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## **Song of Solomon and Go Down, Moses: Black Shame and White Guilt and Their Effects on Love**

Amy Stewart

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## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction .....	3
II.	Chapter I: <i>Song of Solomon</i> : Morrison's Exploration of Shame in the Black Community and Its Effect on Love .....	7
III.	Chapter II: Guilt's Repudiation of Past and Love: Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's <i>Go Down, Moses</i> .....	26
IV.	Chapter III: Overcoming Shame and Guilt Through Self-Acceptance.....	39
V.	Works Cited .....	47

## I. Introduction

Before this country was the United States, before it was America, it was called the New World. This name not only referred to its recent discovery, but suggested to Europeans that they could start over by crossing the Atlantic to settle in the New World. John Winthrop led Puritans over the ocean from England to establish in this New World a "city on a hill" that would serve as a beacon to the rest of the world and restore God's kingdom on earth. People came to the New World to leave their past and make a fresh start.

The Puritan and New World ideals were compromised, however, by a new social ill that began only about a century before New World exploration -- the African slave trade. Begun by the Portuguese in the 15th century, made popular by the Spanish in the 16th century, and continued by the English afterward, trading African lives into a life of slavery was a ruthless exploitation that would continue for hundreds of years (Bennett 34). This slave trade turned human persons into a commodity in high demand. It relied on and perpetuated the premise that blacks were not fully human -- at least not in the "white" sense. The society that some proclaimed a beacon leading the rest of the world back to God was plagued by fundamental injustice.

This injustice ultimately led to the division of a nation and a bloody Civil War that left blacks legally free and the South bitterly defeated. Although the country had legally ended the institution of slavery, the premises justifying it had become so entrenched in the society that no law could remove them. For centuries, blacks were considered to be and were treated as animals. The inherent inferiority of blacks was stressed over and over again by politicians, scientists, doctors, and a majority of white people in the country. As the possibility arose that blacks might attain equality, so did white resistance.

By the end of the Civil War, this myth of black inferiority was not only entrenched in the minds of whites, it was generally accepted by blacks as well. After living in such harsh conditions all their lives, most had internalized white beliefs about them. Even today black activists such as Cornel West write and talk about how the association, for hundreds of years, of the black body with degradation has left severe scars in black minds which he says has created not only a deep <sup>-seared</sup> seeded belief in white supremacy but also a lack of self-worth in the black community (23).

A similar effect has taken place in the minds of sympathetic whites. Still believing in New World ideals, many whites struggle to see this nation as innocent. To do so requires a denial of substantial truth. To look back and see that one's ancestors participated in or endorsed such inhumane treatment is

difficult. Slavery contradicts not only New World ideals, but also the democratic principles on which the United States was founded. It is difficult to reconcile the "American" portrait of such a national hero as Thomas Jefferson with the fact that he was a slave owner and once wrote that blacks are "in reason much inferior . . . and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous" (25). It is impossible to reconcile the statement that "all men are created equal" with the three-fifths compromise. Sympathetic whites are left to question not only ideas about their nation's history, but their own ancestry as well.

The situations of blacks and whites resulting from their slavery-tainted pasts is addressed by Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* and by William Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses*. In these works, Morrison deals exclusively with the predicament of blacks in twentieth-century America, while Faulkner addresses issues of blacks as well as whites.

Morrison explores in her novel the inter-workings of a family dealing with shame of its own blackness. Without knowledge of their own ancestral past, the Deads have disconnected themselves from their race in an attempt to survive in a world dominated by whites. Macon Dead takes on white values, Ruth Dead does not really see herself as black, and their children learn from their parents' example.

As opposed to shame in blacks, Faulkner depicts slavery's curse on whites -- guilt. Through his portrait of the McCaslin family, Faulkner outlines a white reaction to race relations in southern America. The immoral acts of Carothers McCaslin afflict numerous generations. Most affected is Ike McCaslin, whose knowledge of his grandfather's actions leads to his ultimate repudiation of his inheritance.

Although these stories deal with different races, time periods, sections of the country, and problems, both black shame and white guilt affect Milkman's and Ike's ability to love. Insofar as they act from their shame or guilt, they cannot accept themselves as they are or love others. The authors suggest that this hindrance to loving can be overcome only with self-acceptance.

## Chapter I.

*Song of Solomon: Morrison's Exploration of Shame*  
in the Black Community and Its Effect on Love

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead undergoes a transformation. He begins his life in an unconscious state of shame that limits his ability to love either himself or others. When he is older, however, while on a journey in search of gold he discovers his past and begins finally to become himself. Deborah Guth states that "the discovery of Milkman's family past is . . . not simply a retrieval of obliterated facts; rather, the actual process of reconstruction becomes a metaphor for his initiation into a different way of 'reading' the world and constructing meaning which together constitute his cultural heritage" (579). Other characters play crucial roles in Milkman's journey of discovery because they shape his experience and help to define his situation. Macon Dead, Jr., Guitar, Corinthians, and Ruth embody in various ways the effects of shame on one's sense of and capacity to love. Pilate, on the other hand, is not ashamed of herself and so she loves openly and abundantly. Though Milkman begins his life sharing in the shame of those around him, he eventually adopts Pilate's self-accepting way of life and so discovers his capacity to love.



In Book I, Milkman presents himself as a rather selfish and inconsiderate character. He not only takes his family for granted, but he also sees them as a burden. He takes their love and support, but does not give any back. The narrator says "he had never loved his mother, but had always known that she had loved him" (89). When Milkman stands up for his mother by hitting his father, "infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter" (77). He sees both his father's and his mother's confidence in him as an encumbrance that he would rather not be burdened with. Milkman develops the same attitude toward Hagar. After years of a relationship with her, he dismisses her with some money and a thank you (110). He also betrays Pilate. Although she gave him his life, his first taste of true happiness, and has always accepted him for who he is, Milkman steals her "treasure" and is prepared to resort to physical violence if necessary. Not only does Milkman not care for his family, he shows no interest in the black community's racial problems either. To him, racism is just another boring subject of discussion.

