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Animal Imagery in Toni Morrison: Degradation and Community

Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are rich with imagery of nature that often connects with the characters. Something which is not always a prevalent aspect of the nature Morrison describes but is inherently present throughout the texts is the detailed descriptions and portrayal of animals. There are some explicit connections between animals and characters, most significantly between birds and Milkman and Paul D and numerous animals such as cows, beasts, and a rooster. What is so unique about the animals connected with the two central male characters of *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is the underlying symbolism associated with man and animal. Throughout both novels Milkman and Paul D are on very different paths of the African American male. Milkman, brought up in comfortable middle-class wealth has not been subjected to hardship because of his race unlike many of his peers. Paul D on the other hand, has struggled immensely during his life as a slave. The novels are set in two different time periods, *Song of Solomon* during 1931-1963 in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia and *Beloved* in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio with flashbacks as far back as 1850. These two vastly different experiences as African American men are possibly a representation of the progression of the social roles of the African American male. In her novel *Beloved* Toni Morrison uses animals to portray the degradation of African American men through Paul D who struggles to obtain an ideal sense of manhood, and in *Song of Solomon* Morrison uses animals to show that in order to survive in this country as a black male, one must share the struggle through community.

As the main male character, Paul D comes to represent the experience of male black slaves by showing his struggle to assert his manhood in a world that degrades him by treating him like an animal. Mr. Garner, the slave owner of Sweet Home who treated his slaves well compared to other slave owners, raised the men of Sweet Home to his own definition of what it is to be a man, but in doing so deprived them of the right of male sexuality which lead to them committing bestiality with calves on the farm. When Sethe arrives at Sweet Home, all of the young men want to be with her, but they act like gentlemen, the way they were taught by Mr. Garner, and wait for her to choose one of them: "They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves. Yet let the iron-eyed girl be, so she could choose in spite of the fact that each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her" (12). For a young man to be desperate enough to carry out sexual relations with an animal, there has to be an extreme amount of deprivation since there was next to no women at Sweet Home for the men to be with.

Since being enslaved can be likened to a prison experience, where many men end up having sex with each other, Nancy Kang makes an interesting point about whom the men choose to carry out sexual needs with: "The males in *Beloved* do not rape one another, surprisingly; the reason for this is a moot point: either there is a diminished need to assert dominance within their general position of subordination, or the true tenor of their comradeship is constrained by the exigencies of work and a belief in the "self-same," or that one's own hardships are contiguous with another's" (843). Kang's assertions focus on these males being in this degrading experience of slavery together, so they choose to not dominate each other because they are already forced into submission as slaves and none of the Sweet Home men puts their own hardships over another's. So by choosing to rape the calves instead of each other, these men essentially save some of the dignity between themselves as men. But, as slaves who do not have the freedom to

leave the farm and carry on relationships with females, Garner is essentially treating them like the rest of the cattle by not acknowledging the needs of the six young men.

This demeaning experience had a traumatic effect on Paul D; after he finds out that Sethe has killed her infant daughter to save her from schoolteacher, he bestows upon her his own shame he feels through the animal-instinct type of acts they have both committed ““You got two feet, Sethe, not four,”” (194). Tadd Ruetenik examines the dynamic between the two after this encounter:

What Sethe finds unforgivable is that Paul D would liken her to an animal for an action she considered her defining moment as a free human being. Her lover implicitly concurs, and wonders whether he said what he did because of his own shame at engaging in bestiality with calves when he was a sexually frustrated young slave. (320)

Even though Paul D is well aware how degrading comparing a person to an animal is, since he experiences it firsthand throughout his life, he cannot help saying this to Sethe. This could possibly stem from his issues of masculinity and never feeling good enough, so he uses this chance to elevate himself over Sethe.

