Chapter 2

Flight and Return

There are two lasting gifts we can give our children - one is roots and the other is wings.

Anonymous

A folk aesthetic gives structure and meaning to Morrison’s work and a mythic impulse dominates her ability to depict the people and the values the American culture has traditionally neglected. Morrison uses folk and mythic elements to challenge received notions of gender, class and race as well. She endows common place events, places and people with a mythic grandeur to give voice to those whose stories have been untold or unheard. Her fictional narratives are an illustration of how culture is shaped and reshaped by the stories told about it.

In speaking of the fictional characters, Morrison once said, “These are the kind of characters who never had center stage in anybody else’s book. . . . Now they’re there in all their glory” (Albrecht 5). The characterization of Pilate in Morrison’s Song of Solomon and the role she plays in her community suggests that Morrison attempts to share cultural resources rooted in myth and folklore that would both inform and transform the consciousness of her readers. At the centre of the story of Milkman Dead’s quest for identity is the story of Pilate who is the female
sage and conjure woman. Pilate, described as a woman who came into town “like she owned it” is not only credited with making it possible for Milkman’s mother to conceive him by giving her “some greenish-grey-grassy looking stuff” to put in her husband’s food, but she is also the person whose songs and stories teach Milkman how to find meaning in life. Pilate is therefore an example of a female cultural archetype—the priestess figure—a woman equally adept in the natural and spiritual worlds, whose deeds and stories bring healing and knowledge in her community.

“To read is to find meanings and to find meanings is to name them, but these named meanings are swept away toward further names; names invoke each other. . . . I name, I unname, I rename” (Barthes 5). On re-reading Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1971), what we find is a nexus of myth and folklore that is deeply rooted in African-American history and culture. In fact, it is difficult to discuss her fiction without alluding to myth. In her words, she wants “to restore the language that the Black people used to its original power” (Le Clair 26). She reminisces that myths are misunderstood now because the Black people are not talking to each other the way she was spoken to when she was growing up in a very small town. One knows everything in that little microcosm. But one doesn’t live where one was born. So the myths get changed.
This oral tradition also contains a cosmology that she seeks to embed in her fiction:

I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very-down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those words together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited (and) therefore what they knew was discredited. (Morrison 342)

Morrison believes that the past is all that makes the present coherent. Both myth and folklore are employed by Morrison as a communication process that operates within a given cultural context. Historical changes such as Black migration to urban areas, assimilation into the middle class and acculturation to western values have threatened the old values that once gave cultural coherence to Black people's lives. Morrison's fiction therefore is a response to the loss of tradition, ways of
knowing and ways of perceiving oneself and the world. *Song of Solomon* bears witness to these lost and discredited traditions by incorporating mythology to provide what culture did. It is when Milkman discovers, understands and respects these traditions that he discovers the meaning of his name, his own life and his familial past.

The original title of *Song of Solomon* was *Milkman Dead*. The change of title may have been related to the interconnection among myth, folklore, history and culture. Indeed, it is Morrison’s attempt to balance the universal and the particular that makes *Song of Solomon* such a challenge for the reader. Her meandering narrative strategy imitates the oral tradition in the language and style of a folktale:

“That’s the baby’s name.”

“You want this for the baby’s name?”

“I want that for the baby’s name. Say it.”

“You can’t name the baby this”.

“Say it.”

“It’s a man’s name.”

“Say it.”

“Pilate.”

“What?”

“Pilate. You wrote down Pilate.”

“Like a river boat pilot?”
“No. Not like a river boat pilot. Like a Christ-Killing Pilate. You can’t get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that”. (19)

The plethora of names, the shifting chronology, the excessive dialogue and the layers of individual and personal histories create a mosaic of narratives that makes meaning seem elusive. In fact, the reader’s task is not unlike that of Milkman Dead, who must find the meaning in his complicated life story.

*Song of Solomon* is essentially the story of Milkman Dead’s search for and discovery of meaning in his life. Part I treats his current relationships with others and thus represents the present. Part II, which treats Milkman’s confrontation with the incoherent and fragmented stories that others share with him about his ancestry, represents the past. In Part I we learn that he was born the day after the Black community’s insurance man, Mr. Smith, committed suicide in an apparent attempt to fly from the roof of the hospital. The song that is sung at the time of his “flight” is actually the song of the myth of the flying African, the puzzling song that Milkman will later have to decipher if he is to understand the story of his ancestors. We then learn of the loveless marriage of his parents, Macon Dead II and Ruth, of the continued circumstances that led to his conception, of his mother’s unnatural act of nursing him well into his fourth year, of the neighbourhood gossip’s discovery of this act as the
origin of his losing his birth name, Macon Dead III, and being given the
nick name “Milkman” and of his father’s position as the most propertied
Negro in town. We also learn of his eccentric aunt Pilate, of her daughter
Reba, and of Reba’s daughter Hagar, all of whom Macon calls as a
collection of lunatics because they embarrass him.

Also in Part I we learn of Milkman’s alienation from his two sisters,
Magdalene and First Corinthians, of his alienation from almost everyone
but his close friend Guitar Bains, the leader of a quasi-political gang and
of his prolonged but disinterested love affair with Hagar, his cousin. In
addition, we learn of his parents’ respective guilt-ridden attempts to
explain the past to him, of his decision to end his affair with Hagar, and of
her subsequent monthly attempts to kill him. At the end of Part I, we
learn of his attempt to steal a bag from Pilate which his father leads him to
believe contains his inheritance of gold, of his discovery that this bag
contains not gold but only human bones. He decides to leave home and
head South to search for gold, but primarily to flee from the urban milieu
and the responsibilities and entanglements of family, friendship and love
so that he could live his own life. This decision becomes the impetus for
Milkman’s journey to the rural home of his ancestors, a journey which is
narrated in Part II of the novel:

The low howm howm that sounded like a string bass
imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood
and executed. And the dogs spoke to the men; single shot
barks—evenly spaced and widely spaced—one every three
or four minutes, that might go on for twenty minutes. . . .
No, it was not language; it was what there was before
language. Before things were written down. Language in the
time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a
man could sit down with an ape and the converse; when a
tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each
understood the other; when men ran with wolves, not from
or after them. (278)

Milkman’s journey in Part II takes him first to a small Pennsylvania
town where he inquires about Circe, the midwife who cared for his father
and aunt when their mother, Sing, died in childbirth. His inquiry leads
him to a group of men who share their memories of Macon Dead in a
series of story-telling rituals. He then finds Circe, the dreamy witch like
figure who helps him discover more pieces of his familial past, who helps
him to make sense of the fragmented versions he got from Macon and
Pilate and who tells him the location of the cave where his grandfather’s
body had been dumped. Unsuccessful at finding either the body or the
gold in the cave, Milkman decides that the gold must be in Virginia, the
state from which his grandparents had migrated to the North.
Once he arrives in Shalimar, Virginia, his search takes on all characteristics of an initiation rite into manhood. He participates in a verbal battle known as the "dozens", he defends himself in a knife and bottle challenge, he becomes member of a hunting expedition, he experiences genuine sensuality for the first time, he deciphers the meaning of his ancestral song, he endures the betrayal of friendship and he discovers that his true inheritance is not gold, but a legacy of his great grandfather’s heroic fight from oppression back to Africa. In the process of discovering that there is no gold to be found, he learns that the bones Pilate claims as her inheritance are actually the bones of her father, who was killed by the Whites when he tried to save his farm. The novel ends with his return to Michigan just long enough to get Pilate, whom he takes back to Virginia to give her father’s remains a proper burial, with his recitation of his ancestral song to Pilate just before she dies and with his ambiguous yet symbolic gesture of reunion with his friend Guitar at the end of the novel.

“No, I didn’t ask for you by name. I asked him if he knew where a woman name Circe used to live”.

“Circe? Yes, Lord, old Circe!”

... But didn’t your daddy have a sister name of Pilate?”

“Yes Sir, Pilate”

“Still living, is she?”
“Oh, yes, very much living.”

“Isn’t so? Pretty girl, real pretty. My daddy was the one made the earring for her... (230)

Part I of the novel illustrates the folk aesthetic in that it focuses on the Black community into which Milkman is born and on the means by which that community gives itself coherence. Part II illustrates the mythic impulse in that it focuses on Milkman’s individual quest for identity and meaning. Together Part one and two illustrate how the consciousness of the individual self can be transformed through the narrative act of story telling. Narrative is here used to suggest how such a culture could be transformed from within and without by reclaiming its forgotten myths, traditions and values.

In the opening scene of Song of Solomon, Robert Smith, an insurance agent, adorns himself with wings, goes to the roof of the Mercy Hospital and leaps to his death, the day before Macon “Milkman” Dead II is born in 1931. Although Milkman does not connect this event with his own life until much later, Morrison uses this scene to establish the character of the Black community into which the bizarre death and significant birth occur and introduces the White community by implication rather than explicit portrayal.

