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# Flight and Hand Imagery

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Flight And Hand Imagery In

Toni Morrison's Novels  
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**Flight and Hand  
Imagery  
in  
Toni Morrison's Novels**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in the  
Department of English Language and  
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Jennifer L. Fosnough Osburn

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## Introduction

By using familiar imagery, such as flight imagery and hand gestures, Toni Morrison reaches out to her audience and induces participation and comprehension. Morrison's critics have a great deal to say about flight imagery as it pertains to The Bluest Eye (1969), Sula (1973), and Song of Solomon (1977). Her subsequent novels include: Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), and Jazz (1992). While Beloved and Jazz are rich with flight imagery, little has been mentioned about it, especially the central image of a rooster, which both novels share.

Initially Morrison was dismayed by what her critics said; they simply did not understand the nuances of her writing, let alone the images she was trying to project. As time has progressed, however, she has become more pleased by what her critics discover in her work. Apparently her ideas are now discussed and understood to her satisfaction.

Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry define flight in Morrison's work as:

a symbol of the individual's ability to develop a strong and centered sense of self that extends out to others in love and finds expression in communal words and gestures (132).

In order to fly one must take all of his knowledge, weigh options and "create" his wings. One must improvise to attain flight in Morrison's novels, which was initially impossible because the characters refused to accept their heritage. In analyzing the novels chronologically, however, one can actually witness the progression of acceptance and self-knowledge of the characters in Morrison's novels. They begin winged but grounded, evolve to free-fallers, successful fliers, frightened characters seeking safe havens, flee to freedom, and finally migrate to the City. The

characters create their ability to fly, which can be seen in how Morrison has each character use his or her hands.

The young narrator of The Bluest Eye, Claudia MacTeer, explains, “All gestures [are] subject to careful analysis” (The Bluest Eye 149). This justifies exploration of gestures and demands greater analysis. It tells the reader to pay attention to gestures because they are important. Hand gestures evolve by showing abuse and displacement, fear and protection, materialism and self-actualization, control and displacement, protection and acceptance of past events, and finally control, creativity and passion.

Flight is intrinsically connected to hands in Morrison’s work, suggesting that hands are the wings of humans. By using flight imagery and hand gestures Morrison creates a combination of overlapping repeating metaphors that her readers will understand quite easily; so easily, in fact, that they may not realize how easily Morrison’s lessons are being taught.

According to Morrison, “All a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use” (Song of Solomon 280). Touch, one of the primary senses, is Morrison’s tool in her descriptions of hands’ protective and healing abilities. Morrison also emphasizes hands’ ability to improvise. In the words of Jazz’s elusive narrator,

All you have to do is heed the design--the way it’s laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow. . . . You have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time. When to love something and when to quit (9).

The key lesson in life is learning how to be creative--to improvise--to make life flow smoothly; this is Morrison’s larger project, and it, too, has grown clearer over the progression of her novels.

She provokes thought in her audience by weaving together her favorite tools, flight and hands, to tell stories of hope and how one stretches to realize his greatest dream. This involves knowing oneself and one's community, having a mode of creative expression, and being brave and daring as one faces the unknown.

Morrison is fascinated with human behavior and our hands--the primary root of our problems. Our hands act out our deeper psyches' wishes and inevitably lead us to a fall. Morrison clearly wants a mutual exchange of ideas and attempts to create this possibility by subtly infusing her novels with hand motions, descriptions of hands, and complex stories about hands.

This paper will fill in the gaps in the current criticism regarding Toni Morrison's use of flight imagery and will also introduce a parallel line of criticism regarding Morrison's narrative focus on hands and hand gestures, an important and overlapping phenomenon in her novels. This phenomenon serves to elucidate Morrison's larger ideological project, in which she points out the core of one's life is creativity. Flight imagery and hand gestures work together to show a progression in Morrison's novels; thus, they must be considered together in order to completely comprehend characters and their actions as Morrison had intended.

**Flight and Hand  
Imagery  
in  
Toni Morrison's Novels**

. . . flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere--people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking--escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? (LeClair 372).

Flight imagery is one of Toni Morrison's most frequently used tools. Norris Clark explains the background of flight in literature and suggests interpretations of man's chief aspiration to fly:

The ritual itself [flying] is derived from African myth and from black American aspirations; it also, as a literary device, corresponds to the classical myth of Icarus and Daedalus and thus reflects, in symbolic and universal terms. . . man's attempt not to merely transcend space, but also to transcend his own physical limitation . . . . The classic myth, as well as African myth, black ritual and custom, includes the same aspiration, although through different enactments, of man's basic quest, a recurrent theme in all literatures: to go home, physically or spiritually, to be safe, to be free, to purify the soul, to spiritually arise from the deadening forces of religion, heritage, community (Clark 55-6).

Morrison acknowledges such interpretations of what flight means in her work, saying that although she had not intended her flight imagery to be related to the story of Icarus, she wants credit for having done so (LeClair 372-3). Flying was very real to Morrison; thus, it is very real to her characters. On a higher level, flying provides Morrison with many unanswered questions, which she ponders in her novels.

The most detailed analysis of flight imagery in Morrison's novels is Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry's. They acknowledge the richness of the symbolism of flight in many cultures and look specifically at The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Song of Solomon. Morrison's work, they conclude, is a significant extension of the "image of flight in Afro-American literature" (Hovet 121). In The Bluest Eye and Sula, Morrison places "special emphasis on the dangerous implications of flight for her characters--on 'the fall' and upon flying as leading to centerlessness, isolation, or death" (121). Song of Solomon, however, has a "more affirmative view of flight; indeed [Morrison] explores the possibilities of a flight which signifies identity, community, and creative life" (121). A closer look at these three novels and the subsequent three will reveal the progression of flight imagery and introduce the importance of hand gestures in Morrison's novels.

### The Bluest Eye

In The Bluest Eye, "Morrison first sounds her extended criticism of Afro-Americans who accept and seek to adapt themselves to middle-class [white] standards of behavior, rather than to venture out on their own wings" (Hovet 122). Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry refer to these characters as "nesters" and demonstrate the various ways in which Morrison shows her contempt for them. Hovet and Lounsberry contend that

In her fiction Morrison appears to be criticizing methods of coping which are safe and derivative (nesting) or which seek flight away from black identity and community. . . . Afro-Americans cannot 'rise' from blackness. Such flights, Morrison repeatedly implies, lead only to fall (126-7).



Thus, the many falls present in The Bluest Eye are due to characters who are uncomfortable with their “blackness.” No one in this novel is capable of flight.

Similarly, the characters’ gestures and hands show their strengths and abilities and indicate key aspects of each character’s essence. Most of the characters in The Bluest Eye wish to deny their blackness. The strongest character in this novel, Mrs. MacTeer, has hands that are seen as unwavering; whereas, other admittedly weak characters have hands that do nothing but lead them into more trouble. One of those characters is Cholly.

Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father, experiences an embarrassing, haunting moment in his adolescence; he and Darlene are discovered by white hunters making love in the woods (The Bluest Eye 117). Indeed, this event is so traumatic for Cholly, that he wants to strangle Darlene, who hides her face in hands that “looked like baby claws” (117). He remembers his great embarrassment all too long: “He could only think of the flashlight, the muscadines, and Darlene’s hands” (119). This event has, in effect, molded Cholly’s life and is the root cause of his sexual aggressiveness toward Pauline and Pecola and setting fire to their home. Emasculated he rebels against society. His hands show this rebellion.

Most hand gestures used in descriptions of Cholly tend to be poignant and lead the reader to feel great empathy for him. For example, when Cholly touches his dead Aunt Jimmy at her funeral, he pulls back his hand quickly because he does not wish to disturb the privacy of death even to see if the body is ice-cold (113). After running away to Macon and being turned away by his father, Cholly reflects upon his lack of good fortune and how Aunt Jimmy used to hand him food with three fingers “with so much affection,” and it makes him cry remembering her gesture

(125). These gestures make Cholly believe that he is completely free to make his own life; he has no one who cares about him now. Then he meets Pauline.

