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# “The future was a matter of keeping the past at bay”

## Disruptive Family Dynamics in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

Ana Teresa Guimarães Figueiredo Dias

**Julho**

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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos, orientada pela Professora Doutora Márcia Lemos e pelo Professor Doutor Rui Carvalho Homem

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Classificação obtida: (escreva o valor) Valores

*Para a minha mãe,*

*que sempre me ensinou a valorizar a leitura.*

# Table of Contents

## Declaração de honra

Declaro que o presente trabalho é de minha autoria e não foi utilizado previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referenciação. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

Porto, 30 de Julho de 2022

Ana Teresa Guimarães Figueiredo Dias

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## Resumo

A presente dissertação examina dinâmicas familiares em duas obras de Toni Morrison: *Song of Solomon* e *Beloved*. A fim de alcançar este objetivo, analisarei tanto a família Dead como a família que vive no nº 124, Bluestone Road através da lente da *Family Systems Theory* de Murray Bowen. Ao comparar os dois romances, estabelecerei alguns paralelos entre a história das personagens principais, Milkman e Denver, bem como tentarei compreender como o passado das famílias ainda prevalece sobre o presente das personagens. Além disso, utilizando a teoria de Bowen, vou identificar padrões dentro da unidade familiar. O primeiro capítulo centra-se no indivíduo e funciona como uma introdução a *Song of Solomon* e *Beloved* através da aplicação do conceito de *Differentiation of Self*, definido por Bowen, às principais personagens de ambos os romances. O segundo capítulo centra-se na unidade familiar e no conceito de *Nuclear Family Emotional Process* e procura identificar padrões de relacionamento dominantes na família Dead e na família do nº 124, Bluestone Road. O terceiro e último capítulo aborda as personagens no espaço fora da unidade familiar, isto é, na sua família alargada, bem como na sua comunidade, destacando o impacto de ambos no crescimento de Milkman e Denver, respetivamente.



**Palavras-chave:** [família, comunidade, identidade, passado]

## Abstract

This dissertation examines family dynamics in two of Toni Morrison's novels: *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. In order to accomplish this goal, I will analyse both the Dead family and the family living at 124 Bluestone Road through the lens of Murray Bowen's *Family Systems Theory*. By comparing the two novels, I will draw some parallels between the coming-of-age story of the main characters, Milkman and Denver, as well as try to understand how the families' past still looms over the characters' present. Furthermore, using Bowen's theory, I will identify patterns within the element of the family unit. The first chapter focuses on the individual and acts as an introduction to *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* by applying the concept of *Differentiation of Self*, defined by Bowen, to the main characters in both novels. The second chapter focuses on the family unit and the concept of the *Nuclear Family Emotional Process* and seeks to identify dominant relationship patterns in the Dead family and the family in 124 Bluestone Road. The third and final chapter addresses the characters in the space outside the family unit, that is, their extended family as well as their community, highlighting the impact of both on Milkman and Denver's growth, respectively.



**Key-words:** [family, community, identity, past]

# List of Abbreviations

SoS.....*Song of Solomon*

B..... *Beloved*

FST.....*Family Systems Theory*

# Introduction

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

- Philip Larkin, "This be The Verse"

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. Nellie McKay, in an interview with Morrison, describes the author's background as follows:

> Her mother's parents traveled North from […] Alabama […] in a flight from poverty and racism. […] Morrison's father came from Georgia, and the racial violence with which he grew up in that state had a lasting impact on his vision of white America. […] Black lore, black music, black language, and all the myths and rituals of black culture were the most prominent elements in the early life of Toni Morrison. (Morrison & McKay, pp. 413-414)

These elements of black lore, language and culture are present in Morrison's work, namely *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), respectively the author's third and fifth novel. In 1993, Morrison won The Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first African American woman to win a Nobel Prize. And in 2012, when President Barack Obama awarded Morrison the Presidential Medal of Freedom, he proclaimed that:

> Toni Morrison's prose brings us that kind of moral and emotional intensity that few writers ever attempt. From "Song of Solomon" to "Beloved," Toni reaches us deeply, using a tone that is lyrical, precise, distinct, and inclusive. She believes that language "arcs toward the place where meaning might lie." The rest of us are lucky to be following along for the ride. (Obama, 2012)

*Beloved* is considered by many as Morrison's most important book as well as being her most acclaimed one. In 1988, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, which focuses on the recognition of books and authors that have contributed to an understanding of racism and human diversity. In 2006, *The New York Times Book Review* named *Beloved* the "Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years". The result was based on a survey conducted of prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary figures (Stevens, 2006).

On the other hand, *Song of Solomon*, despite not being Morrison's most famous work, is perceived by many readers and critics as the novel that established Morrison's unique talent for representing the African American experience. In 2015, *The Guardian*'s contributor Robert McCrum ranked *Song of Solomon* among one of the "100 best novels" written in the English language (McCrum, 2015) and in 2016, Laila Lalami from the *LA Times* called this work "The Great American Novel" (Lalami, 2016).

Many aspects of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* led to my decision to read and analyse both novels together. Firstly, both are a reflection on parenthood. Whilst *Beloved*, inspired by a newspaper article Morrison came across about a woman who killed her child to prevent their return to slavery, is an exploration of the lengths a mother would go to protect her children; *Song of Solomon* is a tribute to fatherhood, written by Toni Morrison after the death of her own father. Additionally, both families in the novels are heavily influenced by generations past. That explains the title of my dissertation which includes a quote from *Beloved*: "The future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (B, p. 42). The plot of both novels, spanning several decades, is largely told through flashbacks thus providing the story of many generations of the same family. Denver's family, in *Beloved*, and Milkman's family, in *Song of Solomon*, have to come to terms with their families' traumas and past and the fact that their past is still defining their present. Another aspect that connects the two novels is the coming-of-age story. As *Song of Solomon* deals with the life of a young boy maturing into a man, *Beloved* tells the story of a young girl maturing into a woman, both struggling with their identity within their family as well as outside their home, as part of a larger community.

A lot has been written about Toni Morrison and her novels which have been studied, namely, but not exclusively, from the standpoint of African American Studies – note, for example, Therese E. Higgins's *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2001) and Aaron Ngozi Oforlea's dissertation *Discursive Divide: (Re)Covering African American Male Subjectivity in the Works of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison* (2005) – as well as Feminist Studies – Mohamed Deyab's work *Toni Morrison's Womanist Discourse in The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974), and Beloved (1987): Analytical and Computational Study* (2004) and Helen Benet-Goodman's *Forgiving Friends: Feminist Ethics and Fiction by Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood* (2004), being two great examples. Others have also explored the concepts of family and motherhood in Morrison. That's the case of Miehyeon Kim who explores mother loss within the context of African American collective in the essay "Finding Mothers: Reconstruction of African American Motherhood, Family, Community, and History in Toni Morrison's Fiction" and Andrea O'Reilly in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* who intended to "read Morrison as a maternal theorist" (p. 11).

In Portugal, Isabel Caldeira wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled "História, Mito e Literatura: a Cicatriz da Palavra na Ficção de Toni Morrison" (1993) which is considered a pioneer study in the Portuguese language, Adonay Moreira wrote a dissertation about motherhood and identity in Morrison's fiction titled "A Representação Da Maternidade E A Construção Da Identidade Na Ficção De Toni Morrison" (1998) and more recently, Alexandra Gagean wrote a comparative dissertation titled "The Gothic and Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*" (2020).

This dissertation aims to bring forth a different way of looking at Morrison's work, by establishing a connection between *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* through the lens of Murray Bowen's *Family Systems Theory*. The FST, also known as the Bowen theory, is a theory created by Dr. Murray Bowen, an American psychiatrist. It was radical because it conceptualized the family as "an emotional unit" and as a "network of interlocking relationships" (Kerr & Bowen, pp. 8-9). Bowen believed that human beings were a product of the family environment they were around and that it was important

to understand the emotional systems within a family and the complex interactions within that unit.

In 1978, Murray Bowen published *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* detailing the evolution of the FST, providing an overview of his work of two decades. In 1988, Bowen and Michael E. Kerr, who worked with Bowen for many years, published *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*, an explanation of Bowen's theory and its various concepts.

Although the FST is still mostly known in the psychiatric field, over the past few decades, the theory has been used in the world of literary criticism. In 1991, Paula Cohen published *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*, an investigation into works of the nineteenth century such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park,* and George Elliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in the context of the FST. Furthermore, Sarah Schiff published, in 2006, her work *Family Systems Theory as Literary Analysis: The Case of Philip Roth,* where she considered Bowen's system as the primary tool to examine Roth's *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. This theory has thus been applied to literature to a range of different novels, from British female authors of the nineteenth century to an American male author of the twentieth century.

In 2003, John V. Knapp co-edited the book *Reading the Family Dance: Family Systems Psychotherapy and Literary Study*. The book is a collection of thirteen essays that "offers its reader a broad spectrum of writings that apply various aspects of Family Systems Therapy (FST) to the analysis of literary texts" (Adams, p. 196). The book includes readings of E.M. Foster's *A Room with a View,* Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as well as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. In 2004, Knapp published an article titled "Family-Systems Psychotherapy and Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: A Comparative Critique" where he argued for the recognition of the FST as a valuable tool in literary analysis:

> […] I argue that recent developments employing the clinical psychology known as family-systems therapy (most critics use the abbreviation FST) can be quite useful for literary criticism. Indeed, several critics have been applying family-systems theory as an exciting new tool for understanding

> literary characters and, as such, are not only developing alternative answers to issues concerned with mimetic characters but also asking rather different questions. (p. 150)

Knapp reasons that the works of Freud and Lacan have been used for many years and that a newer psychological perspective will allow for an exciting new take in the world of literary criticism. Unlike other psychoanalytic approaches that focus on the individual, the FST stresses the importance of social psychology. In an analysis of Knapp's book, Jeffrey Adams supports the analysis of literary characters through the lens of the FST arguing that it allows for the interpretation of fiction through the eyes of the human condition:

> The emphasis on character plausibility speaks to an issue that appears central to the reorientation of literary criticism promoted by FST: in the past, critics have tended to focus on the *thematic* analysis of character, which assumes that literary figures are not real but rather representations of abstract ideas like jealousy, ambition, or honor. In contrast, FST critics focus instead on a "mimetic" understanding of character that permits a view of the human condition less meditated by intellectual abstractions. (p. 198)

Taking this into consideration, the goal of this dissertation is to analyse the family dynamics in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, and how disruptive those dynamics can be to the different generations of the same family. To do so, I will think about the characters in the frame of their self, their family unit and as members of a community.

# 1. The Self

In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, characters live isolated from the community around them and thus struggle to develop their identity independent from that of their family. Throughout both stories, characters attempt to assert their individuality, expanding their outlook on the world and connecting with others outside of their family unit. This attempt can be best understood if we take into consideration Bowen's *Family Systems Theory*.

Indeed, in his FST, Murray Bowen developed the concept of *Differentiation of Self*, which refers to a scale of differentiation where the more differentiated people are, the more individual and mature they are, and the more "differentiated" they are from their family of origin. *Differentiation of Self* is roughly equivalent to the concept of emotional maturity. At the more differentiated end of the scale are those who can *know* their intellect and *be aware* of their emotional system. They have the ability to operate between intellect and emotion and to act on the fact of intellectual reasoning that opposes their feelings and the truth of subjectivity (Bowen, p. 489). The variable degree of emotional separation that people achieve from their family of origin explains the fact they operate at distinct levels of differentiation. Thus, "complete differentiation exists in a person who has fully resolved the emotional attachment to [their] family" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 97). This concept is fundamental in the understanding of family dynamics because the level of differentiation is an important aspect of the development of the *self*.

## 1.1. The wish for "being normal": Milkman and the Dead family

"Why couldn't anybody in his whole family just be normal?"

*Song of Solomon*, p. 151

In *Song of Solomon*, low differentiation of self is the cause of many of the Dead's family issues. The scale is a continuum ranging from low to high and members of the Dead nuclear family all seem to fall into the lowest levels in the scale in different degrees. If complete differentiation exists when a person has fully resolved the emotional

attachment to their family, Macon, Ruth, and their children have achieved close to no emotional separation from their family of origin. *Differentiation of Self* is usually developed during childhood and teenage years, and when a "solid self" is not developed during these years, it becomes increasingly difficult to emotionally detach from the family of origin. Bowen believes that the only way to increase the levels of differentiation during adulthood is through a structured, long-term effort to change it. In *Song of Solomon*, as the novel progresses, some characters' level of differentiation remains the same, whilst others recognize their emotional dependence on others and become confident in their own perspective, accepting others without being influenced, and thus increasing their level of differentiation.

Ruth Dead, Milkman's mother, née Foster, is the daughter of Dr. Foster and his wife, who are described as "the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster, who had been the second man in the city to have a two-horse carriage, and a woman who had turned heads on every deck of the *Queen Mary* and had Frenchmen salivating all over Paris" (SoS, p. 245). After Ruth's mother died, she developed a close if not somewhat unhealthy relationship with her father and at "sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night, sit on her bed, exchange a few pleasantries, and plant a kiss on her lips" (SoS, p. 28). At the age of sixteen, she married Macon Dead, a gentleman who "at twenty-five, […] was already a colored man of property" (SoS, p. 28). Despite a few good years during the beginning of their marriage, Ruth's relationship with her husband is largely non-existent and she lacks a meaningful and profound relationship with any of her children. Immediately, Ruth is seen as a passive figure to her dominating husband as well as her seemingly uninterested children. Her husband despises her, which explains the question: "What might she have been like had her husband loved her?" (SoS, p. 374); and her (favourite) son sees her as "a frail woman content to do tiny things" (SoS, p. 79). Throughout the novel, Ruth's most consistent and closest relationship is with her dead father. Not only is Ruth's most important connection a member of a previous generation, but it is also a rather unfulfilling relationship as her father died years prior to the main events of the story. Nevertheless, Ruth's relationship

with her father is perhaps the aspect of her life that explains her low differentiation and her inability to correct it.

In his theory, Bowen highlights the importance of developing a sense of self in childhood to reach, as an adult, emotional independence from the family of origin. He also argues that a person's relationship with their parents and relatives during childhood and teenage years greatly influences the way a person operates in their marriage, with their children and with other important people in their lives. In Morrison's novel, Ruth grew up being defined by her relationship to her father, being constantly referred to as "the doctor's daughter" or "the dead doctor's daughter" (SoS, pp. 6,5), leading to no identity of her own. And during her adulthood, not much has changed. This is emphasised when, in Chapter III, Ruth gets invited to the wedding of Anna Djvorak's granddaughter, one of her late father's former patients. Her father had saved Mrs Djvorak's son and "it was natural that she would want the miracle doctor's daughter at the wedding of this son's youngest daughter" (SoS, p. 80). Later, when Ruth is recounting the event, Macon ridicules her when he says to his wife: "Anna Djvorak don't even know your name! She called you *Dr. Foster's daughter*! I bet you one hundred dollars she still don't know your name! You by yourself ain't nobody. You your daddy's daughter!" (SoS, p. 83).