Morrison’s insertion of Hindberg’s name is a means of evoking history in which flight occurs for disparate reasons. Mr. Smith’s flight is a
sign of escape from racial injustice; Hindberg’s is a heroic expression of creativity, ingenuity and freedom. Mr. Smith’s suicide is a response to his inability to cope with the hatred and secrecy required for membership in the Seven Days, a gang formed to avenge the murder of Black people through random killing of White people. Mr. Smith’s flight is a commitment made, a promise kept and a sign of his connection to African and African-American myths about Black people who could fly.

American history is also evoked in references to racial exclusionary practices in housing when “the only coloured doctor in the city” (4) became the first to live on Main Avenue in 1896, in references to the military when 1918 is the year “coloured men were being drafted” (4) and in allusions to medical services when in 1931, Milkman was the “first coloured” child born at Mercy Hospital. In Chapter 3, Morrison evokes history more directly through a barber shop scene in which a group of men were listening to a radio newscast about an apparently racially motivated murder. “A young Negro boy had been stamped to death in Sunflower Country, Mississippi. . . . His name was Till” (80). Clearly, this is an allusion to the early 1950s murder of a fourteen-year-old Black youth named Emmett Till. This murder has historical significance because it became a world-wide symbol of Southern racism, a spark that helped to ignite the Civil Rights movement. Apparently, Morrison’s interest in the Emmett Till murder runs very deep, for in 1985 she wrote a play based on
the same case. The play called *Dreaming Emmett* is one she conceived to show a collision of three or four levels of time through the eyes of one person who could come back to life and seek vengeance.

Morrison consciously draws upon the cultural resources to give authenticity to her depiction of the Black Community. The phrase “word-of-mouth news” (3) describes how some members of the community learn about Mr. Smith’s promise to fly from the roof of the Mercy Hospital. She views her fiction as a written replacement of the “word-of-mouth news” or oral tradition that she feels has been lost. Therefore, folk aesthetic is the very substance that gives meaning and shape to her novel.

The second important sign of the folk elements in *Song of Solomon* is that of names and meaning. We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all these values and traditions which we learn and imagine as being the meaning of our familial past. They also empower the community and the individual to shape and affirm their own experiences. At the end of Chapter 3 of Part I of the novel, there is a discussion on naming by Milkman and Guitar which illustrates this:

“Ask anybody but Reba”, said Milkman. “Reba don’t know her own last name”.

“Ask Pilate”.
“Yeah, I’ll ask Pilate. Pilate knows. It’s in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else’s. Bet mine’s in there too. I’m gonna ask her what my name is. Say, you know how my old man’s daddy got his name?”

“Uh uh. How?”

“Cracker gave it to him”.

“Sho’nough?”

“Yep. And he took it. Like a fuckin sheep. Somebody should have shot him”.

“What for? He was already Dead”. (183)

Naming is first introduced into the text in the rather elaborate explanation of how “Not Doctor Street” got its name. The Main Avenue came to be called as “Doctor Street” when the first “Coloured” doctor moved in there. Thus the name is a recognition of history and affirmation of that segment of the community that gives it validity through continued use. But when the post office refuses to recognize the name and keeps all mail addressed to Doctor Street in the Dead Letter Office, the power of the name begins to fade. Finally, the city legislators see to it that the name is never used in any official capacity by posting public notices that proclaim that the street will always be known as Main Avenue and not Doctor Street. Therefore, the process of naming, unnaming and renaming is an ironic assertion of authority, a recognition of plurality of meaning and a
statement of self-affirmation. Macon Dead, Milkman and Pilate are all names that provide links in the narrative of the past that Milkman must decipher if he is to learn his identity.

Milkman's nickname also has an extraordinary origin. Like the name Macon Dead, it is a misname imposed by someone with no concern about the consequences. It is also a name laden with family history, embarrassment and shame which Milkman never fully understands. His name is first a direct connection to his mother Ruth whose life has been lived vicariously, first through her father and then through her husband. As the only child of Dr. Foster, she is so much a wife to Macon as an acquisition. Like the goddess Persephone whose abduction, rape and subsequent marriage to Hades signify loss of status and feminine power, Ruth's marriage to Macon signifies a similar loss and submission to abusive power and male domination. His failure to sleep with her after their daughters were born, prompts her to consult his sister Pilate, herbal priestess and conjure woman, whose assistance results in the birth of Macon III. The triumph of his birth is that he survived Macon's numerous attempts to make her abort. Though Macon's birth fails to rekindle the marriage, it represents Ruth's "one aggressive act brought to royal completion" (133).

Well into his fourth year, Macon III satisfies his mother's indulgence by allowing her to nurse him at her breasts. The act is
described as pushing her into “fantasy”. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the Miller’s daughter who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her, to see the golden thread stream from her very own shuttle, this is a pleasure, a pleasure which Macon’s mother hated to give up:

She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing a spinning gold. Like the miller’s daughter—the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. So when Freddie the janitor, who liked to pretend that he was a friend of the family and not just their flunky as well as their tenant, brought his rent to the doctor’s house late one day and looked in the window past the evergreen, the terror that sprang to Ruth’s eyes came from the quick realization that she was to lose fully half of what made her daily life bearable. Freddie, however, interpreted her look as simple shame, but that didn’t stop him from grinning. (14)
However, Morrison’s insertion of the Rumpelstiltskin fairytales is no coincidence, for it reinforces the theme of naming and misnaming. Ruth’s pleasure goes awry and these afternoon rituals are confirmed as “strange and wrong” (14) when Freddie, the janitor and neighbourhood gossip, discovers her in the act of nursing Milkman. Even though Macon refuses to acknowledge his son’s nickname, it sticks because of the persistence of the community’s continued word-of-mouth use. Thus Morrison’s elaborate telling of the mythic dimensions of Milkman’s birth, name and childhood gives the narrative a fairytale quality.

Pilate plays an integral role in Milkman’s birth. She is described as one who literally wears her name, it was chosen in accordance with an old African-American tradition of selecting a newborn baby’s name from the Bible. Her father, who could not read or write, selected the name his finger pointed to first. Even though the midwife tried to advise him against the “Christ-killing Pilate” (19), he persisted, partially out of confusion and melancholy over his wife’s death at childbirth. At the age of twelve, Pilate removed the paper that bore her name from the Bible, folded it up, and placed it in a tiny brass box which she wore as an ear ring. The fact that she wears her name suggests the value she places on her identity over her possessions—a quality that distinguishes her from her brother Macon. Her role as a herbalist and conjure woman who saves Milkman’s life is an ironic comment on her name, which is reiterated in
the clue to the name of his ancestors contained in the song Milkman overhears her singing:

O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman’s don’t leave me here
Bukra’s arms to yoke me.........
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)

Milkman’s introduction into his family and community is primarily accompanied through rituals of story-telling. As an essential element of the African-American oral tradition, story-telling is not only a vehicle for passing the history from one generation to the next but also the means by which the community gives itself coherence. The primary stories that give Milkman a sense of his community are those of Macon, Ruth, Guitar and Pilate. Although the stories he hears from his sisters, Hagar and the men in the neighbourhood, help to shape his consciousness to a certain extent, they are not as important as the stories he hears from his parents, his best friend and his aunt.

Macon tells Milkman three stories—the story of his father, Macon Dead 1, the story of the gold he believes Pilate has stolen from him. In the story he also mentions Circe, the midwife who cared for him and Pilate
after their father's death, the circumstances surrounding the name. Pilate is able to teach him something—not in the urban world of acquisition, shallow living and middle-class values but in the rural world of tradition and communal values.

The second story Macon shares is the reaction to Milkman's hitting him for striking Ruth. He also speaks of Ruth's unnatural and almost perverse display of affection towards her father's dead body. This story raises more questions than it answers and prompts Milkman to question precisely why the story of his past is so confusing.

The third story Macon tells is the version about the gold found in the cave where his father's remains were reputed to be. Macon shares this information with Milkman to entice him to go in search of the gold. Rejecting the idea that Pilate's inheritance is anything but the gold, he promises Milkman that he can have half of it if only he will go and get it. Although the other stories mean much to Milkman at first, the story about the gold begins to represent a way out of a community that makes it difficult for him to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The task that Milkman faces, however, is not to escape the various versions of the past that are told to him but to piece them together into his own coherent version. Only after he undertakes his own personal quest for knowledge is he able to do so:
The dead don’t like it if they’re not buried. They don’t like it at all. You won’t have trouble finding it. You go back out the road you come in on. Go north until you come Stile. Right in there the woods are open. Walk a little way in and you’ll come to a creek. Cross it. There’ll be some more woods, but ahead you’ll see a short range of hills. The cave is right on the face of those hills. (245)

The story that Ruth tells him is another version of a story he has already been told—the story of her relationship with her father Dr. Foster and of her marriage to Macon. According to her version, Macon deliberately killed her father by withholding his medicine. She denies any perversity about her actions concerning her father’s death and informs Milkman that it is only because of Pilate that she or he is alive. That she tells her version of the past only after he discovers her visiting her father’s grave is a sign that her story, like Macon’s, is motivated by guilt-ridden self-interest.

