for human life in general. She does not kill as a sacrifice nor does she believe death will lead to another realm: life and death are part of the same continuum, part of the "old" and "sly" knowledge that typifies the nature of human life.

Conclusion: Resisting *Telos*

The understanding of the ethical obligations, which come through an attainment of the spiritual connection among humans, does not mean that conflicts and divisions like sex, race, or class are eliminated or rendered insignificant. In fact, the novels examined here subvert both the idea of death as the superior part of the death and life pair and expectations of a *telos* of the novel that will provide a resolution; instead, they propose that such a definitive ending cannot be anything but illusory. Binx may be narrating the events one year later, but we do not know to what degree his new career and his marriage to Kate will be successful, as we are not sure whether Kate will be able to overcome her mental problems. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* gives us an ambiguous ending with all of the

problems still present: the marginalization of women, the oppressive and racist society, Macon's materialism and self-hatred are all there. Finally, Naylor's *Mama Day* has the two protagonists engaged in a dialogue where they try to make sense of the events that transpired. Subverting expectations sounds progressive and revolutionary, but is there a point to it? Do these novels suggest any use for our understanding of spirituality as human connection or is this simply an academic inquiry?

First, the ethical obligations that come out of such an understanding are clear, even if there can be no clear prediction of the outcome. I think that these texts chart a territory that is part of the philosophy Karen Brown discusses in *Saints and Virtues*, a philosophy that does not seek to make conflict go away "but to make it work for, rather than against, life" (166); that is, to use conflict rather than trying to bring about some utopian instant resolution of it. In her book *Sweet Dreams in America*, Sharon Welch discusses the traditional measure of any idea or proposal, which has been the measure of improvement: will we create a better society as we embark on a new endeavor? Welch argues, and I concur, that it is impossible to know, although we can imagine. Yet it is more productive to focus not on future improvements but rather on ways in which today can change positively. What we learn from Binx's story is that our sense of humanity, our sense of ourselves as spiritual beings and not mere biological entities does not come from books, movies, or observation but from each other and from participation in one another's lives. What we

learn from Milkman's story is that the self can never have coherence until it defines itself within the complex network of human relationships with others—that the spiritual value of Solomon's flight was not his mythical flight itself, but the remembrance of it by those who were left behind. The community used someone who sought escape from connection with others and created out of his myth a bond. What we learn from Pilate is that flight is not being bound by societal expectations. And from *Mama Day* we learn that every city is its people, that there are no spiritual paradises like Willow Springs and spiritual wastelands like New York, only ways of living and strictures on living which can color any place. In all these stories, people define each other as meaningful as they are defined by their meaning-producing relationships. The breath of life, the spirit, does not come out of the sky, but out of each other, and it can be taken away in the same fashion: the same society that allows for Solomon's song to bond a community allows or does not hinder the Butlers from killing Solomon's son.

Such a focus on the conditions that allow or hinder spiritual connection is what these texts offer through their emphasis on spirituality as connection between humans, as the meaning and purpose humans give to one another. While these texts are not the only ones that offer such a perspective, I chose them because all three approach the issue from a different aspect but with the same question in mind: what do we have when we give up the illusion, as Freud calls the belief in supernatural aid? *The*

Moviegoer examines what happens when one cannot turn to religion for easy answers regarding human purpose and meaning anymore, but at the same time refuses to accept the notion that “there are no answers.” *Song of Solomon*, in the story of the Deads, examines the possibility of a life with no answers and no questions, a life where the physical world is merely material with no element of the spiritual, and the result proves inadequate, incoherent, and finally artificial. And *Mama Day* points to the need for integration of the spiritual with everyday life, of past and present, for otherwise they become insular and irrelevant, as Cocoa sees Willow Springs in relation to mainland US.

The three texts also share the structural characteristics of resembling the mythical hero’s quest for enlightenment as they rewrite the monomyth of this quest and its anticipation of an easy resolution. Binx is a pilgrim in the city as many have called him, but his solitary search is a dead end; Milkman’s journey towards his mythic origins reveals the importance of the people he has exploited rather than his importance as the hero who will bring the divine gift to the community; George crosses over to Willow Springs and does not experience an epiphany but rather brings about his death, which is not necessary for the outcome he wants to effect. At the same time, the ending of each text is not a conclusion in the sense Kermode and Brooks discuss. At the end of *Mama Day*, for instance, we learn that George and Cocoa will recount the events they have shared many times over as they try to comprehend their significance. Retroactive illumination

from the ending to the preceding events is not so easy after all. While the scope of this work cannot encompass every aspect of spirituality as I have defined it, I believe that it has at least charted the territory for critical discourse on authors who look for ways to interpret spirituality not as otherworldly but as physical, part of the world we inhabit and actually an important part: spirit matters.

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