Throughout her childhood and whilst her father is alive, Ruth has a very low differentiation of self. She doe not fully develop her *self* outside of being her father's daughter since she passively and willingly lived her life in the service of her father. Furthermore, when Ruth marries Macon, she essentially married a man that is not too dissimilar to her father: "Negroes in this town worshipped him [Dr. Foster]. He didn't give a damn about them, though. […] He was always bragging about how he was the second man in the city to have a two-horse carriage" (SoS, pp. 87-88). Both were admired for their success but also delighted in their own superiority: "It [the fact that the dinner table was always elegantly arranged] was for her father a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived. For Ruth it was the summation of the affectionate elegance with which she believed her childhood had

been surrounded" (SoS, p. 14). Just like her husband Macon, Dr. Foster lacked humility and took pleasure in his family's incompatibility with the men and women of the town.

Happy during the first few years of her marriage, Ruth quickly becomes a lonely housewife when Macon stops sleeping with her after witnessing her kissing her father's feet at his death bed. She loses her father, and as she grieves him, "the only person who ever really cared whether [she] lived or died" (SoS, p. 153), she also loses her husband. She is an abandoned woman. Her childhood dreams of having a loving husband and a loving family fade and she is again under the influence of a man's aspirations. Ruth is, thus, a perfect example of a low differentiated person who during her upbringing did not develop her independence and maturity and, as an adult, married into a relationship that does not allow for her individuality. In Chapter V, when talking to her son, Ruth explains the origins of her assimilation and passivity:

> I am a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him [her father]. I was small, but he was big. (SoS, p. 152)

Ruth's existence was too enclosed within that of her father. Even as she builds her own family, she was too attached to the memories of her father and to her own family of origin and the person she was in the presence of her father. This explains the immense grief that Ruth felt after he died. Not only was she grieving her father, but she was also grieving the person she was to him, the person only he saw and that disappeared once he died.

In his work, Bowen stresses the importance of analysing the relationship of the spouses with their family of origin. He believes that "in periods of stress the nuclear family can be stabilized by emotional contact with a family of origin, just as the nuclear family can also be disturbed by stress in the family of origin" (Bowen, p. 192). In Ruth and Macon's case, the spouses have a contrasting relationship with their family of origin. Ruth remains connected with her family of origin despite the death of her parents, by means of her visits to the cemetery and as a result, her relationship with her father

before and after his death is a great source of tension in her marriage. On the other hand, Macon wishes to have no contact with his family despite living in the same town as his sister and her family. Macon's relationship with his family is a reflection on his emotional instability and thus, his detachment from his own family leads to problems in his nuclear family. As Bowen puts it, the individual "who separates from his family of origin does not resolve the emotional attachment" (Bowen, p. 192) leading to a tendency to handle emotional stress poorly in future relationships. Bowen further stated that during his clinical experiments, he concluded that "people select spouses who have identical basic levels of differentiation of self" (Bowen, p. 129). Ruth is a person with a very low differentiation of self and as Bowen determined, she married a man who also shares her low differentiation. Whilst Ruth's attachment to her past proves to be her biggest impediment, for Macon his detachment from the issues of his past is his own impairment.

A low differentiated person relies heavily on the acceptance and approval of others, driven by a pressure of conformity. During his childhood, Macon had a close relationship with his family, and he spent his days working alongside his father and sister. Through what we learn from Macon's retelling of their childhood, the family unit headed by Macon Dead Sr. was one filled with love and simplicity, where hard work was valued but so was affection. Macon Dead Sr. was admired by the black community around him for having harvested a thriving farm from wilderness. Pilate, Macon's sister, remembers "those twelve years in Montour County, where she had been treated gently by a father and a brother, and where she herself was in a position to help farm animals under her care, had taught her a preferable kind of behavior" (SoS, p. 185).

However, a tragedy destroys the family bliss. Macon tells Milkman that after years of family harmony, he witnessed his father being murdered by white men because of a dispute over his farm. Since his father was illiterate, he unknowingly signed away his land and was murdered when he refused to leave. The white men left Macon and Pilate without parents and without the land they would one day inherit, the land their father had worked so hard on. Decades later, when Milkman travels south and visits the town where his father grew up, he is told by the townsmen that his grandfather's farm

was “the only farm in the country that grew peaches, real peaches like they had in Georgia” (SoS, p. 292) and learns that Macon Dead Sr. was “the farmer they wanted to be” (SoS, p. 293), a man who had nothing and who built himself a prosperous business.

The death of Macon’s father represented a significant shift in the way Macon sees the world. It had profound consequences on his emotional dependence and relation with the rest of the world. After his father’s death, Macon adopts the values of the white men, the status quo ethos, believing that, more than anything else, being the proprietor of vast amounts of land and the owner of a vast amount of money was the way to become a successful, respected man. He believes that “[m]oney is freedom, […]. The only real freedom there is” (SoS, p. 202). Macon tells his son that he must know how to take care and handle money and his business, the things that he is going to leave him one day. Macon believes in the importance of property and ownership, the things that were taken away from his own father. But unlike his father, who believed in the importance of community, Macon sees traits such as kindness and empathy as qualities of the weak.

Despite following his father’s spirit of determination and ambition, Macon does not retain his father’s lessons on community, heritage, and the importance of family. Soon after his father dies, Macon and Pilate go their separate ways despite the fact that “at one time [Pilate] had been the dearest thing in the world to [Macon]” (SoS, p. 24). Macon turns away from the values he was taught during his upbringing. He builds a life for himself and even after having a family of his own, he still makes very individualistic choices. Macon’s low differentiation is evident in his relationship with the community. Macon’s goal is to be revered by the black community around him and to be seen as an equal by the white men with whom he does business. His determination to be seen as an impressive businessman overshadows the importance of family and heritage. Unlike his father who was celebrated by the community, Macon’s determination is looked down on by the black community around him.

After analysing the parent’s differentiation level, it is valuable to understand how their level of differentiation influenced their offspring. Bowen defended that someone’s level of differentiation was highly influenced by the level of differentiation of their

parents as well as other factors such as their gender, their sibling position, the emotional disposition of the parents before and after the birth of the child, the quality of the relationship the parents had with their family of origin (Bowen, p. 454). These factors are important to consider when analysing the children of the Dead family.

Macon and Ruth's children are good examples of how children of the same couple, brought up in the same household can display different levels of differentiation. The less differentiated children are, the less they are able to function outside of the family system, the more dependant they are on others and the less control they seem to have in order to make concrete decisions. All of Macon's family members are meant to reflect the meticulous image he has created of himself and his family. His son Milkman wore velvet suits to school and through his life his clothing alienated him from others, especially as they lived in a modest town in Michigan. At the age of thirty-three, Milkman realises that he never played as a kid because as soon as he went to school, "his velvet suit separated him from the other children" (SoS, p. 330). Macon's family are stuck in a middle between the black community around them and the white men Macon aspires to be. They are too wealthy to fit in with the people in the town, but their race prevents them from being seen as equal by the white families.

Firstly, although Milkman sees his sisters as the same, and the same as his mother, they prove themselves to be quite different from each other and quite different from their mother:

> Milkman looked at his sisters. He had never been able to really distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother. They were in their early teens when he was born; they were thirty-five and thirty-six now. But since Ruth was only sixteen years older than Lena, all three had always looked the same age to him. (SoS, p. 84)

First Corinthians, the youngest daughter, is an educated young woman who studied at Bryn Mawr College, studied abroad in France, and speaks fluent French. In spite of her education, at the age of forty-two she still lives at her parents' house, having made no life for herself. Although Corinthians is seen as aloof, she appears to be the child with the most understanding of the parent's marriage. Whereas "Lena thought Macon's

rages unaccountable" (SoS, pp. 79-80) and Milkman "was only half listening" (SoS, p. 81), Corinthians "began to see a plan" (SoS, p. 80) in her mother's actions and understood the dynamic between her parents – the way Ruth would tease Macon in order to provoke him and bring him "to a point, not of power […], but of helplessness" (SoS, p. 80): "Corinthians listened analytically, expectantly – wondering how her mother would develop this anecdote into a situation in which Macon would either lash out at her verbally or hit her" (SoS, p. 81).

When at the age of forty-two she seeks her own independence, Corinthians gets a job working for Miss Graham, a poet laureate, as a maid. To the delight of her mother, she calls herself an *amanuensis*, a word whose meaning no one really seems to know but that nevertheless sounds sophisticated enough to be impressive. Corinthians need to find a place for herself outside of her parents' home is her first step towards a higher level of differentiation. Unlike her mother, she is able to understand her dependence on others – her parents – and attempts to get her liberation. Whilst on her way to work, Corinthians meets Henry Porter, one of her father's tenants: "The man was a complete nuisance and his flirtation an insult. But no one, not anyone at all, had made any attempt (any serious attempt) to flirt with her in a long time" (SoS, p. 239). She internalised her father's ideas of grandeur and superiority and therefore, at first, believes him to be an inadequate suitor for herself, a refined and accomplished woman. Despite her initial judgment of him and her fear of her father, Corinthians starts a relationship with Henry Porter but keeps the relationship a secret fearing her father's reprimand. Corinthians finds someone who shows affection for her, something she lacked in a house governed by her indifferent father and her compliant mother. Corinthian's fear of her father prevents her from fully allowing herself to be loved by the first man who ever noticed her, and her fear of her father is proven valid when her father evicts Porter once he finds out about their relationship.

Corinthians begins to understand her dependence on her family and realises that what makes her happy is not the life that her parents or she had envisioned. In her decision to be loved by a "yardman" (SoS, p. 245), despite being "First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster" (SoS, p. 245), she

proves her clear demarcation from her family. She makes the decision to be loved and to leave home, without influence of her family or society. It is in her relationship with Henry Porter and her work at Miss Graham that she frees herself from her family. Henry Porter takes care of her in a way that she had not experienced and her work at Miss Graham makes her feel valuable.

On the other hand, Macon's eldest daughter Magdalena (Lena), unlike her sister, did not go to college but, like her sister, it "had been assumed that […] Magdalene called Lena would marry well" (SoS, p. 233). The reader is told that Lena "seemed resigned to her life" (SoS, p. 234) but, regardless of being painted as a passive observer of the Dead household, an extension of her mother, who unlike Corinthians wants nothing more of her life, Lena proves herself to be especially astute. In Chapter IX, after Milkman reveals to Macon Corinthian's relationship with Henry Porter, he and his sister Lena have a conversation. According to Milkman, he and Lena had not spoken "more than four consecutive sentences since he was in the ninth grade" (SoS, p. 263). In the conversation, Lena reveals a much higher level of differentiation than her siblings and much higher than the reader had understood: "You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. […] You are exactly like him [Macon]. Exactly" (SoS, pp. 267-268).

Indeed, Lena accuses Milkman of being exactly like their father, dismissing the women of the house as mere cooks and cleaners. And most importantly she shows herself as an attentive member of the family aware of what goes on in the house. She reveals that the reason she still lives at home, the reason she did not go to college, is that she could not leave their mother alone with their father. Unlike Milkman who thinks he can protect his mother by hitting his father, Lena chooses to give up on a life outside of home in order to stay close to her parents and prevent clashes between the two. She also accuses Milkman of hitting their father, not in order to protect their mother, but in order to assert himself as the man of the house, "letting [them] know [he] had the right to tell [their mother] and all of [the women in the family] what to do" (SoS, p. 268). She proves that, as the older sister, she was not as influenced by her father's distorted values

and she was able to act selflessly, acting in support of her mother and not as a response to the pressures of her family.

Macon does not allow his children to make their own choices assuming that his guidance is what will lead them to success. But it is clear that Macon's parental choices created stale adults who found it difficult to start a life of their own. On the other hand, Macon's belief in his own superiority alienated his children from the rest of the community and by the time all of them are adults they are still living a life not too dissimilar from their youth.

Due to the high intense levels of tension and stress in the family life, Milkman is not allowed to grow or think, feel, or act for himself, while still considering "himself the outsider in his family" (SoS, p. 365). As the son among daughters, Milkman is treated by his parents in a different way to his sisters, validating Bowen's theory that gender and sibling position influence the level of differentiation. And since his sisters are substantially older than him, their life was also dedicated to taking care of their younger brother. Milkman's low level of differentiation comes from his inability to make choices that are not influenced by his parents. Even his acts of rebellion, such as his visits to Pilate's home and his friendship with Guitar, are ways of opposing his parents' pressures. In relation to Bowen's theory, rebellious teenagers are reflective of the lack of differentiation between children and the parents as most of their beliefs and values are formed in opposition to the beliefs of others (Kerr & Bowen, p. 96). Furthermore, in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's inability to view his parents and sisters as people and not simply roles in his life contributes to his low differentiation. Still, Milkman is the best example of an evident change in the level of differentiation. Bowen's theory concludes that "[p]arents function in ways that result in their children achieving about the same degree of emotional separation from them that they achieved from their parents" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 95) but the theory also supposes that "a person with the ability and motivation can, through a gradual process of learning that is converted into action, become more of a self in his family and other relationship systems" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 107).

Milkman's journey of maturity comes from the search and discovery of his ancestry. Initially, Milkman goes to the south, on his quest to find gold, compelled by his father. But as his journey progresses and the gold is nowhere to be found, Milkman makes his own choice. No longer concerned with the gold, Milkman is instead intrigued by his family's history and his own heritage. And so, he sets off in search of his *self*. During his time in Virginia, Milkman gets bathed by Sweet and later they swim in the quarry. In religion and in literature, water is often a symbol of rebirth and renewal. Having faced the symbolic ritual of rebirth as well as losing his possession – Milkman even says "'Damn,' he murmured aloud. 'I'm losing everything.'" (SoS, p. 367) – he is a new man, a matured adult, further detached from the values of his family of origin. Unlike his father, Milkman wants to know more about his heritage and tries to find more about his lost relatives.

Individuals with a well-differentiated self are able to hold their own values and adhere to their goals without being pressured by the family unit. It is only through his journey that Milkman is able to mature and develop his *self*. It is through learning about his family's past that he understands the importance of identity, memory and most significantly the importance of heritage and history. It is only when "Milkman begins to question the people and events around him that his consciousness begins to develop, that he enters the liminal stage of discovery and growth" (Mbalia, p. 58). As he discovers more about his parents and those who came before him, Milkman (and the reader) is able to sympathise with his father and his mother as he sees the world "as it is and not as he wishes" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 111). He is therefore able to fully mature as an adult becoming aware of what those before him had to sacrifice. And in the last moments of the novel, Milkman finally takes responsibility for his actions.

## 1.2. "The effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight": Pilate and her family

"Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight. Reba's soft profile, Hagar's hands moving, moving in her heavy hair, and Pilate."