Cholly's first moments with Pauline are seen in the rape of Pecola at least eleven years later. Pecola's helpless figure standing at the sink as "her hands were going round and round a frying pan" and her foot scratching her calf remind Cholly of Pauline leaning against a fence with her crippled foot dangling beside her (128). Cholly feels

desire to cover [Pecola's] foot with his hand. . . . Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. . . . Following the disintegration--the falling away--of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell (128).

Pecola has fallen due to Cholly's hands, and her hands are the only parts of her which are described in detail. Touch is clearly important in this passage, too:

And Cholly loved [Pecola]. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover (159).

Cholly is doomed to blight everything he touches. The total damage of Pecola is shown by her conversing with her blue-eyed self in a mirror and helplessly moving about like a winged but grounded bird. Hovet and Lounsberry suggest a strong connection between flight and fall imagery in The Bluest Eye; so, too, exists a strong connection between gestures, particularly hand gestures, and the fall in Morrison's work.

When Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, was fifteen years old, she began having fantasies about men and how they might touch her. These fantasies distracted her from her work:

In none of her fantasies was she ever aggressive; she was usually idling by the river bank, or gathering berries in a field when someone appeared, with gentle and penetrating eyes, who--with no exchange of words--understood; and before whose glance her foot straightened and her eyes dropped. The someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest. It did not matter that she had no idea of what to do or say to the Presence--after the wordless knowing and the soundless touching, her dreams disintegrated. But the Presence would know what to do. She had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods. . . forever (90).

Pauline wants help and companionship. This "Presence" is the fantasy of other female protagonists in Morrison's oeuvre and deals primarily with a female desiring guidance and assistance in her many responsibilities. A female laying her head on her beloved's chest appears in each of Morrison's works, too, as a common expression of security and love. Striking, too, are the lyrics Ivy sings that embody the contents of Pauline's soul: "Hold my hand lest I fall / Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on" (91). It is quite clear that Pauline cannot handle things alone; she needs guidance and support from another.

Claudia's mother, Mrs. MacTeer, however, serves as a foil to Pauline Breedlove, especially concerning her hand imagery and strength. Claudia imagines her mother,

A slim young girl in a pink crepe dress. One hand is on her hip; the other lolls about her thigh--waiting. The wind swoops her up, high above the houses, but she is still standing, hand on hip. Smiling. The anticipation and promise in her lolling hand are not altered by the holocaust. In the summer tornado of 1929, my mother's hand is unextinguished. She is strong, smiling, and relaxed while the world falls down around her. So much for memory (146).

Though this is not exactly how events unfolded in 1929, the mere fact that Claudia has imagined them indicates her belief in her mother's strength and character. Her hand is unwavering, showing a determined woman--a role model-- who is not likely to be influenced by white society's ways. She has accepted her blackness, is a strong mother figure and, without a doubt, is the strongest figure in the novel. Mrs. MacTeer might be capable of flight, but Morrison chooses to have no character fly.

In The Bluest Eye, Morrison's characters are winged but grounded; success is virtually impossible. The hand gestures in The Bluest Eye also indicate this inability to achieve success as they are connected to destruction, abuse and displacement. Morrison wants to clearly establish that as long as a character is uncomfortable with himself and his community, as long as the characters have no clear positive identities among themselves and the other members of the community, flight is not possible, nor would it be complete, as Hovet and Lounsberry contend in Sula.

### Sula

Hovet and Lounsberry continue their explication of Morrison's use of flight imagery in their discussion of Sula:

Morrison continues to argue for completeness of identity and community which would lead to sustained and affirmative flight. For Morrison such identity and community require a centered sense of self, love of others, and creative expression (Hovet 27).

The only characters who seem capable of flight in this novel are Eva and Sula. Sula understands that "free fall . . . required--demanded--invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding

the legs and most of all a full surrender to downward flight. . .” (Sula 120). According to Hovet and Lounsberry, “Morrison guardedly admires this daring, inventive flight which she gives to Sula’s grandmother, Eva, as well as Sula” (Hovet 130). Morrison later explains Sula’s demise by telling her reader “Sula has no center, no speck around which to grow” (Sula 103). Sula has no means of expression which allow her the ability to fly (Hovet 130-1). Nel, on the other hand, represents the nesters in Sula, which “in Morrison’s view, so constrict the possibilities for a full life that they are only marginally capable of expressing basic human emotions of grief, joy, and love” (129). Ajax is mentioned as the one character who comes closest to successful flight, but he does not allow Sula to know him completely. Thus, no one in Sula achieves successful flight.

Morrison imparts her point with greater urgency as hand imagery plays an important role in Sula. Various images emphasize the futility of touchstones, words and actions in life’s brief play. Suicide, the “grand finale,” takes center stage as death is shown to be a comfort after a lifetime of thwarted and failed attempts to find meaning in one’s life.

The first image in Sula is that of a neighborhood being torn up, although Morrison had originally planned to introduce the novel with Shadrack (Morrison “Unspeakable Things” 221). Shadrack’s experiences in France in 1917 leave him “blasted and permanently astonished” and frightened of his hands:

. . . he suddenly felt hungry and looked around for his hands. His glance was cautious at first, for he had to be careful--anything could be anywhere. Then he noticed two lumps beneath the beige blanket on either side of his hips. With extreme care he lifted one arm and was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist. He tried the other and found it also. Slowly he directed one hand toward the cup and, just as he was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow in a higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and table. With a shriek he closed his eyes and

thrust his huge growing hands under the covers. Once out of sight they seemed to shrink back to their normal size (Sula 8-9).

He cannot hide them fast enough and is scared of what his hands might do, which is reasonable after his horrific battle experiences. Shadrack is alone, twenty-two years old and sure of only "the unchecked monstrosity of his hands" (12). He inadvertently winds up in jail, where he leans over the toilet with a blanket behind him and sees his reflection. Thus, he is able to confirm his blackness; "...He wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still" (13). Finally, he sleeps. This self-confirmation of his blackness is a strong gesture, considering most of Morrison's characters to this point have been attempting to escape that reality. Although Shadrack is unstable as compared to the norm, Morrison guardedly admires his strength in acknowledging his blackness with calmness and, in turn, she invests him with tranquility.

After twelve more days of struggling, Shadrack finds a solution to control his great fear of the unexpectedness of death, not unfounded after his experiences in battle, and National Suicide Day is instituted. Every January 3rd, he walks through the town of Medallion, OH, encouraging others to end all their suffering. The rest of the year he catches fish to sell and gets drunk and obnoxious, but "he never touched anybody, never fought, and never caressed" (15). He avoids all tactile activities concerning others because he is still frightened, but he finds comfort in National Suicide Day. Truly, he is relatively harmless, although he is painfully self-aware; he understands his personal limitations, unlike the other characters in Sula. He will not, however, experience successful flight because he must share his feelings with others and he cannot.

When Sula and Nel are young, Sula protects Nel from a group of boys by slicing off her own fingertip: "When fear struck her, she did unbelievable things" (101). Another time when the two girls are together, catastrophe strikes again. Down by the river, Sula is swinging Chicken Little around and accidentally lets go, sending him flying into the river to drown. "The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water" (61). Frightened that someone has seen this besides Nel and herself, Sula runs over to Shadrack's cabin. He sneaks up on her and stands watching her at the doorway:

When she called up enough courage to look back at him, she saw his hand resting upon the door frame. His fingers barely touching the wood, were arranged in a graceful arc. Relieved and encouraged (no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her), she walked past him out of the door, feeling his gaze turning, turning with her (62).

His cryptic utterance, "Always," frightens her and sends her running back to Nel (156). They both, however, realize "the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it" (66): "They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay aboveground forever" (66). Sula still remembers a pressure on her hand from that split second in time when fun turned into tragedy--but she never confesses. She does not know how to cope with such tragedy.

Years ago Eva, Sula's grandmother, sacrificed one of her legs to attain insurance money when she was left with three young children to care for but no money. Later she uses her hands to attempt to save two of her children. She sets Plum afire when she realizes he wants to return to her womb and he has become a drug addict. Eva also jumps from her second floor bedroom window in an attempt to save Hannah, who is covered in flames. Eva is unable to save her, and

giving up, returns to her bedroom never to willingly leave it again. Eva's gestures demonstrate the power and brutal strength of "motherlove"; that it is both "the best thing that is in us [and] also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves" (Naylor 585). This will be seen in subsequent works of Morrison's.

