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***Ethics and Care in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon***

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## بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ (٣٢)

### صدق الله العظيم

سوره البقره ايه (٣٢)

Glory is to You, we have no knowledge except what " you have taught us. Verily, it is You , the knower , the Wise".

God Almighty has spoken the truth

Surat Al Baqara , Verses  
Ali (2006: 32)

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## **Dedication**

To my great father ....

To my generous mother ...

To my supportive brothers and sister ....

I appreciate all the praise, the number of rain drops, the colors of cast, and the fragrance of fragrance, for your precious efforts and value, in achieving this research.

Thank you all for giving a helping hand and supporting me.

## Table of Content

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Toni Morrison Life	3
Chapter Two: Ethics and Care	6
Chapter Three : Ethics and Care in Song of Solomon	8
Chapter Four : Conclusion	10
Notes	12

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine post-Reconstruction literature as an intercessor that creates a common memory among readers and activates them as ethical agents who can move through retributive violence rather than enact violence. With the increase or racial violence in the United States, it is essential to find ways to end the cycle of retributive violence and establish a justice system that does not marginalize individuals but forges connections in the midst of oppression. This literary analysis engages novel Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. A Novel written by African American women authors about three time periods Jim Crow Era, Civil Rights Movement, and Contemporary. James Phelan's four ethical situations provide an overarching framework for the three body chapters. This study finds that literature has the ability to transform readers as they ethically commit to redemption rather than retribution. The combination of hermeneutical narrative ethics with feminist ethics of care and coalitional politics has the power to change readers' approach to literature, making one publically accountable for their private reading of a text.<sup>(1)</sup>

*Song of Solomon* is a 1977 novel by American author Toni Morrison, her third to be published. It follows the life of Macon "Milkman" Dead III, an African-American man living in Michigan, from birth to adulthood.

This novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award, was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's popular book club, and was cited by the Swedish Academy in awarding Morrison the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature. In 1998, the Radcliffe Publishing Course named it the 25th best English-language novel of the 20th century.<sup>(2)</sup>

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (born Chloe Ardelia Wofford; February 18, 1931 – August 5, 2019), known as Toni Morrison, was an American novelist. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. The critically acclaimed *Song of Solomon* (1977) brought her national attention and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 1988, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* (1987); she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

Born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison graduated from Howard University in 1953 with a B.A. in English. She earned a master's degree in American Literature from Cornell University in 1955. In 1957 she returned to Howard University, was married, and had two children before divorcing in 1964. Morrison became the first black female editor in fiction at Random House in New York City in the late 1960s. She developed her own reputation as an author in the 1970s and '80s. Her work *Beloved* was made into a film in 1998. Morrison's works are praised for addressing the harsh consequences of racism in the United States.

The National Endowment for the Humanities selected Morrison for the Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities, in 1996. She was honored with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters the same year. President Barack Obama presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom on May 29, 2012. She received the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction in 2016. Morrison was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2020.

## Chapter One

### Toni Morrison Life

Toni Morrison was a Nobel Prize- and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, editor and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, exquisite language and richly detailed African American characters who are central to their narratives. Among her best-known novels are *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Love* and *A Mercy*. Morrison earned a plethora of book-world accolades and honorary degrees, also receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison was the second oldest of four children. Her father, George Wofford, worked primarily as a welder but held several jobs at once to support the family. Her mother, Ramah, was a domestic worker. Morrison later credited her parents with instilling in her a love of reading, music and folklore along with clarity and perspective.<sup>(4)</sup>

Living in an integrated neighborhood, Morrison did not become fully aware of racial divisions until she was in her teens. "When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only Black in the class and the only child who could read," she later told a reporter from *The New York Times*. Dedicated to her studies, Morrison took Latin in school and read many great works of European literature. She graduated from Lorain High School with honors in 1949. At Howard University, Morrison continued to pursue her interest in literature. She majored in English and chose the classics for her minor.



