

Spring 2017

COMPARING TWO CHRISTIAN SERMONS: MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED

Christopher Connell

John Carroll University, christopher.connell@westg.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Connell, Christopher, "COMPARING TWO CHRISTIAN SERMONS: MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED" (2017). *Masters Essays*. 68.

<https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/68>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Essays at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Essays by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact mchercourt@jcu.edu.

The focus of this paper is a comparison between two passages that might be characterized as “sermons.” The first passage from *Song of Solomon*¹ follows Milkman as he visits Rev. Cooper’s house, waiting for his car to be ready. During his stay he was visited by “every old man in town,” who recount for him his memories of his grandfather, Macon Dead I.² The narrator describes the old men’s memories, and at one point in the narration, he personifies Macon Dead’s farm as it “spoke to them like a sermon.” The second passage under consideration is Baby Suggs’ speech to her community in *Beloved*.³ In this scene, the narrator describes how Baby Suggs functions as an “unchurched preacher,” addressing the needs of those who gathered in the Clearing.

Although the critic Judylyn Ryan contends that there were no gender restrictions on spiritual leadership roles in the black communities of the plantation era, there seem to be noticeable distinctions between the narrator’s sermon in *Song of Solomon*, dated about 1961 in the novel and Baby Suggs’s Clearing speech, dated in the years following the end of the civil war. One way to account for these differences is to examine the degree to which gender influences the presentation of the Christian sermon. Another way to account for differences—and the way I will pursue in this paper—is to observe the extent to which these passages embody the characteristics of a traditional Christian sermon. I will divide the paper into two main sections. The first half of the essay examines the narrator’s speech in *Song of Solomon* and argues that this sermon defines a cosmology that co-opts the motif of a Christian sermon and suggests an embrace of materialism. The second half of the essay examines Baby Suggs’s Clearing speech in *Beloved* and shows

¹ All of the quotes from *Song of Solomon* come from pp. 234-5, unless otherwise noted.

² For convenience, I will identify Macon Dead I simply as Macon Dead and Macon Dead II as Macon Jr.

³ All of the quotes from *Beloved* come from pp. 87-9.

how she defines a cosmology that breaks from traditional Christian practices and rejects certain male-centered assumptions. By comparing these sermons, I aim to identify the extent of their efficacy and to outline that Morrison may be more critical of a sermon that hints at materialism than one that emphasizes the body.

In *Song of Solomon*, Chapter 10 begins with Milkman stumbling through a Pennsylvania forest. He is heading for a house that he believes is the site of Lincoln's Heaven, his grandfather's farm, and where he plans to hunt for his aunt Pilate's gold. Milkman has traveled a considerable distance to pursue this gold. He has flown from Michigan to Pittsburgh and then taken a bus to Danville, Pennsylvania, the town nearest to Lincoln's Heaven.

In Danville, Milkman finds an old friend of his father's, Rev. Cooper, who tells Milkman that he knows his "people." Reverend Cooper shares with Milkman stories about his father's boyhood working alongside Macon Dead, about his grandfather's farm which was a paradise of agriculture, nature, and family, and about Circe, a maid and midwife who delivered Macon Jr. and Pilate. Milkman feels a warm glow listening to these stories. He realizes that his father Macon Jr. had a close, loving relationship with Macon Dead. Milkman also believes that Reverend Cooper can help him locate Circe, who Milkman hopes, will lead him to the cave containing Pilate's gold.

When Milkman is waiting at Rev. Cooper's house for his car to be ready, "every old man in town" who remembered Milkman's grandfather visited to share their memories of Lincoln's Heaven. In this scene, the narrator suggests a world characterized by Christian beliefs and practices. One example of this Christian vision is the narrator's

description of the way that the men in Danville saw Macon Dead. According to the narrator, Macon Dead “sang like an angel.” Describing Macon Dead in this way implies that he inspired the old men with a spiritual zeal, that the optimism they felt about his success was a form of religious enthusiasm. The phrase “like an angel” suggests Macon Dead’s Christian virtue. He seems to have built a successful farm with an honest work ethic, armed only with his “free papers,” his “Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife.”

