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Grappling with Christian Mythology: First Corinthians Coming-of-Age within Song of Solomon

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, published in 1977, is one of the foremost examples of literature in the African American context that employs Christian mythology and thematically develops the notions of love, morality, and difference. Therefore, this work presents qualitative descriptive research that explores how the character created in the coming-of-age process is portrayed in relationship to the biblical passages about the ecclesiastical work. First, Epistle to the Corinthians focuses specifically on the Dead, a character from the work, in attempting to identify how Morrison employs poetic languages, mythology, and folklore to create an Afro-centric bildungsroman; secondary data such as theological interpretations and scholarly commentaries are also utilized. The research demonstrates how the moral and psychological growth of the protagonist, First Corinthians, in the context of Toni Morrison's novel, is impacted by the father figure Macon Dead and her transition to a new level of recognition of her worth and freedom due to her affiliation with Henry Porter. Such sociocultural antagonisms are then exemplified through the political statement of elitism and the psychological effects reflected by African Americans; they come to a climax in First Corinthians' escape from her past while embracing a gratifying future in Mormonism.

INTRODUCTION

I am Black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon(1989.). Allusions to the Christian Bible are plentiful within Toni Morrison's iconic 1977 coming-of-age novel Song of Solomon for employing poetic language, mythology, metaphors, similes, and folklore in constructing a modern-day African American bildungsroman (Baillie, 2013; Britannica, September 9, 2022.). For example, the biblical allusion implicit within the naming of Morrison's Afro-centric novel itself, Song of Solomon, shrewdly foreshadows how Morrison will literarily grapple with ethical (moral) development concerns regarding classical biblical constructions of love—Storge (Greek: στοργή as familial affection), Philia (Greek: φιλία as platonic affection), Eros (Greek: ἐρεῶ as romantic affection) and Agape (Greek: ἀγάπη as Divine affection)—and human difference (Ahmed, 2016; Sasson, 1989; Strong, 1890). Morrison concisely highlights how our ethical disagreements as it appertains to issues of love, difference, and morality frequently make substantive "claims upon each of us that are stronger than the claims of law and takes priority over self-interest … there are certain things we must do and certain things we must not do. In other words, there is an ethical dimension to human existence [my emphasis]"(Thiroux, 2021; Whitney & Smith, 1914). This subject matter theme becomes especially evident when considering the literary portrayal and moral development of the female protagonist, First Corinthians Dead, an intriguing Black female literary character whose name itself intimates a scriptural reference to First Epistle to the Corinthians-the second of four letters composed by St. Paul to the early Christian community in Corinth-which purposefully addresses differences concerning "matters of immorality, [love] marriage and celibacy, the conduct of women [my emphasis]" (Britannica, 2020) A plausible argument may be posited that Morrison's Song of Solomon proffers its readers a glimpse into how the biblical theme of love. Morality and difference are creatively encountered, challenged, and accommodated within the African American community through the moral coming-of-age tale of First Corinthians Dead.

LITERATURE REVIEW

First Corinthians, Ruth, and Macon Dead's youngest daughter are artfully introduced in a pivotal scene in chapter one where both "Lena and Corinthians sitting like big baby dolls before a table heaped with scraps of red velvet [my emphasis]. His sisters made roses in the afternoon. Bright, lifeless roses that lay in peck baskets for months until the specialty buyer at Gerhardt's sent Freddie, the janitor, over to tell the girls they could use another gross"(Wagner-Martin, 2022). The graphic character description, mundane occupation, and lack of physical movement attributable to First Corinthians and her sister (Magdalene) suggest a moribund and lifeless existence that calculatingly directs the reader's attention towards First Corinthians's lack of spirit and lack of motivation. The visual imagery employed by Morrison to describe First Corinthians is one notably marked by jejuneness, callowness, and vanity— "high toned and high yellow, she believed what her mother was also convinced

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of that she was a prize for a professional man of color… but on the few occasions when eligible bachelors were among them,

Corinthians was not their choice; she lacked drive [my emphasis]"—emblematic of a grievous moral shortcoming that inhibited her from recognizing her arrogant behavior, privilege, and narcissism(Goldstein, 2022).