After graduating from Howard in 1953, Morrison continued her education at Cornell University. She wrote her thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner and completed her master's degree in 1955. She then moved to the Lone Star State to teach at Texas Southern University.<sup>(5)</sup>

In 1957, Morrison returned to Howard University to teach English. There she met Harold Morrison, an architect originally from Jamaica. The couple married in 1958 and welcomed their first child, Harold, in 1961. After the birth of her son, Morrison joined a writers group that met on campus. She began working on her first novel with the group, which started out as a short story.

Morrison decided to leave Howard in 1963. After spending the summer traveling with her family in Europe, she returned to the United States with her son. Her husband, however, had decided to move back to Jamaica. At the time, Morrison was pregnant with their second child. She moved back home to live with her family in Ohio before the birth of son Slade in 1964. The following year, she moved with her sons to Syracuse, New York, where she worked for a textbook publisher as a senior editor. Morrison later went to work for Random House, where she edited works by Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones, renowned for their literary fiction, as well as luminaries like Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali.<sup>(6)</sup>

Morrison became a professor at Princeton University in 1989 and continued to produce great works, including *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). In recognition of her contributions to her field, she received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African American woman to be selected for the award. The following year, she published the novel *Jazz*, which explores marital love and betrayal in 20th-century Harlem. At Princeton, Morrison established a special workshop for writers and performers known as the Princeton Atelier in 1994. The program was designed to help students create original works in a variety of artistic fields.

In 2006, Morrison announced she was retiring from her post at Princeton. That year, *The New York Times Book Review* named *Beloved* the best novel of the past 25 years. She continued to explore new art forms, writing the libretto for *Margaret Garner*, an American opera that explores the tragedy of slavery through the true life story of one woman's experiences. The work debuted at the New York City Opera in 2007.<sup>(7)</sup>

Morrison traveled back to the early days of colonialism in America for *A Mercy* (2008), a book that some have construed as a page-turner in its unfolding. Once again, a woman who is both an enslaved and a mother must make a terrible choice regarding her child, who becomes part of an expanding homestead. As a critic from the *Washington Post* described it, the novel is "a fusion of mystery, history and longing," with the *New York Times* singling out the work as one of the 10 Best Books of the year.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Ethics and Care**

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, seeks to explore rational decision making, with the hope of establishing standards for ideal behavior. Although most people believe that they have an inherent sense of right and wrong, thus making the study of ethics unnecessary, when ethics is examined across time and across various cultures, we see significant differences in how people interpret these concepts. Complicating things further, ethics is often taught alongside or as an extension of religion. For many, the answer to moral questions can be found in holy books or by consulting clergy. However, the way that Scripture is translated and interpreted has changed over time and is susceptible to different interpretations from one person to another. Because ethical positions are human constructs and because humans are capable of changing their conceptions of right and wrong, ethics is hardly a stable field of study. Rather, these debates are ongoing both among individuals and within larger, even global, communities. Ethics and literature are intimately connected, having emerged simultaneously as humans developed language and began to communicate through stories. Literature is a particularly rich source of ethical reflection in that characters in imagined worlds can make decisions without hurting real people.<sup>(8)</sup>

Ethics impact on reader thinks of his or her own world. Although fictional characters run the ethical spectrum (some positively evil, others absolutely good, most somewhere in between) stories very often involve characters making choices with ethical implications. Similarly, many philosophical texts dealing with ethics make use of small fictions to illustrate a point. For example, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) tells a story to help develop his position on being untruthful. If someone runs into your house to escape a murderer, and the murderer knocks at the door to ask if you have seen his or her intended victim, you are forced to decide between lying or telling the truth (and thus helping the murderer). For reasons that will be examined here, Kant argues that even in this situation it would be unethical to lie. If every ethical decision was clear-cut, there would not be much need for or interest in ethics. However, because so many decisions are not as clear-cut as people would like, often involving a choice between two conflicting principles that we believe in, it helps to think through and articulate not only what we believe to be right, but also the relative importance of the principles behind these decisions.<sup>(9)</sup>

The ethics and care in Toni Morrison's ( *Song of Solomon* ) *Song of Solomon* explores the quest for cultural identity. Based on the African-American folktale about enslaved Africans who escape slavery by flying back to Africa, it tells the story of Macon "Milkman" Dead, a young man alienated from himself and estranged from his family, his community, and his historical and cultural roots. Milkman is mentally enslaved and spiritually dead, but with the help of his eccentric aunt, Pilate, and his best friend, Guitar Bains, he embarks on a physical and spiritual journey that enables him to reconnect with his past and realize his self-worth.