Milkman’s best friend Guitar Bains is the only one person whose stories are not motivated by self-interest. Street-wise and political, proud and sensitive, he attempts to tell Milkman the story of the Seven Days to inspire him about racial, social realities. Guitar attempts to teach him how to survive in their community and how to perceive the world as a whole. Milkman considers Guitar as the “one person whose clarity never failed
him” (79). He finds him in Tommy’s Barbershop in the middle of a loud discussion with some other men about the Emmett Till murder.

Who’s teasing? I’m telling him the truth. He ain’t going to have it. Neither one of ‘em going to have it. And I’ll tell you something else you not going to have. You not going to have no private coach with four red velvet chairs that swivel around in one place whenever you want ‘em to. No. And you not going to have your own special toilet and your own special-made eight-foot bed either. (60)

The significance of this scene is that it provides Morrison with a useful narrative strategy for bearing witness to Milkman’s precarious status of being in the community but not of it, and to the means by which Black males become socialized into African-American life and culture.

Later, when Milkman senses that their friendship is weakening under the strain of Guitar’s involvement with the Seven Days, he confronts Guitar with a barrage of questions about the group and its purpose. Guitar’s account of the gang and his life calls attention to the lack of focus and purpose that characterizes Milkman’s life. He envies Guitar’s willingness to take risks.

Ultimately, it is Pilate’s story that proves the most valuable to Milkman. Though Macon warns Milkman to stay away from the eccentric old herbalist, Shaman, conjure woman and bootlegger, she nevertheless
remains his teacher and spiritual guide. Pilate embodies the folk aesthetic and the mythic impulse as one. Living in a darkened house surrounded by trees, practising witchcraft and healing and making wine, she is very much rooted in the landscape. The opinion of women in the community that she is “something that God never made” (144) coupled with her claim to have often spoken to the dead give her a mythical, other worldly quality. Recognizing that many in her community regard her as a freak because she has no navel, she decides that it would be best if she throws away every assumption she had learned and begin again at zero. It is apt that Pilate is the story teller who will guide Milkman to the true story of his ancestors, for, like him, she is in the community, accepted by it, but not really of it.

“Pilate, old, crazy, sweet Pilate. . . . She came into this city like she owned it. . . . She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-grey grassy-looking stuff to put in his food”. Ruth laughed. “I felt like a doctor, like a chemist doing some big important scientific experiment. It worked too. . . . She saved my life, and yours, Macon. (125 – 126)

Pilate is a Demeter figure. She presides over her own backwoods corner of the world, possesses mystical powers and engages in the arts of root working and herbal healing. She assumes a maternal role by “mothering” Milkman with spiritual nurturance and by offering him
haven from his "dead" household. She resembles Demeter, who assumes a maternal role by nursing Demophoon, the son of Metaneira. As a member of a three women household, she reminds us that Demeter was also part of the familiar triad of maiden, nymph and crone, feminine terms that correspond to Hagar, Reba and Pilate respectively. Pilate's sad wandering from place to place, collecting a rock from each step on her lonely journey across the country, corresponds to Demeter's wandering search for Persephone that accounts for seasonal changes on earth.

Finally, just as the Greek goddess Demeter is believed to mediate between earth and underworld, Pilate meditates between this world and the next, engaging in the life-giving arts of herbal medicine, on the one hand and communicating with and carrying the bones of her deceased father on the other. Thus she mediates between the present and the past.

The first and most important story that Pilate tells is the one embedded in the song that she sings so often, sometimes alone, sometimes, in chorus with Reba and Hagar. The song exemplifies her mythic impulse through its "choral note". Morrison here suggests the intricate, complex and often inaccessible nature of the past as a network of narratives. But it is only at the end of the quest that he realizes that Pilate was not carrying the bones of the White man Macon killed in self-defence but the bones of her own father. It is also at the end that he realizes their father's ghost does not tell Pilate to sing, but it calls the name of his
mother—Sing, shor: for the Indian name Singing Bird. It is finally only at
the end that Milkman learns that the original song contained the name of
his great grandfather Solomon. He no longer hears merely a verse or a
chorus but the entire song, the complete tale within the song:

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come boobe yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
Left that baby in a White man’s house
Come booba yalle, comb booba tambee
Heddy took him to a red man’s house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
Solomon and Ryne Belali Shalut
Yarube Medina Muhammet too
Nester Kalina Saraka Cake
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!
O Solomon don’t leave me here
Cotton balls do choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckral arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303)

The events of Part I lead to Guitar's call for Milkman to make the necessary journey to his own life. From his unusual birth, to his altercation with his father, to his confrontation with his mother, to his severance from Hagar and education from Pilate, every experience in his community prepares him for the quest. All these experiences put the journey from the city to the country from the North to the South, in perspective. Morrison establishes the community as the text that Milkman must read, reject and then re-read if he is to make meaning of his life. He can integrate the versions of the past into a coherent story only when he takes the necessary risk to live his life on his own.

In The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell explains that the "standard path of the mythological adventure is represented in the rites of passage: separation, initiation and return" (172). Morrison expands on this monolith to include allusions to African-American myth, Greek myth, the Bible and folk and fairytales. Campbell's paradigm can be used to analyse Milkman's journey from the North to the South.

Milkman's quest begins with his separation from his urban community in Michigan and his initiation into the rural landscape,
Pennsylvania, then of Virginia. When he arrives in Danville, Pennsylvania, he recalls the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel:

When Hansel and Gretel stood in the forest and saw the house in the clearing before them, the little hairs at the nape of their neck must have shivered. Their knees must have felt so weak that blinding hunger alone could have propelled them forward. No one was there to warm or hold them; their parents, chastened and grieving, were far away. So they ran as fast as they could to the house where a woman older than death lived, and they ignored the shivering nape hair and the softness in their knees. A grown man can also be energized by hunger, and any weakness in his knees or irregularity in his heart-beat will disappear if he thinks his hunger is about to be assuaged. Especially if the object of his craving is not ginger bread or chewy gum drops, but gold. (219)

The allusion to this narrative in the text serves to comment on the illusory nature of his quest for gold and to foreshadow the dangers that await him. His reflections on the airplane, however, are of his life-long preoccupation with flying.

The first person he attempts to find is Circe. The resonances from Greek myth in her name are ironic. When Milkman asks for Circe on his arrival in Danville, he meets with the elders of the community who knew
his ancestors and who illustrates the oral tradition in process. He undergoes not only verbal rituals but real risk-taking, life-threatening rituals in the tradition of the mythic hero. These rituals take the form of a meeting with Circe, a journey to the cave of his ancestors, a verbal battle that becomes a physical challenge, a hunt and a threat on his life from his friend turned antagonist, Guitar.

Unlike the Circe of Greek myth, who turns the men of Odysseus into swine, Circe, the midwife who brought Macon and Pilate into the world is more like a prophetess or Sibyl. Morrison revises the mythic figure of Circe and the negative stereotype of the crone by transforming them both into a positive depiction of the crone as Shaman.

The cave that Circe directs him to is the location of his next ritual. When he enters the cave, he is blinded by the absence of light. This suggests the descent of the mythic hero into darkness or hell prior to his reintegration into the community. This blindness recalls Tiresias, the seer and reader of signs whose loss of sight is compensated by his ability to see inward. It parallels his journey from ignorance to self-knowledge. His excessive hunger prompts him to eat leaves. He has lost his watch and must tell time by looking at the sun. It is a return to a primordial state of innocence. Having descended into the pit of the cave he finds not only that it does not contain gold, but that it contains "nothing at all". Like Tiresias who gains greater insight to compensate for his loss of eyesight
and who becomes a reader of signs, Milkman gains from his journey the discovery that his “mind began to function clearly” (259). He realizes then that he must leave Danville, a way-station between the past and the future, and head for Virginia, his ancestral home:

He entered the cave and was blinded by absence of light. He stepped back out and re-entered, cupping his eyes. After a while, he could distinguish the ground from the wall of the cave. There was the ledge of rock where they’d slept, much larger than he had pictured. And worn places on the floor where fires had once burned, and several boulders standing around the entrance—one with a kind of V-shaped crown. But where were the bones? . . . At the bottom of the hole he saw rocks, boards, leaves, even a tin cup, but no gold. (252)

The next ritual Milkman must undergo is the hunt. Four older men who witness his survival of the confrontation with the younger men invite him to join them on a bobcat hunt. The ritual of the hunt recalls the Cyclops episode in the Odyssey. It is on the hunt that he experiences his most existential moment:

Under the moon, on the ground, alone . . . his self—the cocoon that was “personality” —gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn’t see his feet. . . . Thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the
sight of himself. There was nothing here to help him — not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. . . . All he had started out with on his journey was gone. . . . They would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch — and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on. (277)

The "monster" Milkman faces, however, presents both a psychological and a real threat. As a rite of passage into manhood, therefore, the hunt becomes his most dangerous encounter. It is on the hunt that he experiences his most existential moment. Freed from encumbrances, Milkman learns to listen to the earth and to detect his friend Guitar lurking in the woods waiting to kill him. Thus he is not only the hunter but the hunted. He has passed over into manhood and is therefore ready for the final phase of the quest, reintegration or return.