Upon Sula's return from college to Medallion, she tells Eva, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to *make* myself" [emphasis added] (Sula 92). Sula changes, however, after she meets Ajax. She is a strong female, envisioning herself as a tree on top of him when they make love, but she changes into a housekeeper with a green ribbon in her hair, who deteriorates rapidly and dies with little pain after Ajax leaves her and she realizes she never truly knew him--not even his real name. Thus, Sula's free-fall is parallel to Cholly's rape of Pecola--the life rushed out of her like "the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (The Bluest Eye 128). Pecola is winged but grounded; Sula has crashed and burned.

Thus the flight imagery and hand gestures in Sula indicate inability to sustain successful flight. Each character is caught in a downward spiral, just as an opening image of a neighborhood being torn up by white society. Strength is present in many characters as they try to protect themselves and others, but strength is not enough. Characters must acknowledge their racial heritage, understand personal limitations, and they must share their feelings with others. In spite of their shortcomings, several characters try to fly solo, but none succeed. Singular flight, it would seem, is not possible without acknowledging heritage, limitations and feelings, thus eliminating the displacement experienced throughout this novel. Characters in Sula are victims of a plague of robins and free fall to their deaths, pointing out that although they were brave and daring to attempt to fly, something blocked their success--their lack of self-knowledge.



## Song of Solomon

Because flight imagery is so central to Song of Solomon, a review of suggested meanings for flight imagery is necessary.

Melvin Dixon addresses Morrison's speculations: "What would it take to fly? . . . Suppose you could just move one step up and fly? What would you have to be, and feel, and know, and do in order to do that?"(127-8). Dixon contends that self-mastery and divestment of vanity are the necessary steps for Morrison's characters to achieve successful flight: "This flight is hinted at in The Bluest Eye, sketched out and challenged by Ajax in Sula, and finds its fullest, if not most conclusive statement in Song of Solomon" (126). In Song of Solomon Milkman's leap is successful because he has gained a strong sense of self, stripped himself of all vanities and can "resist the gravitational pull of social conformity" (116). Flight, according to Dixon, is part of personal accomplishment.

Philip Royster states that flying suggests transcendence in addition to control over one's life; "transcendence is the central activity of [Song of Solomon]" (436-8). Similarly, Dorothy Lee explains,

the liberating goal of the pilgrimage [in Song of Solomon] is emphasized by symbols and images related to flying. . . . But there is a rich suggestiveness here in the symbolism. The air is almost always symbolic of the immaterial, of the soul, and of life itself. Milkman surrenders to it and to his brother, thus achieving a final expansion of consciousness. As the author says, death does not matter. It brings the deepest knowledge. Liberation and transcendence--flight, literal and figurative--follow the discovery of self ("Song" 64).

Dorothy Lee expands on this analysis in a later article,

From the flight imagery we have seen to be so recurrent in Morrison's work, we learn now of a triumphant quest, and paradoxes abound. In yielding to the soul (air), you win control of it. In union with the whole (community), you can define the part (self). In losing personal ego, you find it. Out of death comes birth. Most wonderfully, transcendence follows the discovery of self ("Quest" 354-5).

Clearly, according to these critics, Morrison includes flight as a primary image in defining her larger ideological plan; this plan rests on the ideas of self-discovery and transcendence.

Peter Bruck speculates that flying is a "wishing game. . .to express a collective experience. . . . desire to return to one's roots" (297-9). Regarding Song of Solomon, Bruck suggests that Milkman and Guitar's

symbolic fusion at the end not only reintegrates them into the family of flying Africans; it also points to their having left behind their 'whitewashed' lifestyles, acquiring, as it were, their true identity by figuratively returning to Africa (302).

Thus, Bruck sees flight as a return to one's family or racial heritage--being able to "figuratively" return home. This is quite similar to the myth of the flying Africans in Black Folktales which tells of slaves who would say a magic word several times, levitate, and fly back to their homelands (Lester).

Marilyn Mobley acknowledges the variety of interpretation flying raises, ranging from freedom, escape, transcendence and "self-actualization" (28). She emphasizes that Milkman had to leave his home to attain "the selfless love he admires and the sense of direction he craves" (113). "Morrison suggests that the better part of the journey is not to the self but to the community of others" (132). This holds true in all of Morrison's work; the community embraces individuals in spite of their flaws. On the other hand, Morrison "also affirms the value of the

return to the nest, the place of nurturance” (167). One must regain strength before the final flight. Mobley recognizes the continued importance of flight imagery throughout Morrison’s works but makes no further comments on it.

Susan Willis writes:

The end point of Milkman’s journey is the starting point of his race’s history in this country: slavery. The confrontation with the reality of slavery, coming at the end of Milkman’s penetration into historical process, is liberational because slavery is not portrayed as the origin of history and culture. Instead, the novel opens out to Africa, the source, and takes flight on the wings of Milkman’s great-grandfather, the original Solomon. . . .with the myth of the ‘flying Africans’ Morrison transforms the moment of coming to grips with slavery as an allegory of liberation (316).

Song of Solomon tells the story of Milkman Dead going south to find himself. As Willis states, “The problem at the center of Morrison’s writing is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship has been stretched thin over distance and generations” (309). Milkman attempts to show a solution by going back to his family’s roots, migrating south, instead of north.

If The Bluest Eye has winged but grounded characters, and Sula contains a couple of daring fliers, in Song of Solomon,

Morrison again uses the metaphors of nesters and falling and ascending flyers to amplify her thesis. . . . She not only adapts old images and myths of flight to new characters and situations. She also enhances and enlarges them (Hovet 132-3).

Morrison has progressed to characters who achieve flight, ending Song of Solomon with Milkman taking a leap off a cliff. Critics speculate whether Milkman flies or falls; most contend he flies, and Morrison would agree. Hovet and Lounsberry state that

Milkman's ability to fly thus represents a new development in Morrison's delineation of Afro-American character, because she shows him moving from stasis to flight and defining in the process those individual and communal qualities she admires (132).

A few of those qualities include acknowledging one's racial heritage, understanding one's limitations, and sharing one's feelings with others.

Hovet and Lounsberry conclude, "Morrison's use of flight imagery effectively probes many of the myths and common assumptions that individuals cherish regarding the qualities of a full and meaningful life" (139). Flight in Morrison's work is

a symbol of the individual's ability to develop a strong and centered sense of self that extends out to others in love and finds expression in communal words and *gestures* [emphasis added] (132).

Song of Solomon opens with Robert Smith jumping to his death from Mercy Hospital, yet the story focuses on who was left behind when Solomon flew away rather than Solomon himself, a distant relative of Milkman Dead's, as the title might otherwise have suggested (Epstein). Solomon could fly because he knew the magic words and sang them. Jake, a baby, was orphaned in Solomon's mistake of dropping him, and from Jake came a strange dynasty of people who, too, could fly. In order to do so, however, they must attain control--with their hands and hearts--or they will remain, like Pecola or Sula, grounded or dead. They must also know the magic song Solomon sang ("verbal" gesture). Just as Milkman learns to fly, he also learns how to use his hands. It is not surprising that he struggles greatly, based on the way his father Macon Dead, also struggles to use his hands.

Macon's intimate moments with his wife--long ago--consisted of him undressing her slowly and methodically, untying and unlacing her lingerie and finally slipping off her stockings

and shoes. His memory of such moments have all but faded to the point where he must fabricate them to remind himself of how they may have once been. Similarly, his memory of Ruth kissing her dead father's hand evolves into an image of her being naked in bed with the corpse as he explains to Milkman how and why things went wrong. Macon's other tactile moment involves his fondling the keys to all his houses. Macon had also attempted many times to make Ruth miscarry Milkman, and he is still cold and self-absorbed, willing to strike Ruth when she recounts for her family an embarrassing story. He never regrets his brutal actions.