Frustrated with his family and surroundings, Milkman decides to get away. He longs to "feel the heavy white door [of his father's house] on Not Doctor Street close behind him" and "beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present

and was threatening to become his present as well" (179, 197). Just before he does, however, Lena demonstrates persuasively how little he cares for his family. She makes the reader conscious of his selfishness.

Milkman's attitude toward his family results from the nature of his environment. As Guth states, "the world that Milkman sets out from is a portrait of cultural alienation and internal disrelation" (580). To understand Milkman better, then, one must observe some persons who have helped him form his sense of himself or who have been formed by the same, or similar, persons and circumstances.

Milkman's father, Macon Dead, Jr., is a man affected deeply by the shame of being black. Ironically, his shame has risen out of a profound love for his father. Macon admired his father's ability to establish perhaps the most successful farm in the county at a time when that opportunity was not readily available to black men. Macon Sr.'s feat attracted not only the admiration of his son, but also of other blacks in the community. Macon loved his father for his success and the respect he commanded. Unfortunately, despite his strength of character and his success, Macon Sr.'s illiteracy and black skin cost him not only his farm, but also his life. Because he could not read, the white Butler family was able to trick him into signing away his farm. Because he was black, the Butlers believed that they could cheat him out of his land and even kill him with impunity. Despite the power

his son senses in him, Macon Sr. is overcome by his social and legal powerlessness. The manner and cause of his father's death makes Macon Jr. obsessed with power and ownership, and so he devalues blackness. He "seeks . . . to beat the white world by joining it" (Guth 581).

In his obsession with power and ownership, Macon relies on symbols. He places a great deal of significance on his keys. He believes that his keys gave him the status necessary to approach Dr. Foster, "the most important Negro in the city" to ask permission to court his daughter (29). In the white community, ownership confers social status, and social status carries authority. Macon's keys give him a sense of status and authority because they symbolize what he owns. Each key represents not only the property itself but also the lives within it. His keys calm and comfort him as he walks down the street fondling them in his pocket (24).

As well as his keys, Macon sees his car as representative of his power. Every few years, he buys a newer model car so that his is never old or run down. He does not use his car to drive to work or to the store, but only for slow Sunday drives. Others in the community say that "Macon's wide green Packard belied what they thought a car was for" and that "the Packard had no real lived life at all" (40). In other words, Macon does not experience his car the way a car should be experienced. He "never went over twenty miles an hour, . . . never ran out of gas

and needed twelve grinning raggle-tailed boys to help him push it up a hill . . . There was never a sudden braking and backing up to shout or laugh with a friend" (40). Macon owns his cars not to enjoy them, but to demonstrate to the community that he has the money to buy them.

Macon, however, wants to own more than just things. He tells his son that to be successful Milkman must "own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (64). He wants to own people, and he comes to see even his wife and daughters as symbols of power. He pursues Ruth because she is the lemony-skinned daughter of a powerful black man. She is more of a prize than a wife to him. He admits to Milkman that he did not marry her because he was in love with her, and since she was twenty, he has been open about his hatred for her. When he remembers the way they used to make love, after almost twenty years, all he misses is Ruth's underwear (23).

Macon has a similar attitude toward his daughters. At the end of Book I, Lena tells Milkman how Macon treated her and Corinthians before Milkman was born. He would dress them up in expensive dresses and display them in front of poor blacks. She says that as he talked to the other men, he "kept glancing at us, us and the car" (236). According to Corinthians, he only brought her and her sister with him so that other blacks "could see us, envy us, envy him" (236). By relating the girls to the car and

using them to evoke jealousy in others, he objectifies his daughters into yet two more things that he owns that are tokens of his power and worth.

Macon's quest for white power is the result of his hatred of black powerlessness. He associates blackness with a lack of power and so devalues his own race. He reveals his contemptuous attitude toward blacks in his dealings with the community. For example, Mrs. Bains, one of his tenants, comes to him in a state of dire need. She is an old woman with small children to look after and a welfare check that "ain't no more'n it take to keep a well-grown yard dog alive" (28). Without money, she cannot pay her rent and is already two months behind. With no hesitation, Macon is prepared to throw her and her children out on the street. Guth notes the "uncanny similarity between [Macon], as he evicts poor tenants who impede the growth of his wealth, and the white landowners who 'evicted' his father . . . in order to increase their own" (580). He sees Mrs. Bains not as a person in need of compassion or help, but as a worthless woman who does not deserve a home if she cannot take care of herself.

His reaction is similar when he learns that one of his tenants is threatening suicide. Macon cannot care less about the loss of Porter's life. He tells Freddie, "I'm aiming to get my money down. He can go on and die up there if he wants to" (32). His only concern is the money Porter owes him.

Macon's hatred of blackness shows itself even in his own family. His sister, Pilate, is the "one person in the world he hate[s] more than his wife" (23). Because Pilate is poor, he sees her as powerless and therefore worthless. He fears that the white men in the bank will discover that she is his sister. Not just her poverty and lack of status, but also the fact that she makes absolutely no attempt to be like whites embarrasses him. She has values completely different from whites like the Butlers and Macon's bankers, and she lives her life accordingly. Macon is afraid that she will diminish his status, especially with whites. He hates his sister, then, for being herself and for reminding him who he is. In Macon, the reader sees a character whose love for his father turns into a hatred of himself, his community, and his family because of shame.