By associating Macon Dead with an angel, the narrator may also be implying that Macon Dead embodied a kind of religious significance. He establishes his version of heaven, Lincoln’s Heaven, which reinforces the suggestion that Macon Dead is spiritually important, being metaphorically closer to heaven than others. The work he does on this farm is symbolic of his heavenly success. In this way, Lincoln’s Heaven can be seen as a place of redemption, where Macon Dead achieves personal salvation. The narrator also notes that Macon Dead “had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict.” To the extent that these details define Macon Dead, they imply that his ability to build “one of the best farms in Montour County” was due to his Christian work ethic, signaling that his hard work was his duty and a sign of personal salvation.

In addition, the narrator portrays the men as witnesses to Macon Dead’s success, for they claim that this “is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it.” The narrator suggests that the men see Macon Dead’s hard work as a form of spiritual freedom. His farm was more than a topic of conversation. Macon Dead, who “sang like an angel,” was like a divine messenger who outlined for them the moral lessons of his achievements and captivated them with his ability to put his ambitions into forceful

action. For the men, his farm was not only “one of the best farms in Montour County.” It was “a farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush,” as if it animated their lives, making it more interesting and full of life. His farm is sacred in that they understand that it tells them what to do: they should “take advantage” of opportunities; they should develop a sense of ownership “on this planet, in this nation [and] in this country;” and they could achieve prosperity regardless of social barriers if they “grab[bed] the land.”

However, despite the narrator’s characterization of Macon Dead as an image of Christian beliefs, certain details imply some hesitation regarding Macon Dead’s possible religious importance. For example, by saying that Macon Dead “sang like an angel,” the narrator extends the comparison between Macon Dead and an angel only in terms of singing. Denotatively, the narrator is describing Macon Dead’s heavenly voice.

Although the narrator characterizes his voice as angelic, his voice does not indicate that he inculcated Christian values in the men. In addition, even though Macon Dead had a Bible, there is no explicit reference to how he used it. Being “as ignorant as a hammer” also hints that Macon Dead was possibly illiterate, which calls into question the purpose of his Bible. According to his son, Macon Dead “couldn’t read,” and “he never read nothing” (53). If the Bible were merely a prop to project a certain image of Christian conventionality, then the suggestion that the Christian Scriptures informed his life, functions merely to meet the expectations of people who witnessed Macon Dead’s success and believed that Christian faith is enough to succeed.

Another example, though, that reinforces Christian cosmology⁴ is the narrator’s

⁴ It is worth noting the argument that Hardman-Cromwell makes in “Freedom From’ In Negro Preaching of the Nineteenth Century”: slaves did not readily accept the Christian faith they encountered when they were enslaved in America. Rather, these people brought with them a diverse cosmology of god or gods, with belief systems and rituals particular to their own tribal groups.

personification of the farm with the rhetoric of a black folk sermon⁵. The narrator's sermon might be considered as a "black sermon" since it involves slave theology and the rhetoric of the black folk pulpit.⁶ Black sermons frequently modeled their themes after popular sermons⁷, which cast slave owners as Pharaohs and viewed their plight as corresponding to the Hebrew's Exodus from Egypt. The narrator's sermon operates this way. Although there is no apparent reference to the enslaved Hebrews, the narrator calls attention to the blacks' legacy of hardship when he notes that the men experienced "hard times" and that "things stayed the same." Like the Hebrew's Exodus, there is also an offer of hope. The sermon motif frames Macon Dead's farm for the men in Christian terms and like a preacher, it expresses in words which are in the hearts of these old men,

Nevertheless, their African spirituality sensitized them to appropriate Christian beliefs and practices, and they incorporated their African faith traditions with Christianity in dealing with their new conditions. Hardman-Cromwell notes that "they drew on that faith in the midst of the adversity slavery brought into their lives as slavery tried to shape for them an identity that was not of their choosing" (278). She cites a variety of actions that point to how African spirituality might have helped slaves survive their enslavement. Some of these actions include: enslaving other Africans, deliberate suicide, and infanticide of their own children.