Macon's sister Pilate offers Ruth protection from Macon; Pilate also teaches Milkman to fly, acting out the homophonic pun on her name ("pilot"). Pilate says to Reba as she protects her from an abusive date, "Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all" (Song of Solomon 94). She acknowledges the importance of gestures by emphasizing, again, the craziness of motherlove and how a mother uses her hands to protect her children.

Pilate's work certainly involves great use of her hands as she is the protector of nearly everyone in her life. Morrison uses Pilate's hands to further develop Pilate's truly remarkable qualities that suggest divine influence. Hers had toughened with her work long ago, but they then softened with her job as a dishwasher (baptism)--eventually they bled (crucifixion), too. Eventually her hands acquired their shields again (resurrection). In the end, knowing that the bones she'd been carrying around all these years were her [F]ather's lightens her load and prepares her for death--especially after she sees Milkman's growth and willingness to take responsibility for his life and actions. Demonstrating Milkman's willingness to let Pilate be his pilot, Morrison shows the importance of one having guidance from a divine being in order to soar.

Hospital Tommy's description of his tour of duty somewhat parallels Shadrack's tour of duty and foreshadows Milkman's actions at the end of the story: "The human body is robust. It can gather strength when it's in mortal danger" (100-1). This is one of Morrison's typical ploys: putting her characters under such incredible pressure that one can only guess how one might resolve one's own conflicts and grow from experience under such duress.

Milkman's growth can be seen in the gentle bathing of Sweet as compared to his harsh, callous treatment of Hagar. While sleeping in Sweet's "perfect arms", Milkman dreams of flying and someone applauding him:

It was a warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over the earth. But not with arms stretched out like airplane wings, nor shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive, but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper. Part of his flight was over a dark sea, but it didn't frighten him because he knew he could not fall. He was alone in the sky, but someone was applauding him, watching him and applauding. He couldn't see who it was (302).

Realizing his errors, he knows he must make things right. Perhaps this is his final achievement. This, too, is one of the most affirmative actions of hands, as the reader can clearly envision the motion and sound of flight and the flapping and clapping of hands.

Milkman's leap of faith is the greatest affirmative action as it demonstrates a willingness to relinquish control: a surrender of the highest degree--rather a stark contrast to Robert Smith's suicide at the beginning of the book. As Morrison states in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken,"

Milkman's flight binds these two elements of loyalty (Mr. Smith's) and abandon and self-interest (Solomon's) into a third thing: a merging of fealty and risk that suggests the 'agency' for 'mutual' 'life,' which he offers at the end and which is echoed in the hills behind him, and is the marriage of surrender and domination,

acceptance and rule, commitment to a group *through* ultimate isolation (225).

In Song of Solomon, successful flight is achieved by Milkman Dead in spite of the other characters who tried to hold him down. He discovered himself and learned to respect his community and ancestry; therefore, he achieved flight, or transcendence. Self-actualization is clearly seen in his hand gestures as this flight provides critics and readers with ideas about the necessary elements one must possess or acquire in order to sustain positive flight. What *must* one do to soar? How *would* one feel? These questions are continually addressed by Morrison, especially as she decides to have her characters migrate south in Tar Baby in hopes of finding safety.

### Tar Baby

Action is focused in a tropical setting in Tar Baby with both the beginning and ending scenes combining flight imagery and hand gestures. Characters have ventured to the island to find safety. They gain a sense of self-awareness but are uncertain how to live without the assurance of safety from harm. The flight of these characters is, therefore, circular, as they advance and withdraw, frightened of what might happen.

The gestures in Tar Baby show the inability of any character to grasp the gravity of his/her situation or to cooperate fully with each other. With no self-sacrifice, one cannot find safety. "They [her characters] learn something. . . . And in most of these circumstances, there is a press towards knowledge, at the expense of happiness perhaps" (McKay "Interview" 406).

These are the main messages Morrison intended to impart.

Tar Baby opens with Son's escape to the sea, abounding with images of a "water-lady," cupping him in the palm of her hand and gently nudging him out to sea, like "the hand of an insistent woman" (Tar Baby 2-3). After he has climbed aboard a boat and looks around in the dark, the knuckles of the water-lady brush his eyelids and he falls asleep. The only part he sees of the persons on board is a hand: "Beautifully shaped, pink nail polish, ivory fingers, wedding rings" (4). He rests assured; "women with polished fingernails who needed suntan oil would not sail off into the night if they were going very far" (5). This is beautiful, if not ironic, foreshadowing of Jadine's flights.

Jadine recently arrived on the island affected by a vision of a woman in yellow she saw while in Paris.

The woman leaned into the dairy section and opened a carton from which she selected three eggs. Then she put her right elbow into the palm of her left hand and held the eggs aloft between earlobe and shoulder. She looked up then and they saw something in her eyes so powerful it had burnt away the eyelashes. . . . the woman turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below (38-9).

As the Paris vision holds the eggs aloft, one recalls Pilate's offering of eggs and apples to Milkman as he began with her to learn values more fulfilling than his father's. In both novels, the eggs suggest origins and encourage a return to the past (Lee "Quest" 357).

Jadine is haunted by this gesture which smacks of denial of her heritage and femininity in great defiance of culture's ideals. She also determined long ago "never to be broken in the hands of



any man” (106). These actions indicate a rebellious black female bent on setting her own agenda and mapping out her life as she sees fit.

Upon meeting Son, however, Jadine must hold onto the reins of her emotions quite tightly; her plans are in jeopardy. While on a picnic with him, he puts his finger on the sole of her foot,

Then [Son] did it. Put his forefinger on her sole and held it and held it and held it there. ‘Please stop,’ [Jadine] said, and he did, but his forefinger stayed where his finger had been in the valley of her naked foot. Even after she laced up the canvas shoes (154).

Jadine feels the fingerprint long after, knowing it shows his great desire for her: “He wants me and I have the fingerprint to prove it” (159). It is on that day that Jadine experiences her fall into the tar pit. This clearly has everything to do with the woman in yellow and Son’s fingerprint on her *soul*. This simple gesture of a finger touching a foot results in Jadine being distracted and falling; it also confirms their mutual desire for each other.

Jadine and Son leave the island in an attempt to find “home.” Not long after they leave, Jadine realizes their inability to compromise; they are too different. Although they have great passion, which is seen in the way she rests her hand on his head and he kisses her palm, it cannot work. This frightens her: “She was scared of being still, of not being busy, scared to have to be quiet, scared to have children alone” (230). Idleness and sharing a calm, quiet life with Son is not part of her plans; nor will it be. Neither of them has the ability to firmly grasp what is most important to him/her. They flee each other, hoping to find happiness and safety somewhere. “The biggest thing [Jadine] can learn . . . is that dreams of safety are childish,” according to Morrison (McKay “Interview” 406).

Margaret and Valerian Street, however, manage to salvage what is left of their marriage by her becoming his caretaker. Valerian finds himself unable to recover as he did when his father died many years ago:

He scrubbed his heart out, crying all the while, pillowcase after pillowcase, rubbed and rubbed until his knuckles were cherry red and his arms limp with fatigue (*Tar Baby* 121).

He cannot cope with the abuse his wife inflicted upon their son and her growing confusion, so he regresses, hiding in his greenhouse while she and Sydney care for him. Not so long ago he instructed, "Hold her hands!" so she would not hurt herself when Son was discovered in her closet. She cannot hurt herself or him now. In fact, the one thing she asks of him, that he hit her, brings his simple reply, "Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow" (205-6).

Son and Valerian also discuss the way to make the cyclamens in the greenhouse bloom:

‘Shake it,’ said [Son], ‘They just need jacking up.’ . . . I know all about plants. They like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to’ (127).

Son instructs Valerian to slap his plants around if he wants them to bloom; the same treatment should be applied to women, too, in Son’s opinion. Control is the primary goal of hand gestures, ranging from abuse, desire, determination, and, finally, safety. It does not seem surprising that the novel closes with Son crawling across the rocks at *Isle des Chevaliers*:

He felt around, crawled off and then stood up. Breathing heavily with his mouth open he took a few tentative steps. The pebbles made him stumble and so did the roots of the trees. He threw out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he walked steadier, now steadier (263).

Son then breaks into a run as he hopes to find happiness and freedom, and above all, safety.