Discerning the poetic significance of the various names assigned to each discrete literary character within Song of Solomon reveals important details about each individual within the bildungsroman. For example, First Corinthian's surname, Dead, may metaphorically allude to not only her lack of drive but also to America's Original Sin, the dark history of Black enslavement within the United States where the "living dead [my emphasis] aboard the slave ship at sea" arrival both summarizes and condenses how her surname is implicitly ensnared within a problematic African American communal legacy historically associated with the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Smallwood, 2017). Morrison corroborates the historical significance of the surnames assigned to the Song of Solomon literary characters when she explicitly observes how they are derived "from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness [to the Transatlantic Slave Trade]. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians(Kurtz, 2020). The religio-historical consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade vis-à-vis the colonialist practice of white owners renaming the enslaved with Christian names are used to metaphorically assist the reader to identify, interrogate, and discern the many discursive ways First Corinthian's enslaved surname (Dead) imaginatively embodies and intersects with the greater African American sociocultural experience within the United States.

First Corinthians childhood occupation of fabricating red velvet rose petals, which she utterly despises, is also literarily suggestive of her dreary "living dead" existence; Morrison unambiguously notes that even as "Corinthians continued to make roses … she hated that stupid hobby and gave Lena any excuse to avoid it. They spoke to her of death [my emphasis]"(Morrison, 1977). Morrison shrewdly posits how the fabrication of the red velvet roses was an insipid occupation that contextually represented a problematic vocation for First Corinthians: a lifeless (dead) career where others cruelly labeled her as being "unfit for any work other than the making of red velvet roses"(Morrison, 1977). Intriguingly, Morrison's clever portraiture of red velvet rose petals being fabricated by First Corinthian refers to a recondite Christian mystical practice that fuses a Greco-Roman narrative with an obscure form of Catholic mythopoesis. This erudite Christian religio-historical reference harkens back to the red drops of blood exuded by Jesus from his crown of thorns worn during his Passion as allegorically expressed through floral symbolism (Klomp, 2020).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research utilizes a quantitative descriptive research design to analyze secondary data. The Bible's First Corinthians and The Song of Solomon are examined as texts to reveal an ideological analysis of coming of age based on the theology that frames Christian mythology. The commentaries, theological interpretations, other articles, and scholarly commentaries are also analyzed to ensure a complete understanding of the issues being discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Morrison's construction of a First Corinthians literary character imaginatively expresses an African American feminine persona pushing itself up and against an African American masculine identity as embodied by Macon Dead, the father to First Corinthians. First Corinthians's problematic childhood occurred as a result of her father's decision to terrorize, manipulate, and control her; Macon Dead severely restricted First Corinthians' agency to coming freely with other Black children. This mental abuse experienced by First Corinthians is vividly illustrated through her traumatic childhood encounter at the icehouse, one of many emotionally scarring youth encounters that greatly contributed to her single status as a forty-two-year-old unwed female adult(Clements, 1905; Morrison, 1977; Peterson, 1993).

"When we were little girls, he [Macon Dead] took us to the icehouse once before you were born. Drove us there in his Hudson. We were all dressed up, and we stood there in front of those sweating Black men, sucking ice out of our handkerchiefs, leaning forward a little so as not to drip water on our dresses. There were other [African American] children there. Barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty. But we stood apart, near the car, in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves. And when he talked to the men, he kept glancing at us and the vehicle. The car and us. You see, he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him. Then one of the little [Black] boys approached us and put his hand on Corinthians' hair. She offered him her piece of ice, and before we knew it, he ran toward us. He knocked the ice out of her hand into the dirt and shoved us both into the car. First, he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon [my emphasis] (Morrison, 1977).

First Corinthians tightly regulated behavior reveals the extreme nature, extent, and damage wrought by the psychological manipulation she endured at the hands of her father. The fraught psycho-social complexities of upper-middle-class African American life similarly contributed to First Corinthians experiencing a nervous mental breakdown at the age of forty-two— "Ruth [Dead] came to terms with the savage fact that her daughters were not going to marry doctors. It was a shock to them all when Corinthians woke up one day to find herself a forty-

two-year-old maker of rose petals; she suffered a severe depression [my emphasis]"—a vivid literary depiction of the intersectional complications associated with being an educated upper-middle-class African American female (Henriques, 1996; Steele, 1988). A plausible argument may be posited that the emotional trauma experienced by First Corinthians during the course of her lifetime also stunted her empathic ability to relate to other Black folk, crippled her own healthy emotional growth, and handicapped her salubrious psychological development; a direct ethical consequence of her father's perverse psychological desire to inculcate his children with an elitist attitude, posture, and perspective where economic, social, cultural and political power only belongs to a select few Americans (Rahman Khan, 2012).