⁵ I draw this understanding from Pitts who defines the term *black folk sermon* as the "Sunday verbal performance of the black folk preacher who is not seminary-trained but called to the ministry by some visionary experience and whose congregation consists principally of black working-class worshippers." (13) This definition is worth noting because both Baby Suggs and the narrator in *Song of Solomon* seem to base their ministry on a similar visionary experience: Baby Suggs is a witness to the suffering of her community; the narrator is an imaginative voice that animates the men's vision of Macon Dead's farm.

⁶ Although Miller specifically examines "The Drum Major Instinct," a late Dr. Martin Luther King sermon, many of his ideas about the rhetoric of black preaching seem to apply to the narrator's speech, at least to the extent that both King and the narrator stem from the same heritage of slave theology and epistemology, which Miller identifies as originating during slavery. Miller cites Lawrence Levine who explains the universe of slave religion "as a commodious and expansive one that encompassed [for slaves] both heaven and earth and that merged the Biblical past with the present" (225). The slaves understanding of the world is also characterized by a search for "self-knowledge" by relating the struggles of Biblical characters to their present hardships (226). By comparing their lives with those of Daniel, Joseph, and the enslaved Hebrews, black slaves infused a sense of the sacred into their lives.

⁷ Miller cites three examples: "Moses at the Red Sea," "The Eagle Stirs Her Nest," and "Dry Bones in the Valley."

making spiritual and moral lessons something that they can understand by putting it in terms of physical labors and emancipation (Hubbard 297). They “hear” his success as a moral lesson, conventionally structured like most black folk sermons: a conversational introduction, an emotional build up, and a climax (Pitts 137). The “sermon” begins with three opening questions, which challenge the men to witness Macon Dead’s successful farm, leading the men to consider “what they could do” in light of Macon Dead’s achievements:

“You see?” the farm said to them. “See? See what you can do? Never mind you can’t tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling,” it said. “Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can’t take advantage, take disadvantage.”

The farm delivers the sermon in rhythmic speech, manipulating black vernacular English and asks the men to notice Macon Dead’s success, to recognize what he is doing, and to understand that they too can achieve similar results (Pitts 137). The three interrogative questions at the beginning of this “sermon” apparently exhort them to reflect upon this possibility, asking them to “see” Macon Dead’s accomplishments. Seeing his farm documents Macon’s success and endorses his “magnificent” rise to achievement. There is something adamantly didactic and preacher-like about the narrator’s repetitive “see.” It encourages the men to notice. It invites participation in attesting to the truth of the farm, and it actively encourages the men to consider their own possibilities for success. This final question advances a vision of success. It plants the word “see” for the third

time, presumably demanding that the men envision themselves as successful as Macon Dead. The farm, literally described as a “sermon,” addresses the men with phrases such as “the farm said to them” and “it said.” It seems designed to motivate them to change their thinking, using the persuasive rhetorical characteristics of a preacher to capture their attention, to challenge their station, and to generate enthusiasm.

The “sermon” then proceeds with a longer, rhythmic sentence, strung together with the phrase “never mind you,” repeated five separate times. Literally, the phrase “never mind” means that something is unimportant, that a person should just disregard what is being said. Sometimes this phrase is used to reassure or comfort the person to whom it is said. However, in this sentence, the phrase works ironically. It emphasizes Macon Dead’s problems—he was illiterate, born from slavery, lost his name, and lost his father. It also hints that these disadvantages would have crippled a normal man, and it reminds the men that these obstacles did not stop Macon Dead. Additionally, the repetition of “never mind you” challenges the men to confront their own predicaments—perhaps even the “things that stayed the same”—and it dares them, like the moral example set before them, to overcome their social standing like Macon Dead, by commanding them to either “take advantage” of unrealized opportunities or to “take disadvantage.” Regardless of the path they choose, there is little excuse. With a short imperative, the farm orders them to “stop sniveling.”