Like Macon, Guitar Bains has also experienced in his father's death a sense of shame. When his father died on the job, his boss gave the family forty dollars and some divinity. This menial offer devalues not only the life of Guitar's father, but also the needs of his family. From this experience, Guitar now associates candy with his father's death and when he tries to eat it, or only smells it, he becomes nauseated. Guth describes this candy as "the 'loving kindness' that masks white destruction" (583). Besides the pain of loss and the humiliation of his father's death, Guitar has dealt with racism all his life. At the beginning of the novel, Guitar gathers around with the

other spectators to watch Robert Smith's leap from No Mercy hospital. A white nurse orders him to get a security guard, calling him not by his name, but "that one" (13). This kind of treatment makes Guitar susceptible to the ideology of the Seven Days.

The Seven Days is based on a universal love of the black man and a universal hatred of whites. As a member of the Seven Days, Guitar can act out his love and hate in very consequential terms. The Days are specific about their mode of killing, but because they believe that whites are universally guilty, they choose their victims randomly. Dorothy Lee describes the Days as a "program of retaliatory murder that takes no account of individual responsibility as a response to the indiscriminate murder of blacks" (67). Instead of killing the guilty party, the Days seek revenge on innocent people who have had nothing to do with the crime being avenged. Guth describes their violence as one in which "the logic of revenge spins out of control" (580). At the end of the book, Guitar is trying to raise money so that he can kill four little white girls to avenge the death of four little black girls killed in the bombing of a Birmingham church.

Guitar justifies his hatred of whites by telling Milkman it is only for the love of the black man. Like his hate for whites, his love of blacks is universal. For Guitar to say that he kills for love implies a very distorted sense of love. He does not love or hate people for who they are but for the categories they

fall into. His stance on race issues is as skewed as that of whites who lynch blacks. His distortion of love reveals itself at the end of the novel when Guitar, who has pledged his life to kill for love of blacks, and who has told Milkman he would never kill a black person, is now trying to kill not only a black man, but his best friend. He succeeds at killing Pilate, whom he has already looked at with utter contempt and hatred after she has gained his freedom by lowering herself before the white policemen. Because of his shame, his love transforms itself to hate run amok.

Ruth's capacity to love also becomes strangled and twisted by her shame. Like Guitar and Macon, she also acquires her shame from her father. From what Macon tells Milkman about Ruth's father, the reader knows that he, too, was ashamed of his blackness. When he delivered his grand-daughters, his first concern was the lightness of their skin. Ruth is light-skinned and her father probably was as well. Before the Civil War, in some areas, the lightness of a black's skin could entitle him or her to more rights because light skin implied white blood. The whiter the skin, the more Caucasian ancestry a person could claim.

Dr. Foster tried to live his life in a fashion similar to whites. One might even say that he was the whitest black man in town. He was a doctor, respected in the black community, and he had a street named after him. Ruth "honors her father's contempt



of the black community by carefully burying him 'someplace other than the one where Negroes were all laid together'" (Guth 580). Ruth's whiteness tends to isolate her from the rest of the community. Because she detaches herself from other blacks, she does not have any close friends, yet she cannot socialize with whites. She tells Milkman that as a child, "I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my silk stockings" (137). She is caught between two cultures and she does not really fit into either of them. She feels shame -- her father's shame -- because she is "not quite, not white." She devalues herself because of her blackness. Ruth's low self-esteem leads to her obsession with being loved -- first by her father and then by her husband. She focuses all her attention on these two loves in her life because they make her feel good about herself. She loves to the extreme things that symbolize herself being loved.

Ruth loves obsessively, but her love never leads to hate as Guitar's and Macon's do. Her love also began with her father. She tells Milkman that he was "the only man who ever really cared whether [she] lived or died" (137). Ruth so needs to be loved that she is attached to her father all her life and maintains her obsessive attachment even after his death. As a child, her relationship with her father bordered on the inappropriate. Even he was uncomfortable with her good night kisses and the way she looked at him. Macon finds her behavior utterly unacceptable and

comes to hate her for it. Although he is troubled by Ruth's close relationship with her father and by his delivery of Ruth's babies, Macon does not draw the line until he sees Ruth kissing her dead father's hands. In time, Macon has elaborated his recollection of this simple act. He tells Milkman that he saw Ruth naked with her dead father's fingers in her mouth. Morrison reveals at the beginning of the novel that Macon does not really remember that much of the actual event and has instead made up the things he cannot remember. Even though Macon never really loved Ruth to begin with, because of this memory, he will never show love for her again. Therefore, with her father dead, Ruth fears that she will never again feel loved. She deals with this loss with her "two secret indulgences" (19). She makes late night visits to her father's grave to try to feel close to him again. Then after she gets Pilate to help her trick Macon into making love to her again and she bears a son, she nurses her son to give herself comfort. For Ruth, Milkman is the last male she will ever love or feel loved by. Because she does not want to give that up, she nurses him longer than is necessary or appropriate.

Corinthian's source of shame is less demarcated than Macon's or Guitar's. Like her mother's and Milkman's, her shame has risen out of the environment in which she lives. She has learned from her parents to devalue blackness. Her upbringing is similar to her mother's in that she has been taught to love only what is

white about her. Her shame is demonstrated in her attitude toward her job. She is a maid, like many other black women, but is ashamed to tell her family. She wears high heeled shoes and nice clothes on the bus so that none of the other riders suspect her occupation. She tells her mother that she is an "amanuensis," a latin word meaning secretary. Like her mother, Corinthians is caught between two worlds. Because of her extensive education, she is overqualified to be the wife of a black professional, but can be nothing more than a maid to whites (Bakerman 560). Because she is ashamed of the conditions of her existence, she does not accept them.