*Song of Solomon*, p. 36

In contrast to her brother Macon, Pilate Dead could be described as someone with a remarkably higher differentiation of self. Contrasting with Macon's behaviour, after their father's death, Pilate lives a life of a nonconformist, making unconventional decisions frowned upon by Macon. Pilate is Macon's younger sister whose mother "died before [she] was born" (SoS, p. 174) leading to her being born without a navel. This unusual characteristic made her atypical from the moment she was born and most people she encountered in her life pronounced her as unnatural and looked at her with "horror" (SoS, p. 177). Consequently, after her father dies, Pilate lived a life of constant moving, aware of people's trepidation in regard to her missing navel and her extraordinary nature:

> It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, […] every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them. […] when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. […] Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. (SoS, p. 184)

Aware that as soon as people found out about her navel, they would disapprove of her, she lives an isolated life, moving from town to town. After a relationship with an "island man" (SoS, p. 183), she gets pregnant with her daughter Reba but refuses to marry the man "who was eager to take her for his wife" (SoS, pp. 181-182). After a few years, when Reba herself gets pregnant, Pilate decides to find her brother to reconcile, with the intent of having her granddaughter live amongst family. However, arriving at Michigan, she finds "her brother truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving" (SoS, pp. 187-188). No longer the siblings they once were, Macon and Pilate live in the same town but are distant from each other, now shaped by very different values.

Pilate, unlike her brother, is sure of her beliefs and convictions but not dogmatic in her way of thinking. She is secure within herself to be able to function without being affected by praise or criticism. She is realistic and her assessment of self and others is not influenced by her place in the hierarchy. These characteristics make Pilate a great

example of a person with a very high differentiation of self. Growing up without a mother and having lost her father at a very young age, Pilate had to mature in order to survive. Separated from her only family and ostracised because of her missing navel, Pilate develops her *self*, without being dependent on the support or acceptance of others. The only moments in the novel where Pilate is more emotionally vulnerable and acts in an unrestrained manner is when the people she loves are concerned – like in Chapter IV, when she threatens Reba's boyfriend who beats her or in Chapter XIII, when she screams during Hagar's funeral.

Just like Milkman, Hagar is the youngest member of her family, and she is an example of how the low differentiation of a parent can be transmitted to a child and that without a big effort to change, that low differentiation can lead to social and mental problems. A motherless mother, Pilate raises her daughter Reba as a single mother, without the presence of the child's father or any extended family. Reba grows up and begins "to live from one orgasm to another, taking time out to produce one child, Hagar" (SoS, p. 186). Reba's life revolves around her several short relationships – with men who treat her poorly but to whom she gives all her things – and the product of one of those relationships, her daughter Hagar. Just like her mother, Reba raises her daughter without her father and the three women form a family of their own, an unconventional family but nevertheless a loving one.

Raised without the presence of a male figure, both Reba and Hagar depend on men for a sense of validation and devote themselves to the men they sleep with, trying to find ways to keep them around. They are however attracted to men who do not treat them well and whilst Reba seems to be able to move from man to man, Hagar develops a co-dependent, obsessive relationship with Milkman.

In his theory, Bowen stated that a person with a high level of differentiation of self "is one who can be emotionally close to others without emotional fusions or loss of self, or loss of identity" (Bowen, p. 129) and thus, Hagar's co-dependence and servility are a reflection of her low levels of differentiation. Hagar is described as "prissy", "vain" and "proud" (SoS, p. 187) and seems to be most like her grandmother's brother, sharing his ideals of grandeur as well as having absorbed the values and epitomes of the white

status quo. Although seemingly content with her life, living with her mother and grandmother who "spoiled her" (SoS, p. 187), giving in to all her indulgences despite often being "astonished […] by her wishes" (SoS, p. 187), after being rejected by Milkman, Hagar becomes irrational. When her attempts to kill him do not work, Hagar believes that the only way to get his love back is by transforming herself into the person she believes Milkman could love.

Bowen's theory argues, furthermore, that people with higher levels of differentiation "can adapt to changes such as births and deaths without much alteration in functional level, but poorly differentiated people can experience a permanent drop in functional level after such events" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 100). Since Hagar always reflected lower levels of differentiation – especially compared to her grandmother – it is after Milkman leaves her that she reaches her lowest level of differentiation. People with the lowest differentiation of *self* lack beliefs of their own, adapting quickly to the prevailing ideology. Their feeling can easily soar with praise and be dashed by criticism. Most importantly, "so much life energy is directed toward 'loving' and seeking 'love' and approval that little energy is available for self-determined goals" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 103). Hagar exemplifies Bowen's theory in this respect. Her break-up with Milkman affected her to a point that she believes herself to be worthless proving that her feelings are exceedingly tied with other people's ideas of her. Near the end of the novel, it is Guitar's words that emphasise this aspect of Hagar's personality and the damaging consequences to her happiness:

> You think because he doesn't love you that you are worthless. You think because he doesn't want you anymore that he is right–that his judgment and opinion of you are correct. If he throws you out, then you are garbage. You think he belongs to you because you want to belong to him. Hagar, don't. It's a bad word, 'belong.' Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn't be like that. (SoS, p. 382)

Her self-image is formed by her reaction to the needs of others, allowing herself to function so as to gain Milkman's acceptance. At the end of the novel, Hagar's need to transform herself ends up leading to her passing. She dies believing that, in order to be

loved, she should have had “silky”, “[p]enny-colored” hair with “lemon-colored skin” and “gray-blue eyes” (SoS, p. 394). And at Hagar’s funeral, while Pilate screams “And she was loved!” (SoS, p. 398), she also realised that her love alone could not save her granddaughter. As Guitar tells Hagar: “He can’t value you more than you value yourself” (SoS, p. 382).

## 1.3. “Making do”: Sethe and Denver at 124 Bluestone Road

> “That she lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do.”
>
> *Beloved*, p. 164

As *Song of Solomon* demonstrates the significance of parental influence on the development of the *self*, the characters in *Beloved* are likewise representations of the impact of the undeveloped self during childhood. Illustrating Bowen’s theory, the characters in both novels are, as adults, impacted by their childhood, exhibiting symptoms of emotional imbalance that impact and impair their emotional and physical health as well as their relationships. As Ruth, Macon and Pilate’s differentiation levels are reflected in their descendants, the mother figures in *Beloved* have similarly contributed to the development of the self of the younger generation.

Not much is known of Sethe’s past before Sweet Home but, in Chapter XX, Sethe shares two important details about her mother. Firstly, she remembers being breastfeed by a woman who was not her mother who also breastfed other children, white children, who got the milk before her, leaving Sethe with little for herself. Sethe recalls:

> Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; (B, p. 200)

Furthermore, Sethe reveals how her mother died – hanged, presumably for attempting to escape the plantation. Sethe wonders if her mother had run off and abandoned her:

> You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. […] I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now? Leave her in the yard with a one-armed woman? (B, p. 203)

The story of Sethe's mother is juxtaposed to Sethe's journey of motherhood and the hardships she faced when trying to save her children. Sethe recalls memories of her mother in an attempt to explain her own actions. She will not abandon her children and she will not let them starve. Sethe's story of being breastfed by Nan makes schoolteacher's nephews' assault even more traumatic for Sethe. All she wanted was to give her children what her mother had not been allowed to give her.

The composition of a self is heavily determined by an individual's relationships during childhood. The less differentiated people are, the more impact others have on their functioning, without recognizing their dependence on others. The reality of Sethe's life is different from the main characters of *Song of Solomon* since Sethe spent most of her life without a structured family unit. When Sethe is thirteen, she arrives at the Sweet Home plantation. There, she meets Halle, who she later marries, and she is treated kindly by the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Garner. Still, the small amount of liberty they were given ends when Mr. Garner dies and the plantation is taken over by schoolteacher, Mr. Garner's brother-in-law, who treats the Sweet Home slaves inhumanly. Sethe had no control, no freedom, no individuality, no sense of home. When Sethe escapes schoolteacher and manages to free her children, she is determined to give them a life that she was not given. However, her traumatic past still heavily influences her way of thinking, and it is these unresolved traumas and consequential fears that prompt Sethe's emotional fragility and social anxiety.

In fact, Sethe's run from Sweet Home was the first thing she ever did on her own and it becomes clear that what pushes Sethe is her love and devotion to her children. Sethe got her children out safely, sending them to Baby Suggs, Halle's mother, doing so by herself, even without the help of her husband:

> I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. (B, p. 162)

Bowen's theory supports the idea that growing up in an intensely emotional environment can have drastic effects on someone's level of differentiation, as the person is strongly led by emotions rather than intellect. Bowen believed that the lower someone is on the scale of differentiation, the more prone to extreme mechanisms such as emotional distance and isolation as well as physical illness they will be and the harder communication with those outside of the family unit will be. Furthermore, those with low levels of *self* find it harder to distinguish between the feeling and the intellectual process.

Already low differentiated, changes in Sethe's life drastically affect her level of differentiation, making her more dependent on others and more susceptible to emotional and physical illnesses as well as social dysfunction. Sethe's attempt to kill her children is reflective of her life experience and her troubling relationship with her past. As a young girl, she was separated from her mother, who went to work in the fields, and "cared for by the eight-year-old girl" (B, p. 51) who had to point out her mother to her. Abandoned by her mother and scarred by her years as a slave, she would rather free her children through death than see them return to the place she fought so hard to escape from.

Her emotionally reactive responses to fear are a result of her upbringing, making her highly sensitive and anxious. After Sethe's attempts to kill all her children – but only managing to kill her eldest daughter – the townspeople turn their backs on her. The attempt to kill her children is also reflective of her instability since Sethe acts from emotion and not from reason. As a consequence, Sethe, already susceptible to isolation,

cuts off from society, becoming a recluse amongst her family. For Sethe, her children are her home, and she believes that: “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be” (B, p. 183). Sethe finds safety in her home, a place where she believes her children can be protected, where she is not someone’s property, and she can love and take care of her children the way she deems right. Still, “this was not a normal woman in a normal house” (B, p. 40).

When her mother-in-law dies, Sethe’s mental state deteriorates. Baby Suggs, the matriarch of the family, was a mother figure to Sethe and a beacon of hope for the family in 124. The death of a member of the family can significantly change a person’s functioning, especially when the person (Sethe) depended on them (Baby Suggs) for support and stability. Subsequently, Beloved’s arrival proves to be the biggest weight on Sethe’s functioning. Beloved is assumed to be the ghost of the daughter that Sethe killed years before. Beloved is adored by Sethe who sees her return as a way to make amends for her actions, and Denver, Sethe’s daughter, finds solace in having a sister that can keep her company. As Sethe senses that Beloved really is the incarnation of her dead daughter, her guilt is intensified, and Beloved’s control is amplified: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became” (B, p. 250). Determined to make it up to Beloved, Sethe distances herself further from those outside of her home, losing her job and focusing all her attention on her returned daughter:

> When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself—be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best— Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane. (B, p. 242)

In the house of 124, Sethe no longer exerts any authority. Beloved demands Sethe’s constant care and attention whilst Sethe’s and Denver’s emotional and physical distress intensifies. Although Denver initially enjoys Beloved’s company, she progressively becomes aware of the cost that Beloved’s presence has on her mother’s mental and physical health. Sethe starves herself to feed Beloved and spends the small amount of money she has left on indulgences for her eldest daughter who “invented desire” (B, p.

240). Beloved takes control of the house and of Sethe, who no longer pays attention to an increasingly lonely and hungry Denver. What was once a happy home has turned into a prison for Sethe and Denver. If Beloved's return seems to be motivated by her love of her mother, it is also shaped by the belief that Sethe should be punished for what she did to her. Sethe develops an obsessive relationship with Beloved, abandoning all her responsibilities and taking no notice of her daughter Denver. Sethe's low differentiation is explained by two aspects of her character: her highly reactive and emotional behaviour and her dependence on and attachment to Beloved.

Comparably to Macon Dead, events from Sethe's past contribute drastically to her choices in regard to the upbringing of her children and their own differentiation. As Macon sees his father murdered because of property, Sethe sees her mother leave her behind, escape slavery but abandoning her daughter. Macon believes that money earns respect and Sethe believes that freedom should be gained at any cost and that she would rather kill her children than see them return to the plantation and possibly get separated from them. Their dogmatic viewpoints are reflections of the past and are reflected in their parenting.

Bowen believes that the most effective form of treatment for people with very low levels of differentiation is to focus on their relationships with others. If a person with a higher differentiation of self can help and maintain contact with the poorly functioning person, that person has a higher chance of improvement. This proves to be true in Morrison's novel. It is only when Sethe rids herself of Beloved and reconnects with Denver, Paul D, and the members of the community that she is able to build up her strength. Sethe proves that connection to a supportive relationship system is fundamental in order to reduce dysfunction. Like most of the characters in both novels, Sethe's level of differentiation fluctuates throughout the novel, reaching its lowest point during Beloved's stay and reaching its highest point at the end of the novel.

On the other hand, Sethe's need to differentiate herself from her past comes as the result of her daughter Denver's own transformation and maturity. Denver is born on a boat, during her mother's escape from Sweet Home and thus, she becomes the first person in her family not to be born into slavery. Just days after her birth, her mother

attempts to kill her (as well as her siblings) but fails to do so. Although not old enough to remember the incident or the reasoning behind it, Denver is aware of what her mother did.

After her siblings run away, Denver is Sethe's only remaining child. Once Baby Suggs dies, Denver lives in 124 with her mother and the ghost of "her dead sister" (B, p. 103). Separated from her absentee brothers and missing her deceased grandmother, Denver has few relations in the world and thus she develops a very dependent relationship with Sethe. They are a "twosome" (B, p. 13) with little contact with the world outside of 124. Eight years after Baby Suggs' death, the arrival of Paul D, a man from Sethe's past, challenges Sethe and Denver's relationship. Due to the family's isolation, Denver is fearful of strangers but most importantly, with Paul D's arrival, Denver is no longer the only recipient of Sethe's attention. Denver's mistrust of Paul D, and her rudeness towards him, draws from her mostly reclusive state at home with her mother and the ghost, thus illustrating the consequences of isolation for the child.

The functioning of a person is highly influenced by the central relationships in that person's life. Throughout the story, Denver struggles with her identity and depends heavily on her relationship to others – firstly to her mother and later to Beloved. Affected by her mother's past, Denver is unable to develop her own values and thoughts. Denver suffers from arrested development and at eighteen years old, she still displays very childish traits and a "face young enough to be twelve" (B, p. 246). In his theory, Bowen argues that children are born totally dependent on others (usually the infant's mother) for their well-being and that it is up to the child and the parent to allow the child to become less dependent, allowing for an emotional separation and the development of their independence: "As the years pass, the developing child has the task of becoming an individual in [their] own right, and the parents have the task of functioning in ways that permit that individuality to emerge" (Kerr & Bowen, pp. 94-95). In the novel, aware of Denver's impairments, Paul D tells Sethe that she will not be able to protect her daughter forever and that Denver must learn to look out for herself. In chapter XII, after losing sight of Beloved, Denver cries "because she has no self" (B, p. 123). She feels "[b]reakable, meltable and cold", not knowing "where her body stops,

which part of her is an arm, a foot or a knee" (B, p. 123). Her life and identity are too attached to her relationship to Sethe and Beloved. The monologues – Sethe, Beloved and Denver's – in Part II of the novel "reveal an utter breakdown of the borders between self and other, a collapse that is bound up with incorporative fantasies" (Schapiro, p. 202).