At the end of passage, the intensity of the “sermon” grows with a cascade of directives, constructed of simple, direct, yet powerful verbs followed by the pronoun “it”:

Grab it. Grab this land! Shake it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it,

plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!

The strong, passionate verbs in this section (“shake,” “squeeze,” “stomp,” etc.) increase the vocal energy of the sermon, and the litany of these verbs—spilling one after the other with only the pause created by the repetitive “my brothers”—accelerates the movement of the language. Although “emphatic repetition most often takes the form of anaphora,” black sermons are not limited to strict repetition of words or phrases (Snead 151). In fact, “various rhetorics come into play.” (151). For example, the phrases “my brother” and “can you hear me” are characteristic of the rhetoric of a black sermon because they seem to work like “back channeling cues,” short messages between the preacher and his audience which reinforce consent between the two and direct the preacher to continue (Pitts 140). Though the Danville sermon lacks the men’s “vocalized agreement,” reminiscent of a congregation’s call and response cries, the fact that the sermon proceeds from a “conversational introduction” to an “emotional build up” implies that the men have signaled their agreement, for “if the congregation does not agree with the course of the argument, they may rudely withhold their reply, thus bringing to a premature end the preacher’s performance” (Pitts 142). Additionally, the verbs in these sentences act as a moral compass. They urge the men to “take advantage,” to find freedom by emancipating themselves. Listing the verbs in this way gradually increases the intensity of the speech, escalating to the moral climax that orders the men of Danville to “Pass it on!” This intensification is an adaptation of African religious ceremonies that were employed to encourage slaves to become Christian. The narrator’s “sermon” moves from a vernacular introduction that builds familiarity with the old men, and increases to a

mandate to “take advantage,” culminating in an optimistic celebration of what the men can do. Like traditional black folk sermons, the men are “empowered by a vision directed towards them and their situations” (Hardman-Cromwell 281). The final construction of this urgent passage, “pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!” is an impassioned command that echoes the spiritual enthusiasm of a sermon and exhorts a practical purpose for witnessing the success of Macon Dead’s farm. Personifying the farm might signal that the narrator is constructing a Christian cosmology by reinforcing the practice of serving as a witness to faith. During some black, Christian spirituals, it was typical for the preacher to call the audience to bear witness to the preacher’s message; the audience, in turn, responded to this request by answering the preacher with spontaneous expressions of affirmation.⁸

However, the men’s responses are noticeably missing. A black folk sermon is typically accompanied by audience responses which produce an emotional peak “in which the coinciding repetition of parallels, rhythm, and the congregation’s involvement can no longer resist the emotional force of possession” (Pitts 138). The absence of this interaction between the personified farm and the “listeners” (who are now old men) implies a lack of participation from the men and a lack of spiritual efficacy from the farm. Their lack of participation—such as a distinct call and response cry—suggests that these men may have understood Christianity’s incompatibility with slavery and its heritage of racial injustice. Like many slaves, they make “a distinction between the slaveholders’ gospel of obedience to their masters and true Christianity” (Hardman-Cromwell 278). Their lack of a vocal response hints at their inward rejection of the white

⁸ The dialogue between preacher and congregation is also commonly known as a “call and response.” I believe that this description comes from Hardman-Cromwell, but I am unable to locate the exact reference.

man's version of Christianity. As freemen, they are able to express their distaste for moralistic preaching because they experience the dichotomy between Christianity and the practice of white Christians (Hardman-Cromwell 278).

