Research Question: How effectively does Toni Morrison combine virtue and flaw to depict her characters in her novel, *Song of Solomon*?

Title: Toni Morrison's Art of Characterisation

Extended Essay

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Fig. 1. Toni Morrison in her younger years… from: Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Toni Morrison." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Feb. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Toni-Morrison/media/393004/13090.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"It is the combinations in characters that are the best part of writing novels – the combinations of virtue and flaw…"(Conversations with Toni Morrison 148).

Toni Morrison has crafted her characters in a way that the lines defining good and bad are blurred. *Song of Solomon*, written in 1977, is a contemporary work of 20th century literature, that adopts conventional understandings of virtue and flaw. Virtue can be understood as moral strength and is indicative of intrinsic goodness in character. Flaw is imperfection, but it is not the antonym of virtue and does not imply vice or moral depravity. Flaws could equally be endearing or unbecoming of characters. Morrison, through combinations of virtue and flaw to different degrees in characterisation, compels her readers to forgo insular judgments on her characters.

This essay aims to uncover the layers of her complex, lifelike characters in her novel, *Song of Solomon*, through the Research Question,**"How effectively does Toni Morrison combine virtue and flaw to depict her characters in her novel, *Song of Solomon*?"**. This essay explores *Song of Solomon*, because it constitutes myriad hues of characters constructed in the African-American context of slavery.

Morrison assumes a more profound approach to the African-American question in *Song of Solomon*: she is unapologetic in her acknowledgement of the disturbing African struggle against slavery. Understanding the combinations of virtue and flaw in Morrison's characters will enable readers to better understand and acknowledge the exceedingly grim conditions of the African struggle against slavery that blurs the lines between virtue and flaw. Morrison shows resilience through acceptance of the struggle against slavery in her characters. Readers not only see shades of human nature in her characters, but also are acquainted with the oppression against the African-American community up close. This

enables readers to understand the complexity of the characters and the complexity of their choices and actions given their extenuating circumstances. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison validates and enriches an African-American culture that has long been under attack. Arising from African folklore, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* illustrates an obligation to bear objective witness to the past of African-American slaves to nourish the hearts of a people. "Through her literature, Morrison deliberately works to counteract the loss of the folklore tradition that constitutes one of the basic elements of African-American culture" (Van Tol 1).

This essay consults a host of secondary sources: books, academic papers, websites and lecture videos, which encapsulate the contemporary interpretations of virtue and flaw that come closest to Morrison's understandings of the same. After trying different avenues like Princeton University and Knopf Department in Random House Publications to procure an interview with Toni Morrison and being unsuccessful, the next best substitute for the same has been *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, a book of over twenty interviews with Morrison. To have a more meaningful understanding of Morrison's literature, an interview was conducted with Dr. Sonal Parmar, a doctorate in Morrison's literature, the transcript of which is in the appendix.

This essay will weigh the effectiveness of Toni Morrison's combinations of virtue and flaw in her characters through themes of the morality in flight, the impact of the past, notions of love and mercy and techniques like the Ritual of Naming in her novel, *Song of Solomon*.

In *Song of Solomon,* Toni Morrison uses the theme of morality in flight to attribute flaw to some characters and virtue to others. Flight is simply interpreted in two ways: flying either to or away from some place. In African-American folklore, flight is a common motif associated with freedom from slavery: slaves would fly to their homeland, Africa, to freedom. They would, however, also leave their families behind, in the shackles of slavery. The introductory epigraph to the novel, "The fathers may soar//And the children may know their names" (Morrison), highlights this dichotomy in flight. The first line speaks of the folkloric flight of African slaves who are fathers, while the second line highlights the slaves' families left behind with nameless children. Names hold a very important place in the construction of selfhood and identity in African-American culture and so abandoning children without names, which they may know through their mothers, is flaw of flying African slaves. Morrison assigns the idea of morality to flight: "Unlike most mythical flights, which clearly imply triumph, in the attempt if not in the success, Solomon's escape…[is] ambiguous, disturbing. Solomon's escape from slavery is also the abandonment of his family. …These flights, these erstwhile heroics, are viewed rather differently by the women left behind"(Morrison). Other slaves view Solomon's attempt of flying to escape slavery as heroic, but those left behind have a different story to say. Ryna, Solomon's wife, is left to raise twenty-one children alone. The attribute of 'disturbing' emphasizes the flaw in flight: leaving everybody behind. In *Song of Solomon,* two verses of song show the two opposing perspectives on flight: how other slaves view the flight and how the family left behind perceives it.

"Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home" (Morrison 378).

The above verse is the mythical version of Solomon's flight passed down through the ages. There is a sense of strength in cutting across the sky, and going back home. The verse is from

a third person point of view, which shows the general belief in Solomon's heroic flight. This homeward bound flight to Africa is seen by other slaves as a feat of valour. This verse consigns virtue to Solomon's flight.

"O Solomon don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me "(378).

On the contrary, the above verse is sung by the family left behind by Solomon. Ryna, Solomon's abandoned wife, sings this contrasting verse of sorrow. This verse shows the destruction of families: the refrain 'O Solomon don't leave me here' is in first person, and emphasizes Ryna's desparation, fear and entreatment. The 'cotton balls' are symbols of the slavery and 'choke' elicits feelings of suffocation, imprisonment and jarring images of extreme pain. 'Buckra' is African-American slang for a white man and 'yoke' is a wooden crosspiece used on animal to plough the field. This horrific imagery of the animal treatment of slaves a direct reference to the hostile institution of slavery and gives a glimpse of the conditions in which people who flew away were leaving their families behind. Those left behind are the "caroling softly souls of slavery" (Griffin 176) . This verse emphasizes the immorality of Solomon's flight.

Pilate, on the other hand, "without ever leaving the ground… could fly" (419). The previous quote is poignant due to its paradoxical: Pilate could fly staying grounded. Here flight is a metaphor for personal freedom. Pilate never chose this freedom over familial responsibilities. She took the best care of her daughter and granddaughter that she could and this rootedness and commitment to her family set her soul free. Pilate's most becoming virtue is ability to be free by choosing to be committed to her family.

Yet, it isn't easy enough to categorise flight as either 'immoral' or 'moral'. Flying away despite knowing what you leave behind and the complexity in choosing between freedom through flight and family in the African-American context of slavery adds layers to the characters. Solomon chooses freedom through flight and leaves everyone behind, while Pilate chooses family and is still able to fly. Morrison, thus, depicts the seamlessness in virtue and flaw in the African-American milieu to create well-rounded characters.

Morrison's characters are shaped by their pasts: some defined by their failure to embrace it, while others characterised by their acceptance of it. Macon Dead fails to embrace the past as a part of himself. He completely disregards his relationship and shared past with his once beloved sister, Pilate. " 'Pilate tried to make me a cherry pie once.' Macon paused… He had not said any of this for years. …for years he hadn't had that kind of time, or interest" (64). Macon wilfully represses the his past and his denial hinders him from truly letting go of past grudges. He blames Pilate for running away with gold a long time ago, without knowing fully what happened. " 'Raggedy bootlegging bitch.' 'She's still a bitch?... You thought she stole [the gold]. … all these years you've been holding that against her' " (254). Macon accuses Pilate to be a 'raggedy bootlegging bitch', a rather crude and derogatory phrase: 'raggedy' implying a threadbare appearance, 'bootlegging' implying moral dearth because of stealing and 'bitch' being a demeaning expletive. His dismissal of the past makes him more bound to it, and is a flaw in his character. It renders him flat and incapable of any growth.

On the contrary, Pilate's unashamed acceptance of her burdensome past shows her strength of character. Pilate, with her earring housing her name and sack of bones, takes ownership of her past and is unapologetic about her origins. At a young age, Pilate embraces her name and keeps it in an earring on her left earlobe as a reminder of the past. Names are an

integral part of African-American identity and Pilate's name is that of a Christ-killing man, Pontius Pilate. Accepting her name and all the negative implications that come with it show Pilate's strength. Her acceptance of the past is a virtue in her: it makes her whole and free. She carries a sack of bones with her wherever she goes to remind her of the life she had taken: "…the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it's… a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way it frees up your mind" (258-259). As seen through the previous quote, 'dead' is indicative of a burdensome and negative past which stays with you whether you want it to or not. Pilate's philosophy is that it's better to accept the past and 'free your mind' from it's burdens than deny it and let it hinder your noesis of self. Morrison's depiction of Pilate's acceptance of her difficult past underscores virtue in Pilate.

Thus, Morrison shows Macon's flawed denial of the past as an inhibiting factor to his growth, and depicts Pilate's virtuous acceptance of the past as a mark of Pilate's evolved sense of selfhood.