The animal most notably associated with Paul D’s demeaning experience is Mister the rooster. Paul D recounts multiple times the better quality of life that this feathered figure was experiencing over him. Susana Vega González explains Paul D’s feelings towards Mister:

When Paul D digs into the past and describes his humiliating imprisonment, he does not consider the pain and degradation caused by the iron bit he was forced to wear in his mouth. What he found most humiliating was the stare and the apparent smile of Mister, the rooster whom he had helped hatch. (79)

Paul D does not have the freedom to roam and do as he pleases like this bird does, but he longs for this kind of privilege: “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (86).

Mister’s presence, whose name is a title of courtesy---something Paul D would never be given as a slave, leads Paul D to think that his role in this world is lesser than that of a rooster on a farm. This leads to Paul D feeling anything but empowered and essentially dehumanized. In her book of symbols, where the definition for “rooster” is found under “cock”, Nadia Julien explains that roosters are associated with “victory because he would rather die than ever abandon a fight” (71). During his reminiscing, Paul D describes how Mister fought with all of the other animals in the yard. Mister’s ability to fight inspired Paul D to do the same, which landed him in Alfred, Georgia, for trying to kill a man that schoolteacher sold Paul D to. Mister not only represents Paul D’s desire of freedom but also the fight that Paul D had in him in his desolate life as a slave.

Another more vulgar symbolism of the rooster is the fact that the word “cock” is a slang term for penis. “Given American society’s inflated symbolic investment in the black penis, the significance of “cock” is evident even in late twentieth, early twenty-first century urban slang as a synonym for the phallus” (Kang 848). Morrison’s deliberate association between Paul D and this rooster could be a nod toward the phallic symbolism of this bird. Mister is a representation of the American stereotype of African American males’ genitalia, and is a motif of a hyper masculine ideal of manhood that is unattainable for a male slave.

An animal that does not directly associate with Paul D but is ultimately a symbol for his experience in Sethe’s dog, Here Boy. Here Boy is taunted by Beloved’s ghost and even injured

by it: “And when the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue, still her mother had not looked away” (14). After this point Here Boy actually leaves the house because of the injuries from Beloved’s attack. It is notable that Here Boy is a male, and he avoids the house because of his violent treatment from the ghost. King argues that Here Boy’s experience is symbolic of the forced into submission life of the black male slave. “Not only was the dog-like obedience demanded of men like Paul by the master, they were perpetually commanded in the same abrupt, dehumanizing, and emasculating manner- “Here, Boy!” -to approach, submit, and perform” (849). Here Boy’s reality as a dog was to be submissive (according to his name) and he is rewarded with violent treatment and left to his own devices to save himself. Paul D’s life as a slave also had to be lived in this manner in order to survive. Also in the experience of Here Boy, Paul D was treated as though he had an owner like an animal by schoolteacher, like Sethe owning a dog.

Since slaves were treated as property, they had a monetary value associated with them, similar to a high ticket price on a well producing cow. When the slaves of Sweet Home attempt an escape but are caught, and Sixo is being burned alive, Paul D overhears his own “worth”:

Shackled, walking through the perfumed things honeybees love, Paul D hears the men talking and for the first time he learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value---as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm--- but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future. (267)

Hearing this only furthers Paul D’s identity into a low, desolate place because he finally hears the hard fact of the price on his head. Even though he always knew it existed, hearing it makes it

a concrete reality for him. David E. Magill recognizes the devastating impact of slavery on masculinity and self worth, “*Beloved* questions traditional masculine models of self-ownership, contradicting those humanist ideals against a legacy of slavery and its notion of Black selfhood as the property of another” (204). Because of Paul D’s experience as someone’s property as an animal rather than a free man, he is not able to develop a sense of self ownership or even a sense of direction after he escapes slavery. He is only able to be at peace and start a life with Sethe because she understands what he went through, and they both share a bond of being made to feel like an animal through slavery: “How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him in his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers” (322). It is in the final pages of *Beloved* where Paul D is able to reassert his manhood because he has risen above the degradation of being treated like an animal and is able to feel human again.