Corinthian's relationship with Porter is hampered by her shame. At first, she is practically insulted by Porter's advance. Even after accepting his offer of friendship, she hides her relationship with this poor black man. The narrator says, "Corinthians knew she was ashamed of him" (212). Her shame for Porter eventually leads to a confrontation. She cannot reveal their relationship, she says, because it would not please her father. Macon never wanted her to "mix with ... people" (213). Porter tells her she is not a real woman. Corinthians understands him to mean that she is not like the other black women on the bus "who were not hiding what they were" (214). To be a "real woman," she must accept herself and not be ashamed. Her first reaction to Porter's words is anger. By comparing her to the other maids on the bus, Porter has compared her to "the

only people she knew for certain she [is] superior to" (214). When she gets home, however, and remembers her life before she met Porter, she realizes what he means to her. She goes running back to him, banging on the car windows, "mindless of who might see her," and then lays herself across the hood of the car. When she forgets her shame, her heart is free to love this man. In doing so, Corinthians rejects "her father's false values, values assumed and copied from whites" (Bakerman 562).

Unlike the other characters mentioned, Pilate is utterly unaffected by shame. Although she goes through the same ordeal as Macon, she has a completely different response to it. Jane Bakerman says Pilate "knows the danger of the white world because it blew her father off the fence; she has learned that the black world cannot or will not truly accept her. Being strong, she undertakes, then to build a world of her own" (555). Instead of turning to hatred or trying to prevent herself from ever falling victim to the power of whites, she simply accepts the order of the world and her place in it and lives her life accordingly. For example, when Reba is being beaten by her boyfriend, Pilate threatens his life, knowing the regret she would feel and the pain his mother would feel if she did kill him. She also knows that if she must choose between his life and Reba's, she must choose her daughter's life. Although she does not want to kill, she is prepared to because she accepts it as something that she simply must do.

As a result of her acceptance of herself and her lack of shame, Pilate is able to love freely and in concrete terms. Her love's concreteness is what makes it so strong. She addresses her immediate, concrete situation in every aspect of her life. When Milkman first meets Pilate, she manifests this trait. Milkman and Guitar want to know if it is true that she has no navel. Through their questions, it is clear what they are asking even though they do not specifically say those words. Although their meaning is implied, Pilate will not settle for implications. She wants them to ask her specifically and in those concrete words, "Do you have a navel?" She will not respond to abstract hints, but only to a specific, correctly worded question.

Later, when she tells them the story of her father's death, she shows again her concrete frame of mind in her description of colors. She takes the name of a color and associates it with a specific object in her memory -- her mother's blue ribbons. With black, she does a similar thing. To her, black is a very abstract idea because black merely describes a huge group of similar colors. To describe something as "black" is much too general to her. She says that "saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green." Night black "may as well be a rainbow" (49). Pilate's sense of the concreteness of colors and things contrasts that of Guitar, who sees all blacks as the same and not as different shades or individuals.

Pilate also transforms time into concrete terms. One hour or five minutes means nothing to her. She has to think of a span of time in terms of an action -- like when she is boiling the perfect egg. She does not instruct the boys to boil an egg in terms of clock time, but instead in terms of the time it takes to perform a small task -- like a quick trip to the bathroom.

Because Pilate lives in the concrete world, she loves particular persons and things. She says, as she is dying, she wishes she could have known more people. If she had known more people, she would have loved more. That is how Pilate loves -- by meeting and interacting with persons. Her statement contradicts the kind of love the reader sees in Guitar, who claims to love even those he has no knowledge of. His love is abstract because he cannot say that he loves Milkman or that he loves Empire State. He can only say that he loves the generic "black man." On the other hand, not Macon's love, but his hate is abstracted. He does not see blacks as individuals but as a class of worthless degenerates whom he must rise above. Likewise, he sees all whites as powerful. Similarly, Corinthians and Ruth categorize people by their race and not by their individual traits as persons. As one leaves the concrete realm, love and hate become distorted and lose their authenticity.

These characters both shape and illuminate Milkman's situation. His parents pass onto him a shame of his blackness as they did to Corinthians. His father's aim in life is to become

more powerful and so to repudiate his blackness. His lemony mother does not associate with the other blacks in the community. Neither of his parents have any friends because they separate themselves from other blacks. Macon is only friendly to the whites at the bank. Guth states that Milkman's immediate family members "all contribute to the analysis of a family which has denied its cultural heritage in favor of the acquisitive, status-conscious values of the white urban middle-class" (580).

The sense of himself that Milkman develops from them is not the same as that developed by Corinthians because he is not "white" like she is. Milkman is very dark skinned, so his problem is not that he looks down on others in the community -- because he longs to be connected to it. Unlike the rest of his family, he does not try to separate himself. They do it for him. When he is in school, the nice clothes his mother dresses him in, a sign of their money, separates him from the other children. When he makes friends with Guitar, he gains a door to the community. He still cannot go into certain places, however, because of who his father is.

Not only does Milkman lack a sense of worth in himself as he is, he also lacks a history. No one tells him stories about his grandparents or great-grandparents. Macon only talks about his father on a few occasions. Without a sense of family history, Milkman has no awareness of roots connecting him to others. He is burdened by his family and wants to separate himself from

them. He especially wants to disconnect himself from his father and strives to be different from him -- he wears long ties just because his dad likes bow ties. Unlike his father, Milkman is nice and friendly to the tenants. Not only does he not like who his father is, he does not like himself. He does not like his name, his walk, or his face. Morrison begins her description of Milkman as a young boy who loses all interest in himself as soon as he learned that he could not fly.

Milkman's lack of interest in himself has caused in him a deficiency in loving. He does not love himself and so he does not love anyone else either. He does not love his father or his mother -- he would let his mother be eaten up by plants in her garden. He resents their expectations for him and their confiding in him. Not only does he not love them, but he sees their love as a burden. He does not really love Hagar either, for he throws her away like an old shoe. At the end of Book I, all he cares about is getting Pilate's gold so that he can get away from his family and all the burdens that they place on him.