In addition to themes, Morrison uses myriad notions of love to add layers of virtue and flaw to her characters. Morrison makes her characters diverse and complex by providing differing notions of love to each of them. Hagar is a prime example of obsessive love, termed 'anaconda love' by Morrison. "Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own" (169). 'Anaconda love' has a zoomorphic aspect to it. An anaconda is a large and extremely deadly Southern American snake that kills through constriction. Morrison uses this ghastly image to convey the suffocating power of Hagar's love for Milkman. Hagar's 'anaconda love' consumes her identity: the repetition of the word 'no' shows that she has lost everything to this love. This extreme love feeds on her until she is no longer distinguishable from the beast itself and she

tries to kill Milkman. Morrison humanises Hagar's vice by blaming the origins of this obsessive love to being spoiled as children. "They were always women who had been spoiled children. … who grew up to be stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight" (382-383). Hagar's love is directly prescribed animal traits of the anaconda when described as eating 'everything in sight'. The negative connotation and repetition of forms of the word 'stingy', which means 'suffocating', characterise this flawed love. Thus, Hagar's 'anaconda love' is her greatest flaw.

Contrary to Hagar, Pilate shows selfless love on one end, which is seen in, "If I'd knowed more, I would a loved more" (418). This love is pure and knows no boundaries. It extends to all people. Pilate loves without expectation, she loves out of the goodness of her soul. This love is Jesus-like, and thus is the highest form of Christian love. Pilate's capacity to love like this makes readers wonder about the incongruity in her name and personality. Pilate, however, is not without her flaws. She indulges in surfeit overprotective love for her daughter and granddaughter to a point where her love becomes "parental enmeshment" (Hogle 3). She cannot see beyond her enmeshing love and doesn't realise the harm that she causes Hagar by spoiling her. The 'enmeshment' is detrimental to Hagar, because Pilate is unable to define clear emotional boundaries for her. "Astonished as Pilate and Reba were by her wishes, they enjoyed trying to fulfill them" (186-187). Ironically, Pilate's love fuelled by the need to protect Hagar spawns Hagar's 'anaconda love' which eventually kills her. Pilate's love for her family is different from her love for others: her selfless love is virtuous, but her 'parental enmeshment' is flawed. Thus, through two differing, almost contrary, notions of love, Morrison combines virtue and flaw in Pilate.

Conversely, and possibly as a foil to Pilate, Ruth Foster Dead displays incestuous and selfish love in her inappropriate sexual interactions with her father and her son. "Her steady beam of love was unsettling . . . At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at

night… and plant a kiss on her lips" (28). Ruth's love for her father is 'unsettling' and unnatural. She insists on a kiss on the lips from her father at the age of sixteen, which is too long past girlhood to be normal. A kiss on the lips is a passionate act of lovers, and grossly inappropriate for a sixteen-year old, grown up daughter to ask of her father. This act impurifies the platonic father-daughter relationship. On Dr. Foster's death bed, Macon, Ruth's husband, sees her in naked bed with her dead father. "In the bed. …Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (91). Ruth's incestuous love takes on a grotesque form, when she is caught naked in bed with the dead body of her father. The use of words like 'white' implying paleness and 'puffy' implying swollenness to describe Ruth's father's dead body add to the jarring nature of Ruth's love. Morrison does not provide any reason to justify Ruth's notion of love, which adds to the jarring nature of this inappropriate sexual bond initiated by her with her father. Ruth also loves her son inappropriately: "It was one of her two secret indulgences—the one that involved her son. …When he came into the little room she unbuttoned her blouse and smiled" (16). This love is selfish. Since Ruth does not maintain a healthy sexual bond with her husband, she seeks physical pleasure in her son's suckling of her breasts long after his boyhood. This is another disturbing example of Ruth's warped love. She seeks pleasure for herself, while not considering the ramifications on her innocent son if someone were to find out about his breastfeeding beyond boyhood: in fact, that's how he gets the name Milkman. Ruth, thus, for her own selfish needs, inappropriately loves her father and her son, and this is an inherent flaw in her. The only semblance of a reason for Ruth's love is "libidinal repression" (Leonard) by her husband, but that does not warrant any of her actions. Morrison intentionally shows only vice in Ruth's notion of love, to influence the readers to dislike Ruth, so that she can establish foils to other virtuous characters like Pilate.

Thus, Morrison displays notions of love to layer her characters: Hagar's 'anaconda love' is flawed but pitiable, Pilate's selfless love is virtuous while her overprotective love is flawed, Ruth's incestuous and selfish love is objectively wrong.