Furthermore, despite details such as the "Bible" and the "angel" that point to Christian beliefs, the narrator frames the sermon with an emphasis on materialism to suggest that blacks investment in Christianity may not be as effective a tool for liberation as a reliance on materialism. In fact, the narrator co-opts the Christian sermon motif to suggest a reliance on materialism. When the narrator describes Macon Dead as "tall" and "magnificent," standing "head and shoulders above all" the good and bad times, the old men "talk on and on" about him in a way that suggests he is more than a cherished memory or a token of Christian values. He is a mythic success story, a version of the American Dream that informs their lives and models for them the person they wish to be. In the narrator's words:

Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog-slaughterer, the wild-turkey roaster, the man who could plow forty in no time flat.

The story of Macon Dead advances the importance of tangible success for the old men. Although the sermon's structure might imply a Christian vision, the narrator draws attention to Macon Dead's ability to secure domestic stability through his own determination and by valuing material possessions. He views the "accumulation of individual land ownership rather than political and legal enfranchisement as a central category in black liberation. His sheer force of will and personal ambition allow him to develop Lincoln's Heaven, a farm that comes to stand for the immense potential of

individual black male autonomy” (Murray 125). Macon Dead creates a “beautiful Lincoln’s Heaven” through “backbreaking work.” The men recognize in concrete terms how he built “the only farm in the county that grew peaches.” “They talked about digging a well, fashioning traps, felling trees, warming orchards with fire when spring weather was bad, breaking young horses, [and] training dogs” (Miller 234). These details point to his single-mindedness. They also illustrate how Macon Dead produced his own economy through physical labor and practical, productive activities. Moreover, by animating the farm as a sermon, the narrator suggests that the men understand Macon Dead’s reliance of possession in religious overtones. They “hear” his farm as a sermon which suggests his materialism—his renting, buying, selling, owning, building, and multiplying replace the Christian model. Therefore, the sermon promises a kind of redemption, or a heaven on earth, through work and the accumulation of land. Christian heaven, however, is not of this earth, and it often requires humility and self-sacrifice, as opposed to the kind of glorified materialism that the Danville sermon points to.⁹

Even Macon Dead’s “singing” hints at his self-determination and preference for material possessions over spiritual values. Living in the South, the old men may have been quite familiar with the kinds of songs associated with working the land—these were the songs of slavery. Describing Macon Dead as having “sang like an angel” suggests his personal freedom—not just because the word “angel” implies a beautiful song unlike the slave work songs heard on the plantations, but the image of the “angel” also points to Macon Dead’s metaphoric ability to fly, his ability to escape racism and secure freedom by achieving worldly success on his own. He is not associated with an owner or a

⁹ The ideas at the end of this paragraph were supplied during personal communication with Dr. Christopher Roark.

plantation, for the narrator describes him as coming “out of nowhere.” He arrives seemingly by his own volition and with a willingness to work the land even though he is “as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict.” So free is Macon Dead, that the men apparently perceive him as unbound by ignorance or penury. Furthermore, the narrator notes that Macon Dead owns himself. He has his “free papers,” but he also possesses “a Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife,” images that reinforce his ability to exercise personal freedom.

In addition, the narrator implies that the men see the strength of Macon Dead’s success as a function of his self-determination—as opposed to a reliance on Christian faith or Scripture. For example, the narrator mentions three separate times that “they talked” about Macon Dead. This repetition, coupled with the description of how “Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be,” points to their preoccupation with Macon Dead, as both a man and a farmer. They even measure their own lives by his death: his death was “the beginning of their own dying.” His freedom and successful farm show the men that he has inverted the image of a slave working on a plantation to a black man possessing his own farm. He demonstrates a freedom of ownership, and since they see the farm as an image of private property, it creates psychological space that allows them the freedom to envision themselves realizing a similar kind of success. When the narrator says that “they wanted to be” like Macon, the narrator is not only conveying their wish for freedom, but also expressing a sense of psychological independence where they have the mental and emotional room to allow Macon’s farm to “color their lives like a paintbrush” and to imagine themselves “tak[ing] advantage...on this planet, in this nation, [and] in this county right here.” The personified farm, encouraging the men to

“pass it on,” implies that recognizing Macon Dead’s freedom helps the men understand their own lives and appreciate the possibility of their own socio-economic independence. This phrase—repeated twice in the emotional climax of the sermon—reinforces the idea that the men have received and accepted this “sermon” which they are now inspired to share with others.