Throughout his stay in Shalimar, pronounced "shaleemone" (261) Milkman hears children singing. When he first arrives, he describes it as a "kind of ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker game" (264). He considers the verse a meaningless rhyme:
Jay the only son of Solomon

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Whirled about and touch the Sun

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

As a performed ritual, the song signals a cathartic epiphany for Milkman. The significance of the song is threefold. For Milkman, it signals the story of his family. For the community in Shalimar, it functions as a kind of cultural glue through the children who learn, sing and perform it; and for the reader, it serves as an illustration of Morrison's artistry at work. The song tells the story of Solomon, an African slave, who, one day in the middle of his work in the cotton field, decides that he will not tolerate his oppression any longer. He flies home, back to Africa, leaving his wife, Ryan, and twenty children. He tries to take his youngest child—Jake—with him, but drops him soon after he gets in the air. For Milkman, the children are no longer singing a nonsense rhyme. He realizes, as he recognizes the names Circe had mentioned that “these children were singing a story about his own people” (304).

Milkman thus learns the song from a group of children. It suggests the cultural function of the folktale. It gives cohesion to the community in that the children learn, sing and perform it in an almost ritualistic fashion. It is a mere nonsense rhyme to them, but it is a conduit to history and culture. For the reader, it serves another function. It illustrates and thus
affirms Morrison’s use of folk and mythic elements as dynamic communal processes that could link the self to its community. The song is a folk narrative that confirms the mythic hero. At the same time it affirms the identity of the hero who hears it. Thus it illustrates the ability of the narrative to transform consciousness.

In the narrative within the *Song of Solomon*, Morrison consciously draws on the motif of flying that is endemic to the African-American folk and literary tradition. She has stated that “people who could fly . . . was [sic] always part of the folk love of my life; flying was one of our gifts” (Leclair, *Conversations with American Writers*, 241). The song upon which she bases her novel is a variant of the Gullah Folktale in which an individual rather than a group takes flight. Morrison here uses her mythopoeic license. Though the tale focuses on the flight of one, the narration of it serves a cultural function for the community.

Having listened to the complete narrative of his ancestors, Milkman is able to connect the past with the present, to see himself in context. In his great-grandfather, however, he sees not just an ancestor but a hero. As he exclaims to Sweet: “He could fly! You hear me? my great grand daddy could fly! Goddam!” (328). Empowered by the story of his heritage and the attendant self-knowledge, he finally returns home. But his return is brief and purposeful. He returns home to share his story with Pilate and to take her back to the South to give her father a proper burial. Milkman’s
story helps her to revise her misinformation and to celebrate the past she has already shared with him. As they ride back to Shalimar, the utter contentment she feels is reflected in the words, “Peace circled her” (334) which both describe and foreshadow the fateful outcome of her return.

As Pilate lies dying in his arms, he sings the Song of Solomon to her. Having learned the story of his past, his family and himself, he can sing in affirmation of his reconnection with her, his spiritual mother and griot, whose song contained the only story he could really use. Contrary to what Macon believed, Pilate had given him something he could use in this world as well as in the next. When she dies, two birds circle over her, and he realizes that he loved her because she had taught him that “without ever leaving the ground she could fly” (336). The final words of the text represents a conciliation between the past and the present, the community and the self:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (337)

The conclusion represents a reconciliation between the past and the present, the community and the self. Milkman has come full circle from
being born on the day after a tragic Icarus-like flight to a triumphant flight of his own in the tradition of his African ancestor. He has plunged back into the past, recovered his name, and gained the knowledge necessary to tell a coherent story of his own life. He has learned now to read and re-read the past to make meaning of his life and to affirm his place in time and space. His life bears witness to the novel’s epigraph: “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names”. Morrison concludes that each one of us must take a journey like Milkman’s into the cultural roots of the past if the present is to become meaningful to them. The journey is thus a flight and a return, a flight from the present to the past to return to the present.

*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison’s *The Waste Land*. Like Eliot, she too presents the bleak, wastelandish human conditions characterized by grotesque environment, which like the earth of 1941, is unyielding. She brings into focus a place that fosters an underground invisibility and barrenness, composed of an imaginary cultural dissolution and fraught with brutal discrimination that strains human comprehension, where the “soil is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds will not nurture, certain fruits will not bear . . . and the victim had no right to live” (160). The Lorain of 1941 is almost an industrial incarnation of the wastelandish underground where Blacks like Cholly and Pauline Breedlove are pathetically relegated to a hidden existence, “festering together in the
debris of a realtor’s whim” (31). Hopelessly fragmented under the weight of various horrors typical of Black life in America, the Breedloves remain buried as deep as the failed sacrificial marigold seeds planted by Claudio and Frieda Mac Teer. Displaced from daylight they remain invisible to the noted blue eyes of the Euro-American culture, yet ironically enough, such blue eyes are what dark Pauline and her eleven year old girl child Pecola obsessively long for. The novel presents Black persons who became grotesque by embracing the generationally inherited White culture and its value structure as their own.

Narcissus in Greek mythology fell in love with his reflection in the waters of a pond on Mount Helicon in Greece. Day after day he lay beside the pond, gazing lovingly at his reflection until he wasted away and died. Echo also wasted away from her love for Narcissus, finally becoming nothing more than a voice in the woods. The best known version of the Narcissus story appears in the Metamorphoses, a collection of tales by the Roman poet Ovid.

Offering a critique of mirrors and reflections, Jacques Lacan notes that the “mirror image could be seen to be the threshold of the visible world” (3). Culture, however, encourages cases of mistaken identities as one grows, since only certain images appear to have a chance for recognition by others. In The Bluest Eye, Black girlhood assumes tragic propensities when it borrows identity models from the mandates of White
culture and from the malevolent parental mirrors as well. To seize upon and maintain a foreign image seats the individual in the wastelandish soil of the psychic underground, a terrain characterized by grotesque isolation and fragmentation—Pecola Breedlove’s fate precisely.

Like many other contemporary Black women writers such as Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall, Morrison too believes in the anxiety Black girls/women feel about what their mirrors tell them. She holds that girls growing up Black and female in a White society often experience the malady of internalizing the belief that an aesthetically pleasing image is what constitutes the necessary precondition of receiving love and security. Pecola’s search is for the security of a loyal mirror, for its total acceptance which, as Pecola presumes, can easily be found in the pre-oedipal unity of the mother-daughter symbiosis.

The Fisher house is a place where Pecola retains the illusion of being among the fairest in the land. A White movie theatre is no mere place, but some religious shrine signifying wholeness and vision. To Pauline, it is a place where “the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame threw away their crutches” (97). She represents a self that exudes nothing but mania for all that is White and lovelessness for everything that is her own. She reflects what Lacan calls a “primordial discord” (4) to her daughter. The image that Pecola returns, weighs her
mother’s fantasies even more. She stands as a constant reminder of Pauline’s blackness and limitations.

As opposed to Pauline’s mirror which Mrs. Mac Teer holds out to her daughter is the one which Demeter held out to Persephone. She provides Claudia enough sustenance and security to allow her to develop a voice that surfaces from the crisis of adolescence and blackness. In spite of the stress and tension that she encounters in White society, Mrs. MacTeer displays love everywhere. The voices of her mirror transform Claudia’s Blues into sweet, exotic songs. Claudia narrates:

She would sing about hard times, bad times and somebody - done – gone – and left – me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without ‘a thin-di-i-ime to my name. . . . Misery coloured by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a condition that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (24)

Not having succumbed to the societal indoctrination, Mrs. Mac Teer sustains her daughter’s gaze. Unlike Pecola, Claudia longs to express her knowledge based on a strong sense of relationship as well as on internal wholeness. She possesses a faculty which she inherited from the well guarded African image of her mother. It is this power of the
Demeterian mirror that enables Claudia to resist the notion of White superiority and to feel connections with her own community. In Claudia, one finds what Lacan calls a perfect “dialectical synthesis” of the internal self and the external reality. She feels whole and happy and embodies the spirit of her community so much that Morrison thinks of her as a reflection of “the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead . . . a choral note” (341). The symbiosis with self and community is what Claudia has inherited from the positive reflections of her maternal mirror. By mirroring one another, the Mac Teer family, especially the mother, endows her daughter with a sense of identity and self-worth, something that Pecola does not know. It is through the correct mirror of the mother that Claudia has gained a valuable insight into the mechanism of ideological environment.