Paul D’s escape and lack of self ownership leads him to roam throughout the country for some odd years, being taken care of by a woman for a couple years, before he ends up travelling to Sethe. Being treated as an animal led Paul D to a life of freedom without direction, and he and the other slaves were even known as “buffalo men” by the Cherokee Native Americans that they found refuge with. The nickname of the escaped slaves as buffalo men was possibly a nod to the woolly texture of the black men’s hair, but buffalo are known for their nomadic lifestyle and for how strong they are. This could be symbolic for the travelling nature of Paul D and the strength he had to have in order to overcome adversity from slavery.

Morrison is interested in the roaming nature of the black man. In her interview with Robert Septo, Morrison admits this aspect of African American males fascinates her: “And in the process of finding, they are also making themselves. Although in sociological terms that is

described as a major failing of black men---they do not stay home and take care of their children, they are not there---that has always been to me one of the most attractive features of black male life” (26). Morrison’s interest in the roaming nature of black males can be seen even more prominently in the way Milkman chooses to live his life, with no sense of direction or meaning, but instead in a never ending chase for his own “flight” which readers see in the bird imagery which surrounds him.

One of the most striking animals associated with Milkman is the white peacock which appears in front of Guitar and Milkman in a parking lot. Milkman asks Guitar why peacocks cannot fly any better than a chicken and Guitar replies, “Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (Morrison 179). Guitar’s explanation-turned-life-advice is a foreshadow of what is going to happen to Milkman when he goes down South. A peacock is a bird that is all show but cannot do the most fundamental action of being a bird: fly. So they show off in another way, by their appearance, which is much like what Milkman does with himself since he is not able to ascend into his own flight at this point in the novel. “Because of the jewels in its tail and its magnificent plumage, the peacock always symbolizes, on the one hand, the beauty of existence, on the other, narcissism, vanity, feelings of power and its inevitable corollary, isolation” (Julien 312). Milkman is most definitely isolated in his community because of his socioeconomic status and the way he carries himself, similar to these birds who are symbolic of extravagance. The white color of the peacock symbolizes how Milkman’s class gives him an immunity to experiencing racism, unlike his best friend Guitar who is a part of the lower class, so this white peacock certainly is Milkman in animal form at this point in the novel.

The only bird that has been repeated in both of these novels that represents both men is the rooster, and Milkman encounters one after a few days of his travels down South. There is only one sentence mentioning the rooster that is Milkman, “A black rooster strutted by, its blood-red comb draped forward like a wicked brow” (Morrison 265). Milkman has no reaction to the rooster other than stating that it is simply there. A rooster is a male bird that looks out for its own group, which is representative of Milkman shedding his self centered skin by finding out about his family and their past. The transition from a white bird to a black bird represents Milkman’s newfound pride of his African roots. “It confers an attractive personality, pride and vanity, precision, a developed critical sense . . .” (Julien 72). These traits are something shared with Milkman and his newfound sense of self after his journey, where he has developed a critical sense of awareness of his family’s past and of his own life. A rooster gives wakeup calls by crowing and asserting itself and at this point Milkman has most definitely had his own wake up call and has realized his outward wealthy appearance does nothing for him.

The overarching theme of flight in *Song of Solomon* is pervasive throughout the novel, which is a normal theme associated with bird symbolism in writing. The beginning of the novel opens up with a man “flying” (or falling) to his death and Milkman’s mother going into labor with him at the same time and location. Since birth Milkman has been obsessed with the thought of flying. “Mr. Smith’s blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier---that only birds and airplanes could fly---he lost all interest in himself” (Morrison 9). Milkman stops living his life as soon as it starts, because he has learned that a man cannot do something as magnificent as fly. The transition of Milkman and the birds that represent him attribute to his journey and his final ability to be able to “fly” at the end of the novel, where he has finally come to terms with his family’s



past and his own place in his community. Jan Furman accurately sums up a positive critical view of Milkman's final flight: "In the end, Milkman leaps not into a void, as some critics have claimed, but into the arms of his brother [Guitar], thereby affirming and embodying the surrounding community" (12). Milkman's final ability to insert himself into his ancestry and his surrounding community allows him to fulfill his lifelong dream of experiencing flight, just like a bird.