Like her mother, Denver is easily affected by changes in her life, as shown by her behavioural change with the arrival of Paul D and the arrival of Beloved. Initially Denver is overjoyed by Beloved's presence, as well as the departure of Paul D, as she finally has someone to take care of and keep her company. However, as Beloved takes over 124, Denver is lonely, isolated in her own home. Not only is she secluded from the world outside of 124 but at home, she feels alone, kept apart from Sethe's close relationship with Beloved. Furthermore, she realises how harmful Beloved's presence is: "The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved. Now it was obvious that her mother could die and leave them both and what would Beloved do then?" (B, p. 243). As Denver's isolation grows deeper and her mother grows weaker, Denver recognizes that to free her family she must seek the help of the community around her, just as her grandmother and mother had once done:

> Whatever was happening, it only worked with three—not two—and since neither Beloved nor Sethe seemed to care what the next day might bring (Sethe happy when Beloved was; Beloved lapping devotion like cream), Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help. (B, p. 243)

Denver's journey from girl to woman begins when she steps out of her house, which she had never done on her own, and asks for help. Denver's former teacher Lady Jones, along with other women from the community, provide food for the family and Denver finds a job working for the Bodwin family. These moments in the novel illustrate Denver's effort to make decisions of her own, knowing that only she can save herself and her mother. For the first time in her life no one is looking after Denver who proclaims that it "was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (B, p. 252). Once a child isolated from society, she steps out into the world and, through her courage and

labour, saves her mother, finally finding value in herself. Just as Sethe once saved Denver from a life of slavery, Denver saves her mother from Beloved. Just as Sethe wanted a better life for her children by escaping slavery, Denver understood that she needed to help her mother escape her past, a past personified in the apparition of Beloved. It is Denver who assumes the role of saviour then.

Milkman and Denver become well-differentiated *selves* when they are able to separate the emotional from the intellect, becoming able to think for themselves without the control or manipulation of their family. When Milkman decides to prolong his quest, no longer looking for the gold, but looking for information about his family, he confidently makes a decision that is not influenced by anyone else, no longer following his father's or Guitar's instructions. For the first time, he makes a thoughtful choice not as a response to someone's pressure. Similarly, Denver's decision to leave 124 and ask for help is the moment when the character is able to see herself outside of her family. She can distinguish herself as a separate individual with free will. Despite having been told by her mother than the outside is evil, she is able to detach herself and realise that the evil is already in her home: that Beloved and her mother's trauma are the true destructive forces and not the community around them.

## 2. The Family

Following the analysis of the main protagonists of the novels as individuals and the evolution of their sense of self, it is then important to draw attention to the family unit, understanding the environment in which the characters exist, defining the relations between the members of that unit and the patterns that exist. As established in the previous chapter, the isolation of the families contributed to a lack of development of individuality. Furthermore, this isolation also prompts higher levels of tension and anxiety within a family unit.

According to Bowen's theory, the concept of *Nuclear Family Emotional Process* presents four categories of dysfunction that can possibly occur in a nuclear family: 1. *Marital conflict*, 2. *Dysfunction in one spouse*, 3. *Impairment of one or more children* and 4. *Emotional distance*. The third and fourth pattern were deemed important enough to be accorded a position as two separate theoretical concepts – *Impairment of one or more children* is further developed in the fourth concept entitled *Family Projection Process* and *Emotional distance* became concept number six, *Emotional Cutoff*.[1] The concept of *Nuclear Family Emotional Process* describes the range of relationship patterns in the system between parents and children. Depending on the relationship patterns each spouse developed in their families of origin and the patterns they continue in marriage, a nuclear family can display one of the four patterns mentioned previously or a combination of the four (Bowen, p. 344): "The patterns of relationships back to their families of origin help determine the intensity of nuclear family problems. The more open the relationships to families of origin, the less the tension in the nuclear family" (Bowen, p. 231).

These four emotional patterns aim to investigate how families behave when facing their anxieties and fears. Whilst some families exemplify all four patterns, thus representing highly dysfunctional families, the most common case is that a family will show evidence of being impacted by one or two of Bowen's patterns. The pattern

[1] I will be using the terminology of the separate concepts (*Family Projection Process* and *Emotional Cutoff*) and will be analyzing the novels through the lens of the concepts and not simply the patterns within the *Nuclear Family Emotional Process*.

focuses on the relationships within the family unit, between spouses and between parents and children, as well as the relationships with the family of origin as a way to better understand the vulnerability of the family system to develop emotional illnesses.

## 2.1. "We need some kind of tomorrow": the challenge of being a couple

"'Sethe,' he says, 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.'"

*Beloved*, p. 273

To understand the dynamic of the family unit, the analysis of the central relationship of the family, the marital relationship, is crucial. Bowen's concept of *Marital Conflict* refers to the internal anxieties felt by the spouses which are externalized, creating friction and tension in the couple as well as in the nuclear family. Bowen writes that *Marital Conflict* "occurs when neither spouse will 'give in' to the other in the fusion, or when the one who has been giving in or adapting refuses to continue" (Bowen, p. 523). *Marital Conflict* is a predominant pattern and the main couple of *Song of Solomon*, Ruth and Macon, is a good example to understand this concept.

Throughout the novel, many of Ruth's and Macon's actions are attempts to reflect the idealized image of the white nuclear family – from Ruth's afternoon tea with women from the town to Macon's family rides on Sunday in the family car. These gatherings are ways for Macon and Ruth to display their loving family, their house with twelve rooms and their expensive car. Ruth wants to be seen as a wealthy, refined housewife and Macon as a successful businessman worthy of being compared to the white businessmen. However, these are not portrayed as happy family activities and despite their attempt to resemble a typical family, they are unable to hide their dysfunctionality. At the start of the novel, the atmosphere of Ruth and Macon's marriage is already intensely hostile, and, in the course of the story, the reader is led through the important turning points in Ruth and Macon's marriage.

Macon tells Milkman that he married his mother in 1917 when she was sixteen and living alone with her father. When they married, he was not in love with her, but

Macon explains that it was not unusual as it was not a requirement at the time. For Macon, what was important was a connection to Dr. Foster, the most respected black man in town, and a marriage to his daughter would benefit Macon's business ambitions. For Ruth, marriage equalled the possibility of building a family of her own, the possibility of becoming a wife and a mother. Except for a few years of an agreeable marriage, resulting in the birth of Milkman's two older sisters, Ruth and Macon's marriage was persistently tense. The first strain in their marriage was Ruth's father, a constant tension, even after his death. Macon was disappointed to find out that the richest, most respected black man in the town was actually a "hypocrite" (SoS, p. 87).

Furthermore, his closeness to his daughter disturbed Macon, especially after Dr. Foster delivered his granddaughters himself: "Well, we had some words between us about it, and I ended up telling him that nothing could be nastier than a father delivering his own daughter's baby" (SoS, p. 88). This disturbance reached a critical point when Macon witnessed what he believed was Ruth, naked in her father's deathbed, kissing her ailing father's body. Disturbed by what he saw, Macon rejects his wife and refuses to sleep with her. As he turns away from Ruth, Macon leaves his wife feeling abandoned. It is important to note that Macon and Ruth recall moments in their marriage very differently. Ruth tells Milkman that Macon killed her father, by throwing his medicine away, and that she was not naked when she was kissing her father, even though she admits to having had a very close relationship to him. The disparity in their stories further emphasises their conflict.

The subsequent strain in their marriage is in relation to Macon's sister Pilate. After Macon stops sleeping with Ruth, she is left feeling alone, forced to be in a celibate, loveless marriage. This feeling of solitude is revealed in a conversation with her son Milkman: "You know, I was twenty years old when your father stopped sleeping in the bed with me. That's hard, Macon. Very hard. By the time I was thirty … I think I was just afraid I'd die that way" (SoS, p. 154). Feeling lonely and abandoned, Ruth gets Pilate's help in order to win over Macon and have him sleep with her again. Pilate gives Ruth a "nasty greenish-gray powder […] to be stirred into rain water and put into food" (SoS, p. 161) and, for four days, Macon and Ruth are happy once again. Two months later, Ruth

found out she was pregnant, and Macon "immediately suspected Pilate" (SoS, p. 155) had been involved. Macon tries to provoke a miscarriage but once again Pilate helps Ruth "stand him off" (SoS, p. 155). Because of Ruth and Pilate's brief alliance, Milkman's existence is a source of tension. Pilate is "the one person in the world he hated more than his wife in spite of the fact that she was his sister" (SoS, p. 20) and her involvement in his family enrages Macon. Milkman was born "in the most revolting circumstances" and thus, Macon regards his son with "disgust" and "uneasiness" (SoS, p. 19).

In the course of the novel, Ruth and Macon constantly compete for Milkman's interest and use their son as a way to provoke the other. After Milkman starts working for him, Macon realises how delighted he is as he "belonged to him now and not to Ruth" (SoS, p. 78). "Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation" (SoS, p. 165), Ruth's world is a small and lonely place. The obsessive, inappropriate relationship she once had with her father is shifted to her son, who she sees as a reminder of "the last occasion she had been made love to" (SoS, p. 165) and as "her single triumph" (SoS, p. 164). As neither of them are willing to change, Ruth and Macon's conflictual relationship is never resolved and, at the end of the novel, "relations between Ruth and Macon were the same and would always be" (SoS, p. 417).

If Ruth and Macon, characters of *Song of Solomon*, fall under the pattern of *Marital Conflict*, in *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D present a more balanced relationship that performs as an alternative to the dysfunction of the Dead parents and the Bowen pattern of *Marital Conflict*. Sethe and Paul D meet at Sweet Home when Sethe arrived as a replacement for Baby Suggs. Paul D is in love with Sethe, but she chooses Halle to be her husband and the father of her children. Eighteen years after their escape from Sweet Home, they are reunited at 124. They are now former slaves, but they are still haunted by the horrors they endured during their time at the plantation and the difficulties of their escape. Paul D was left deeply traumatized by the incidents that occurred during his journey towards freedom and he says that he has a "tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (B, pp. 72-73), where he locks away the painful memories.

Paul D and Sethe's intimacy is built on their shared past and traumatic experience and therefore, they can understand each other's pain. After Baby Suggs' death, Paul D is the first person that Sethe welcomes into her home. He encounters a place full of grief – for Halle, the baby, the sons who ran away and Baby Suggs – and cares for Sethe, proving to be her first glimpse of hope. The first time they have sex, he expresses that "[n]othing could be as good as the sex with her Paul D had been imagining off and on for twenty-five years" and Sethe recalls that since Halle no man had looked at her the way Paul D does. Skipping "love and promise", after one night together, "they were talking like a couple" (B, p. 42).

Shortly after Paul D arrives, he drives the haunting spirit out of 124 and together with Denver, Sethe and Paul D enjoy a day in town. After years of hiding in their home and being haunted by the ghost, Denver and Sethe re-enter the community for a day and can enjoy themselves. Sethe believes that Paul D will be able to heal some of her wounds and Paul D tells her that he will take care of her and Denver:

> Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out. […] I been in territory ain't got no name, never staying nowhere long. But when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn't the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life. (B, p. 46)

For the first time, Sethe, a woman determined to keep the past away, allows herself to imagine a life and future for herself and her daughter, with a man from her past[2]. Despite a few brief moments of harmony in the house of 124, the arrival of the mysterious Beloved creates friction between Sethe and Paul D as he becomes suspicious of Beloved's identity and intentions. Similarly to what later happens to Sethe, Beloved's presence brings up agonizing memories for Paul D. When Beloved demands sex from

[2] As Mbalia points out it "is a mark of Toni Morrison's heightened consciousness that she depicts the life that Paul D struggles to build with Sethe as one based on a common history and a common struggle that both shared on Sweet Home. It is not based on sex, such as the Milkman-Sweet affair of *Song of Solomon*, nor based on physical appearance, such as the Son-Jadine affair of *Tar Baby*. […] Together, Paul D and Sethe must struggle to forge a positive life under the most oppressing conditions." (pp. 94-95)

Paul D, the painful trauma that he kept hidden comes out. In chapter X, he recalls what happened to him after escaping Sweet Home and before arriving at 124, his time chained in a prison and the horrors he suffered and witnessed. Their relationship is further complicated when Stamp Paid shows Paul D a newspaper clipping, describing what Sethe did to her children. Horrified, he leaves, believing that Sethe's love was "too thick" (B, p. 164). Paul D's condemnation of Sethe's actions is significant. Up to this point in the story, Sethe and Paul D connected over their shared trauma and they were able to love each other outside of Sweet Home and build a life together, but the revelation of Sethe's crime "scared" (B, p. 164) him. Paul D is so wounded that he believes Sethe is in the wrong for loving her children so much. He believes that "[f]or a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (B, p. 45). Even though he himself had experienced horrific and traumatizing episodes in order to escape the plantation, he compares Sethe's actions to those of a wild animal when he tells her: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (B, p. 165). Toni Morrison revealed that the question that prompted her novel *Beloved* was "the effort of a woman to love her children, to raise her children, to be responsible for her children. And the fact that it was during slavery made all those things impossible for her. […] She couldn't be a mother" (Morrison, 1993). Paul D fails to understand the complexity of motherhood, especially for Sethe who, for the first time in her life, is able to mother her children as a free woman.

At this point in *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D are comparable to Macon and Ruth. Paul D is unable to overlook Sethe's actions or try to understand her. The same happened to Macon as he dwells over Ruth's relationship with her father, believing her actions to be inexcusable and thus he withdraws from her. Nevertheless, it is Paul D's actions at the end of the novel, when he returns to Sethe, that distinguishes the couple in *Beloved* from the parents of *Song of Solomon*. This is because, according to Bowen's theory, *Marital Conflict* only occurs when neither of the spouses gives in to the other in major significant issues. In the novel, when Paul D and Sethe first reunite, they are both repressing their traumas believing that the best way to survive is to not confront their past. But when Beloved arrives, the personification of the family's trauma, she forces

Sethe and Paul D to confront their pain. Beloved opens Paul D's "tobacco tin" forcing him to relive painful memories and as for Sethe, she constantly reminds her of her time as a slave and her desperate actions to prevent her return. In the final chapters of *Beloved*, when Paul D returns after finding out that Beloved is gone, he wonders why he ever left Sethe, claiming that "[h]e left her unwillingly because he wanted to talk more, make sense out of the stories he had been hearing" (B, p. 267). His willingness to return, forgive and take care of Sethe and wonder why he ever left are the reasons why their relationship plays in opposition to Macon and Ruth's. He returns aware that he must face his griefs and he must help Sethe overcome her own despair. As Paul D tells Sethe:

> "Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."
> He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.
> "Me? Me?" (B, p. 273)

The contrast between the two couples illustrates Bowen's theory that *Marital Conflict* occurs when spouses bring into the relationship their internal anxieties, and neither are willing to give in during the fusion. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon turns his back on Ruth as he believes that nothing can change her or their relationship. Both are unwilling to compromise and thus, at the end of the novel, their marriage is as dysfunctional as it was at the beginning. What distinguishes Sethe and Paul D, in *Beloved*, is their willingness to change and help make each other better. Paul D's final words to Sethe, telling her that she is in fact her own "best thing", contrast with the turbulence of the previous chapters, and provide a moment of hope for the characters.