In contrast, Pauline is no Demeter, nor Pecola, a Persephone signifying a nurturing ground of authentic being. Pecola, therefore can harbour no such resentment. Owing to her mother’s flawed mirror, she gets her psyche hopelessly fragmented. To her, eating the penny candy is the only way to salvation.

The discordance of Pecola’s girlhood could be attributed not only to Pauline and her flawed mirror but also to Cholly and his mirror-free life. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother who “wasn’t right in the head” (126) and later by Aunt Jimmy, Cholly remains blind to proper
relationships with others. Devoid of mirrors reflecting primary identification, Cholly’s sense of self is not only wavering but also fraught with simplistic notions that life is just a matter of light over darkness, power over powerless, and male over female, or father over daughter, to be precise. He destroys Pecola by raping and impregnating her, shatters the cohesiveness of her self, and violates her reflective image, permanently transforming her into a big contaminated other. She remains without a place in a patriarchal society where she tries to achieve love for her father. Pecola becomes an emblem of inversion, of waste, of all rubbish that no one really wants. The voice of patriarchy shatters her semi-tranquil mirror, ruins the world of her relationships, and finally produces conditions of isolation, psychic derangement and silence in Pecola’s life.

In the novel, there is the ironic juxtaposition of the White mythology of the Dick Jane Primer and the lives of African-Americans as part of a larger interplay of differences within the novel. The order and the apparent moral certainty of the White world is contrasted with the inner dislocation and search for coherence in the lives of Pecola and her parents. The novel itself is organized into four sequences, each associated with a season and beginning with Claudia’s memories of that season. There are seven subsections, introduced by lines taken from the primary extract in the preface, related from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The lines,
reprinted with punctuation and spaces removed, are ostensibly unintelligible so as to emphasise the dislocation between the White Dick-Jane mythology and the norms of Black experience. At the end of the book we realize that the voice of Claudia which becomes fused with that of the omniscient narrator, is that of an older Claudia, who, now living in the North, is looking back and tracing the stages which have led to her maturity of outlook. Thus on one level, the narrative takes us backwards from the present in the North into the past and the South, whilst on another level, taking us forward in the events of Pecola’s tragedy.

The Black community is envisaged as existing like a cell within the larger White body of America, sustained by traditional strengths and values but weakened by division within it. These diversions are the result of the gradual embourgeoisement of Black people, as a consequence of a complicated process of adjustment and accommodation to White norms. The structure of *The Bluest Eye* is one of the means by which the novel explores how and why Black people are being devoured and is best approached from this perspective. In speaking of African-Americans as being consumed, Morrison is inventing how Whites, since earliest colonial times, represented Blacks as bestial. She is ironically stating how African mythologies about slavery posited the Whites as cannibals because Blacks taken by them never returned; here perceiving the exploitation of Blacks by Whites as economic cannibalism. It is a view, however, which ignores
how African-Americans have influenced language, dress, names and culture even in the South.

Black people are visible to Whites in *The Bluest Eye* only so far as they fit the White frame of society. The novel deconstructs this frame literally through dismembering the American Dick-Jane mythology, essential features of their world, house, family, friend—-are separated from each other and this process of dismemberment is analogous to Claudia’s increasing dismemberment of a white doll in an attempt to discover the superiority of White culture.

I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red low line lips. Traced the turned-up nose, popped the glassy blue eye balls, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. (14)

Claudia’s destruction of the doll is a complex response which requires us to understand how western culture inspires hatred toward and among people of African descent, inducing destructive behaviour and an equally adverse disconnection from anything not western. In removing the various parts of the toy, Claudia dismantles the structure which constitutes and sustains it as an emblem of White beauty. Following Claudia’s recollections of autumn 1940, in which she
The extract introduces the ironic differences between the pretty house of the primer and the abandoned store in which the Breedlove family lives. The store consists of rooms which have partitions that do not reach the ceiling; there is no bathroom but there is a toilet bowl which is out-of-sight though within earshot of the inhabitants. The irony is underscored by the repetition of the word "pretty" which occurs only once in the preface and the way in which the extract breaks off with the first letter of the word.

The stress placed on the word "pretty" also anticipates the misery endured by the Breedloves, and especially Pecola, in the following chapter because they believed that they were ugly. The chapter is introduced with a primer extract that talks of family happiness and breaks off equally significantly with the first letter of "happy". Unlike the ideal, sanitized family of Dick and Jane, the Breedlove's marriage is quarrelsome and violent, though both Pauline and Cholly Breedlove need this kind of relationship. Mrs. Breedlove finds zest and passion in her formalized battles with her husband, whilst he projects on to her a sense of an inferiority arising from the way he has been treated by Whites.

One day Pilate sat down on Hagar's bed and held a compact before her grand daughter's face. It was trimmed in a goldlike metal and had a pink plastic lid:
“Look baby. See here?” Pilate turned it all around to show it off and pressed in the catch. The lid sprang open and Hagar saw a tiny part of her face reflected in the mirror. She took the compact then and stared into the mirror for a long while. “No wonder”, she said at last. “Look at that. No wonder. No wonder”. (173)

Mirrors are dangerous objects in Morrison’s fiction.

In *Sula* the point at which Nel looks into the mirror and discovers herself is almost as fraught into premonition of disaster as when Hagar peers into the pink and gold compact in *Song of Solomon*. For Nel the mirror reflects, not a concept called Nel, but something other: “I am not Nel. I am me. Me. Each time she said the word “me” there was a gathering in her, like power, like joy, like fear” (24-25). Nel’s assertion of selfhood, whether an indication of false pride or merely an adolescent delusion, ends in the reality of her common identity with other women of the community.

The early scene in *Sula* in which Shadrack attempts to discover an identity in toilet bowl, confuses the idea that self lies in blackness rather than in any subjectivity or uniqueness.

“There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal it astonished him. He had seen harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real, that he
did not exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with
its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more”. (11)

In this novel, blackness is a presence rather than an absence, a key to an
identity that is always multiple, shared, a form of membership in
community.

Even Sula, although the novel is named after her, is not strictly
speaking a protagonist, for she shares the novel’s focus as well as a black
identity with Nel, Nel’s mother Eva and the community itself. Her
identity, multiple as it is, is a reflection of community identity; when she
absents herself from that community for ten years she ceases to exist
within the text itself. Her much quoted assertion, “I don’t want to make
somebody else. I want to make my self” (80) is one indication of the many
of the moral ambiguities that Sula represents. To “make” one’s self or at
least to make one’s self a single entity, is impossible, for all selves are
multiple, divided, fragmented and a part of a greater whole.

Even Sula’s birth mark, potentially a sign of an individual self,
however fragmented and multiple, is rather an indication of relationship,
being one of a series of marks, bonds or emblems that Morrison employs
in most of her novels to symbolize the character’s participation in a
greater entity whatever that is, community or race or both. The marks are
hieroglyphs, clues to a culture and a history more than to individual
personality. Whether the “mark” is Pauline Breedlove’s crippled foot in
The Bluest Eye, Eva’s missing leg in Sula, Pilate’s navel-less stomach in Song of Solomon, Son’s Rastafarian locks of hair in Tar Baby or the crossed circle Mandela branded beneath the breast of Sethe’s mother in Beloved or even the choke-cherry tree scenes on Sethe’s own back, these represent membership rather than separation. These marks distinguish a racial identity for most are either chosen or inflicted by the condition of blackness itself, by the poverty that has historically accompanied blackness, or by the institution of slavery which marked its victims literally and figuratively, physically and psychologically. “If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know by this mark”, Sethe’s African mother tells her. And the child Sethe answers, “Mark me, too. . . Mark the mark on me too” (61). Whether this is the mark of Cain or the blood stain of a passover, a curse or an anointment, it denotes a sisterhood of Africa which in itself is a political statement both subversive and confrontational.

The verbal equivalent of such mark is of least importance in Morrison’s novels. These names are a part of the dominant signifying order, those denoting ownership, appropriation, those originating in slavery, those which deny group identity and African origins. In Beloved Baby Suggs recalls her slave name as Jenny Whitlow. Her lack of a name: “Nothing. . . I don’t call myself nothing” (141) is testament to the “desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (140).
Baby Suggs has no "self" because she has no frame of reference by which to establish one, no family, no children, no context "sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like" (140).

Sethe’s name is one of the few in this novel chosen by a mother and it is a mark of blackness and of acceptance into the tribe and culture. Whether this name is derived from that of the Egyptian God, Sethe or from the Biblical Sethe, like most of the names Morrison designates as chosen, it represents a sense of heritage and a context of relational identity.

And, Beloved whose birth name we never learn, takes her identity from the single word on her tombstone and from the love her mother bears her, the paradox of which is reflected in the novel’s epigraph from Romans: “I will call them my people which were not my people: and her beloved” (140). Finally Beloved has no identity other than that merged with the sixty million and more of the dedication of all those who suffered the outrage of enslavement. Her consciousness is a group consciousness, her memory a racial memory of the Middle Passage. All names in Morrison’s fiction are finally, like that of Beloved, names of the “Dismembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is
looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (275).