Milkman's trip South that he thinks will provide him the means to separate himself from his family and his past effectively accomplishes just the opposite. He discovers his history, his family, and himself. Discovering these things, he experiences a new sense of pride and belonging and a new capacity to love both himself and others.



In the South, he learns where he came from. As he hears stories of his father, his aunt, and his grandfather, he gains an incredible sense of pride. Having heard the stories in Danville from other men, he is able to "reinterpret his father's words about his own father, seeing love, respect and mutuality" (Guth 581). After his experience in Danville, he begins to open up to other people, and he becomes more considerate. When a man asks for help loading a crate, Milkman helps him. Earlier he would not have.

When he finally makes it to Shalimar, Milkman has opened up enough to understand the feelings and motivations of the people there. After he gets into a fight with a man at the local store, Milkman realizes how much he has offended these men. On his hunting trip he comes to understand Guitar and his love of the woods. Before, Guitar's descriptions of the South and hunting had just been words. Now that he has experienced these things for himself, Milkman feels what Guitar has felt.

Milkman's familial pride is complete when he realizes that his grandfather is Solomon, the slave who could fly. With this discovery, he becomes happier than he has ever been. The little boy who lost all interest in himself because he could not fly has been renewed with the sense that he can. Likewise, "for the first time he feels deep regret for his treatment of Pilate and Hagar, and he understands his parents" (Lee 70).

At the end, however, because of his new capacity to love, Milkman is in danger of succumbing to hate as Guitar has. The rest of his life will be a struggle between love and hate. Milkman is not like Guitar. As shown by their arguments over the ideology of the Seven Days, Milkman does not believe in the universal love or hatred of people. He also does not agree that one white is the same as any other -- to him, some are guilty and some are innocent. First in the woods and then at the end of the novel he must confront Guitar's danger -- the hatred that springs from love.

## Chapter II.

## Guilt's Repudiation of Past and Love:

Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*

In *Go Down Moses*, William Faulkner develops a counter theme to black shame -- white guilt. As Booker T. Washington states, slavery is a "curse to both races" and whites as well as blacks have been profoundly affected by it (152). Faulkner presents a history of the McCaslin family showing, generation by generation, how slavery has affected the family members. Ike feels tremendous guilt for his grandfather's actions. As a result, he must choose between living in the world with a guilty conscious or removing himself as much as possible from the past and present guilt of his family and community. Because he chooses the latter, he lives a life without intimacy and love.

Faulkner traces Ike's connection to slavery back two generations to his grandfather, old Carothers McCaslin. Head of a southern plantation, Carothers is a slave owner and he is hardly a virtuous and pious master. In New Orleans he buys a slave girl, Eunice, and has by her a daughter, Tomey. By Tomey he later fathers a son, Terrel. Richard Pascal asserts that "by his attitude and behavior, Carothers reduce[s] Tomey to something beneath the level of a person while at the same time elevating himself to . . . a kind of godling with absolute power and

control" (65). From Terrel, the black shadow branch of the McCaslin family descends. Since old Carothers is dead when the novel begins, the reader does not see directly his motives for his actions. The reader does see, however, the reaction of his sons, Buck and Buddy. They do not know how to deal with the consequences of their father's moral corruption. They try to escape the situation by removing themselves from the system that produced their black half-brother.

Buck and Buddy move out of their big plantation house that was built by slaves and turn it into the slave quarters. They live, instead, in a small log cabin "which the two of them built themselves and added other rooms to while they lived in it, refusing to allow any slave to touch any timber of it other than the actual raising into place the logs which two men alone could not handle" (251). They wanted to live off their slaves as little as possible.

Not only do the brothers relinquish the effects of slave labor, but they also renounce control of their slaves and try to disown them altogether. After moving the slaves into the big house, Buck and Buddy reach a tacit agreement with them. So long as the slaves are back home by morning, Buck and Buddy do not care what they do at night. The brothers clearly have no desire to have power over the slaves. They do not even want to be slave owners. As shown by the ledgers, even before the war started they began freeing their slaves. The slaves chose to stay. Buck

and Buddy exhibit a sense of frustration in their dealings with their slaves. To them, the slaves are a burden they must bear.

The slave most burdensome to Buck and Buddy is their quarter-black (at most) half-brother, Terrel. They do not know how to deal with a colored brother "whose arms were supposed to be black but were not quite white" (28). In "Was," they try to get rid of him. After Mr. Hubert refuses to buy him, Buck uses Terrel as stakes in a poker game in hopes of losing him.

Buck and Buddy both feel the force of formality and tradition. They maneuver very carefully within a prescribed pattern of action. If they could, they would let all their slaves run off, but the pressure of their peers and the needs of the blacks require that their slaves be back by morning. Their southern society dictates the forms of correct behavior, but it does not take notice of colored relatives. Buck and Buddy do not have the option of treating Terrel as their brother, but they cannot treat him as a mere slave. As a result, they fumble around and do the best they can. They attempt to make up for the situation of his birth by increasing his inheritance from the one thousand dollars old Carothers left him to three thousand dollars. Their attempt to escape the situation their father has put them in, as well as to escape their guilt for Terrel's lot in life, assumes a form even more extreme in Buck's son, Ike.