## 2.2. The emotional impact of "another leaving": broken families

> "She won't put up with another leaving, another trick. Waking up to find one brother then another not at the bottom of the bed, his foot jabbing her spine. Sitting at the table eating turnips and saving the liquor for her grandmother to drink; her mother's hand on the keeping-room door and her voice saying, 'Baby Suggs is gone, Denver'."
>
> *Beloved*, p. 123

Whilst high levels of anxiety and unresolved family issues can provoke conflict in a marriage, that anxiety can also reflect on the others, causing members of the family to withdraw physically and emotionally in order to escape the family's tension.

In American history, during the period of slavery, black families were unable to build stable, safe families as family separation was a constant threat. Enslaved parents lived in constant fear of their children being taken away from them, sold to a different plantation. Furthermore, there was also the possibility that one or both of the parents could be sold. In the novels, both families are affected by slavery and family separation, even the generations born after the end of the Civil War. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, despite having given birth to nine children, is unaware of their whereabouts. All her children, except for Sethe's husband Halle, were sold away and taken from her and, "in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers" (B, p. 23). Paul D remembers the people he encountered along his journey, including families who he marvelled at as they had been able to stay together:

> Once, in Maryland, he met four families of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years: great-grands, grands, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, children. Half white, part white, all black, mixed with Indian. He watched them with awe and envy, and each time he discovered large families of black people he made them identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who. (B, p. 219)

Indeed, in both stories, the flight of a family member disturbs the families so deeply that it affects the lives of multiple generations – Sethe's mother escaped the plantation leaving Sethe behind to fend for herself whilst Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon "flew back to Africa" (SoS, p. 401), leaving his wife and twenty-one children behind.

In the article "The Violence Of Family Formation: Enslaved Families And Reproductive Labor In The Marketplace", Kendra Field writes about the practice of separation of enslaved families by sale as one of the two practices that violently shaped enslaved family formation (the other being forced reproduction of enslaved labour through sexual violence). She observes that "[f]or many enslaved people, […] the emblem of slavery was the denial and destruction of family bonds, and the vision of an

emancipated future rested upon the security of family and kinship" (Field, p. 256). Slavery meant that family bonds were volatile, and even painful as characters were always on the verge of losing their loved ones, seen as white people's property and saleable goods. Curiously, in post-slavery generations, families are also broken apart, not necessarily by others but by members of the family themselves.

Bowen's concept of *Emotional Cutoff* describes "the way people manage the undifferentiation (and emotional intensity associated with it) that exists between the generations" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 271). *Emotional Cutoff* between the generations was originally described by the concept of *emotional distance*. Cutoff becomes a separate concept in the theory "to emphasize its importance for explaining the intensity of the emotional process in a nuclear family and its importance in the conduct of family psychotherapy" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 271). There are various degrees of *Emotional Cutoff*. It can vary from a person staying completely away from their family to someone who has regular contact with their family but there are certain issues and family members with whom they would rather not deal with.

In *Beloved*, 124 is the home of a broken family – Baby Suggs got unwillingly separated from her children just as Sethe gets separated from her husband Halle during their escape. Still, her two sons, Howard and Buglar, run away from 124, on their own accord. In the first chapter of *Beloved*, the reader is told of a "spiteful" house of which "Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims" (B, p. 3). The grandmother had passed away and "the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old" (B, p. 3). Sethe's sons were victims of Sethe's attempted killings and later are haunted by the ghost of the dead baby, shattering mirrors or leaving "two tiny hand prints" (B, p. 3) in a cake. Upon their departure, their ailing grandmother Baby Suggs is only surprised that they did not leave sooner as they must have realised "that every house wasn't like the one on Bluestone Road" (B, p. 3). Frightened of their mother and disturbed by the ghost, Sethe's sons leave the women of 124, telling Denver that they wanted "to fight the War" (B, p. 205), and are not present for the entire story. Throughout the novel, Sethe often thinks about her sons and, after they leave, there was a time when, every day and night, she looked for them in the fields. Sethe fears that

as the years go by the memories of her sons' faces will fade from her memory but her time at Sweet Home will always come back to her and, Denver misses her brothers and the pleasure of their company. The departure of the two children further aggravates Sethe's emotional fragility and increases Denver's loneliness. Sethe's sons leave behind their wounded family, and by cutting off, Howard and Buglar play no role in the recovery of their mother and the alleviation of the family's trauma. By staying and facing the horrors of the house and the family, Denver is able not only to heal herself and her mother, but also assure the broken family's survival.

On the other hand, Paul D also distances himself from Sethe upon learning from Stamp Paid about what she did to her children, behaving "like everybody else in town once he knew" (B, p. 173). Unlike Sethe's sons, Paul D does not go far and instead, stays at the town's church. His return is meaningful since her relationship with Paul D represents an optimistic future for Sethe.

In *Beloved*, *Emotional Cutoff* is achieved through the reduction of emotional contact by physical distance, as characters run away from those who evoke distressing memories. In *Song of Solomon*, even though *Emotional Cutoff* plays a significant role in the story, characters distance themselves from others through what Bowen calls *emotional distance*. Bowen and Kerr write that "[t]he amount of physical distance that exists between people and their families of origin is not equivalent to the amount of emotional distance that exists" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 272). This theory argues that physical distance and emotional distance are not always equal and that in fact, a person can live "on the same street, or in the same house as their family of origin" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 272) but have no contact with them. In the novel, Macon Dead is the best representation of this theory. Despite living in the same town as his sister and her family, Macon refuses to allow Pilate to be a part of his family.

Pilate's existence and choices are her brother's main source of trepidation. Macon compares his sister to "common street women" (SoS, p. 25). Pilate's unrefined home, her job as a bootlegger, and her family of "lunatics" (SoS, p. 25) go against all of Macon's stern principles, and he is certain that the white men in the banks who help him buy and mortgage his houses would disapprove of her. Macon believes that his

association with her detracts from the considered image he has created of himself. Thus, Macon distances himself and his family from his sister and her family as a connection to her would prove detrimental to his social position.

Through flashbacks, the reader is led through Macon and Pilate's relationship and their eventual falling out. After their father dies, the Dead siblings hide away in a cave, where they encounter an old man who Macon kills. After he is killed, Pilate and Macon find gold within the man's possession and Macon wants to take it with them:

> "That's stealing. We killed a man. They'll be after us, all over. If we take his money, then they'll think that's why we did it. We got to leave it, Macon. We can't get caught with no bags of money." "This ain't money; it's gold. It'll keep us for life, Pilate. We can get us another farm." (SoS, p. 212)

The discovery of the gold is a pivotal moment for Macon and Pilate's relationship. Pilate believes that taking the gold would be considered stealing from a man Macon just murdered. Macon however sees the gold as "[l]ife, safety, and luxury" (SoS, p. 211). He believes that the gold they found would secure their future, starting the narrative of Macon's obsession with money. The moment Macon and Pilate separate in the cave is representative of their distinct beliefs. Whilst Pilate wants to leave as she believes taking the money would be stealing, Macon sees his future financial security, foreshadowing the greed that dominates his adult life. Later in his life, Macon is furious when Ruth gets Pilate's help and Milkman's interest in Pilate stems from a defiance of his father. Although physically close to them, Macon is emotionally distant.

In Bowen's theory, *Emotional Cutoff* is seen as an unsustainable way of differentiating oneself from the family and "[m]ost people who claim to be 'independent' of their families have 'broken away' from them rather than 'grown away' from them" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 272). In order to fully differentiate oneself, separation is not sufficient. In fact, it is understanding and dealing with the family's generational trauma and how it is projected upon its members that one can actually sustainably grow away from the family.

## 2.3. "Beat a path away from […] parents": generational trauma

"He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well."

*Song of Solomon*, p. 223

Bowen's *Family Projection Process* describes the way in which parents transmit their emotional problems to their children. This process can impair the functioning of children, increasing their chances of inheriting relationship sensitivities such as a heightened need for approval and attention or having the tendency to blame others for their own misgivings. If the projection is very intense, the child can even develop stronger sensitivities than those of the parents. Bowen believes the solution to this projection is "to avoid becoming entangled in the issues of the family projection process and to direct attention to the parental anxiety that feeds the projection" (Bowen, p. 157). Parents' unresolved fears and perceptions can shape the way children grow up and relate to the world outside of their family unit. Often, in a family with several children, one of the children can receive more attention from parents, and in the process take in more of the parents' fears whilst the other children develop a more differentiated outlook.

In *Song of Solomon*, the process of projection is evident in the relationship between Ruth and Macon and their son Milkman. As emphasised in the first chapter of this thesis, the Dead parents suffer from low levels of differentiation which stem from their childhood. During Ruth's upbringing, she did not fully develop her independence or her sense of self outside of being her father's daughter. And so, she develops an inapt dependence on others. Macon, having witnessed his father lose everything he had worked hard for, becomes relentless in his quest to become a successful businessman that black men fear and revere and white men respect.

In his theory, Bowen mentions that the *Family Projection Process* does not necessarily affect all the children equally, and that it is, in fact, usually just one child, one that receives more attention, who is likely to receive more projection too:

> The lifestyle of parents, fortuitous circumstances such as traumatic events that disrupt the family during the pregnancy or about the time of birth, and special relationships with sons or daughters are among factors that help determine the "selection" of the child for this process. The most common pattern is one in which one child is the recipient of a major portion of the projection, while other children are relatively less involved. (Bowen, p. 524)

Due to the circumstances of Milkman's birth as well as the fact that he was Ruth and Macon's first son, he becomes the main recipient of his parents' projection. Indeed, Milkman inherited from his parents his low levels of differentiation, resulting in him becoming rebellious teenager that tries to be different from his parents, not allowing their past to become his present. Although he tries hard to be unlike his parents, through a process of projection, his parents' emotional problems reflect on Milkman and his way of behaving and seeing the world.

Firstly, Milkman picks up, from both his parents, a sense of superiority and grandeur. Although he often rebelled against his father, Milkman believes in the same things his father does: his own superiority within society and the importance of money and possessions. While many of these lessons are taught to him by his father, Ruth is equally proud of their status in society, despite the reality of their turbulent marriage and their dysfunctional family. This sense of superiority translates into Milkman's passivity and immaturity: "Milkman had stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years" (SoS, p. 121). He is indifferent and lacks any empathy for others, especially those he believes inferior to him, and he even admits that "he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people" (SoS, p. 132).

Secondly, Macon's hostility and Ruth's passivity provide Milkman with a terrible example of a respectful relationship between a man and a woman and thus Milkman fails to have a loving, considerate relationship with any woman, be that romantic, as is the example with Hagar, or simply platonic, as is the example with his sisters. Milkman exhibits chauvinistic traits and views women as inferior to him, as is demonstrated when he describes his sisters as "the most tolerant and accommodating of all the women he knew" (SoS, p. 98) or when, thinking that his mother was meeting a lover at the train station wonders "what man wanted a woman over sixty anyway?" (SoS, p. 149).

Milkman's carelessness has real consequences, the most obvious being the downfall of Hagar, an already fragile person who is seriously wounded by Milkman's disinterest.

Finally, Milkman is unwillingly given his nickname. Milkman's nickname originates from an incident when Freddie, one of Macon's employees, witnesses Ruth breastfeeding Milkman as a grown child. Freddie coins the nickname Milkman and throughout the novel, only his family call him Macon. Milkman's nickname therefore derives from his mother's emotional problems and her inappropriate relationship with her son. Macon, unaware of the origin of the nickname, notes that: "He knew that wherever the name came from, it had something to do with his wife and was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her, coated with disgust" (SoS, p. 19). Although for a while Milkman does not recall the origin of his name, in Chapter III, he is horrified when he finally remembers. And so, Ruth's actions impacted her child not only in a psychological way, as he believed that she "had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near—be it her father or her son" (SoS, p. 98), but also in a real, tangible manner, as his nickname becomes the name he is known for.

And so, from his parents, Milkman is projected upon a sense of superiority, a distorted view of women and a passivity towards life. And these traits are the product of his parents' own insecurities. It is only after he is separated from his parents that he can change. During his trip to the south, Milkman acknowledges and interacts with the people in the town, unlike what he used to do in his hometown, he begins an affectionate and considerate relationship with Sweet, a young woman he meets during his trip, and he acknowledges the importance of the women in his life – "From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea" (SoS, p. 412). In order to grow, Milkman "must first become conscious of himself in relationship to his people; then and as a consequence, reject the individualistic, vulturistic class aspirations of his oppressor before experiencing a wholesome relationship with a woman" (Mbalia, p. 67). And despite all the pain he caused the women in his life, "Milkman is willing to die at the end, and the person he is willing to die for is a woman" (Morrison & McKay, p. 419). Milkman realises

that his parents' unresolved issues are not only taking over their lives but are also impacting his life. Although neither of his parents seem willing to resolve their impending emotional problems, at the end of the novel, Milkman is clearly a different, liberated person.

Just like Macon and Ruth's traumas unwillingly reflect on Milkman, Denver, the remaining child in 124, is greatly affected by her mother's past. Throughout the novel, Sethe is haunted by her days as a slave woman and the brutality and horrors she encountered. She escapes the plantation, bringing herself and her children to safety, but the memories of her past still deeply affect her. Sethe's "brain was devious" (B, p. 6) as the memories of the children she lost slowly fade away but the memories of Sweet Home and the men who hurt her, memories she tries so hard to forget, unexpectedly come to her. Sethe's sons were old enough to remember what their mother tried to do to them and so, at the age of thirteen, they flee 124. Denver was only a new-born and so has no memory of her mother's actions. But when she discovers what her mother did, she is fearful of her, saying of her mother: "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it" (B, p. 205).

Denver's upbringing is shaped by her mother's choices both in a positive sense and a negative one. On the one hand, it is due to Sethe's motivation to escape Sweet Home that Denver was able to grow up a free child. Sethe believed that by killing her children, they would be protected from slavery and, for her, death was better than slavery. Although she only manages to kill one of her children, her will prevails. Since schoolteacher believed Sethe to be crazy, her children did not in fact return to Sweet Home. As Sethe proclaims: "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em. […] It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (B, p. 165).

On the other hand, Sethe's extreme actions brought onto the family a reclusive state and a loneliness felt most strongly by Denver, especially after her brothers escape and her grandmother dies. What is left in the house is Sethe, Denver and the ghost of the dead daughter who haunts the house:

> 124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. (B, p. 3)

Being the two remaining occupants of 124 and with little contact with the outside world, Sethe and Denver develop a close bond which results in an intense process of family projection.

