***Song of Solomon***

***Athenaeum April 2013***

 Morrison's reputation as a leading author was established with publication of the novels "The Bluest Eye" (1970) and "Sula" (1973). Her third book "Song of Solomon" won the National Book Critics Circle award in 1977. Later in 1993 should would win the Nobel Prize. Outstanding prose is a strength of the novel. Morrison seems to navigate a style somewhere between the staccato brevity of Hemingway, and the flowing melody of James and Conrad. But like these other luminaries, no words are wasted. The pages unfold with effortless rhythm, whether in the drawn out soliloquy of an individual, or routine action of a scene. The image of Milkman at age 8 sitting on his mother's knee, legs barely touching the ground, or Pilate's story of the death of her father "blown 5 feet in the air", the dancing and singing children in Shalimar, or the evening Milkman spends with Sweet - told in a single paragraph - stand tribute to her talent. The reader has no trouble connecting with the main characters despite their complexity.

 The action of "Song of Solomon" opens on Feb 18, 1931 with the birth of Macon "Milkman" Dead (this also Morrison's birthday!). Born to a hard and driven father who is carving out a middle class lifestyle at expense of the black community, and a defeated mother who harbors a misplaced intimacy with both her father and her son, Milkman grows up emotionally and socially estranged. His wealth and home on Not Doctor Street drive a wedge between him and the poorer Southside black community. At the same time, he is drawn to his Southside family, especially his aunt Pilate and cousin Hagar. The action that unfolds is a coming of age story, less about the journey from boyhood to manhood as it is about reconciliation with his racial identity. The tug of war between Milkman's family and history plays out in seemingly retrograde motion in a series of one-on -one vignettes with Macon, Ruth, Pilate and others, each retelling and recasting former events. Each story sheds light on his family's past, but at the same time creates confusion as the paradigms by which he understands his history are pulled down and replaced. The genius of Morison's storing telling is the persistent juxtaposition of opposite movements. The more Milkman tries to interact with poor African Americans, the less he is accepted by them. The older he gets, the more Milkman is pulled into his past. The more he travels to the places of his family's past, the more he becomes aware of his identity in the present. And finally at the moment of self realization, he surrenders to death.

 The way in which the characters are named is a mechanism to accentuate Milkman's identity confusion. The patriarch, Solomon, has no family name. When his son registers as a free man he is assigned the name Macon Dead though the drunken ignorance of the white registrar. And following generations assign names to their children by randomly selecting them from a Bible they cannot read -- another form of ignorance. By the time Milkman is born, his name is earned by nefarious reputation through no fault of his own. By devaluing their names, Morrison scatters all continuity of an historical identity. Milkman, stirred to action by the search for gold, finds himself in a forgotten Virginia town where that history is preserved in the songs of children, and mysteriously linked to the an ancient African legend of a man who is able to take flight and return to his native home. The unraveling of this story -- of the deep profound racial identity at the core of this myth and song -- is the prize awaiting Milkman.

 Each of the main characters -- virtually all of them black -- must chose between fight or flight as they attempt to carve out a life in a racially hostile America. Macon Dead Sr, Guitar Bains and Hagar best represent the fighters, but with differing motives. Macon Dead Sr fights for himself, irrespective of who he hurts or the color of their skin. He seems to find value in property, wealth and status. He is playing the white man's game. Guitar on the other hand, part of band of vigilantes sworn to repay the death of any black with the murder of innocent whites, is fighting against the white man. His hatred is so boundless it eventually turns on Milkman, in seeming contradiction of his desire to "balance the score" of death. Hagar repays Milkman's rejection with repeated attempts to murder him. On the other hand Solomon, Ruth and Milkman represent the fliers. Solomon and Milkman ultimately chose to deal with the injustice of society by removing themselves from it completely, while Ruth flies emotionally, forced to seek solace from a cold and bitter husband by pursuing a bizarre and inappropriate intimacy with father and son. Whether in fight or flight, the common theme is struggle.

 "Song of Solomon" ends with Milkman and Pilate taking her father's remains to Solomon's Leap in Shalimar, the very same place where his great-grandfather took flight for Africa. But Guitar's unchecked racial vengeance catches them both. In that epiphany moment when Milkman reaches the precipice of both a historically and contemporary knowledge of the connection to his own racial identity, Guitar first shoots down Pilate then turns on Milkman. Milkman chooses death leaping from the cliff -- and while the ending is ambiguous, it serves two purposes. First it creates a bookend to the physical action in the opening scene when Mr. Smith leaps to his death on the day of Milkman's birth. More importantly, our journeyman -- who spent his youth looking from the window with a desire only to fly -- joins his earlier ancestral flier, Solomon, closing the spiritual action of the book.