Jadine anticipates finding the same in Paris.

Characters in Tar Baby flee to find safe havens, only to continue wandering from nest to nest, cage to cage. Flight imagery and hand gestures combine to show characters searching for safety, attempting to navigate by sonar in hopes of avoiding contact with objects, places or each other. This is a reversal of the flight imagery and hand gestures in Song of Solomon. “Morrison provides no pat answers. Like Song of Solomon, Tar Baby concludes with a new beginning or, to be more precise, new beginnings” (Werner 165). The novel ends with an optimistic yet cryptic sense of the potential for happiness regarding Son and Jadine, separately though.

### Beloved

The desire for safety in Tar Baby is present in Beloved, but the need is much greater, as Beloved, the first in a proposed historical trilogy, is literally a flight to freedom (Carmean 87). The narrative is also in flight as the story is told in the fashion with which one might remember a story--not necessarily in chronological order nor in complete detail. In other words, the narrative may be at one level describing a specific event and suddenly plunge into one character's thoughts. It may then emerge at a higher altitude. Nonetheless, the narrative resembles a flight pattern of an erratic, perhaps frightened, bird. So too, one might describe such rapid descents in the narrative as “dream flights” where characters are challenged to choose to survive or fall (Epstein).

Always roaming, always in flight, Beloved's reality and her homelessness are left to the weather, the thaw of ice, and the wind.  
. . . Toni Morrison's dream flights cause standard conceptions of reality to break open and soar around in order to make room for

larger understanding of events and motivations. Characters must wrestle against conceptions of reality within these narratives to find a space for themselves and their own stories, which have been marginalized by the dominant culture. Struggling against the imprisonment of language, they assert their dreams and enchantments, generating larger-than-life versions of the world and humanity (Epstein 146-7).

The idea for Beloved is based on an actual person, Margaret Garner. As Morrison explains,

The story [Margaret Garner's] has a lot of questions in it for me. The novel [Beloved] is an attempt to deal with those questions. It was an era I didn't want to get into--going back into and through grief. (Russell 45).

Aside from the narrative itself taking on the form of flight, a "new" image of flight is relied on quite heavily: Mister, the rooster at Sweet Home. Paul D recalls for Sethe Mister's rough beginning:

Was me took him out the shell, you know. He'd a died if it hadn't been for me. The hen had walked off with all the hatched peeps trailing behind her. There was this one egg left. Looked like a blank, but then I saw it move so I tapped it open and here come Mister, bad feet and all. I watched that son a bitch grow up and whup everything in the yard (Beloved 72).

Paul D describes a poignant moment in nature when he rescued a chick who may have been left to fend for itself, having been abandoned by its mother. Given that Paul D probably never knew his mother and that Sethe is a mother, this crippled chick represents far more than a bird. It represents motherhood and childhood stunted by slavery. Slaves were "crippled" when it came to knowing their families. Another point about this particular bird is that chickens do not fly often. They seem quite content to scratch around at the dirt and remain in their coops. Mister, a rooster, will be quite content doing the same, although one cannot help but wonder if he, in fact,

might not be more content flying since he has bad feet. Nonetheless, Morrison makes it quite clear that Mister represents Paul D's sense of abandonment by his mother. Mister also is a wonderful foil to Sethe, who is so protective of her babies that she actually attempts to kill them to protect them from a life of slavery.

After being captured and returned to Schoolteacher at Sweet Home, Paul D sees

Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was . . . Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't even allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub (72).

Paul D sees the great irony in this pathetic bird left for dead by its mother and cannot help but compare Mister to himself. This bird has an identity; Paul D has nothing, not even the acknowledgment of having saved Mister years ago. Worse yet, Paul D thinks he sees Mister "smiling as if to say, You ain't seen nothing yet. How could a rooster know about Alfred, Georgia?" (229). This bird haunts Paul D.

Another haunting image is one of Sethe that Stamp Paid envisions. Stamp Paid is near the woodshed when Sethe sees Schoolteacher and his nephews coming to capture her and her children to take them back to a life of slavery on Sweet Home. She grabs her children and runs out to the woodshed. Inside, she attempts to kill each of them with the only weapon she can find--a saw. Stamp Paid tells Paul D the story as gently as he can,

So Stamp Paid did not tell [Paul D] how [Sethe] flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed. . . (157).

The lucidity in this imagery is possible only because flight imagery is so universal in Morrison's novels; few, if any, people could claim to not know what a hawk looks like, let alone how one might look and behave when capturing its prey. The hawk's eyes would capture the movement of prey. Its primal instinct would make it swoop down in an elegant, yet urgent, dive and grab the prey with its sharp claws, killing it almost instantaneously, mercifully, as the hawk flies off to devour the fresh kill. This flight imagery conveys great passion and urgency in Stamp Paid's interpretation of the scene.

Two critical moments of the novel employ flight imagery: Paul D's saving of Mister and Sethe's demonstration of the great, yet brutal, power of motherlove.

[Schoolteacher] is coming in [Sethe's] yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No, no. Nonono. She flies (262).

Other critical moments in the novel employing flight imagery are found in the escape scene. . . the flight, in another sense of the word. Discovering the group's plans to escape Sweet Home together have been thwarted, Sethe improvises and escapes on her own. On her way to freedom, she encounters Amy, who helps her give birth to Denver. Soon thereafter, Sethe and Denver meet up with Baby Suggs and Sethe's three children who had been sent ahead.

Weeks pass, then Sethe sees four horsemen on the horizon and recognizes them to be her owner, his nephew, a sheriff, and a hired slavecatcher. Frantically, she runs to the woodshed and tries to kill her children, knowing that they would be better off dead than in the hands of these men. She only succeeds in killing one, the older daughter, but she manages to demonstrate to

Schoolteacher, her owner, that she is useless as a slave because of her instability. "You can't mishandle creatures and expect success" (150). She would be a great risk to have working for him. As Morrison explains, "A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (Naylor 584).

Over the years, as Sethe gradually faces the past that has remained repressed for so long, she is weakened. "The process of memory is naturally complicated, especially when there is a powerful reluctance to remember" (Carmean 86). Once the past has been faced, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D can all look forward.

In defense of her style and choice of subject matter, Morrison states,

I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about and I hope that I set it up in such a way that it is a legitimate thing, and a valuable thing (McKay "Interview" 404).

Flight in Beloved is, therefore, a critical progression in Morrison's work as it indicates growth in characters, Sethe, in particular. In protecting her children, Sethe fell but has managed by the conclusion of the novel to rise from her stricken state with the help of Paul D, Denver, and Baby Suggs's words of wisdom. "Guilt and the past must not be avoided. They must be taken up and possessed" (Carmean 91). Having faced the past and acknowledged her need for others, real people, Sethe begins an upward growth, as do Paul D and Denver, having discovered the same things for themselves. They may not stay together, but they are able to now move forward and discontinue these patterns of self-destruction and self-deception.

Similarly, hand gestures indicate a growth of self-awareness throughout the novel.

Evidence of ghostly gestures appears immediately in Beloved with a baby's handprints in a cake.

Sethe killed her baby eighteen years ago, and what her hands have done causes great unrest for the characters, too. This is a novel in which actions speak volumes. From Sethe's breasts being held by Paul D to the shadow of three people holding hands, Sethe desires someone else sharing her responsibilities. These are foolish thoughts, indeed, and reminiscent of Jadine's desire for safety in Tar Baby. As Morrison states, "Freedom is choosing your responsibility. It's not having responsibilities; it's choosing the ones you want" (Naylor 573). Sethe has chosen her responsibilities and protects her choices with her bare hands: thus, the murder of her daughter when her freedom was threatened by Schoolteacher and his nephews.

Other hand gestures are of interest in Beloved. Beloved clings to Sethe like a child. Baby Suggs's hands have the power of a healer. Her gentle bathing of Sethe before letting Sethe's children see her demonstrates her tender maternal instinct. She instructs Sethe, "Love your hands. . ." (Beloved 88). Of course, this is prior to Sethe's murder of her daughter, but it does emphasize Baby Suggs's preaching of important lessons. Baby Suggs also advises Sethe to "*lay it all down*" (174). Not only must Sethe love her hands; she must also accept what she does with them.