Most of the characters in *Tar Baby* have at least two names, which Morrison indicates is symbolic of their fragmentation. Lost between the White and the Black worlds, Jadine is Jadine to her aunt and uncle but a more exotic Jade to the White streets who have educated her and imbued her with questionable values. Ondine is Nanadine to Jadine, but Ondine to the streets, just as Sydney is Sydney to the person he calls Mr. Street, years of intimacy not being sufficient to challenge racial and class protocol. Therese and Gideon are the generic Mary and Yardmen to the streets and ironically, even to Ondine and Sydney whose superiority as Philadelphia Negroes depend on such distinctions. Son at one point ponders over Gideon's identity: “It bothered him that everybody called Gideon yardmen, as though he had not been mothered” (138). There is some justice in the fact that Margaret Street, White but as powerless as anyone else in her relationship to Valerian (whose name is that of a Roman Emperor) also has multiple names – Margaret Lenone / Margerette—wherein lies her essence, “under the beauty back down beneath it where her Margarethood lay in the same cup it had always lain in—faceless, silent and trying like hell to please” (71).

Sula, like most of the outsiders in Morrison’s fiction also represents the essence, the unconscious, for she is a part of every member, a part of
an idea of Blackness itself. As Morrison describes her in *The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, she is quintessentially Black, metaphysically Black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is the new world Black and the new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness “... Improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out of the house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained, and uncontainable” (223). Sula is thus an intrinsic part of the community just as she is a part of an idea of God. She is the Jungian shadow, that last unexplained quadrant of the crossed circle symbolic of mandelic wholeness, the fourth face of the Holy Trinity without which Father, Son and Holy Ghost are incomplete: “In their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula” (102). And identifiable as parish and as witch, Sula purifies the community, makes it whole, encloses the “medallion” or mandale that inspires the community’s very name. “Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had to leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (102). Although the community returns to its former amorality after Sula’s death, she remains for the people “the most magnificent hatred they had ever known” (148 -
49), making good her own death bed prophecy: “Oh! they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me” (125).

At least one person in Medallion does love Sula—Shadrack, the Holy fool to Sula’s witch, an incarnation of the River God of African lore, is her counterpart and the recipient of a virtually mystical transferral mission, symbolized by Sula’s belt, which Shadrack keeps as a talisman, and by the exchange of a single word, one that denies death “always”. He recognizes in Sula a life principle; she is “his woman, his daughter, his friend” (135) and her female essence contradicts or at least balances his experience of war and his fear of death. War is here Morrison’s equivalent to the Biblical fiery furnace in which the original Shadrack found his apotheosis. In order to control that fear, to order death, Shadrack has instituted “Suicide Day”. “If one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” (12). The community depends on the annual regularity of Shadrack’s ceremonial bell ringing and his ritual invitation to death, but it is not until just after Sula’s death and their own moral back sliding has occurred that the people respond. Like the Pied Piper leading away the children of Hamlin in revenge for a bad debt, Shadrack leads a great many members of the community to their death in the abandoned tunnel, thus not only ordering death itself but also ridding the town of its “rats”, its
unconscious guilt, and thus purifying it, just as Sula has done, and Pecola and Cholly Breedlove before her.

In *Tar Baby*, there is a single house that is a melting pot of White and Black and an island that isolates and renders this group unique in the world. But even this small number of people requires its scapegoats, its agents of purification and moral regeneration, its confrontation with the dark face of the other which is also the self. Son, manifesting himself from the sea, hiding in people’s closets, shaking his dreadlocks, is as Rubenstein suggests, “a demon from the White unconscious” (127), or “a serpent in paradise” (104). His function is to tear aside the veils, remove the masks that dominate as image in the novel, expose the secrets of every other character, to force confrontation with “truth” in all its manifestations. Because of Son’s presence, Valerian’s “innocence” is challenged and his inherent racism revealed; Margaret’s deep secret that she tortured her infant son with pins and cigarette burns is exposed; Sydney and Ondine’s superior but nevertheless subservient blackness is at least partially subverted; and Jadin is introduced for the first time to her own blackness, the superficiality of her choices of “Ave Maria” over gospel music and Picasso over an Itumba Mask. She is also radically confronted with her own sexuality. “He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her” (105). By the end of the
novel and son's return to the unconscious, symbolized by the maternal swamp, L'Anbe de la Croix is in shambles, riddled with truths, shattered, fallen, but somehow also redeemed. For Morrison, art is an expression of Black culture, a manifestation of that “precious, imaginative yet realistic gaze of Black people” (226).

"Art" for Morrison, transcends appreciation for the African mask; rather, it is a quality of perception and the translation of that perception into language or music or colouring all of which are indivisible, interrelated and synaesthetic. By this definition all of Morrison's characters, to relative degrees, are artists: tale tellers, musicians, good cooks, conjurers. Even the least likely candidate for "artist", Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest-Eye, deprived and finally depraved, is an artist in her soul, defining the world by its colours, its rainbows and its “streaks of green”, and searching for order in the chaos of her experience:

She liked, most of all, to arrange things to line by things up in rows-jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves. . . . Whatever portable plurality she found, they organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape or gradations of colour. Just as she would never put the jars of tomatoes next to the green pears . . . she missed without knowing what she missed points and crayons. (88-89)
Pauline is like Sula, who:

"had she paints or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity or her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for". (105)

Pilate, too, is an artist in Song of Solomon, conjuring her world, brewing her wine, singing her spontaneous songs, telling her stories in magical ways, cooking her eggs.

And every character in Beloved searches for colour and finds it in a colourless, meaningless world: "Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for colour. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed" (4). According to Morrison,

"The painterly language of Song of Solomon was not useful to me in Beloved. There is practically no colour whatsoever in its pages, and when there is, it is so stark and remarked upon, it is virtually raw. Colour seen for the first time, without its history". (229)

The orange square on Baby Sugg's otherwise colourless quilt and her recurring request for colour in the abstract, "lavender... if you get any. Pink, if you don't" (4). Amy Denver's quest for "canine" velvet even
Sethe's refusal to remember the painful life of colour—"It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the less of it" (39) —all are indications of the artistic vision that can see colour in a colourless world and make life meaningful, even when historical events are so antagonistic as to invalidate aesthetic consideration.

Finally it is Denver who will reinvent colour and retell Sethe's stories, for art survives in spite of history. Denver is also Morrison's symbol for hope, for the bridge between alienation and community, for the survival of identity, associated as that always is with both race and gender. Along with Lady Jones, we look at Denver in the wildly coloured clothes in which Sethe has dressed her with the recognition that "everybody's child was in that face" (246).

Why should Morrison draw upon myth? At one level myth is a metaphor for human experience, a means of communicating that experience and of ascertaining its meaning. The reclamation of myth by African-American writers was part of a "return to myth" among twentieth century writers generally, and especially among the women writers: De Weever explains:

The experiences of Black people in the New World into which they have been forcibly thrust against their will, cannot be told or treated in realistic or naturalistic
traditions in which American literature has been cast. The pain of the results of three centuries of oppression is too great to be faced and confronted in a realistic mode. (4)

A particular characteristic of the mythic narrative then, is that it "establishes lines to a world that is not only beyond the real world but that, at the same time transforms it" (De Weever, 4). Tar Baby uses a traditional African myth. The novel invents and deconstructs the West African myth of Anansi, the trickster spider and the American Vernacular tale of Brer Rabbit. As a fable, the Tar Baby story is supposed to reveal values but the values which are revealed are much more complex than those in the original oral narratives. As a result Tar Baby leads the reader not to a moral resolution, but to more complicated moral dilemmas.

The Tar Baby myth originated in Africa as part of a cycle of trickster tales associated with the spider, Anansi, which developed before European contact. It reappeared in nineteenth century America, initially as an African-American response to slavery but was then included by Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus’ Plantation tales. Despite these different versions, the plot elements have changed very little. In the Uncle Remus version, Brer Fox sets the Tar Baby in the road to catch Brer Rabbit while he watches from the cover of the bushes. Brer Rabbit accuses the Tar Baby of being “Stuck up” and is determined to “Ian you howter talk ter spectubble folks” (62). Angered by the Tar Baby’s silence, the
Rabbit strikes him and becomes stuck in the tar. In the version which Son tells, the Tar baby is placed in the road by White farmers to entrap Brer Rabbit whom they believe is eating their cabbages. On finding the Tar Baby, Brer Rabbit is again offended by its apparent arrogance in not responding to his greeting; in the course of their encounter, the rabbit becomes entangled in the tar and completely immobilized. In this version he is able to escape by manipulating the White farmer’s cruelty, convincing them that he dreads being thrown into the briar patch from where he knows he will be able to escape. They cannot resist throwing him in because of their vindictiveness, evidencing the cruelty of Whites generally towards others. As part of the African trickster cycle, the story is the tale of a scarecrow made out of sticky, gluey rubber to catch the trickster spider, Anansi. The Scarecrow is constructed by Anansi’s family who are tired of seeing their yams disappear and it is the apparent haughtiness of the figure which, as in the Brer Rabbit version, arouses Anansi to anger and results in him becoming entangled with it.

