



“Without Ever Leaving the Ground, She Could Fly” **Ecofeminism and Soul Fulfillment in Toni Morrison’s Pilate**

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Abstract: The concept of ecofeminism uses the age-old connection between women and nature as a bridge to strengthen both the feminism and the ecological movements which seek to end the oppression of women and nature. In today’s world as families move into the cities, away from the land, their personal relationship with nature is disconnected. This puts families in competition for material possessions. As has been consistent through centuries of western history, women and nature are subdued by masculine aggression which thrives in the competition of market economies such as capitalism. In Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* the ideals of ecofeminism are at work in the tension between two major characters: Pilate and Macon Dead. Gerry Brenner says that “Pilate hungers not for family dynasty, for domestic respectability, for...authority...or even for others’ regard,” and that “her heroism resides in her self-acceptance and self-content...performing routine responsibilities without fretting about whether she is ‘macon’ something of her life” (Brenner 123). Pilate is a defining example of a woman’s connection with nature as well as a model of how to live a fulfilling life outside of capitalism’s grip. Macon does not experience the same fulfillment that Pilate does in his life, he is displaced from his ancestors, he’s filled with a greed that’s never satisfied, his concern with materialistic culture omits the rights of the women in his family and the natural world that he lives off of, he’s “unmindful of [his] history of living harmoniously on the land” (hooks 107) and has no “respect for the life-giving forces of nature, of the earth” (hooks 104). It is through the contrast of these two characters, Pilate and Macon, that Morrison reinforces the value of women and nature in society. Through this ecofeminist lens, Morrison suggests that we should all analyze the value we place on certain ideals and objects of our lives.

The concept of ecofeminism uses the age-old connection between women and nature as a bridge to strengthen both the feminism and the ecological movement. This bridge was built on the belief that women and nature are oppressed in a similar manner, and therefore should band to-

gether in their fight for liberation from masculine oppression. Women are also linked to nature by the “ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother” (Merchant 472), which means that this connection, though fairly recently termed ecofeminism, has been recognized by our ancestors for

Jessica Lyn Gama attended the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth as an undergraduate English Literature major and graduated in the spring of 2007. Her focus during her four years of study was mainly American Literature, particularly 20th Century American Literature and the works of Toni Morrison. The paper was written as an ecofeminist literary critique of a novel for a Philosophical Theory class titled “Ecofeminism.” The class was a study of both feminist and ecological literature and the newest theories that provide the groundwork for the ecofeminist movement. This class was held in the spring of 2006, and it was “team-taught” by Dr. Jeannette E. Riley and Professor Catherine Villanueva Gardner.

centuries. The link of women and nature, and the oppression of both, can be recognized in many aspects of society past and present. As the world progresses economically and families move into the cities, away from the land, their personal relationship with nature is disconnected. A community's mind is then displaced, and instead of concentrating on "growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul" (hooks 105), families are in competition for material possessions. This lifestyle change allows families to extort the land without feeling or caring about the effect. This explains why Carolyn Merchant, in her essay "Women and Ecology," states that "both the women's movement and the ecology movement are sharply critical of the costs of competition, aggression, and domination arising from market economy" (472). Women and nature are subdued by masculine aggression which thrives in the competition of market economies such as capitalism.

Through *Song of Solomon's* main characters author Toni Morrison challenges the ideals of capitalism and its affects on women and nature. Macon and Pilate Dead are the children of Jake and Sing, two freed slaves from the American south. Through the contrast of Macon, who symbolizes the negative effects of capitalism and disremembering ancestry, and Pilate, who embodies ecofeminism through a connection with nature and her denial of masculine domination within her household, and who carries with her the legacy of their ancestry, the reader can determine, and Morrison certainly suggests through Milkman's (Macon's son) final decision, which lifestyle is less harmful and more fulfilling.