Nevertheless, Macon Dead dies in a way that hints that he was an ineffectual symbol of social emancipation. Even though he attains success in acquiring land, his achievements are limited because a white family, who wants the land for themselves, “shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches.” Macon Dead runs into the realities of black life in Pennsylvania, and even though this is not the South, he is destroyed by a legacy of violence that continued to spill over from cruel and oppressive slave practices. The narrator’s “sermon,” as an expression of spiritualized hope, signals the degree to which the men depend upon Macon Dead’s farming success. In other words, the men’s emotional and psychological investment in Macon Dead indicates how marginalized they felt. Even after the 1863 emancipation, these men needed a figure to emerge as a “black patriarch” who would lead them out of their slave history (Murray 125). For the elderly black men of Danville, Macon Dead represented a myth in which their desire to escape their collective marginality “was displaced with Macon Dead’s material achievements” (Murray 127). Furthermore, Macon Dead’s death implies a criticism of embracing materialism too strongly—a kind of enthusiasm one associates with religious zeal. In fact, the simile, “the farm spoke to them like a sermon,” establishes a comparison that implies the men saw his farm was fraught with religious

significance.¹⁰

This religious significance contrasts discernibly with Baby Suggs's "sermon" in *Beloved*. If the Danville "sermon" inspires the old men to envision freedom rooted in their own empowerment and also suggests its inability to engender substantive change in the men's lives, then Baby Suggs's "sermon" is a steadying force. Her language, unlike the narrator's "sermon" in *Song of Solomon*, stabilizes her audience. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents Baby Suggs as an "unchurched preacher" who, despite having "nothing left to make a living with but her heart," possesses an ability to lead the people in the Clearing to heal, in contrast to the failure of the sermon in Danville to help the men change their lives.

Baby Suggs's stabilizing love is illustrated in Chapter 9 in *Beloved*, when Sethe is troubled to learn that her husband, Halle, has witnessed her brutal rape. In response, she recalls the steady, soothing presence of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and she seeks comfort in a place called the Clearing, where Baby Suggs once preached; men, women, and children danced and sang; and everyone celebrated the crippled old woman's healing love.

The image that Sethe recalls shows Baby Suggs operating in a broad, unorthodox, Christian cosmology by preaching in an unofficial capacity and taking on a role of an actual preacher. Unconnected to any church, Baby Suggs "visit[s] pulpits and open[s]"

¹⁰ The sermonic language of this passage differs sharply with Milkman's greedy search for gold. It also signals Milkman's spiritual journey over the course of the novel. Since the focus of this essay is how this passage functions as a sermon and not Milkman's self-discovery, I will not explore this latter idea in depth. However, it is worth noting that this "sermon" passage contributes to Milkman's growth, helping him realize that his inheritance is, in fact, not the gold. He eventually discovers the importance of family and his connection to the past.

her great heart to those who could use it.” Being “unchurched” implies that she does not strictly follow church doctrines, and being “uncalled, unrobed, unanointed” suggests that she is likely to be a free thinker, a humanist who relies upon her own intuition to guide her practices of valuing human life, of taking particular interest in the attitudes that her “congregation” has for their lives. This stands in contrast to Macon Dead’s farm which seems to advocate for the acquisition of land, as if material possessions and physical control provide spiritual values.