Firstly, Denver is a lonely child, withdrawn from society. After Sethe murders her daughter and is sent to jail, the black community distance themselves from her. Sethe accepts this reality as she believes that all she needs is her family, but for her youngest daughter it means being reluctantly estranged from the black community. At age seven, Denver attended school at Lady Jones's house with other black children. Denver was "so happy she didn't even know she was being avoided by her classmates" (B, p. 102). Because of the reputation of 124, Denver is rejected by the other children. Still, school was "precious", and Denver loved being in the company of other children, "[e]specially so because she had done it on her own" (B, p. 102). But after a year, she refused to return to the school after another child, Nelson Lord, asked her: "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (B, p. 104). After this incident, Denver begins to ponder the real reason why her brothers ran away but realizes she is too afraid to know the truth and thus does not return to school. Denver believes that it was something that exists in the outside world which prompted her mother to try and kill her children. Fearful of her mother's actions, Denver further believes that bad things are waiting for them outside of their home and thus, does not leave the house by herself until the final moments of the novel.

Secondly, due to Sethe's overly protective parenting, Denver is very immature. Having been an only child for most of her life, she is very dependant on her relationship with her mother and her mother's protection and attention. Paul D tells Sethe: "[…] she has to take it if she acts up. You can't protect her every minute. What's going to happen when you die?" (B, p. 45). Denver is egocentric and childish, disliking "the stories her mother told that did not concern herself" (B, p. 62), loving instead to hear the part of the part of the stories that were "all about herself" (B, p. 77), like the story of Amy

Denver, the woman who helped her mother during childbirth and from whom she got her name. Furthermore, she immediately disapproves of Paul D as he takes her mother's attention away from her. The consequences of Sethe's mothering are reflected on Denver, the child she spent the most time with, and the result was "a timid but hard-headed daughter Sethe would die to protect" (B, p. 99).

Finally, the presence of Beloved, as well as the ghost of the dead baby, heavily impact Denver's mental state as well as her relationship with the outside world. Beloved represents Sethe's past coming back to haunt her present and as Denver is the child that remains, she is equally disturbed by her mother's suffering. Despite having escaped slavery, Sethe is full of physical and emotional scars that unwillingly affect Denver, despite her having never experienced slavery. Denver has recurrent nightmares of her mother cutting her "head off every night" (B, p. 206), the same nightmare her brothers had. Furthermore, although not imprisoned by the plantation owner, Sethe and her daughter are still restrained to their house. And as Beloved takes over the house, Denver is separated from her mother and is isolated in her own home.

Thus, Denver is projected into a fear of the unfamiliar world and a dependence of her mother which lead to a fearful, lonely, childish young woman. At the end of the novel, when she ventures into the outside world by herself, Denver goes against all that her mother had passed on to her. She reaches out to the community and accepts their generosity, believing in the importance of community, starting "her life in the world as a woman" (B, p. 248). In the last chapter of the novel, after Beloved is exorcized, Denver is a different person. Now a grown woman, Denver has a job, hoping to be able to continue to help her mother and is now an active member of the community. And most notably, when she encounters Paul D, she seems to have accepted him as she encourages him to visit her mother.

Bowen observes that the most common example of transfer of anxiety is from mother to child. Bowen believed that in order to heal this projection it was necessary to focus on the mother's own functioning and not the child's as it would be through healing the mother that the patient would be healed. In *Beloved*, this is true. It is only through healing Sethe that Denver can be freed of her anxieties. At the end of the novel, Sethe

has dealt with her pain which allows her to re-join society and to allow herself to be loved by Paul D. *Beloved* is an examination of the lasting impact of slavery and the impact of generational trauma. Morrison illustrates the consequences of this unresolved trauma and how it affects the newer generations, even those born freed from slavery.

# 3. The Extended Family

In her essay "Family Systems Theory as Literary Analysis", Sarah Schiff observes that:

> It is significant that Bowen focuses his attention on the "nuclear" family – that structure that, in the 1950s and 1960s, was so highly esteemed over the more common organization of the extended family […] Bowen actually considers the nuclear family as less encouraging for physiological development than the extended family, because the latter offers a wider emotional support system […]. (p. 35)

Schiff refers to the idea that the nuclear family can be seen as unsustainable and that in fact, in order to relieve anxieties and tensions, close contact with an extended family is beneficial. A nuclear family is commonly used to refer to two adults tied by marriage and their children. The term nuclear family was popularized in the United States in the 1950s and 60s, becoming the most common and appealing form of family structure. On the other hand, an extended family is the expansion on that nuclear family, consisting of members of the parental lineage. In *Family Evaluation - An Approach Based On Bowen Theory*, the authors suggest that "[i]mproving emotional contact with the extended family has the potential to significantly reduce serious physical, emotional, and social symptoms in oneself and/or in one's nuclear family" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 276). They believed that a larger relationship system was a stabilizing dynamic for a nuclear family and that contact with that system could alleviate anxieties developed in the family unit. As will be shown below, Toni Morrison agreed with this idea.

Indeed, Morrison is often considered a critic of the traditional nuclear family composed of a mother, a father, and their children. In her fiction, female-headed households often represent the most stable, loving families despite not following the traditional family structure. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon describes "the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (SoS, p. 36) in Pilate's home. In *Sula*, both Nel and Sula grow up in a house without a father. Helena, Nel's religious mother raises Nel in a stable environment and it is believed that Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, purposely put her leg under a train in order to receive insurance money that would help feed her children. In her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea

O'Reilly writes about the central role of motherhood in Morison's novels and argues for the powerfulness of motherhood, writing that:

> In each of [Morrison's] seven novels we find representations of women who embody the ancient proprieties of traditional black womanhood. Mrs. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva in *Sula*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, and Sethe in *Beloved* are women who, to use Morrison's words, "could build a house and have some children . . . they are both ship and safe harbor at the same time." (p. 41)

Morison's opposition to the nuclear family system comes from the placement of wives as inferior to the husbands. Placing the husbands as the money-makers and the wives as the caretakers, women are represented as passive and obedient, playing the nurturing role within the patriarchal house. A nuclear family that could be considered a positive ideal in Morrison's fiction are the MacTeers in *The Bluest Eye* who exist to contrast with the highly dysfunctional but "traditional" family of the Breedloves. Toni Morrison agreed that flaws existed within the nuclear family model and in an interview, when asked about family, Morrison responds:

> We were talking earlier about family and the difficulty of describing it because there's so many labels. The language has got to change but we just get family values means something very, very specific now. And what we define as a family is what is different. I am telling you I am a woman with two sons. I'm a family but I need a larger family. I'm not sure that a family has to be the mom, the dad, the two kids, and the dog and the cat. […] There are other figurations. And what I needed was a larger configuration of a family. Sometimes you call it an extended family. (Morrison, 1993)

Morrison supports the idea of broadening the concept of family, allowing for the recognition of single parent homes as well as amplifying the importance of the extended family, the ones outside the family that help keep the balance within the nuclear family. Furthermore, the concept of nuclear family in the United States usually depicts two white parents and their white children. David Brooks, in his article "The Nuclear Family Was A Mistake", echoes one of Toni Morrison's most famous quotes "One person cannot raise a child. Neither can two. You need everybody" (Morrison, 1993) when he writes:

> African Americans have always relied on extended family more than white Americans do. […] Mia Birdsong, the author of the forthcoming book *How We Show Up*, told me recently. "The reality is, black families are expansive, fluid, and brilliantly rely on the support, knowledge, and capacity of 'the village' to take care of each other […]". (Brooks, 2020)

Throughout their book *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*, Bowen and Kerr acknowledged the importance of the extended family and their supportive role towards the nuclear family. They believed the last part of the process of family evaluation in clinical trials was to gather information on the extended family system as a way "to broaden the perspective on the presenting problems" (Kerr & Bowen, p. 299) and that a therapist must look into the extended family relationships to get a better picture of the emotional forces affecting the family. The agitation within a nuclear family can be stabilized by outside relationships by establishing a larger relationship system for the members of the family. This larger system is most often made up of members of the extended family, but it can also include close friendships.

In *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison explores the roles of the extended family and the role of the community in the lives of the central families. In both novels, extended family does not simply include relatives of the immediate family. Friends and the community around play a big part in the growth of the characters as the outsiders provide a different perspective of the family from those within the household. This new perspective proves to be important for the protagonists to differentiate themselves from their family of origin and make their own paths. Those around the Dead family, in *Song of Solomon*, and the family in 124, in *Beloved*, are crucial in the understanding of the families' dynamics, as they provide an onlooker perspective, but they are also crucial to mitigate the family's anxieties and provide a sense of stability.

## 3.1. "Every woman's not as strong as she is": Baby Suggs and Pilate

> "'Was that something? Wow! She's two inches taller than he is, and she's talking about weak.'
> 'We are weak.'
> 'Compared to what? A B-52?'
> 'Every woman's not as strong as she is.'
> 'I hope not. Half as strong is too much.'"
> *Song of Solomon*, p. 118

In her article “Reconstructing Kin: Family, History, and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’”, Dana Heller writes about the important role of caretakers in the education and guidance of young children:

> Under the yoke of slavery, permeable and unstable kinship structures were often necessary so that parents could entrust their children to someone else if they were sold away or separated. Often, as a result, children were parented more by a community of caretakers than by their biological parents, […]. (p. 109)

In fact, this idea is present in both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. In *Beloved*, Denver’s grandmother Baby Suggs and, in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s aunt Pilate act as mother figures and spiritual guides to the unsettled characters in the novels. Through Baby Suggs’ preaching and Pilate’s singing and storytelling, they inspire positive changes in the protagonists, often acting as moral guides. Having survived difficult pasts and childhoods, their hardships instilled in them a sense of compassion and generosity to others and, often in the novels, the matriarchs act as a comfort to the anxious others. Morrison celebrates the value of female-headed households, the women holding their families together, the matriarchs and caretakers who honour their ancestors and support the descendants.

*Beloved* is the story of an African American family, broken up by slavery, living in the years before, during and after the Civil War in the United States. At a time when black families did not have control over their lives, it was important to rely on community and extended family to assure safety and shelter for children. When Sethe needs a refuge for her family, she sends them to Baby Suggs, her husband’s mother who she had never met before.

Baby Suggs, Halle’s mother, and thus Sethe’s mother-in-law and Denver’s grandmother, was born into slavery but bought out of slavery by her son Halle. She had eight children (Johnny, Patty, Rosa Lee, Ardelia, Tyree, Nancy, Famous and Halle), fathered by six different fathers. At different points in their lives, all her children, except Halle, were taken away from her. Before Sweet Home, as the reader learns in Chapter

XV, her former master called her Jenny Whitlow, but she changed her name to Baby Suggs – Suggs being her husband's last name and Baby the name he used to call her.

Just like Pilate, Baby Suggs' name is a connection to someone she loved and lost. "Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed" (B, p. 142) and she did not care that Mr. Garner did not consider it a good enough name for a freed slave. That name was how her husband and children remembered her and thus, she keeps it in case any of them try to find her. Asserting her independence from her slave given name, Baby Suggs begins her journey as a freed woman. Embraced by the community in Cincinnati, Baby Suggs becomes a mother figure to the townspeople. "Baby Suggs preaches and prays a strong message of grace and redemption through love" (Griesinger, p. 689), which is particularly relevant as the characters in the novel struggle to make peace with their past: "Whatever they have suffered, however intolerable their past, they can, if they choose, imagine that God has not forsaken them, that life is not therefore as hopeless as it appears to be" (Griesinger, p. 689). Baby Suggs is missed by the community around her who remember 124 before Sethe's arrival, as "a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed" (B, pp. 86-87).

After the arrival of her grandchildren and her daughter-in-law, Baby Suggs, a mother robbed of motherhood, behaves as a parental figure in the house of 124, especially for Sethe who lost her mother when she was young. At home and elsewhere, she is a calming and healing presence. Sethe and Baby Suggs shared a traumatic past filled with pain and loss and thus their connection is profound. Having lost her mother very young, Sethe often thinks about Baby Suggs and misses "Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nape, reshaping it, saying, 'Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield […]'" (B, p. 86), comforting her and healing her. Sethe does not often talk about her biological mother but does often think of Baby Suggs and for Sethe "[n]ine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much" (B, p. 86). After the community fail to warn Sethe of the arrival of schoolteacher, Baby Suggs loses her faith and withdraws into 124.

When Baby Suggs is on her deathbed, Sethe takes care of her, blaming herself for Baby Suggs' collapse. Her death is a turning point for Sethe as Baby Suggs dies

heartbroken having witnessed the betrayal of the community and Sethe's killing of her child. Baby Suggs was also Sethe's connection to the community and so, after Baby Sugg's death, she separates herself even further from the community who wronged her. Despite her passing, Baby Suggs is a constant presence in the novel and an inspiration and guide for Sethe, and especially for Denver, and her memory in the town is what ultimately convinces the community to help the women in 124.

In *Song of Solomon* another character plays a similar role, reigning over the whole novel and inspiring the other characters as Baby Suggs does in *Beloved* – that character is Pilate, a larger-than-life woman who has an effect on all the characters in the novel, but especially on her nephew Milkman, playing a big part in the maturity of the protagonist. Indeed, Pilate takes over as the maternal figure in his life as his parents prove to be unreliable. Pilate's guidance of Milkman, a child that is not hers, is reminiscent of the African American tradition of *othermother*. *Othermothering* is the practise of accepting responsibility of taking care of a child, not of one's own, in a formal or not formal arrangement. Pilate takes over the maternal role in his life and Milkman even affirms that "[h]is visits to the wine house seemed […] an extension of the love he had come to expect from his mother" (SoS, p. 98). In her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O'Reilly writes about the practice of "Othermothering and Community Mothering" as a central tradition to African American motherhood and its importance in the survival of African American families. Considering Pilate an example of othermother in her relation to Milkman, O'Reilly notes that:

> Pilate is a healer. Her healing, however, is not only physical or emotional; it is most powerfully a spiritual healing. […] Pilate engages in what was described in the introduction as communal mothering; a concern and caring for people who are spiritually troubled. Pilate heals Milkman by returning him to his community and history. (p. 82)

When Milkman is a teenager, he visits his aunt's house for the first time and after spending a few moments with Pilate and her family, he proclaims that "it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy […] surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him" (SoS, p. 58). Milkman felt that his "whole family was a bunch

of crazies" (SoS, p. 94), including Pilate and her family, "[b]ut at least they were fun and not full of secrets" (SoS, p. 94), and found that the women "accepted him without question and with all the ease in the world" (SoS, p. 98). In an interview, when asked about Milkman and Pilate's relationship, Morrison responds that "Milkman's hope, almost a conviction, has to be that he can be like her" (Morrison & McKay, p. 421). Pilate tells Milkman stories about his heritage, inspiring his journey through the south and his eventual redemption.

Sharply contrasting with Macon's sophisticated home, Pilate's house, which she shares with her daughter and granddaughter, has few pieces of furniture and no electricity. Pilate lives a life with few possessions and only truly values the earring she wears, an earring that houses a piece of paper with her name written on it, the only word her father ever wrote. Furthermore, unlike Macon, Pilate is uninterested in cultivating an impressive image of her family in the community. Pilate is known as the woman who anyone "could buy wine from" (SoS, p. 29), someone "who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody" (SoS, p. 116), as well as a fiercely protective mother and grandmother who "had the power to step out of her skin, […] and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga" (SoS, p. 116). Without much money or many possessions, Pilate and her family are the clear representation of a supportive and nurturing family, despite not following conventions.