## Chapter Three

### *Ethics and Care in Song of Solomon*

Guitar's moral code seems to be in flux throughout the novel: he possesses the qualities of a caring friend during the earlier chapters, however he goes so far as to attempt murder upon his best friend, Milkman, near the end. Blinded by the false sense of justice perpetuated by his secret society, the Seven Days, he wishes to carry out their perception of vengeance, which is to murder an innocent white for every black man killed. The term "innocent white" means nothing to them because in their mind no white man or woman is innocent, not even children; they believe that any white individual has the potential and will inevitably murder a member of the black community. Because he has to fund his operation, he joins Milkman in his quest for gold, however when he feels as though Milkman has betrayed him and has taken the gold for himself, Guitar begins to hunt his best friend, tossing aside their years of friendship for the new moral code he has adopted, one of deception and clouding of judgement. In the end, he kills Pilate in order to further his goals, and either him or Milkman perishes in the minutes following her death. Guitar's conscience seems to side-step whatever moral concept holds him back from his mission, a flaky and ultimately inconsistent code of virtues.

After killing the older man out of fear in the cave, which isn't exactly morally violating considering he was concerned for his own life, he finds his gold. This is when Macon decides that his own life and success is worth more than the preservation of this man's possessions and the sanctity of his grave.

When Pilate forces him away from the gold, he becomes bitter and resentful, feeling as though because she kept him away from what he perceived as “his”, that she was an enemy. Blinded by the allure of wealth, he loses sight of his relationship with his sister and ultimately continues down the path of trading success for his moral code and relationships.

During the beginning of his hunt for the gold, Milkman seems to abandon any connection he had with Pilate in order to obtain the gold from her, which he thinks is his/his father’s. Despite the story concerning the old man and how Macon killed him, Milkman’s greed overpowers his conscience which would tell him that Pilate’s choice was the morally sound one. It also prevents him from hesitating when he breaks into her house and steals the bag. His desire for wealth essentially blocks out his morals.

## Conclusion

As exhibited in *Song of Solomon*, narrative ethics involving ethics of the told affects how an audience responds to the text. Milkman, who many would argue is undeserving of mercy, is granted it in such a way that it transforms him into an ethical agent. Through Pilate's instruction and mercy, Milkman learns empathy and what it means to be responsible to another human being. Readers observe the lessons Milkman learns about life and himself, and they can be prompted to consider the ways in which they are called to extend mercy to others. The novel intercedes on readers' behalf, illuminating the horrors of Jim Crow and the retributive violence it incited, but rather than leaving the reader in a place of hopeless anger or shame, this literary intercessor provides a way out of the violence through empathy and mercy.<sup>(10)</sup>

The way in which Toni Morrison describes goodness during a 2017 interview with David Carrasco entitled "Writing Goodness and Mercy" is relevant to this project. In the interview Morrison expands upon the three definitions of goodness she gave during her Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard Divinity School in 2012. In her lecture, "Goodness: Altruism and the Literary Imagination," Morrison identifies three categories of goodness present in her work: "

1. Goodness taught and learned (a habit of helping strangers and/or taking risks for them).

2. Goodness as a form of narcissism, ego enhancement, or even a mental disorder.

3. Goodness as instinct, as a result of genetics (protecting one's kin or one's group)".

She sums up her understanding of goodness by saying it is the "acquisition of self-knowledge." She goes on to say, "The protagonist really does learn something morally insightful that she or he did not know earlier on". The implication is that action will follow knowledge acquisition, and this implication applies to readers as well as protagonists, and, as I have argued based on Phelan's ethical situations, authors and narrators too.<sup>(11)</sup>



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