Later, Baby Suggs recalls her realization of the freedom her son gave her:

Something's the matter. What's the matter? What's the matter? she asked herself. She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling. 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands' (141).

Again, she realizes the importance of knowing that she is now in control of her life. It is when Baby Suggs becomes confused about how God could let Sethe do something as confusing as kill



her own baby that Baby Suggs loses her will to preach and live. Sethe's fall leads to hers as Baby Suggs retires to her room to contemplate colors and die.

As seen in Sethe's daring escape from Sweet Home and throughout Beloved, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Sethe chose to continue her escape plans even though the others had failed. She had to get to her children. Her escape--her claiming ownership of her freed self--is an important lesson because it involves free use of the hands. Each of Morrison's characters must learn this lesson, too, because each has something which he/she must find a way to understand and accept or change. One needs to know and understand the contents of the past before one can move on. This is what Sethe must do.

Sethe's hands are rarely idle: "She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten" (61). Her kneading of bread dough parallels her beating back the past: "Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73). This motion calms Sethe, and she tries to do the same for Paul D as he recalls the painful moment of the discovery that Mister, the rooster, was better off than he:

Sethe put her hand on his knee and rubbed. Paul D had only begun, what he was telling her was only the beginning when her fingers on his knees, soft and reassuring, stopped him. Just as well. Just as well. . . .Sethe rubbed and rubbed, pressing the work cloth and the stony curves that made up his knees. She hoped it calmed him as it did her (72-3).

However, as Sethe remembers the past, she recalls hands of past associates: Baby Suggs's soothing hands that would tenderly massage her neck. Schoolteacher and his nephews' violating

hands. Amy's strong hands that massaged her terribly swollen feet and helped her give birth to Denver. "[Amy] had good hands. . . thin little arms but good hands. . . I guess the hands made her think she could do it: get us both across the river" (76-7). Amy's hands were also on a quest to Boston for velvet, emphasizing her tactile sensitivities. Paul D's educated hands that have seen much and help him "to tell, to refine, and tell again" (97-9). In Beloved hands tell a great deal about a person in subtle ways.

Paul D's hands "quit taking instructions when [he was] shoved into [a] box" (107). When restrained by "the best hand-forged chain...Paul D's hands disobeyed his blood" (107-8). He communicated with his chain-gang by yanking the chain and swimming through the muck. His hands have long taken instructions from others, so when he is finally given the opportunity to do what he wants with them, he caresses Sethe, makes love, and even wipes tears from his eyes after hearing the horrid story Stamp Paid shares with him: "[Paul D] held his wrist between his knees, not to keep his hands still but because he had nothing else to hold on to" (218). His hard-working hands should be worn out, although they are quite capable of scaring off ghosts and renewing life in Sethe. He recalls helping Mister the rooster out of the shell:

Was me took him out of the shell, you know. He'd a died if it hadn't been for me. The hen had walked on off with all the hatched peeps trailing behind her. There was this one egg left. Looked like a blank, but then I saw it move so I tapped it open and here come Mister, bad feet and all. I watched that son a bitch grow up and whup everything in the yard (72).

Paul D recognizes the irony of him helping Mister, the rooster who saw him in irons when Schoolteacher had him ready to be sold.

Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out of the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was. . . Mister was allowed to be and stay what he

was. But I wasn't even allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub (72).

That was years ago, but the memory of Mister's gestures still haunts Paul D as the memory of Beloved haunts Sethe. In the end, finally free, Paul D must choose what he wants for his hands, and having seen a multitude of possibilities, he makes his decision.

Sethe remembers an important part of the past when Beloved, Denver, and she are ice-skating. They hold hands and keep falling in spite of efforts to stand. This epiphany comes when Sethe contemplates all the falls they took. It is then that the past has surfaced, and she must face it. Morrison explains,

. . . my mode of writing is sublimely didactic in the sense that I can only warn by taking something away. . . .at the end of every book there is an epiphany, discovery, somebody has learned something that they never would otherwise. . . . it's more important to make a reader long for something to work out and to watch it fall apart, so that he will know what, why and how and what the dangers are, more important than to show him how they all solved their problems (Koenen 213).

Denver asks the community for help and comes to understand the importance of self-preservation from the one person who had made her life change dramatically so many years ago: Nelson Lord. Denver is also the one who wrestles the ice pick away from Sethe, who in a state of confusion tries to kill Edward Bodwin, the town's white benefactor known for his beautiful hands: "the ice pick is not in [Sethe's] hand; it is her hand" (*Beloved* 263). Hands do take on the form of objects of urgency when freedom is threatened; it is a natural defensive reaction.

Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she

feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe had been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her (262).

The symbolism here is rich, showing an abandoned spirit, who sees the pain of slavery now, although she never experienced it firsthand. Such an experience is unnecessary to feel the pain. Edward, the town's benefactor, is still guilty, according to Morrison, which is revealed by the fact that it is difficult to distinguish him from Schoolteacher at this moment. Slavery affects everyone--still--as Morrison indicates with these gestures. Abandoned or not, it affects us all.

The final scenes in Beloved emphasize the intimacy of holding hands, touching a face and how this can lead to changing things. "[Paul D] leans over and takes [Sethe's] hand. With the other he touches her face. 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' His holding fingers are holding hers. 'Me? Me?'" (273). This is a different Sethe than the one who dreamt of her children, Beloved in particular, while "Paul D's chest rose and fell, rose and fell under her hand" (132). Paul D has the power in his hands to bring her back to him and help her accept the past. He once told her she had two feet not four--the way his and her hands are used will prove that once and for all. "Blacks can now grasp life and make it their own. But they must be aware of *who they are and where they come from*" (Russell 43). The past can be conquered, which is seen in these hand gestures.

## Jazz

In Jazz, the second novel in the historical trilogy, flight involves migration to the City, beloved pet birds being set free in a fit of jealousy, and a narrative soaring in free-flight. One can surmise why Morrison chooses to tell a passionate story based on a picture and the accompanying story she discovered in The Harlem Book of the Dead (Naylor). As Morrison tells Thomas LeClair years prior to writing Jazz, "I am enchanted, personally, with people who are extraordinary because in them I can find what is applicable to the ordinary" (LeClair 374). In Jazz, flight imagery is, therefore, filled with emotions and seen in terribly passionate moments. Jazz opens with an elusive narrator, one the reader can never identify:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. . . she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, 'I love you' (Jazz 3).

Using this image to open a novel, Morrison encourages the reader to consider flight immediately. There is nothing that would have distinguished Violet from the people around her until something happened. "Freeze or fly" shows the desperation of Violet Trace's act and amplifies the motive behind it. Joe Trace, Violet's husband, had not only had an affair with Dorcas Manfred, an eighteen-year-old, but he had then killed Dorcas in a desperate attempt to keep her to himself for eternity. Violet set her birds free, disgusted by the hypocrisy of hearing "I love you." Joe was disgusted by being dumped for a young rooster who would inevitably mistreat Dorcas. Poor Joe, convinced that Dorcas had found him, could not allow her to leave on any

level; so intensely did he feel this that even months after her funeral he is still beyond consolation and teary-eyed.

The flight imagery in *Jazz* is subtle. Violet is compared to “an old street pigeon picking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind” (6). She is a pitiful character, having attempted to cut the face of Dorcas as she lay in her coffin. Once she escaped that funeral and the horrid scene she created, people are uncertain if they should be frightened of Violet or simply pity her. Having freed her pet birds, Violet tries to regain Joe’s attention by having an affair, attempting to win back Joe’s love, and finally learning as much as she can about Dorcas. Eventually Violet is enthralled with Dorcas and becomes friends with Dorcas’ Aunt Alice.

Joe’s life is filled with a haunting image: his wild mother and “redwings, those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close” (176). It is because of his mother’s denial of her relationship to him that Joe has dysfunctional relationships with women. Perhaps this also causes him to mistakenly interpret the behavior of male and female humans with that of roosters and chickens. When he takes his sample case of Cleopatra Products to Alice Manfred’s, he is reminded of “the young roosters who stood without waiting for the chicks who were waiting—for them” (70). He thinks of city men as “closed off to themselves, wise, young roosters. Didn’t have to do a thing—just wait for the chicks to pass by and find them” (132). In Joe’s opinion,

Chickens find the roosters and find the place, too, and if there is tracking to be done, they do it. They look; they figure. Roosters wait because they are the ones waited for (133).