As one of the Black oral tales of the plantations, Brer Rabbit encapsulates the wit and guile with which Black slaves were able to outwit and survive the cruelty of their White masters. In Tar Baby, this strategy is employed by the Black servant Gideon. Sydney, adopting the role of the superior Black, presumes that Gideon, whom he calls by the name “Yardman” rather than by his own name, is illiterate; Gideon for his
part adopts this role to avoid being given the extra work which would follow if Sydney and Ondine knew he could read instructions. As a character in one of Harris's Uncle Remus tales, Brer Rabbit is drained of his guile and the story itself becomes an example of how White culture identified Negroes with animals in turn reconciling the inhuman treatment of Black people with the White's apparent Christian and democratic principles. Uncle Remus himself, a docile old slave who always wore a benign grin, became the White American stereotype of the acquiescent, faithful Negro slave.

Brer Rabbit clearly re-enters the fable as the trickster figure, in the person of Son, who, at the beginning of the novel, turns the household of Valerian street upside down. The enigmatic nature of Son is evident from the first and the last episodes which frame the narrative. In the prologue to the novel, Son's plunge into the sea suggests not only death by drowning, but also rebirth. At the end of the book, he emerges from the sea on to the land in a sequence that mirrors the evolution of life, crawling, standing and eventually walking upright. A supernatural female force, the water spirit enables Son to be born again out of the ocean to transform the lives of two women on the island about whom the ocean goddess would appear to be concerned.

Like the trickster figures of whom Brer Rabbit is one example, Son has lived on the edges of society. As Walner observes, the novel "focuses
on individuals who have cut their ties with community, family and the past” (189) and Son is not only a veteran of Vietnam but also a fugitive who, having murdered his wife and her teenage lover, has been on the run for eight years. Changing his name several times, like the trickster figure, Son has assumed different identities among different people—William Green, Herbert Robinson, Louis Stover and in keeping with the trickster traditions, the reader never learns his true name. He is also the skeleton in the Street’s closet, both literally and metaphorically for, he emerges from a wardrobe in their house. Black, bearded with chain-gang hair, he represents the African-American past which Valerian, as a White-American Capitalist forgets, with which the Black servants Sydney and Ondine have lost contact. On one level he quite literally brings a family secret out in the open, the way in which Valerian’s wife abused their son Michael, when he was a small child by burning him with cigarettes.

If Son is ostensibly Brer Rabbit, then in some respects, Jadine may be seen as a latter-day version of the Tar Baby itself. As the niece of Valerian’s Black servants, Sydney and Ondine, she has been educated with Valerian’s financial support and is now a Europeanised African, an art and history graduate of the Sorbonne in Paris, an expert on cloisonne and a cover model for Elle. The text develops in Jadine the haughtiness which is misunderstood in the original Scarecrow and Tar Baby stories
and which led to Anaansu and the Brer Rabbit becoming entrapped. In the course of the novel her association with tar assumes an increasingly wider significance. On revisiting the swamp after her return to the island from New York, her legs burn with the memory of tar; her memory is not only of a specific incident in her life but a folk memory of how tar was used to mask injuries on the skin of the slaves at auction. At one point in the novel, Jadine appears to be a latter-day Brer Rabbit. Her experience of becoming trapped in the swamp in a substance which looks like pitch is redolent of the experience of Brer Rabbit, for example, as is the way in which she becomes entangled with Son’s image in the bedroom mirror: “She struggled to pull herself away from his image in the mirror and to yank her tongue from the roof of her mouth” (113).

The ambiguous position in which the Tar Baby leaves Son and Jadine defers the kind of traditional closure which we might expect a novel to reach. Son is running into the rain forest, where according to one version of the myth, naked, blind men-slaves who escaped when the ship carrying them to the island floundered on the rocks—supposedly race horses over the hills while Jadine is left literally in mid-air on aeroplane to Paris. The book appears to reclaim the open-ended conclusion of the Uncle Remus, Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox version of the Tar Baby tale. There we are not told the fate of Brer Rabbit. The story ends with him stuck to the tar and Brer Fox rolling on the ground with laughter, threatening to
eat him. The unresolved nature of the novel's ending might encourage readers to review the narrative, creating their own scenarios of what is going to happen to Son and Jadine either individually or together. Here Morrison appears to draw upon an African belief in which ancestors are believed to take an active interest in the welfare of their living descendents, intervening in their lives to remind them of their culturally specific moral obligations. The myth is complicated and made problematic by its appropriation in the novel.

Morrison's interest in occluded texts around the subject of slavery is evident from her use of the Bible. In *Beloved* the words which Sethe uses to claim Beloved—"Beloved She mine"—and which *Beloved* used to claim Sethe—"I am Beloved and she is mine"—have their source in the *Song of Solomon* which had inspired the title in part and the concern with ancestral wisdom in her earlier novel. The epigraph of *Beloved* reminds us that its title comes from a part of Paul's epistle to the Romans in which he in turn is quoting Hosea in the Old Testament. One of Hosea's three children was called not Beloved, a representative of the Israelites who had been temporarily rejected as punishment for their own betrayal. After a period of retribution, God reclaims the lost people:

I will call them my people,

Which were not my people,

And her beloved,
Which was not beloved. (93)

On the plantations religious instruction was used as a form of social control. The Bible read from a particular historicized cultural perspective was one of the means by which colonial authorities tried to inculcate Western values and introduce European or Anglo European notions of culture to Africa. Indeed, its apparent dualism “Black Satan” and “the shorn White lamb of God” appeared not only to justify slavery, but to offer up the history of slavery as a particular text, as it were. The Bible like all texts is not one text but a multi-layered narrative. Interpreted from a Black perspective, it could be seen as a different text from that which had been used by Whites to justify slavery providing images appropriate to their condition and history: delivery of the righteous, retribution of the wicked, Judgement day, Zion, the promised land. Through its delineation of the history of the Jewish nation, the Bible expounded the trials and miseries of slavery. It offered slaves a source of command, strength through notions of faith, grace and the Holy Spirit, even a means of achieving healing.

On reading the title Beloved, one often presumes that the African-American writer has gone to a different text, a different Bible from the Whites. The source of the work Beloved is not only in Paul’s epistle to the Romans but in the words spoken by the preacher over Beloved’s grave. Sethe who bought the name for her daughter's grave stone with ten
minutes of stand-up sex with stone engraver, would have liked to have had the other word “Dearly” which the speaker spoke over her dead child. However, Sethe’s healing and rebirth can only begin when she has knowledge and understanding of the absent narratives. The novel hinges upon what is called rememory, the basic concept of which is that memories have a physical existence beyond the minds of individuals in whom they originate, it is possible to bump into and inhabit another person’s memory. Paul D is associated with rememory throughout the novel. At the beginning of the book he brings to Sethe rememories of what happened to her husband, Halle, and explanations as to why he did not come to console her. Sethe then literally learns to inhabit and take for herself these rememories which are Paul’s. In doing so, she begins to piece things together, and Sethe’s experience in this respect mirrors together the experience of the reader in taking the intricately woven structure of the novel as a whole. At the end of the novel, for example, just before Paul D returns to reclaim Sethe from death, he is haunted by something that he does not understand, something on the edge of consciousness. Suddenly he realises that it is a memory of Baby Suggs dying, although the memory is not his own because she died nine years earlier, in his absence. Such shifts between different narrative levels and challenges to ideas of casualty are techniques used by Morrison to represent a sense of community in the novel. One of the concluding images is of Paul beside
Sethe’s bed, rocking and staring at the patch-work quilt. The novel itself is like a quilt and it is important to remember that the quilt, a feminine art form, was used to map the ancestry of a family as each successive generation added to it.

As Gates Jr (1992) points out, the Whites lie that the Black people did not have a memory was encouraged as part of the myth that Black people and American Indians had lower mental capacities than other races. As he observes, metaphors of the “child-like nature” of the slaves, of the masked puppet-like personality of the Black, all share this assumption about the absence of memory. But in fact, the connection between remembrance and the reclamation of ancestry, racial pride and self-esteem is much deeper than even Gates Jr suggests. Since slavery destroyed not only whole communities but entire families banning their religions, stopping their music and eradicating their cultures, the only way in which individuals could acquire any sense of their ancestry line was to possess and piece together the stories and memories of others, to literally acquire for themselves the texts of which they had been deprived. The full significance and the extent of the fracture which slavery created for Black people can only be appreciated in the height of the African concept of the slavery. In African-cosmology, ancestors are important because they provide access to the spirits who intrude for the benefits of social cohesiveness into people’s lives. Obliterating Black slave’s contact
with their ancestors also destroyed their contact with the spirits. Through its powerful figurative language, the novel impresses the enormity of the fracture on the readers. *Beloved* is not only a novel with a patch-work, quilt-structure which the reader has to piece together but also a text which literally demonstrates how any narrative has the potential to conceal a myriad of other narratives and how in emphasizing one, we often allow others to lie dormant and temporarily forgotten.