Because both of Ike's parents are old when he is born and die when he is young, he must turn to others for direction. The

man who most influences Ike is Sam Fathers. Sam shapes Ike's life by teaching him about hunting and the woods. Sam does not only teach Ike to stalk and kill prey, but he instills in him also "an unforgettable sense of the big woods -- not a quality of dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding" (169). Sam teaches Ike to be aware of his surroundings and to love and respect nature and animals. He teaches Ike that "the earth [is] no man's but all men's" (4). Sam's vision of the woods and hunting focuses on the cycles and the value of life and creates a sense not only of mortality, but also of immortality. After Ike's first kill, the "buck still and forever leaped, the shaking gun-barrels coming constantly and forever steady at last, crashing, and still out of his instant of immortality the buck sprang, forever immortal" (171). With that buck's blood, Ike becomes "forever one with the wilderness which had accepted him" (171). The blood marks him as a hunter, but also with something "Sam had had in his turn of his vanished and forgotten people" (175). In the woods, Ike learns an order of life very different from that which the world operated under. The order he learns under Sam's tutelage does not revolve around property, ownership, or money. Ike realizes that "although it had been his grandfather's and then his father's and uncle's and was now his cousin's and someday would be his own land which he and Sam hunted over, their hold upon it actually was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the

chancery book in Jefferson which allocated it to them and that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Fathers' voice the mouthpiece of the host" (165).

A former slave on the McCaslin plantation, Sam Fathers, like many other former slaves, remains there even after the war and emancipation. Although he had been a slave, by blood he is only one-eighth black because his mother was a quadroon and his father was Ikkemotubbe, a Chickasaw chief. The "only visible trace of negro blood was a slight dullness of the hair and the fingernails, and something else which you did notice about the eyes, which you noticed because it was not always there, only in repose and not always then" (161). This look in the eyes is "not the mark of servitude but of bondage; the knowledge that for a while that part of his blood had been the blood of slaves" (161). Sam's father sold him and his mother to old Carothers along with the land that old Carothers turned into a plantation with the help of his slaves. So even though Sam has spent most of his life as a slave, he is actually royalty. Sam does not blame his father for his slave status but instead blames his mother. He believes that he was "not willfully betrayed by his mother, but [was] betrayed by her all the same, who had bequeathed him not only the blood of slaves but even a little of the very blood which had enslaved it; himself his own battleground, the scene of his own vanquishment and the mausoleum of his defeat" (162).

Ike recognizes Sam's greatness, as do all the other people who know him. "Although Sam lived among the negroes . . . and consorted with negroes . . . and dressed like them and talked like them and even went with them to the negro church now and then, he was still the son of that Chickasaw chief and the negroes knew it" (163). Even as Sam approaches his death, the narrator says that "for seventy years now he had had to be a negro. It was almost over now and he was glad" (206). As a child and young man with a fairly limited understanding of the world or the circumstances of his history, Ike cannot understand or accept Sam's pronounced inferiority. To Ike, Sam is the greatest man he has ever known. Therefore, he has great difficulty accepting his heritage that has enslaved such greatness. It is perhaps to Ike the ultimate injustice.

Matters are made worse when Ike, at age sixteen, discovers his father's and his uncle's ledgers. From them Ike learns of his grandfather's role in the ugly system of slavery. He learns "not only the general and condoned injustice and its slow amortization but the specific tragedy which had not been condoned and could never be amortized" (254). The knowledge of his close attachment to this inhumanity causes Ike to suffer intense guilt. Now not only must he face the world's prideful rapacity, he must also acknowledge his own very intimate connection to it. Ike inherits it "as Noah's grandchildren had inherited the Flood although they had not been there to see the deluge" (276).



Because his grandfather has established the family legacy by actively participating in the corruption of slavery, Ike sees his legacy as its direct result. According to John Peters, "by repudiating, Ike also attempts to rid himself of the land's curse through non-participation. If he accepts his inheritance, he becomes party to the corruption by tacit consent; he aids in selling the land into slavery" (41). Accepting his inheritance also means accepting "old Carothers' doomed and fatal blood which in the male derivation seemed to destroy all it touched, and even he was repudiating and at least hoping to escape it" (280). Because of his love for Sam Fathers and his devotion to the older way of life he has discovered in the woods, Ike cannot allow himself to participate in any part of this legacy gained by and used for the degradation of human beings. He therefore repudiates his inheritance and turns it over to Cass. He says that he has to "because I have got myself to have to live with for the rest of my life and all I want is peace to do it in" (275).

In explaining his decision to Cass, Ike claims that the land is not his because land can never be owned and so can never be passed on or bought or sold. He says that Ikkemotubbe could never have owned the land in order to sell it to old Carothers, who then passed it on to his heirs, because "on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever,

father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing" (246). Ike also appeals to what he considers to be God's plan. Ike says that not only has he seen God's plan, but he is a key player in it. Ike believes that God arranged for this property to fall under the ownership of the McCaslin family so that Ike could grow up to repudiate it. This action would be the first step toward the transformation of the entire world into one more like the vision he learned from Sam Fathers in the woods.

Ike's reaction is much more than just a repudiation of property -- it is in a way a repudiation of himself. First, he loses his capacity for pride in his family. When he thinks of his heritage now he sees this singular action of his grandfather and the injustice and degradation associated with it. Without pride in his own past, Ike cannot have pride in himself.

In order to cope with his immense sense of guilt and grief, Ike removes himself from the world. When he has set out in the woods to see Old Ben, he has to surrender his ties to civilization -- his watch and compass -- because they "taint" him (199). He has to remove them in order to find the bear. Now, he must also relinquish all his other ties to civilization and the world. He "wants to avoid what he sees as moral corruption -- the rape of the land brought about by an immoral institution (Peters 41). By giving up his monetary and physical connection to his ancestral past, he at the same time gives up his

attachment to the world and its order. Ike does not reject just his family's money and property, he rejects the value of money and property altogether. He lives the rest of his life with as little of each as possible -- he only owns one more possession than he can carry. He does not see just his family as guilty, but the entire world as being cursed -- its hands stained with the blood of blacks. Ike's sense of guilt is so severe that he must evade it in order to endure life. He believes that by limiting his involvement in the world as much as possible, he can also limit his chances of ever playing the role of the guilty party again.