Song of Solomon cogently demonstrates how the African American feminine aptitude to mentally establish a wholesome and morally healthy psychological disposition towards other Black men and, to a lesser degree, manage adult responsibilities can be awkward at times for some upper-middle-class Black females. For example, Morrison powerfully corroborates this social difficulty by describing how "Corinthians was a little too elegant [my emphasis]. Bryn Mawr in 1940. France in 1939. That was a bit much. A woman who spoke French and who had traveled on the Queen Mary might not have the proper attitude if the [Black] man was a teacher; he steered clear of a woman who had a better education than he did" (Morrison, 1977). Curiously, the deliberate cultivation and conscious promulgation of snobbishness, conceit, and self-importance within First Corinthians during her childhood years became emblematically no less unnatural, artificial, and ersatz when compared to the "red velvet [flowers] that had flown all over the snow that day when she and Lena, and her mother had walked past the hospital on their way to the department store. Her mother was pregnant—a fact that had embarrassed Corinthians when she first learned of it. All she could think of was how her friends would laugh [my emphasis] when they found out she had a pregnant mother" (Morrison, 1977)

Morrison convincingly demonstrates how the resolute dismemberment of all traces of Black feminine excellence, spirit, and joie de vivre from First Corinthians by her father contributed to her "Ivy retardation … because the last thing an elite education will teach you is its inadequacy [my emphasis]"; First Corinthians became over time a societal misfit such that "she had a hard time finding employment befitting her [Seven Sisters] degree. The three years she had spent in college, a junior year in France, and being the granddaughter of the eminent Dr. Foster should have culminated in something more elegant than the two [maid servant] uniforms that hung on Miss Michael-Mary Graham's basement door"(Deresiewicz, 2008) Morrison shrewdly critiques how the two maidservant uniforms dangling upon Miss Graham's doorway is symbolic of holiday ornaments and, by so doing, invites the reader to intellectually engage and interrogate the discursive ways by which First Corinthians is being humiliatingly reduced to a living . Black female decoration to festoon, embellish, and bedeck Miss Graham's colonialist-inspired white domicile; all the objects, animate and inanimate, within "her home was a tribute to the fastidiousness of her dedication (and the generosity of her father's will). Colors, furnishings, and appointments had been selected for their inspirational value when she learned the woman's name, Michael-Mary was so charmed by the sound of Corinthians Dead, she hired her on the spot [my emphasis]"(Morrison, 1977).

Miss Graham was delighted with Corinthians' dress and slightly uppity manners. It gave her house the foreign air she liked to affect [my emphasis], for she was the core, the very heartbeat, of the city's literary world … It was also a pleasure and a relief to have a [Black] maid who read and who seemed to be acquainted with some of the great masters of literature. It was so nice to give a maid a copy of Walden for Christmas rather than that dreary envelope and to be able to say so to her friends. In the world, Michael-Mary Graham inhabited, her mild liberalism, a residue of her Bohemian youth, and her posture of sensitive lady poet passed for anarchy [my emphasis]. Corinthians was naive, but she was not a complete fool. She never let her [white] mistress know she had ever been to college or Europe or could recognize one word of French that Miss Graham had not taught her (Entrez, for example)(Morrison, 1977).