Finally, distraught that Dorcas no longer desires him, Joe asks,

What would [Dorcas] want with a rooster? Crowing on a corner, looking at the chicks to pick over them. Nothing they have I don't have better. Plus I know how to treat a woman. I never have, never would, mistreat one. Never would make a woman live like a dog in a cave. The roosters would (182).

Joe's dysfunctional relationships with women begins at fourteen when his wild mother refused to acknowledge him: "it would have made him the happiest boy in Virginia" (36). The pain of his mother's refusal haunts him.

Lying next to [Violet], his head turned toward the window, [Joe] sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing (224-5).

These flowing thoughts demonstrate improvisation, seamless movement in perception, rather like the smooth transition from one instrument to another in a jazz tune. One picks up where the other leaves off, adding its unique sound to the entire composition. This is much like hands' fluid movements to accommodate one's needs and help one survive. Things do come full circle for Joe and Violet. They manage to make up and buy a new bird to care for:

[Violet] guessed the bird wasn't lonely because it was already sad when she bought it out of a flock of others. So if neither food nor company nor its own shelter was important to it, Violet decided, and Joe agreed, nothing was left to love or need but music. They took the cage to the roof one Saturday, where wind blew and so did musicians in shirts billowing out behind them. From then on the bird was a pleasure to itself and to them (224).

Violet, the one noticed by the narrator in the beginning, was also a stray from her flock. She solved her problems by improvising, as the musicians in the era performed. Music provides the bird with comfort, as does Violet's improvisation in life. She has taken charge, once again, finding musical methods that enable her to toughen up again.

Flight in Jazz symbolizes the softness one acquires over time, especially in the City, where the Traces' parrot's "wings [had] grown stiff from disuse and dull in the bulb light of an apartment with no view to speak of" (93). Morrison admonishes her readers to keep busy and stay alert; the music is always changing and it affects everyone's mood swings, even those of the birds. Thus, the progression of flight imagery indicates a keen need to improvise constantly in order to move forward despite the adversities one will undoubtedly face. As Morrison tells Thomas LeClair,

I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment (LeClair 370).

One must face these adversities in order to advance. One must become aware of the "other" self to grow. Comfort, Morrison warns, leads to the Fall, thus one must remain alert and ready to react at any time, especially when passions dictate the actions of people.

The main focus on hands in Jazz, is to demonstrate that hands, which can be powerful shields, also ironically contribute to the fall of each character. Like Beloved, the story in Jazz revolves around a paradoxical killing: Joe Trace shoots his eighteen-year-old lover Dorcas Manfred in an attempt to keep her solely for himself. He is committed to Dorcas although he still cares for Violet, his wife. Clearly, he is in a difficult situation and must resolve himself to not having Dorcas. Again, actions speak louder than words--even carefully selected and poetic words:

[Jazz] permits the voices or instruments to cover a whole range of possible intonations and individual peculiarities in order to express themselves and constantly test their versatility (Berret 272).



So too, the characters in the book Jazz must constantly improvise and work harder to express themselves.

Violet Trace is a beautician, and although she, like Pilate, once labored hard enough in the fields to attain shields on her hands, right after she met Joe and moved to Tyrell to be close to him:

It was there she became the powerfully strong young woman. . . . It was there where the palms of her hands and soles of her feet grew shields no gloves or shoes could match. All for Joe Trace (Jazz 105).

Those shields are now gone; moving to the City has softened Violet, who had her own set of problems before she learned from Malvonne of Joe's infidelity. Violet had had three miscarriages prior to moving to the City, which she and Joe had figured was for the best. Not long after moving to the City, however, when Violet turned forty, the urge to have a baby becomes stronger than ever. For Violet, holding a baby was like holding brightness.

The worst burn she ever made was on the temple of a customer holding a child across her knees. Violet, lost in the woman's hand-patting and knee-rocking the little boy, *forgot her own hand* holding the curling iron [emphasis added] (107-8).

She craves a child and buys a doll to comfort herself. Violet needs something tactile for comfort.

In fact, she must stay busy,

because it is impossible to have nothing to do, no sequence of errands, no list of tasks. She might wave her hands in the air or tremble if she can't put her hand to something with another chore just around the bend from the one she is doing (15).

Violet's "independent hand" found a knife in her parrot's cage and tried to stab the dead girl's face as she lay in a coffin (24). This desperate act may seem crazy, but all she really wanted to do was keep Joe:

I got quiet because I didn't know what my hands might get up and do when the day's work was done....I just had to keep hold of him any way I could and going crazy would make me lose him (97).

Violet is quite conscious of her actions, especially what her hands might do. She must protect herself from losing Joe. Becoming acquaintances with Alice Manfred will help.

Alice Manfred, aunt and mother to Dorcas whose parents tragically died years ago, and Violet discuss their upbringing and how idle hands were discouraged. In fact, Violet "never knew what it was to fold [her] hands" (112). Alice attains personal strength by holding a gathering rope in one hand and clenching her other into a fist: two different hand gestures (58-9). Joe Trace also kept his hands busy by becoming a "maniacal" worker once he realized his mother would not acknowledge him as her son. All he asked for was a sign from her: "Show me your hand" (36-7). Each of these characters' parents had a harsh impact on his or her life, and none of them has had children as a result. Morrison tells of the power of being a parent: the effects are long-lasting and self-perpetuating because children mirror the actions they see, not the words they hear. Similarly, hands mirror what one *feels* one must do, not necessarily what one *should* do.

One of the most powerful noises in Jazz, aside from the music that floats out windows and through the streets, is an omnipresent clicking. It is this noise that moves young adults, much to the dismay of their parents:

The click of dark and snapping fingers drives them to Roseland, to Bunny's; boardwalks by the sea. Into places their father have warned them about and their mothers shudder to think of. Both the warning and the shudder come from the snapping fingers, the clicking. And the shade. . . . Shade. Protective, available. Or sometimes not; sometimes it seems to lurk rather than hover kindly, and its stretch is not a yawn but an increase to be beaten back with a stick. Before it clicks, or taps or snaps its fingers.

Some of them know it. The lucky ones. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same size so you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap (226-8).

Music is powerful and seemingly leads one to abandon self-control, which is why it is not appreciated by all. Alice Manfred abhors the influence music plays in life; whereas, Dorcas lives for it. Alice maintains constant self-control, never allowing her hands to be idle; whereas, Dorcas must have music and self-abandonment. Dorcas wants her passion, not reason, to rule; she is completely willing to show in gestures how she feels.

When Dorcas was younger, she was watched by the Miller sisters while Alice worked.

Neola Miller was the more entertaining one, but was partially paralyzed after her fiancé left her.

The pain of his refusal was visual, for over her heart, curled like a shell, was the hand on which he had positioned the ring. As though she held the broken pieces of her heart together in the crook of a frozen arm (62).

Dorcas knows music and passion's powers. Neola's frozen arm merely confirms what Dorcas believes to be true: passion is powerful and crippling. Neola tells a story, and Dorcas was

enchanted by the frail, melty tendency of the flesh and the Paradise that could make a woman go right back after two days, two! or make a girl travel four hundred miles to a camptown, or fold Neola's arm, the better to hold the pieces of her heart in her hand. Paradise. All for Paradise (63).

This is an incredible, passionate story for a young girl, ironically about the fall of another woman. Combined with visual proof of passion's crippling power, this story verifies the thoughts Dorcas maintains about passion and serves to foreshadow her fall at the hands of Joe Trace.

Later, Joe explains the impetuous nature of youth and his marriage:

Young people fly off the handle. Bust out just for the hell of it.  
Like me shooting an unloaded shotgun at the leaves that time.  
Like me saying, 'All right, Violet, I'll marry you,' just because I  
couldn't see whether a wildwoman put her hand out or not (181).