Black ancestry is important in all Morrison's work, and especially in *Song of Solomon*, the ancient African way of life reinforces the ties between women and nature by showing that a "collective black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth, when

we remember the way of our ancestors" (hooks 108). The novel is told through the eyes of Macon's son Milkman, and Milkman is shaped by both Pilate and Macon. Milkman's quest throughout the novel expresses hooks's view of renewing his relationship with the earth by searching for ancestry. He travels through many towns mentioned by both Pilate and Macon, in search of a bag of gold to split with his father. But as his quest progresses, his objective changes from capitalistic greed (the influences of his father Macon), to a greater fulfillment through African ancestry (the influences of Pilate). In the end, Morrison reveals which lifestyle is more fulfilling by Milkman's "question[ing of] his father's materialistic compulsion to objectify and control both people and property" (Armbruster and Wallace 221). Therefore, an ecofeminist reading of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* emphasizes Pilate's connection with the land, an essential value passed down from her ancestors, as a mode of fulfillment and self-regard that her older brother Macon has lost in his adoption of capitalism and oppressive patriarchy.

Pilate is a pivotal character in the novel. She is the embodiment of difference and subtle, passive defiance. She rejects social norms, views and economical progress in favor of an age old connection between women, nature, and ancestry. Pilate, though an outcast of the society of Southside, scorned and feared by the community, hated by her brother Macon, is judged differently by the reader. Morrison describes Pilate as being outside of the standards of community. Her appearance is unusual in comparison to the standards of beauty within society, her house is different both in its structural build and its family structure. Macon hates Pilate for her difference, for her refusal to conform to modern society. Macon tells his son Milkman "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world" (Morrison 55) and commands Milkman to stay away from Pilate. This command sig-

nifies the opposition of Macon and Pilate's way of life, and both Milkman and the reader must determine what she says about both, and which is more gratifying. To Milkman and the reader, Pilate is appealing, wise, affectionate, and inviting. Though Macon has the money and reputation in town, Pilate has the warmth and fulfillment in life.

Morrison describes Pilate as both an internally strong woman and a woman connected to her ancestors through small gestures and a simple way of life. Pilate feeds her family through their joint production of homemade wine, a trade she learned from a small community outside of Virginia. This way of life, though not significantly important to the events of the novel, is symbolically important to an ecofeminist reading of the text. First, Pilate's winemaking provides the only image of a female sustained household within the novel, opposite of Macon's patriarchal, capitalistic household. Second, the way of homemade winemaking signifies a direct working of the fruit of the land, which has no damaging effect on nature as does Macon's prospects of clearing land to build condos. Pilate's winemaking is a connection to her ancestors through a linking of women and nature. It is through this way of Pilate's "people," recognizing a soul's fulfillment through a respectful relationship with the land, that Morrison proposes a solution to the sorrow and hopelessness of the displaced northern town of Southside.

Morrison also incorporates the "traditional Black female activities of...herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery" (Smith 374) into the character Pilate, not only to further emphasize Pilate's link to ancestry, but also providing yet another example of how women and nature have been inseparable throughout history. Pilate gives Ruth (Macon's wife) an herbal remedy when Ruth wishes to have another child, an example of "herbal medicine," and Pilate is feared throughout the town for "conjure."

Pilate is a symbol of the ecofeminist woman-nature connection, as well as an example of the lifestyle ecofeminists promote. She is what we all should be, self-affirmed and fulfilled. Macon, though Pilate's older brother, is her exact opposite. If Pilate is portrayed as a heroine, that Macon is the novel's villain. And, though Macon is Pilate's older brother, Morrison creates Pilate's granddaughter to be older than Macon's youngest son Milkman, confusing the reader into thinking that Pilate is older, and therefore giving her an authoritative presence over Macon. Despite that, Macon claims authority over Pilate in every aspect of society. He makes his living and supports his family through owning and renting houses. He plans to buy forest land along the lake and clear it to build condos, therefore objectifying nature through his capitalist mindset. He sought out and married the most prestigious girl in town, the doctor's daughter, and then had children predominantly to parade them around as accessories. He attempted to physically abort his own son, therefore rejecting a woman's claim to her own womb and her nurturing nature. Macon's daughters did not date men until well into their forties, and still then his younger daughter did so in secrecy.

Macon inspired fear in his family, which contributed to the oppression of the female figures in his family. Macon was always described as sounding "rough," in an unhappy manner, and though he possessed more money and property than any black man in his town, Macon was never satisfied. His lack of satisfaction may have been caused by many things, but it is certainly proof towards the ecofeminist reading of *Song of Solomon*. Macon does not experience the same fulfillment that Pilate does in his life, he is displaced from his ancestors, he's filled with a greed that's never satisfied, his concern with materialistic culture omits the rights of the women in his family and the natural world that he lives off of, he's "un-

mindful of [his] history of living harmoniously on the land" (hooks 107) and has no "respect for the life-giving forces of nature, of the earth" (hooks 104).