Morrison also uses the dichotomy between mercy and cruelty to consign virtue and flaw to her characters. "Mercy is compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender…" (Merriam-Webster). The ability to be merciful shows strength of character. Thus, the lack of mercy is a telling vice. Pilate is merciful beyond measure on more than one occasion: she forgives Milkman for his theft of her sack of bones, and more significantly, for the death of her granddaughter Hagar, which is caused because of Milkman's temporary and heartless love for her. " [Hagar's death] was [Milkman's] fault, and Pilate knew it. …Knew what Pilate's version of punishment was when somebody took another's life. … When he went home that evening… he returned with a box of Hagar's hair" (414-416). Pilate is just and merciful. Hagar is Pilate's beloved granddaughter and Pilate knows that Milkman's want of love for Hagar kills her. But Pilate's punishment for Milkman is the same that she undertook when killed a man. She kept a sack of his bones with her as a memory of the life she had taken, and she made Milkman do the same thing for Hagar, by giving him a box with her hair in it. Pilate was merciful through her fairness in punishing Milkman.

Guitar, on the contrary, has a grave dearth of mercy which takes manifestation in his physical cruelty. He thinks that killing innocent white people to avenge black people killed and balance the numbers is the only right thing to do, by his race, to establish black identity. "… white people kill black people from time to time, and most folks shake their heads and say, 'Eh, eh, eh, ain't that a shame?'… I can't … I had to do something about it. And the only thing left to do is balance it…" (191-192). Guitar blames white people for killing blacks and black people for only showing trivial concern without feeling the need for justice to be

sought. His warped sense of justice is killing innocent white people randomly to avenge the black lives lost and maintain the balance. This absolute lack of mercy is Guitar's biggest bane. Yet, "[t]here is a certain realism in [Morrison's] characters. The essence of their being is imperfection, and Morrison… maintains that imperfections aren't bad. …Nobody is perfect, in the same way that nobody is irredeemable" (Parmar). Morrison characterises Guitar in this way, to showcase a darker hue of human nature: Guitar's portrayal adds the element of realism to Morrison's characterisation.

Thus, through notions of mercy and the lack thereof, Morrison assigns virtue to Pilate and flaw to Guitar.

In addition to notions, Morrison uses techniques like the Ritual of Naming to consign virtue to some characters and flaw to others. The Ritual of Naming, a traditional feature of African-American literature, is one of the most interesting techniques employed by Morrison to assign virtue and flaw to characters in *Song of Solomon.* Morrison gives this ritual a new meaning: she celebrates names as those "… got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness" (410-411). Names bear witness in African-American culture: they are significant components of identity. Their function is to be "witness bearers to an individual's treasure of selfhood" (Furman 189). Morrison affords a certain weight to the names of a character, by using irony in names and names which suggest a distinctive trait of the character.

The Ritual of Naming is even more fascinating because it compels readers to form opinions about characters in the first meetings with them. Whether or not these notions are justified, the names subliminally influence the readers' judgments of and affinities to Morrison's characters.

" 'Pilate. You wrote down Pilate' 'Like a riverboat pilot?' 'No. …Like a Christ-killing Pilate. You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that' " (23). In the quote itself, Morrison shocks the readers with the terrible man's name given to a newborn girl, and subliminally influences them to feel that Pilate will grow up to be murderous, true to her name. However, this Ritual of Naming is most ironic, because Pilate turns out to have virtues of a 'pilot' in the novel, rather than vices of the Christ-killing Pontius Pilate. She guides Milkman to regard himself within his own name. Thus, "she is the dramatization of [Ralph] Ellison's point that 'we take what we have and make our names what we can…' " (Furman 190). Pilate accepts the burden of her name and is able to construct her identity contrary to its negative implications. This irony is backed further by the image of Pilate dying, Christ-like in Milkman's arms, speaking of loving more like Christ had, in his last commandment to his disciples to love one another as he had loved them: "[Milkman] dropped to his knees and cradled [Pilate's] lolling head in the crook of his arm… She sighed. … 'If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more' " (418).

On the contrary, Morrison deliberately assigns the last name 'Bains' to Guitar Bains. 'Bains' is a pun on 'banes' which means destruction. Guitar accepts his name in its entirety as integral to who he is: "Besides, I do accept it. It's a part of who I am. Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that" (199). Guitar unapologetically embraces his name as the expression of how his heritage shaped him and is committed to express who he is. We see Guitar's 'baneful' nature in his involvement in the Seven Days, a merciless organisation that kills innocent white people at random to avenge the deaths of blacks.

Unlike Pilate, Guitar embodies the negative implications of his name. Thus, Morrison uses the Ritual of Naming ironically for Pilate to show her virtue and aptly for Guitar to highlight his flaws.