The consequences of Ike's action, however, are counter to his intentions. Even though Ike has chosen to live apart from the world, he nevertheless gets married. Perhaps he believes that by marrying he will tie himself only to another person -- not to the community and its worldly order. Unfortunately, his view of marriage is very different from that of his wife. She realizes that to live in the world, one must also participate in its order. That is why she insists that they have some assets before they have a child. She understands the need of an inheritance and a legacy for a family. She understands the practicality of property. Even after his wife refuses to bear him the child Ike has always wanted unless he claims his inheritance to pass on, Ike will not relent. By refusing to concede to her wishes and to the practical consequences of his

desire for offspring, Ike foregoes not only his chance to have children and heirs, but also the opportunity to grow in love in a close, intimate relationship with his wife. In effect, he chooses not to completely love her as his wife because love requires giving oneself. Love is not just an emotion or good intentions. It must be acted upon to be real. Love also is not selfish, but selfless. Ike, however, chooses to please himself instead of relinquishing himself to a wife and family. He cannot bring himself, no matter what the consequences, to sacrifice his conception of the world. Thus he becomes "uncle to half a county and father to no one" (1). At the end of the novel, Ike -- now an old man -- is questioned by Roth's mistress: "Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (346).

Ike refuses absolutely to give up his conception because he fears the guilt he has dedicated his life to escaping. He knows that by re-entering the world, he would give up his "peace" (275) and feel again the painful, burden of familial guilt. He would also put himself in a position in which he might hurt other people and thereby increase his guilt. No matter what he does, however, Ike cannot elude this last threat to his peace. Even his act of repudiation causes others harm. Ike sees the plantation as a curse that he must escape. But his mode of escape is to transfer the intolerable burden to Cass -- someone whom he loves. Even though Cass willingly accepts the curse, Ike

should want to protect his loved ones from suffering what he himself refuses to endure. Although Cass seems to avoid any adverse affects of this curse, as "The Fire and the Hearth" and "Delta Autumn" show, his grandson, Roth, does not.

In Roth, the reader sees a very frustrated man. The plantation has been to Roth exactly what Ike had feared it would be -- a curse. Roth does not appreciate or seem to want the land or especially the responsibility of being the overseer of the property and the people who live on it. His dealings with Lucas show him to be alone and lonely with little actual control. Roth possesses the land "and its benefits and responsibilities" (44), but the latter weigh much more than the former. He does not make a lot of money, and he certainly does not have a great deal of freedom. Lucas Beauchamp, his black kinsman who lives on the plantation, leads a happier and more fulfilled life than Roth could even imagine. Lucas has the satisfaction of working his own land, he has married and raised a family, and he has freedom and control over his own life. Roth, however, is weighed down by the responsibility of his inheritance and therefore cannot have these things. Nor can he leave the plantation as Ike did because he knows that to abandon it would be to abandon all the people there who depend on the plantation and on him.

In "Delta Autumn," things have deteriorated from the time of "The Old People" and of "The Bear." Hunters now must drive two hundred miles to reach hunting grounds because "the territory in

which game still existed" is "drawing yearly inward" (320). No longer can a hunter shoot "a doe or a fawn as quickly as he [does] a buck" -- "that time was gone now" (319). Moreover, in this story, the reader sees the extent to which Roth himself has had to sacrifice for this curse. He has fallen in love with a woman with black blood who has bore him a son. But, tied down with obligation and restricted by social custom, he cannot be with her. Instead, he must live without her and without his son. He "had had a wife and lived with her and lost her . . . because she loved him" (335).

Ike becomes aware of Roth's situation and his sacrifice, but does nothing about it. By this time, he is "an old man without children, spouse, or property, living out his years for two weeks of hunting every November" (Peters 42). His discovery of Roth's relationship reveals to him that his attempt to avoid causing harm to anyone else has failed. His reaction is not to step in and right this wrong that he is responsible for, but instead to continue along his path of denial and evasion. Ike's noble attempt to avoid guilt for anyone else's pain seems misguided. Perhaps the more honorable response to his inherited guilt would have been to accept his place in the world and to do what he could to remedy its injustices. By taking himself out of the world, he has surrendered his power to effect any change.

In "Delta Autumn," Ike realizes that his effort to end the transmission of his grandfather's and humankind's acts of

rapacity and injustice have failed. The story recalls in the present circumstance the familial curse. Roth's relationship with the young woman echoes old Carothers' relationship with his daughter. Although to a much more extreme extent in the case of old Carothers, both relationships are bi-racial relationships and both are inter-familial. As she reveals to Ike, the young woman is the grand-daughter of Tennie's Jim, which makes her Ike's and Roth's very distant cousin. The two relationships are also fundamentally different in that Roth's relationship centers on love, which was completely absent from old Carothers' sexual relations with his daughter. Although different, their similarities serve to remind the reader that Ike's repudiation really changed nothing -- not even in the context of his own family.

### Chapter III.

#### Overcoming Shame and Guilt Through Self-Acceptance

*Go Down Moses* and *Song of Solomon* both record the effects of slavery on those who are its heirs, whether white or black. For both Milkman and Ike, the ultimate effect of slavery is the hindrance of love. Neither can give himself fully to another because neither can accept himself as he is. Their common inability to love themselves and so to love another manifests itself differently in each. Their differences lie in the characters' awareness of and reaction to their situations.

In their own ways and for many reasons, both Milkman and Ike seem self-absorbed and self-centered. At the end of Book I, Lena makes Milkman's selfishness quite clear. Oddly, his self-absorption is not very noticeable until she points it out. During his journey into the past, Milkman gradually sheds his selfishness and for the first time learns empathy and compassion. At the end of the novel, he realizes how badly he has treated his parents, Hagar, and Pilate. As a result, he returns home to make amends. Lying in Pilate's basement, Milkman accepts responsibility for Hagar's death and is truly sorry for his part in it.