Pilate has as much of a hand in bringing Milkman to life as had his real biological mother. Pilate's influence on Milkman's life started before he was born. When Pilate arrives in town, she acknowledges Ruth's loneliness and helps bring Ruth and Macon together. During Ruth's pregnancy, Pilate watched over Milkman like he was her own and by the time Milkman was born, even though Pilate already had a daughter and a granddaughter, to Macon's perplexity "she seemed to be more interested in this first nephew of hers" (SoS, p. 23). Despite Macon's best efforts to separate his family from Pilate's, Milkman is fascinated by his mysterious aunt, someone not only captivating to him but also a famed and intriguing figure in the community. Milkman's visits to the wine house were not only enlightening and a form of escapism from his home life but they were filled with "secrecy and defiance" (SoS, p. 61) from his father.

Unlike Macon, Ruth and even Hagar, Pilate's love for Milkman is not possessive but better reflects the relationship of a spiritual guide and her pupil. Pilate sees Milkman's similarities to Macon, his selfishness and greed and tries to guide him towards a better life. In Milkman's journey to the south, during his spiritual quest, he often thinks of his aunt Pilate and feels "homesick for her" (SoS, p. 373) and upon his return she is the first person he visits as he is "so eager for the sight of Pilate's face when he told her what he knew" (SoS, p. 412). She inspired Milkman to free himself of his past and value his family and his heritage and, at the end of the novel, Milkman is willing to die for her.

Despite the positivity they generate, both Pilate and Baby Suggs die heartbroken. Pilate dies not long after the death of her granddaughter and Baby Suggs dies having witnessed the community turn their backs on her family. Although powerful in their own way, they were unable to protect the ones they loved from their own suffering and, ultimately, unable to impart their strength onto the weaker ones. Regardless of her death, Baby Suggs' presence is felt throughout the novel and even in her absence, Milkman often thinks of his aunt Pilate in moments of hopelessness and chaos. Both women value family and community and selflessly care for others. Their deaths represent a loss for the characters, but they also inspire the protagonists to act.

Baby Suggs' actions are inherently selfless, and she deposits much of her hope in the people around her: "Bought out of slavery by her son Halle, she becomes an unchurched preacher, dedicating her life to loving African people and encouraging them to love themselves" (Mbalia, p. 93); and at the end of her life, Pilate proclaims: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (SoS, p. 418). At the end of the novels, both Baby Suggs and Pilate have passed away, but their spirits are still heavily present as they guide the protagonists to change.

## 3.2. "The one person left whose clarity never failed him": Milkman's friendship with Guitar

"He needed to find the one person left whose clarity never failed him, and unless he was out of the state, Milkman was determined to find him."

*Song of Solomon*, p. 98

Throughout *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is not able to cope with or comprehend the tension between his parents nor the dysfunctional dynamic of his family and therefore, searches for direction elsewhere, from his aunt Pilate's guidance to the opinions of his good friend Guitar. In Chapter VI of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman tells his friend: "We've been friends a long time, Guitar. There's nothing you don't know about me. I can tell you anything—whatever our differences, I know I can trust you" (SoS, p. 191). Considering how alienated Milkman feels within his family, these words he mutters to Guitar are significant.

The friends meet at school when Milkman is twelve years old, when Milkman was an "uncomfortable little boy" (SoS, p. 43) and Guitar the person who "could liberate him" (SoS, p. 44). Guitar becomes Milkman's "confidant" (SoS, p. 328), the friend he can vent to about his parents but also someone that offers a different image of life. Being older and having experienced poverty throughout his life, Guitar is, in many ways, more knowledgeable about the real world than his friend. Their inherent differences are illustrated in the moment when Milkman and Guitar are fantasising about what they would do if they found the gold in the cave. Milkman can only think of buying "boats, cars, airplanes" (SoS, p. 223), things that could get him far away from his family. Milkman knows that all the luxuries he hopes to acquire would not have him lead a life much different from the one he already has. In contrast, Guitar can only dream of what he would buy "for his grandmother and her brother, Uncle Billy, […]; the marker he would buy for his father's grave, 'pink with lilies carved on it'; then stuff for his brother and sisters, and his sisters' children" (SoS, pp. 222-223). Despite their differences, Guitar becomes Milkman's best friend, seemingly his only friend.

Kerr and Bowen believed that "[m]any people 'escape' their families of origin determined to be different from them" and as a consequence, "develop 'substitute families' through friends or organizations and invest emotionally much more in them than in their extended families" (p. 272). In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman invests much more of himself in his relationship with Guitar as he is "the one person left whose clarity never failed him" (SoS, p. 98) and Guitar can be seen as a more inspiring parental figure to Milkman than his biological father. Whilst Milkman "differed from [his father] as

much as he dared" (SoS, p. 77), he emulates and reveres his friend Guitar. His influence on Milkman is tangible as he is the only person Milkman listens to and whose opinion matters. Guitar represents a lot of what Milkman lacks, being described as "wise and kind and fearless" (SoS, p. 58) but, just like Pilate, Guitar is fond of Milkman whilst still conscious of his many faults. Aware of Milkman's arrogance and materialism, Guitar hopes to enlighten Milkman. Whereas Macon tells Milkman that "[m]oney is freedom" (SoS, p. 202), Guitar utters to Milkman arguably the most famous quote of the novel: "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" (SoS, p. 222).

But in some ways, Guitar is not too dissimilar to Macon. Guitar is a disturbed individual, unable to let go of the past, and thus, allows the tragic death of his father to cloud over his decisions. Determined to right the world's wrongs, Guitar joins the Seven Days, an extremist group fixated on revenge for the death of black individuals, disregarding common sense. Guitar's dogmatism proves to be his biggest fault (similarly to Macon) as his strange sense of justice causes him to be unable to see clearly and, at the end of the novel, he even believes he must kill his best friend.

All in all, both Guitar and Pilate play parental roles in Milkman's life, filling in for the absence of real support from his biological father and mother proving that attention and support are two different things. In contrast, what Guitar represents to Milkman is missing in *Beloved*, as there is no one outside of her family that Denver can turn to. A "young girl living in a haunted house" (B, p. 15), Denver is described as a "lonely" (B, p. 12) and "lonesome" (B, p. 55) child, deeply affected by the loss of her brothers and her grandmother as well as the fact that no children had ever wanted to play with her.

In Morrison's fiction, friendships are important for her reserved protagonists as they often contrast with the reality of the home life. In *Sula*, for example, Nel's strict upbringing is challenged by her friendship with Sula. And in *The Bluest Eye*, lonely and delicate Pecola is the opposite of her strong-minded friend Claudia MacTeer, who is able to love Pecola in a way that her own family never did. However, in *Beloved*, Denver has no one, and even Stamp Paid proclaims that she "needed somebody normal in her life"

(B, p. 170). The role Guitar plays in Milkman's life, of a companion and confidant, would have been important to Denver as it would have contributed to her liberation sooner.

After the disappearance of the ghost, which was at a point, "the only other company she had" (B, p. 19), the arrival of Beloved is a new chance for Denver. Finally, Denver had someone who needed her and her excitement at taking care of Beloved was so great that at times she even "forgot to eat" (B, p. 54), and she is overjoyed when Beloved agreed to share her room. The relationship Denver attempts to create with Beloved is that of a sister, a companion. Beloved's happiness was Denver's reward and she happily spent time with Beloved and taught her things about her family and the world. However, Beloved attaches herself to Sethe, leaving Denver behind. Denver's initial interest in Beloved turns into fear as she senses that Sethe could die, leaving Denver alone with Beloved.

Still, at the end of the novel, after Denver seeks the help of the community, Nelson Lord, the child whose "words blocked up her ears", smiles at Denver, greeting her with: "Take care of yourself, Denver" (B, p. 252). In this moment, there is hope for Denver that, as she becomes part of the community, she can find the company she so longs for.

## 3.3. "Stepping off the edge of the world": the importance of reaching out to the community

"Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help."

*Beloved*, p. 243

In addition to the extended family, related by blood, both novels articulate the importance of relations between the families and the community, functioning as an extension of the family and providing a larger relationship system that allows for the ease of anxieties and for the possibility of self-discovery outside of the nuclear family. In the novels, the link with the community also functions as a connection to the past and the family's heritage. In *Beloved*, the aiding of Denver and Sethe is reflective of the community's affection towards Baby Suggs, and, in *Song of Solomon*, the residents of

Danville and Shalimar help Milkman in his quest to learn more about his family upon learning of his kinship to the great Macon Dead.

The moment Denver realizes that it is up to her to help her mother, she understands she is not capable of doing it by herself. The reality is that Denver is just a child who spent all her life sheltered from the outside world and projected upon her mother's traumas. She has no more family as her brothers are nowhere to be found and her grandmother, the woman who certainly would know what to do, has passed away. However, Denver realizes that in fact, she is not alone, as she remembers that at one point in their lives her mother and grandmother relied on help from the community, and she must do the same herself. Denver knew she had to "ask somebody for help" to save herself and her mother, but wonders "Who would it be? […] Denver knew *about* several people, from hearing her mother and grandmother talk. But she knew, personally, only two: an old man with white hair called Stamp and Lady Jones" (B, p. 243). Denver believes that the community could help because they had helped her family before. In addition to Stamp Paid and Lady Jones, she thinks of the Bodwin siblings, who "were most likely to help since they had done it twice. Once for Baby Suggs and once for her mother. Why not the third generation as well?" (B, p. 252). This passage highlights the importance of the community bond in the stability of the family as the community was essential in helping several generations of Denver's family.

Firstly, Denver seeks the help of Lady Jones, her former teacher, who, unlike others, considered Denver a bright child. Denver asks Lady Jones for work because she believed that "asking for help from strangers was worse than hunger" (B, p. 248). Two days after her visit, Denver finds food in the front porch brought to her by a member of the community. And since then:

> Every now and then, all through the spring, names appeared near or in gifts of food. […] to let the girl know, if she cared to, who the donor was, […] some of the parcels were wrapped in paper, and though there was nothing to return, the name was nevertheless there. […] All of them knew her grandmother and some had even danced with her in the Clearing. (B, p. 249)

In the Bodwin house, she meets Janey Wagon, one of their employees, who “had nothing but sweet words” to say about Baby Suggs, telling Denver she was “a good woman” (B, p. 254) and that everyone misses her. Feeling that she must confide in Janey, Denver tells her the truth about 124, about Beloved and her mother’s condition.

Despite the community’s initial divide from Sethe, they gather to help the mother and the child in 124. Upon hearing Denver’s stories, Ella, a member of the community, takes charge in the exorcism of Beloved. Ella had helped Baby Suggs when she arrived, helped Sethe reach Baby Suggs and her children after escaping Sweet Home, met Denver when she was a day old, but she was also one of the members of the community who had not alerted Sethe to the arrival of schoolteacher. Nevertheless, Ella believes that, despite Sethe’s actions, she “didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy” and in fact, it “was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order” (B, p. 256). Ella’s role is important as it represents the forgiveness of the community as well as a possible remorse over their role in Sethe’s downfall. In previous chapters, Ella is extremely critical of Sethe, indicating that she could never be friends with a woman capable of murdering her children. Still, Ella forgives Sethe believing than no one should have to spend decades of their lives paying for a past action. Her forgiveness, and ultimately, the forgiveness of the community is crucial as it indicates that perhaps Sethe can also forgive herself.

Stamp Paid, Lady Jones, Ella and the Bowdins were all members of the community who knew Baby Suggs and were present when Sethe arrived with her children. The novel proposes that “a family closed off from caring relationships with nonkin is a family doomed to be consumed by the spirits of the unresolved past” (Heller, p. 106). As Denver must reconnect with the community in order to save herself and her family, Milkman’s quest to learn more about his family means going back to his family’s home and connect with locals. In his journey to find the gold, later turned into a spiritual journey, Milkman encounters several people who guide him through his quest. He meets people who knew his grandfather and his father, and he even encounters members of

his extended family. Throughout his trip Milkman was surprised by “his ability to get information and help from strangers, their attraction to him, their generosity” (SoS, p. 324) which heavily contrasts with the reality of his hometown. In Danville, Milkman encounters Reverent Cooper who had once known his father and grandfather:

> “I could use your help, sir. My name is Macon Dead. My father is from around—"
> “Dead? Macon Dead, you say?”
> “Yes.” Milkman smiled apologetically for the name. “My father—"
> “Well, I’ll be.” Reverend Cooper took off his glasses. “Well, I’ll be! Esther!” He threw his voice over his shoulder without taking his eyes off his guest. “Esther, come here!” Then to Milkman: “I know your people!” (SoS, p. 285)

Milkman proclaims the good feeling it was to “come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people” (SoS, p. 286). Reverend Cooper tells Milkman about the history of the Dead family and for the first time he did not need to feel embarrassed about his surname. Reverend Cooper tells him about Circe, the Butlers, and the men who killed his grandfather. Throughout the conversation, Milkman listens attentively to this man while he describes a story that he had heard so many times before but had never really paid attention to. Now, sitting in the town where his father’s childhood was spent, Milkman takes in the story that no longer feels “exotic, something from another world and age” because “maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem so real” (SoS, p. 288). It is only when listening to Reverend Cooper that Milkman begins to understand his father and his aunt and finds himself missing his grandfather, the men they all spoke about with “such awe and affection” (SoS, p. 291). The men in the town “remembered both Macon Deads as extraordinary men” (SoS, p. 292) and Pilate as a “pretty woods-wild girl” (SoS, p. 292). The more the men talked, the more real the stories Milkman’s father told him seemed and the more he grasped the bond between his father and his grandfather. For the first time in the novel, thinking about his family, Milkman “grew fierce with pride” (SoS, p. 294).

Reverend Cooper leads him to Circe, the woman responsible for saving Macon and Pilate. After meeting Circe, he discovers the cave but no gold inside. This is a turning

point in Milkman's story and development for he does not find what he was initially looking for but meeting the people who knew his family ignites something in Milkman and he is determined to fill in the gaps of his family's history. Deciding to follow Pilate's "tracks" (SoS, p. 322), he leaves behind his materialistic, greedy self and begins his spiritual journey, following Pilate physically but also spiritually. In Shalimar, Milkman meets Susan Byrd, a woman "who looked to be about his mother's age" (SoS, p. 358). Milkman learns from her stories that they are likely related through Milkman's grandmother's side[3]. Miss Byrd's father was the brother of Milkman's grandmother Sing. Susan's grandmother Heddy Byrd is Milkman's great-grandmother. Curious about Milkman's inquiries, she asks Milkman: "It's important to you, is it, to find your people?"; to which Milkman replies: "No. Not really. I was just passing through, and it was just—just an idea. It's not important" (SoS, p. 364). But later Milkman proclaims: "It wasn't true what he'd said to Susan Byrd: that it wasn't important to find his people. Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing" (SoS, p. 365).