Conclusion

"If you judge them all by the best that they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them all by the worst that they have done, they are terrible" (Conversations with Toni Morrison 148).

It is only fitting to conclude the introductory quote, in an attempt to conclusively answer the Research Question, **"How effectively does Toni Morrison combine virtue and flaw to depict her characters in *Song of Solomon*?"** Morrison allows readers to understand the best and worst facets of characters, by compelling them to reserve judgments on her characters. The above quote encapsulates the effectiveness of Morrison's combinations in characters: characters are virtuous and flawed depending on the angle that the reader sees of them.

Morrison combines virtue and flaw to different degrees in each character. The theme of the morality of flight shows a combination of virtue but more flaw in Solomon because he abandons his family, but only virtue for Pilate Dead. Macon Dead is flawed in his denial of the past, while Pilate's acceptance of her burdensome past is virtuous. Moreover, Morrison, through differing notions of love, shows combinations of virtue and flaw in Pilate Dead, but depicts only flaw in Hagar and Ruth Foster Dead. She, however, does give reasons to allow sympathy for Hagar, but not for Ruth. Thus, here, she has not been entirely effective in combining virtue and flaw, but does so deliberately, to successfully establish foils to characters. Furthermore, in discussing the quality of mercy, Morrison assigns Pilate's mercy virtue and Guitar's cruelty vice. Lastly, Morrison uses the Ritual of Naming to show virtue in Pilate through the irony in her name, but only flaw in Guitar through the pun in his last name.

Morrison successfully depicts the complexity of her characters' actions in the African-American context of slavery. Combinations in her characters humanise them in a way that they are relatable: the protagonists, like Pilate, are not without flaws and the antagonists, like Guitar and Hagar, are not without reasons for their flawed actions. Thus, Morrison, through the aspects of flight, the past, love, mercy and names, is successful in constructing characters which are neither entirely black or white, but are made of varying shades and tints of grey.

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Appendix

An Interview with Dr. Sonal Parmar, a PhD in Toni Morrison

Beauty in Complexity
A Conversation with Dr. Parmar on the Writings of Toni Morrison

1. What was your thesis about?

A. My thesis was on images of motherhood in Morrison's works.

2. Why did you choose to pursue a doctorate in Morrison?

A. Toni Morrison speaks of motherhood in a different light. Motherhood, for Morrison, is not a conventional nurturing of the body but is more importantly nurturing of the spirit: the soul and the self of her child. The female spirit is beautifully captured through the tribulations and triumphs of motherhood, and through the idea of nourishment of the soul Morrison redefines the idea of 'mothering'.

Other themes that Morrison explores are the juxtaposition between life and death, restoration of a sense of fractured self, the burden of the past, the conflict between freedom and love and the overlap between gender and race. Another poignant and unique aspect of Morrison's writing is her acknowledgement of loss as a reality in all her works. She recognizes injustice and imperfection in the world, but in this imperfect world, she urges us to rise above.

3. What, according to you, is the most striking feature of Morrison's writing? Possibly something that sets her apart from other contemporary writers in the African-American genre?

A. Toni Morrison has a lovely and interesting way of using words, like "plash of water" instead of 'splash', which has a different effect. It makes her imagery more vivid. She also sometimes lapses into poetry. There is no apology in her realist portrayal of characters. This definitely sets her apart.

4. Specifically about 'Song of Solomon', do you believe that Milkman grew as a character?

A. I definitely believe that Milkman's character did develop through the course of this novel. He went from blissful ignorance to earnest realization, which is certainly change. Milkman, a not conventionally conflicted character, undergoes a desire to know himself, which shows growth of character

5. 'The fathers may soar//And the children may know their names'
What was your reaction to this initial epigraph in 'Song of Solomon'? What do you believe flight is? Liberation, escape or something completely different?

A. While flight is construed as a means of liberation, this is incomplete without considering the aspect of abandonment. Flying to freedom is also flying away from responsibility. Flight is a complex idea, and when looked at from a gendered approach, as in *Song of Solomon*, means something else: Solomon flew away and left Ryna and this highlights the selfishness of the act.

6. As a critic of Morrison, do you believe that she is successful in crafting layered characters?

A. Toni Morrison has somehow managed to beautifully humanize her characters by developing them in layers. There is a certain realism in her characters. The essence of their being is imperfection, and Morrison, through her writing, maintains that imperfections aren't bad. They add complexity and depth to characters in a way that readers can relate to them. These layers are the best part of her writing. Nobody is perfect, in the same way that nobody is irredeemable.