Other animals that contribute to symbolizing the transformation of Milkman's self and manhood are the dogs that are present on the bobcat hunt that Milkman attends with other black males of the southern community. While on the hunt Milkman marvels at the way the men are able to communicate with the hunting dogs and vice versa. He sees the connection between man and animal in a beautiful natural way here:

It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not a 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 two converse; when a tiger and a man ran *with* wolves, not from or after them. (278)

On this hunt Milkman is finally engaging in the black male community, whereas before he lives a life of single solidarity. Down south he finally starts to understand why this idea of community, similar to the pack of hunting dogs, is so positive. Milkman is able to see firsthand why Guitar, who is from the south, misses it yet does not go back. "But something had maimed him, scarred him like Reverend Cooper's knot, like Saul's missing teeth, and like his own father. He felt a sudden rush of affection for them all, and out there under the sweet gum tree, within the sound of

men tracking a bobcat, he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him” (278). Milkman sees that these men have to deal with racism and they cope with it by creating little communities where they can share their struggle, which he is now a part of because he is no longer only concerned with himself. Magill notes that this change in Milkman’s outlook brings him success in the novel: “Milkman’s success comes when he gives up individualistic notions of manhood and embraces the community and its definitions of identity through language and communal myths” ( 204). The dogs of the hunt symbolize the traditional characteristic of the animal: loyalty. These black men are loyal to each other because that is all they have in this racist climate.

The center of the hunt is the hunted, in this case it is a bobcat which comes to stand for the deteriorated, used up, black male. After the bobcat is killed there is a field dressing performed on the cat to make it suitable for meat. In between the descriptions of the body being cut up, off, and taken out, the words of Guitar from earlier in the novel come in every couple lines.

*“It’s the condition our condition is in.”* Omar cut around the legs and the neck. Then he pulled the hide off. *“Everybody wants the life of a black man.”* Now Small Boy knelt down and slit the flesh from the scrotum to the jaw. *“Fair is one more thing I’ve given up.”* Luther came back and, while the others rested, carved out the rectal tube with the deft motions of a man coring an apple. *“I hope I never have to ask myself that question.”* (282)

The men switching off between who cleans the animal shows that they all have a connection to it, while the narration of Guitar’s past speech links itself to this animal being taken apart piece by piece, which is what is described of the African American male experience by Guitar. These men

do not get to choose when to die or what to die for in this country, they have given up on fair treatment by white people, and by saying “Everybody wants the life of a black man” Morrison is saying that maybe everyone thinks their lives sound easy, but they truly do not understand the amount of pain associated with this life.

For both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* it is mesmerizing to follow the paths of Paul D and Milkman because of their mysterious, male roaming nature. The roaming of buffalo and flight of birds contribute to the image Morrison’s readers have of these men trekking throughout the country in search for themselves. They both finally find themselves through their discoveries of their own communities, however small they may be. Morrison uses animal imagery throughout both of the novels to foster connection between man and nature, while also highlighting the extensive use of dehumanization of the African American slave. Tadd Ruetenik sums up Morrison’s ultimate goal in her writing: “. . . a victimized community must acknowledge its past while having the courage and faith to interpret this past in a productive way” (324). It is through animal imagery in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* that Morrison navigates her way through Paul D’s degraded manhood and the progression of Milkman’s need for and discovery of fellowship. Through Morrison’s portrayals of the males of her novels *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* using animals, she ultimately uses them to acknowledge a degrading past of the African American male and to provide a motivation to move forward from this past as a community.

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