The pointed reference to the illusory social status, moral respectability, and privileged life advantages that First Corinthians did not possess within white society despite having attended an academically renowned and prestigious Predominantly White Institution (PWI)—Bryn Mawr is part of a select group of seven elite liberal arts women colleges colloquially known as the Seven Sisters—is cleverly juxtaposed against her life as a Black woman and, by so doing, Morrison subtly critiques the societal power misperceptions and common upward mobility tropes ascribed to attending a PWI where quite a few educated young white feminists "often lack [sociocultural] awareness of class and race"(Gershon, June 12, 2015.) First Corinthians, in a heartfelt literary scene, finally recognizes the folly of telling others she is an amanuensis (literary assistant) and, with this in mind, becomes cognizant of how "Bryn Mawr had done what a four-year dose of liberal [white] education was designed to do: unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world, first by training her for leisure time, enrichment, and domestic mindlessness. Second, by a clear implication that she was too good for such work"(Morrison, 1977). First Corinthians, in her coming-of-age moment, perceptively recognizes that she must cloak her formidable.

Black intelligence, multilingual ability, and cosmopolitan past from her white mistress and employer, Miss Michael-Mary Graham; Morrison cleverly notes how First Corinthians "never let her mistress know she had ever been to college or Europe [my emphasis] or could recognize one word of French that Miss Graham had not taught her"(Morrison, 1977). The deliberate concealment of her talents by First Corinthians serves as a literary

foreshadowing of her female movement towards achieving Black feminine maturity, independence, and freedom that culminates in the establishment of an adult romantic relationship with her Black paramour, Henry Porter; a love affair humorously characterized within Song of Solomon as being between "a pair of middle-aged lovers who behaved like teen-agers"(Morrison, 1977).

Significantly, First Corinthians' desire to become a fully functional, self-reliant adult Black female propels her to initiate the arduous spiritual development needed to realize her feminine agency, power, and potential as a fearless Black woman. Morrison illustrates the difficulty of this task by noting First Corinthians's tempestuous interaction with Henry Porter, a member of Seven Days, who was initially introduced within the Song of Solomon through his very public nervous breakdown where he despairingly proclaims: "I love ya! I love ya all. Don't act like that. You women.

Please stop it. Don't act like that. Don't you see I love ya? I'd die for you, kill for you. I'm saying I love ya. I'm telling ya. Oh, God, have mercy. I cannot take no more love, Lord. I can't carry it; it's too heavy. Jesus, you know. You know all about it. Isn't it heavy? Jesus? Ain't love heavy?"(Morrison, 1977). It is not coincidental that within Song of Solomon, both First Corinthians and Henry Porter experienced a similar type of nervous breakdown within their respective lives and, more tellingly, an unsympathetic acknowledgment and response from Macon Dead. (Morrison, 1977). The character development of First Corinthians and Henry Porter's romantic relationship illustrates the moral meaning, significance, and progress of the First Corinthian journey toward achieving maturity, independence, and spiritual freedom.

The climactic scene for First Corinthians arises when she experiences a life-changing transformative epiphany as she exits Henry Porters' automobile and begins walking home to her parent's residence, a decisive moment where she astutely recognizes how she no longer desires to be that young Black girl fabricating red velvet roses at the oak table inside her parents' domicile (Morrison, 1977). First Corinthians' discernment of the lifeless (dead) future ahead of her should she remain within her parents' home arrives at that precise "moment she had put her foot on the step leading up to the porch [at her parent's domicile], she saw her ripeness mellowing and rotting before a heap of red velvet scraps on a round oak table. Corinthians ran toward [Henry Porter's automobile] it faster than she had ever run in her life, faster than she'd cut across the grass on Honoré Island when she was five. The whole family went there for a holiday. Faster even than the time she flew down the stairs having seen for the first time what the disease had done to her grandfather" and, by so doing, consciously liberates herself from the emotional insecurities that tethered First Corinthians down to her problematic past(Morrison, 1977). First Corinthians's journey is complete as she leaves her parent's home for good to start a new life with Henry Porter.

CONCLUSION

In Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison uses Christian symbolism and imagery to paint the picture of the concrete, African American reality of First Corinthians Dead that strives toward personal freedom. Morrison connects the character's moral and psychological growth to the larger issue regarding the oppression of Black female individuals within their communities and families. Further, the epiphany in First Corinthians and salvation from her dark past indeed represent an important discourse on the need to empower oneself and be free from the spiritual bonds that imprisoned African Americans into submission and hopelessness. Thus, Morrison's narrative contributes to the development of African American literature and presents readers with an analysis of the essence of love, morality, and differences between people.

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