He also has learned an important lesson from that moment so many years ago: "Never. Never hurt the young: nest eggs, roe, fledglings, fry . . . ." (181). The pain of his mother's refusal haunts him. Yet he somehow manages to kill Dorcas with hands that know better? Clearly this rings a warning bell for the reader, indicating need for further explanation. Or does it? This rash decision to kill Dorcas may simply illustrate Joe's impetuous youthfulness and amplify the ultimate power hands possess. Hands "know" more.

Joe's metaphoric justification of his affair with Dorcas emphasizes the role of hand gestures regarding the Fall of mankind: "...no point in picking the apple if you don't want to see how it taste" (40). He also says to her, "I would strut out the Garden, strut! as long as you held my hand, girl" (134-5). He knows that she is his fall, and he shows unbridled restraint in taking a lover. Clearly, Joe is obsessed with the myth of Eden and has no doubt that Eve was to blame for the Fall:

Girls can do that. Steer a man away from death or drive him right to it. Pull you out of sleep and you wake up on the ground under a tree you'll never locate again because you're lost (173).

On one particular occasion he tells Dorcas about Eden and their relationship's similarity to Eden:

I looked at your knees but I didn't touch. I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart.

You looked at me then like you knew me, and I thought it really was Eden, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks (133).

This is very persuasive, on Joe's behalf, as it seeks to demonstrate his remarkable sense of control—he could actually resist touching her. He does have some restraint. Poor Joe, though, has misinterpreted those marks to be tracks that he should follow--tracks that were laid specifically for him to follow.

You can't get off the tracks a City lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age, you always end up back where you started: hungry for the one thing everybody loses--young loving (120).

Morrison seems to imply that young loving, which involves a great deal of touch, drives everyone to distraction.

Similarly, Dorcas' dying words are "There's only one apple. Just one. Tell Joe" (213). She really did love him, although she restrains. She leaves Joe for a second-rate man and then refuses to name who shot her as she lay dying, especially after describing her time with Joe: "I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand" (191). She loves the power she has over Joe and describes this with words suggesting powerful gestures. Thus, they both contribute to their expulsion from Paradise by simply being unrestrained, yet paradoxically innocent.

Similarly, Violet's hands release her pet birds when she realizes the hypocrisy of hearing "Love you" from an unnamed bird.

...she had never said it back, or even taken the trouble to name him--[but he had managed] somehow to fly away on wings that had not soared for six years. Wings grown stiff from disuse and dull in the bulb light of an apartment with no view to speak of (93).

The parrot has literally flown off; this is one of Violet's falls, too, and it shows the problem of taking something precious for granted. What can be done once it is gone? Her hands show her longing for their old routine of covering the birds' cages at night; thus, when she and Joe reacquaint themselves with each other, they get more birds. Lying in bed, Joe wants to "take [Violet's] hand and put it on his chest, his stomach" (224). "Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well" (225). They are content, and their hands show this. Their mattress is even "curved like a preacher's palm, asking for witnesses in His name's sake" (228). Again, this hand imagery is affirmative as it shows them recovering from their loss of Paradise.

After discussing the intimacy of a couple under the bedcovers, the narrator of Jazz mentions hand gestures:

But there is another part, not so secret. The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. The part that closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolley; and brushes lint from his blue serge suit when they come out of the movie house into the sunlight.

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it--to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer--that's the kick.*

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If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now (229).

Clearly the great power of hands is amplified in this final passage of *Jazz*. While a gesture may be intended to be casual, it can be quite intimate, especially to an innocent bystander. The ultimate power of hands is creativity, which includes the ability to express emotions in simple gestures: "What's the world if you can't make it up the way you want it?" (208). This power can lead to positive and negative actions: the fall in particular. Morrison's increasingly frequent mention of hands and their movements is intended to emphasize the difficulty in balancing the powers of creation and destruction hands possess. Ironically, hands that bring about the fall allow the characters peace by keeping their minds occupied with tasks: ironing, sewing, cooking, dancing, and styling hair. This is the primary message Morrison wants to share: improvisation is one of the most important abilities of hands.

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There is always something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel. I'm interested in survival. . . . It's the complexity of how people behave under duress that is of interest to me.

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There is joy and there is pain; there are successes and failures; but always there is tension, a tension that is the struggle for integrity (McKay "Interview" 402-8).

Gestures, primarily hand gestures, in Toni Morrison's literature demonstrate an appreciation of the individual's creativity and originality and his primary instruments of success

and failure. Hands tell a great deal about an individual and how one struggles for control and integrity.

### Nobel Lecture in Literature 1993

This key lesson about hand gestures is summed up in Morrison's Nobel Lecture in Literature, given when she accepted the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. Morrison uses flight imagery and hand gestures to convey the importance of language, especially creativity. The lecture contains a story about an old blind woman and two children. The children ask the blind woman if the bird in one of their hands is alive or dead. The bird is language and the hand represents the force which can be applied to the language by a writer. The woman contemplates their queries and thinks, "Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty, if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives" (Morrison Nobel Lecture in Literature 19). The children become impatient with her and eventually state, "Passion is never enough; neither is skill" (28). Having invoked their creative-thinking skills and hearing their ideas, the woman states with satisfaction,

'Finally,' she says, 'I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is now in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done--together' (30).

The children's imaginations were spurred on with the woman's reactions, or lack thereof, to their questions. And they all created with passion.

This leads one to contemplate where Morrison will take her readers in the third novel in the trilogy, tentatively entitled Paradise ("Toni Morrison" 319). There should be no doubts, however, that this novel will rely heavily upon flight imagery and hand gestures, imagery which



Morrison has used with great success in all of her novels. As she explains, “The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework” (McKay “Interview” 409).

## Conclusion

You have to rely on the reader to help you make the images work. But underneath there has to be some other thing, it's like heartbeat, or it's like the human responses that are always on the surface in all humans. And you struggle for it, once you know what it is (Koenen 215).

Morrison has studied human nature intently. She shows this in her writing by finely tuning flight imagery to work with gestures of hands and does so because of a preoccupation in her fiction.

Gerry Brenner describes her preoccupation as exploring how "humans use and make fiction to give their lives meaning and significance" (Brenner 114-5). I contend this preoccupation stretches throughout her complete works; Morrison uses her fiction to help people find meaning and significance in their lives. She is not, however, convinced she must provide all the answers, as she describes using an elegant metaphor:

Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. . . . There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that--because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more--that you can't have it all right now. . . . That is a part of what I want to put into my books. They will never fully satisfy--never fully (McKay "Interview" 411).

Knowing that Morrison wishes to provoke thought and give meaning to the individual lives of her readers, one can begin to discover the core of her larger ideological project by carefully examining the tools she uses: flight and gestures, "human responses that are always on the surface" (Koenen 215).

Toni Morrison uses flight imagery in her novels to impart ideas about broader human behavior. Flight has everything to do with an atmosphere that holds one down and makes self-actualization or transcendence extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible. In using flight imagery, Morrison wishes to acknowledge the difficulties involved in life yet encourage one to hold out hope for success. Her primary message regarding flight is that if one ever hopes to fly, one must recognize the ebbs and flows in life; one must improvise, not think concretely. Flight need not be one's main mission, as it seemed to be for Milkman in Song of Solomon, but if successful flight is desired, one can accomplish it by divesting oneself of his vanities, acknowledging and understanding the past, and improvising as one works toward self-awareness. After having accomplished these steps, one is capable of flight or transcendence.

In hand gestures Morrison attempts to explain broader human behavior and survival by showing how characters react to crises. Typically hands do what is necessary for protection before the brain allows the hands to know what might have been more socially acceptable. In attempting to impart vital lessons, Morrison has shown us that one must use one's bare hands for self-actualization and that hands, like birds, speak a universal language. We see lives unfold in flight metaphors. But lives are directly related to what hands do, how they respond to each fall with protective measures and the healing powers of creation and improvisation. Hands and what they do illustrate the seamless journey from innocence to awareness. Hands propel the individual ambitiously forward through tedious events, bringing light to new ideas and motivations as the individual is constantly learning and aiming higher. Hands are the wings of humans; they are the primary means to create and recreate lives in the hopes of eventually attaining the ever-elusive Paradise.

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