Morrison herself saw the African-American novel as a healing art form:

> For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours. We don’t have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it, it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans in a way that it was needed before. . . . (340)

*Jazz* is set in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance in 1926 midway through a decade when the United States was in the throes of "The Jazz Age" or "The Roaring Twenties". The city generally assumed legendary significance in African-American mythology through stories told, for example by porters and waiters working on Pullman trains, or through letters sent from friends and relatives. In the northern cities,
Blacks should make their own decisions including whom to love, although they rarely enjoyed the unbridled liberties of the mythology; they could enjoy higher wages, though never as high as the stories which circulated in the South would have them believe. But whatever the discrepancies between the dream and the reality, there were significant new found dreams and excitement. The language used in the South to describe the cities of the North actually took on the same Biblical connotations—the Promised land Canaan—as during the period of slavery. Harlem’s own legendary status is encapsulated in jazz in the narrator’s initial description of it, related from the point of view of the incoming migrants who are said to fall in love with it unequivocally and “forever”. The description in fact echoes accounts of Harlem at the time from writers such as Langston Hughes, who wrote on his arrival:

I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem. . . . At every station I kept watching for the sign; 135th Street. . . . I went up the steps and out into the bright September light. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again. (81)

For Hughes, Harlem is a place where he can breathe again and rediscover himself. At one point the city in Morrison’s novel has no air, only “breath”. In jazz the city allows people to be themselves; “their stronger riskier selves” (33).
The title *Jazz* is indebted to the aesthetics of African-American music. The influence of *Jazz* where the melody is introduced and then subsequently unravelled and embellished, is clear from the outset where the essence of the story is unfurled within the first ten lines and then subsequently retold from different viewpoints. In *Jazz* as Rice points out, musicians play against each other, each establishing a unique sound in the *ensemble* which is sometimes developed in long solo pieces. In the novel various characters relate their versions of what has happened, mirroring the group nature of Jazz music, exemplifying how a singular art work is constructed from several solo voices. The light airy music of rag time, to which *Jazz* is partly indebted was an attempt to capture the mood of the decade which the novel in places also tries to recreate in its prose style.

*Jazz* like *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* moves backwards and forwards in time. Like *Song of Solomon* it takes us on a reverse journey from that which many Black-Americans undertook after the Civil War; the novel in retracing the past lives of Joe, Violet and their families take the reader from the North to the South, from the city to the country and from the Twentieth to the Nineteenth Century. In doing so, it provides the reader with vivid glimpses of the South after emancipation. Indeed the impact of the previous century is more significant in *Jazz* than in *Song of Solomon*, underscoring the importance of it in *Beloved*. As Rodrigues observes: "More than just a story of three individuals, the novel is a
confirmation of *Beloved*—jazzifies the history of the people“ (742). Urban Black music embraced the complexity of human relationships and the stresses placed on them, sometimes with anger and frustrations but sometimes with melting sentimentality and all these emotions are played off against each other in Morrison’s novel. As Shaw (1987) points out, there were numerous songs of love and of loss. Despair and resignation were keynotes of popular torch songs such as “I’d Rather Be Blue Over You (Than be Happy with Somebody Else)”, “I Cried for You (Now It’s your turn to Cry over Me’)” and “Day by Day You’re Going to Miss Me” (78). The novel highlights the same concerns of the period as the music; loneliness, the changeability of feelings, emotional insecurity in personal relationships and the anguish of failure. In doing so, it draws on the personalized nature of the lyrics of jazz which enabled singers and song writers, such as the one featured in the novel, to break new ground in exploring emotional situations. Taking its cue from jazz, the novel alternates between external description and internal longings such as Videt’s desire “to have a baby which becomes heavier than sex: a panting unmanageable craving” (180) the kind of loss suffered by Violet and also articulated in the novel by Alice; and the jealous thirst for vengeance experienced by a number of characters in the novel. Indeed it is the sensuality, the unpredictability and the dissonance of African-American life during the Jazz age which the novel probes and develops.
Watching, being watched and looking in mirrors are in fact, salient motifs in the novel. Violet’s bird cages have mirrors where the birds can watch themselves. Dorcas practises in front of the mirror to tell Joe that she needs a mirror to see the pictures which Dorcas has drawn on her body with lipstick. As Rigney (1990) suggests in a discussion of Huges in Song of Solomon, mirrors are dangerous objects in Morrison’s fiction because of the vision of self that they reflect, representing White standards of beauty or the illusion of a unified self. In Jazz they mark a transition from one social reality to another but one where what is reflected represents a greater regression from Black social norms.

Morrison’s folk and mythic instinct takes a different turn in her novels. The folk aesthetic is marginalized in one sense to suggest how the contemporary Black woman who denies her history and culture marginalizes her authentic self. She achieves this effect by adapting the famous folktales to myths to affirm freedom to venture outside of male restrictions in the tradition of the quest. In explaining her adaptation of the Tar Baby folk myth, Morrison says that she saw it as history and prophecy. The reader is triggered to question the freedom of the contemporary woman who neglects the essentials from the past. Many of her novels thus become cautionary folktales of our times. Morrison affirms the heroic quest of women but she also affirms the value of the return to the nest, the place of nurturance. She assures us that we will
know ourselves only in as much as we recognize our own stories— of both our mothers and our sisters.

Critics have often termed Morrison as a magical realist as well as a mythical symbolist. Her writing has been allied with the conventions of fabulism and folklore. Enthusiasts of the grotesque aspects in her writing have seen her as a kind of Black Gothicist. More traditional critics have described her as a kind of Black classicist. But the most distinguishing feature of her fiction is the “Black” language of her people. In using this language, Morrison identifies herself with Blacks— their saying of words, holding them upon the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. She has the poet’s sense of using the pure language. She deliberately sets out to clean the language and to give words back their original meanings, not the ones that are sabotaged by constant use. She has discovered that if one works very carefully, one can clean up ordinary words and repolish them, make parabolic language seem alive again.

At the same time Morrison wants her language to do what music used to do for Black people in America. What music used to do was to provide the primary means of sustaining a unique culture. This culture, based on the idea of a consciously shared community, is now threatened with disappearance. Black-Americans used to live mostly in actual or abstracted villages, compounds or enclaves. These communities expressed their unique character and unifying beliefs and aspirations through
various means of communication usually coded against intrusion from
the threatening White world. Of these means of communication, music
was the most essential. But new generations of Blacks are progressively
more educated, but also more ignorant of their unique traditions.

Morrison deliberately accompanies her narratives with what might
be called a sound track of Black music. When faced with intense
experience of happiness or pain, her characters often break into folk
songs, gospel numbers, popular tunes, the Blues or they simply whistle or
hum. These musical moments or interludes are in turn characteristically
allied with various images placed in the texts as reflective reminders of
the communal values and inspirations Black music was designed to
express. As Evelyn Hawthorne remarks:

Elevating the text as a whole is the special sound of
Morrison’s language. This sound may best be described as
“literary jazz”. Morrison herself has said she is always
attempting to write in “a Black style” that for clarification
could be compared to what Black musicians try to do. (105)

Morrison’s novels can generally be said to open with a sounded
motif, which is then repeated and resounded in a circular and
reverberating way, building to recognizably dominant themes. Morrison
has a wonderful ear for the music of language. In the tradition of the groit,
the central idea was to create oral stories with an open ended quality. The
expectation was that as the stories were told and retold, they would take on newly imagined lives, again and again. Morrison has succeeded in realizing through the written word what the oral story tellers used to do for their listeners—providing them with a kind of cultural life support system. The narratives simply start and go on, apparently without a definite structure, unfolding and meandering in various directions, all at once.

Morrison’s characters usually discover that they must go back to their African heritage if they are to find themselves in the fullest sense. But Morrison doesn’t simply preach that a return to original roots is a panacea for Black-Americans. She draws on African myths, folklore and popular wisdom with many of her characters illustrating that they are directly or indirectly influenced by these sources. At the same time, however, Morrison is also prone to work myths and folklore into her texts as well as classic fairy-tales, fables and nursery rhymes. What she understands is that human truth resides in completing myths and stories and that personal actions and cultural behaviour are affected by these multiple tensions. She tends to focus on their dreams and imagine their collective legends and rituals because she believes that altogether these phenomena reveal their characters most fully and at best assumes the ubiquitous question—What makes Black folk act that way? The answer lies to a great extent in their African roots.