Milkman's ultimate triumph occurs when he listens to a group of children in Shalimar sing a familiar song. Milkman pieces together the information he has learned from his father, Pilate, Reverend Cooper and Susan Byrd and he is able to understand that the song the children sing in Shalimar, Pilate's song, was "a story about his own people!" (SoS, p. 379). And at the end of the novel, despite Pilate's death, she knows that the Dead family and their history will now survive through Milkman. As Morrison writes in the epigraph to *Song of Solomon*: "The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names".

*Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* both emphasize the importance of community. In the novels a connection between individual and community represent support, evolution, and survival. As Heller writes: "'family' came to mean a structure of relations capable of transcending blood kin to form an extended family including neighbors and

[3] "He was curious about these people. He didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody. […] But there was something he felt now—here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville—that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house." (SoS, p. 365)

friends" (p. 109). The final chapters of both novels highlight the importance of connection with others who share the same experiences and identity. Furthermore, connection to the community also represents a reconnection with the past. The novels prove that the isolation of the families is harmful for the mental stability of the characters and that kinship is the solution that allowed for the growth of the characters and the mitigation of past traumas.

## Conclusion

Bringing to mind Philip Larkin's "This Be The Verse", a lyric poem about the emotional trauma passed on from parents to their children, through the use of flashbacks and memories, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* tell the story of multiple generations of two African American families trying to cope with their traumatic past.

In *Beloved*, the family in 124 Bluestone Road struggles to deal with the consequences of slavery in its many generations and the difficulty of forgetting distressing memories. In *Song of Solomon*, the descendants of former slaves are still impacted by the lasting consequences of slavery as well as the isolating consequences of racism. Denver, a lonely childish girl living in the shadow of her mother's actions and Milkman, an immature and greedy young man alienated from his family as well as from the community around him, are the characters driving the stories. By placing Denver and Milkman in the centre of their respective narratives, Morrison builds two coming-of-age stories of two young people coming to terms with their individuality and their sense of self.

As a literary analysis tool for the two novels, the *Family Systems Theory* works particularly well as it positions the family in the centre of its study. Morrison often tells the story of a character conveying their present family relationships but also revealing the family's past – *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are two other good examples. In this way, Bowen's theory is a good complement as it also seeks to understand the mind of individuals by knowing more about the family that surrounds them.

With the concept of *Differentiation of Self*, it is possible to understand how the traits of parents reflect on their children. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon's excessive need to be admired by others and be seen as superior in the community shielded his children from the world beyond the home, making them unable to connect with anyone outside of their family. Only when Milkman and Corinthians question the classicism that they were taught to believe in are they able to find love and a sense of purpose. The same happens to Denver, in *Beloved*, as it is only when she refuses to accept her mother's judgment of the townspeople that she can connect with the community and save her family. Macon, Ruth, and Sethe reflect their low levels of differentiation onto their

children, who are only able to develop when they are capable of forming opinions and judgments of others without the influence of the parents.

In addition, differentiation levels also reflect how similar trauma can affect people differently. Pilate and Macon suffer the same loss but cope with that pain in very different ways. As Macon becomes obsessed with possessions and status, Pilate grows up to be a matriarch who loves her family above all else. Macon believes that the way to pay tribute to his father is to accumulate what was taken from him (property), whilst Pilate extends the love and affection that was given to her by her father and brother to her own family. And thus, Macon's lower levels of differentiation are juxtaposed with Pilate's higher levels.

The concept of *Nuclear Family Emotional Process*, which encompasses *Marital Conflict*, *Emotional Cutoff* and *Family Projection Process*, explains how anxieties are externalized and how they impact the relationships between the members of a nuclear family. By analysing the two central couples in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved,* Ruth and Macon and Sethe and Paul D, respectively, through the concept of *Marital Conflict*, it is possible to understand how couples externalise their anxieties onto their romantic relationships. Macon and Ruth are both unhappy with the reality of their lives and their marriage but seem unable to communicate with each other, and so they confide in their son but are ultimately unable to reconcile. Alternatively, Sethe and Paul D, who are both haunted by their days as slaves, initially supress their pain but, at the end of the novel, are able to come together and are determined to help each other heal.

*Emotional Cutoff* examines how separation affects not only the person who leaves but also the person who is left behind. Once her sons leave, Sethe's mental state deteriorates as a result of the abandonment by her children. Macon's cutoff from Pilate is revealing of their different paths of life. Still, their separation is tragic, especially as they both remember their childhood relationship as loving and affectionate. Therefore, Sethe and Macon, for example, perfectly illustrate the concept of *Emotional Cutoff* which examines how personal trauma and internal conflict can isolate people, even from the ones they love.

Additionally, the concept of *Family Projection Process* seeks to explain how parents' fears and anxieties are projected upon their children and how destabilising that projection can be. Some of Milkman's and Denver's traits can be attributed to the influence of their parents, including their arrested developments. For Milkman and Denver, it is the recognition of their families' history and the struggles of their parents' past that drive the characters' development. Morrison does not allow for the villainization of any of her characters. Instead, characters are not antagonists but products of their upbringing. Milkman and Denver are capable of growth only when they step out of their familiar sphere and embark on a journey into the unknown, experiencing a life out of their ordinary settings. In Danville and Shalimar, Milkman explores the city where his father lived, starts a loving relationship with a woman and interacts with the men and women of the town. Denver steps out of her house by herself, for the first time, and accepts the help of the community. She gets a job and connects with the men and women who had once cared for her grandmother and her mother.

And finally, through the notion captured in *Extended Family*, both novels are reflective of the benefits of a larger family unit as well as the importance of communal support. The role of a larger family is embodied by Pilate and Baby Suggs, two women who, despite the suffering they endured, are pillars of hope and courage in the world of the novels. They are caretakers who look after others, not because of what others can do for them, but because of their inherent kindness and their dedication to their families. Milkman and Denver both witness the death of these beloved characters – Pilate and Baby Suggs, respectively. Still, their grief turns into motivation to act: at the end of *Beloved*, shy and lonely Denver reaches out to the community as her grandmother had once done; and, in *Song of Solomon*, passive and patronising Milkman sacrifices himself to save his aunt's life, the first person to love him for who he was.

What's more, Milkman and Denver encounter individuals who were familiar to them as they had been part of their families' histories. By spending time with Ella, Stamp Paid (in *Beloved*), Reverend Cooper and Susan Byrd (in *Song of Solomon*), they are reconnecting with their ancestors and by learning about their history, they are keeping

their memories alive. Morrison highlights the importance of community, extended family, society, and the support of others outside of the family environment, in order to survive as a family in an oppressive world.

*Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* tell, in different periods of history and through different characters, similar stories. The families in both stories are disruptive as a result of their unresolved generational trauma and their isolation. Both narratives prove that, unless confronted, trauma will disrupt the development of the younger generations, shadowed by the families' past conflicts. Likewise, unresolved inner conflict is also an impediment to good parenting, as parents project upon their children their insecurities and fears. Moreover, trauma proves to be isolating. Not only are the members of the families emotionally distant from each other but they also recluse themselves in their household creating an oppressive and tense home. By placing the troubled, tormented families in the centre of these stories, Morrison explains the lasting impact of generational trauma, its danger to the younger generations and the benefits of the support of a community and the importance of connection with others. It is only through the great effort of the younger characters and their embrace of society that there is a glimmer of hope at the end of *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

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## Attachments

## Attachment 1

The Family Diagram[4] is an extension of the *Family Systems Theory*. The research done during a family evaluation can be recorded in the family diagram. However, the information contained on a family diagram is meaningless without a thorough understanding of the principles that govern emotional systems. It works as a supplement to family systems therapy (Kerr & Bowen, p. 306).

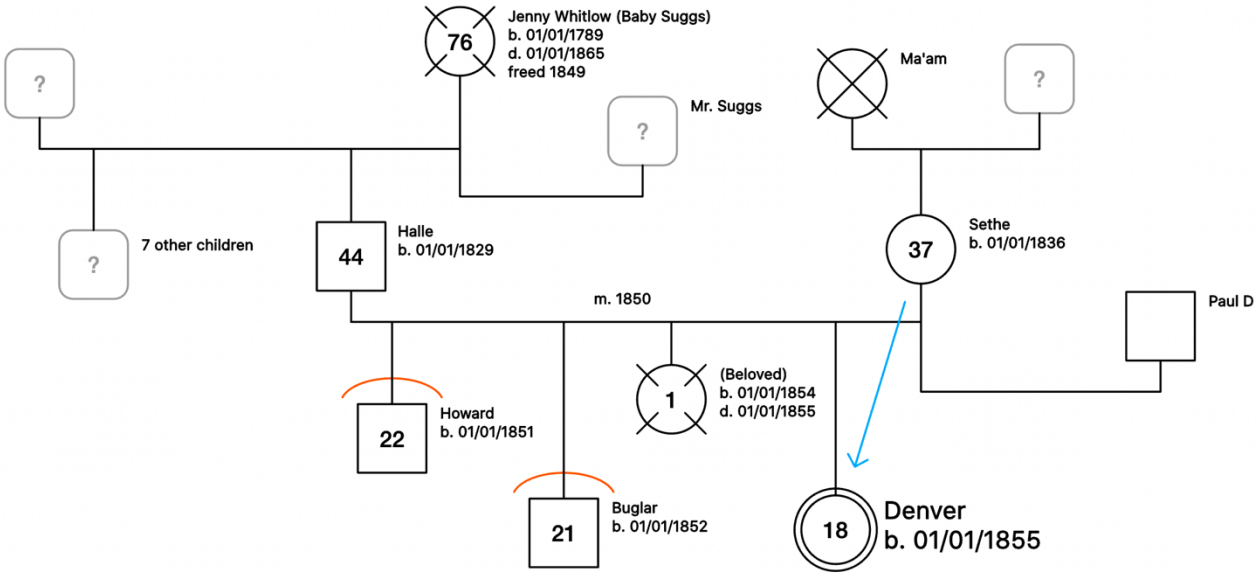


**Figure 1** Family Diagram of *Beloved*

The diagram shows the year 1873[5]. The round orange line represents Cutoff. The blue arrows represent *Family Projection Process*.

[4] The Family Diagram is created using a tool created by the Alaska Family Systems. Due to the system's features, it is not possible to omit the dates and months and thus when dates and months are unknown, I have recorded it as 01/01. The squares indicate males and the circles females. The crossed-out squares and circles indicate that the person has passed away. The squares with question marks indicate than not enough is known about the person. The numbers inside the squares and circles indicate ages (the birth and death dates are estimated based on passages from the novels).

[5] "Eighteen fifty-five. The day my baby was born." (*Beloved*, p. 7)
"Sethe was thirteen when she came to Sweet Home." (p. 10)
"Halle, of course, was the nicest. Baby Suggs' eighth and last child." (p. 23)
"Denver. She was ten and still mad at Baby Suggs for dying." (p. 4)

## Attachment 2

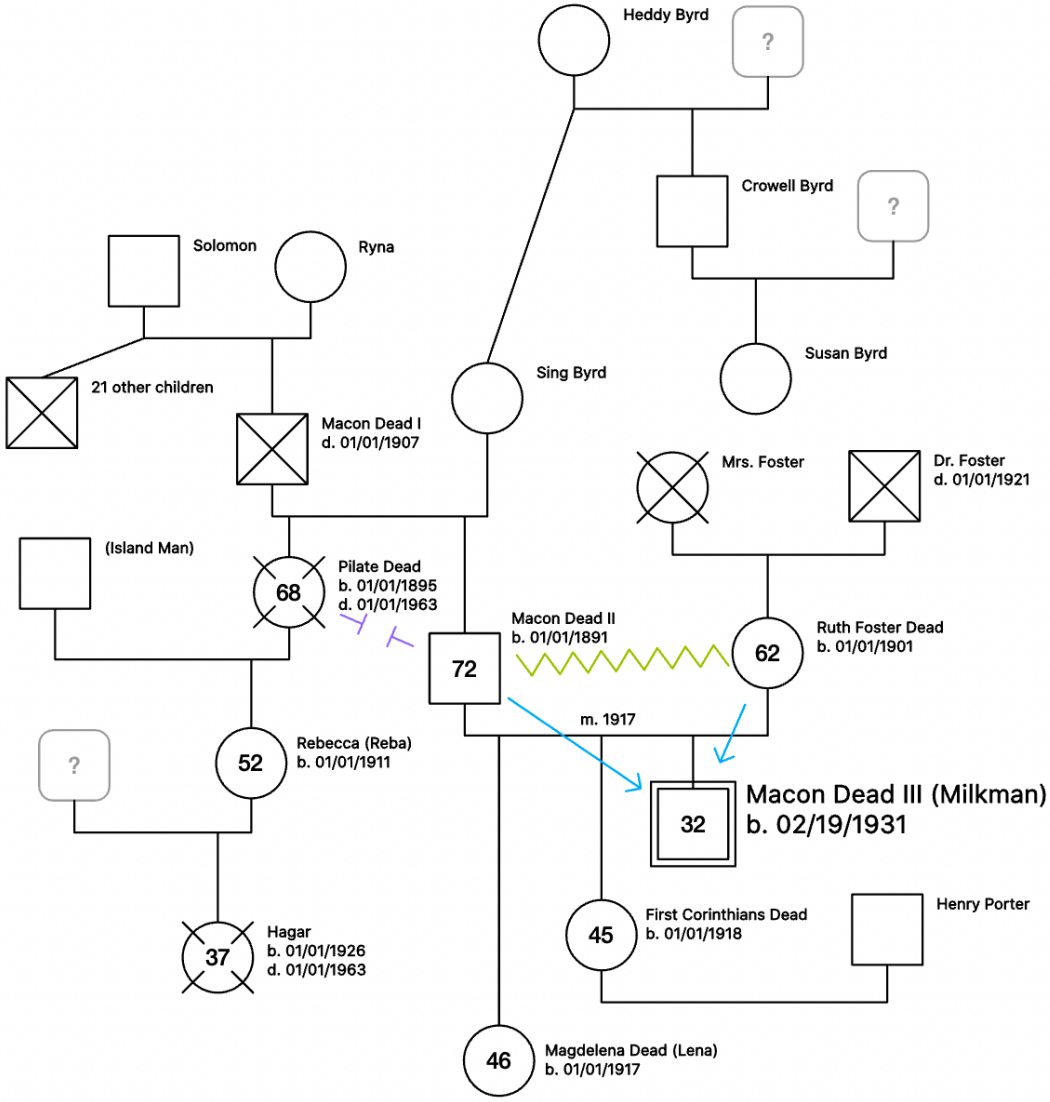


**Figure 2** Family Diagram of *Song of Solomon*

The diagram shows the year 1963[6]. The green line represents *Marital Conflict*. The lilac lines represent Emotional Distance. The blue arrows represent *Family Projection Process*.

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[6] "At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all. […] The next day a colored baby [Milkman] was born inside Mercy for the first time." (*Song of Solomon*, p.3-11)
"[…] in 1963, when [Pilate] was sixty-eight years old, […]" (p.185)
"[…] Ruth was only sixteen years older than Lena, […]" (p.84)
"Hagar could still whip it into a pant when [Milkman] was seventeen and she was twenty-two." (p.114)