It is through the contrast of these two characters, Pilate and Macon, that Morrison reinforces the value of women and nature in society. Through this ecofeminist lens, Morrison suggests that we should all analyze the value we place on certain ideals and objects of our lives. Who and what is really important to our lives, and for what reason? And what in our lives provides fulfillment of body and soul? Bell hooks states that "living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers" (105). Ecofeminism states that not only are black people so connected to the land, but women have always been linked to nature. Though *Song of Solomon* Morrison shows us not only how black people are displaced in industrial society, but that women are displaced also. All of the women within this book are objectified or oppressed in one way or another. Pilate is the only woman who does not allow herself to be affected by this oppression.

Pilate's appearance "defies all Anglo-Saxon standards of physical beauty...she is tall and angular with short hair" (Denard 177), and her skin is dark black. In contrast to Macon's wife Ruth, Morrison writes "they were so different...one black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress...one wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it" (Morrison 139). Yet, despite her appearance, Pilate is strong and independent from masculine support. She is feministic, and shows that women can be strong, commanding respect without obeying the capitalist society's standards of appearance. Carolyn Denard suggests that Pilate is one of Morrison's most attractive female characters, not because of her appearance but because of what lies beneath. Denard says

that Pilate's "physical idiosyncrasies...do not determine [her] self-worth or her value to her family" (177), once again proving that personal fulfillment must come from somewhere other than the ways of capitalism and the oppression of women and nature. If this woman, strong in her refusal to conform to capitalism, is a symbol of life-affirming harmony, then perhaps she should be a model for re-evaluating the quality of life in capitalist communities.

Barbara Hill Rigney, in her essay entitled "The Disremembered and Unaccounted For," suggests Pilate's strength through her "female way of knowing and interpreting the significance of history" (66), and shows Pilate's connection to nature through her description as a woman "who smells like pine trees and who can defy gravity to teach men to fly" (69). Gerry Brenner says that around Pilate "have gathered fabulous beliefs: that she has 'power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga'" (Brenner 121). He also says that because of her nature, "Pilate hungers not for family dynasty, for domestic respectability, for...authority...or even for others' regard," that Pilate is "heroic," and that "her heroism resides in her self-acceptance and self-content...performing routine responsibilities without fretting about whether she is 'macon' something of her life" (Brenner 123). Pilate, in these senses, may in fact be a minor heroine within the novel. And if she is, she is because of her ecofeminist nature, her disregard for capitalist pressures that consume Macon, her connection to nature through ancestry and wine making, her rejection of a husband and a male head of her house, her disinterest in societal ideals of beauty, her herbal medicines, her perfecting the cooking of boiled eggs, her "undeniable...nurturant power" (Brenner 121) as Reba's mother, Hagar's grandmother, and the love that rules over her family rather than the greed of Macon's family.

At the end of the novel, Milkman ap-

pears as the deciding jury between Macon and Pilate's way of life. After his quest, Milkman returns to Pilate, not Macon, with what he has found out. He then leaves Southside with Pilate on another short quest to bury the bones of his grandfather in the south. During this journey, Milkman realizes, as does the reader, that "peace circled" (Morrison 334) Pilate. Milkman and the reader understand what's so important about Pilate's lifestyle. Pilate's dying words are "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (Morrison 336). Here, Pilate's words are advice for us all. On her deathbed, her one regret concerned the number of people she loved. We could imagine that, thou Macon does not die by the end of the novel, if he had his last words would be something like "I wish I'd a owned more things."

Pilate was peaceful. Through Milkman Morrison mirrors how we all search for a way of life that will breed self-fulfillment and happiness. In *Song of Solomon* she says that way is not capitalist or competitive, it is not through the oppression of women and nature, but instead in the recognition of the value of both, and one's ancestry. The last thoughts of Milkman also reinforce the value of Pilate's way of life: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (Morrison 336). Certainly, Pilate could not physically fly in the way a bird would, but symbolically her soul soared. Pilate held the way within her, through her value of woman's work with nature, absent of masculine and industrial oppression, a way that her ancestors knew and cherished as the way to life fulfillment.

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