Ike's selfishness is less obvious, perhaps because no one ever acknowledges it -- not even Ike. Indeed, his attempt to



free the world of the curse of racial injustice by sacrificing his own claim to wealth and financial security seems a very unselfish act, but a closer analysis reveals its deeper motive to be otherwise. Ike's motive for leading the world to this higher state of being stems from his own need to deal with his consciousness of guilt. Even when he sees that his noble intentions are getting in the way of his family life, he refuses to give up his place in his conception of God's plan.

In "Delta Autumn," when he is at the end of his life and still can see no progress toward his vision of a re-ordered world, he again refuses to yield his vision for the well-being of a family member, but rather judges him in the light of that vision. Even though he realizes what a burden the land has been to Roth, Ike never takes responsibility for the part he has played in Roth's unfortunate situation. By this time, he should realize the naiveté of his original beliefs. Doing so would free him to act in some small but effective way to make some other person's life better. But he cannot do that because to help those around him would require him to take back his inheritance and therefore to free Roth of his burden and put himself in a position to have an impact on the lives of those living on his land.

Although it is probably too late for Ike to make such a drastic gesture, he could at least acknowledge the part he has played in Roth's situation and extend to Roth some compassion for

what he is going through. Doing so would negate his place in his vision of God's plan and require him to accept his own responsibility for the wrongs of his ancestors and therefore to live with his guilt. Since Ike cannot do that, others must suffer the consequences.

From opposite sides both Ike and Milkman confront the effects of slavery and racial injustice. Ike deals with the issue openly. He is fully aware of his moral struggle with slavery and his connection to it. Milkman, on the other hand, is not as conscious of the social and psychological consequences of slavery for him. Milkman is born into a middle class family whose members in different ways try not to see themselves as black. Their lack of pride in themselves is in part due to the fact that they have no sense of their past. Macon does not want to tell about the shame of his father's life, and he cannot return to a past before his father's generation because an incompetent white man has robbed their family name and so their connection to the rest of their ancestors. Being removed two generations from the institution of slavery, Milkman never confronts it directly or consciously until he is a young adult, when he learns that his grandfather was born into slavery. Even after that, he never gives it another thought. Whether or not he is aware of its cause, his shame is a result of racial injustice because it engendered his father's shame and that of the rest of

the community. A racist society made them believe that they were inferior beings.

Ike and Milkman also share a similar experience in the woods that transforms them, but they react to their experiences in different ways. For Ike, the woods is where he experiences an order of things different from the mundane and the temporal. His experience of this order leads him to repudiate his inheritance. The woods is also where Milkman experiences an order so ancient that in it men and animals speak to each other, and he suddenly discovers his connection with all other beings. By coming thus into possession of himself amid the wonders of the woods, he also forms a crucial connection between himself and Guitar. He knows what Guitar loves because he loves it himself. While these episodes are similar, they have radically different effects on the characters. Milkman's experience connects him to the world. Ike's, however, detaches him from it.

Milkman begins his life unknowingly learning to be ashamed of himself. Although unaware, he lives with his shame nonetheless. Once he gains an awareness of it, however, he can choose how to deal with it. He can live with the shame and all its effects or he can strive to be like Pilate, who has accepted herself and her place in the world and therefore has no sense of shame. Fortunately for Milkman, his trip helps him to overcome his shame and enter the world by realizing his stake in it.

As he enters the world, however, Milkman also confronts the danger of hatred. In his critical moment in the woods, just when Milkman comes to understand Guitar's love for nature and hunting, Milkman feels a wire cord around his neck as Guitar tries to kill him. At the end of the novel, after Milkman has acquired the ability to love, he again faces Guitar and the threat of death. These scenes demonstrate a crucial link between love and hate. Like Guitar, whose love for blacks has developed into a severe hatred whites and then of his own best friend, Milkman will now face the danger of hatred every day -- hatred for those who hurt the ones he loves. While his separation from the world is the price of his shame, entering the world has its price as well. Morrison, however, does not depict Milkman's ultimate fate because it is not important. What is important is that Milkman has truly started to live.

Ike, on the other hand, does not acquire his guilt until he is sixteen and discovers his family's sordid past and after he has seen Old Ben in the wilderness. He is therefore able to live sixteen years of his life virtually unaffected by slavery because he was unaware of the severity of its injustice and his close connection to it. It is his awareness, then, that causes him problems because his awareness leads to his guilt. Ike's reaction to his guilt somewhat mirrors Milkman's pre-awareness experience. Once Ike experiences his guilt, he takes actions that effectively limit his participation in the world. Since he

happens when someone tries to deal with guilt by not accepting his or her responsibility for the wrongs done. Ike seems defeated in the end not because his intentions were not admirable, but because his method was misguided. Ike is certainly admirable for wanting to save the world from any more injustice. He is misguided in that he thinks that he can do it himself, that he arrogantly believes that he can see God's plan, and especially because his solution for dealing with his tremendous sense of guilt is to deny it by denying himself.

In contrast, the reader sees Milkman at the end of *Song of Solomon* as successful, even though he has not accomplished anything in the way of changing the world, and he has not really made amends for his previous behavior. He has, however, come to a new understanding of himself and he has begun to make what amends he can. The Milkman of Book I and the Milkman at the end of the novel are two completely different characters. Milkman has not changed the whole world, but he has affected what little part of it he can realistically be expected to -- himself. He has traced his shame back to its source by learning of his grandfather, Macon Dead I, and of his great-grandfather, Solomon, who was a slave. Instead of further rejecting himself and making his shame more severe, Milkman finds in his past something to be proud of and which finally allows him to accept who he is. That is the key to dealing with the effects of slavery. One must

first recognize the historical circumstances, accept the burden of his or her place in it, and move on.

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