Unlike preachers who are officially tied to Christian churches and who have a tacit responsibility to preach the gospel, Baby Suggs “respects the stories of others and offers them something back” without “reverting to the nostrums of dogma or to the claims that the world is in fact a better or safer place than it is” (Byerman 197).” Baby Suggs’s communicates personally. She allows “her great heart to beat,” and she calls attention to their suffering by specifically naming the many ways in which they experienced pain. In addition to her openness, Baby Suggs also connects to her people by “saying no more.” As Henderson notes, “dance also functions as the bridge that speaks the unspeakable in rhyme and rhythm so that flesh and spirit become one” (158). Unlike churched preachers who may take their cue from scripture, church rituals, or theological doctrines and who sermonize in an official capacity from a pulpit, Baby Suggs “lets her great heart beat in [the] presence” of the people, soliciting the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry. “The Word that Baby Suggs preached was one in which laughter, tears and dancing all had their place; sorrow and joy were mixed together” (Cullinan 94). She allows her “heart” rather than her religious authority to establish ties with the people. “In this mix of laughter, tears and dance, Baby Suggs

not only spoke of redemption to those who would hear, but she also enabled it to come to life among them. All was whole: the joy and sorrow, the living and the dead, the laughter and the weeping. As people around her laughed and cried, she told them to love and spoke about what it meant to love” (94). Unlike the Danville sermon whose delivery depends upon the power of rhythmic speech and the manipulation of verbs to create intensity, Baby Suggs preaches from a kind of vulnerability and passivity. Instead of interrogating her congregation with questions (as when the farm asks the men “You see? See? See what you can do?”) Baby Suggs “bow[s] her head and pray[s] silently.” She begins her service with a simple, subtle gesture, by merely “put[ting] her stick down.”

In spirit, however, Baby Suggs is a preacher. She is associated with the pulpit as a visiting preacher, and she frequently “carries [her message] to the AME’s and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, The Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed.” “This impulse to testify, to map out the contours of one’s journey from bondage to freedom in some cases, provides the most stimulating view of cultural re-creation, as the quest for dignity and self-hood becomes the impetus for a restructuring of AA subjectivity. Sugg’s actions in the Clearing bear witness to this premise.” (Henderson 161). Baby Suggs’s role as an “unchurched preacher” undermines the assumptions of Christian patriarchy. Not only does Baby Suggs occupy the position of a preacher which would normally be reserved for males, but she also changes the function of the preacher from one who serves in an official Church capacity from a recognized church with an assembled congregation, to an “uncalled, unrobed, unanointed” preacher “who decides that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she [puts her heart] to work at once” (Cullinan 87). The positive language and diction that gestures to

her role as an unsanctioned preacher counteracts assumptions about male-centered power and authority. As someone who was “accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing only a small caress after it,” Baby Suggs casts herself as a figure of humility and obedience. In contrast to the assumption that male authority equates to power, control, and dignity, Baby Suggs transforms her role as a preacher to one who emphasizes “women’s equalities”: caring for others, tending to others’ needs, self-sacrifice, etc, constructing, in effect, a new definition of what it means to be a preacher. The way Baby Suggs operates also suggests the value of the individual giving significance to her ability to serve others and to act as a preacher without sanctioned authority from established church officials. In a traditional patriarchal Christian church, officials often define roles, determining privileged positions in Church hierarchy and establishing functions. By defining herself and claiming a space within Christian hierarchy, Baby Suggs undermines the male homogeneity of Christian authority.

Another way Baby Suggs works apart from sanctioned religion—in effect reaching towards a different, perhaps more expansive source of power—is by relying upon herself instead of God as a source of healing. In “Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” Channette Romero characterizes Morrison’s novels as exploring the complex origins of black identity and community which are rooted in a history of trauma (415). She argues that Morrison’s novels center on how religion and spirituality are used as a healing mechanism for the community, and she identifies the diverse religious beliefs Morrison portrays in her novels as non-institutionalized, spiritualized practices that work to accept marginalized individuals—as opposed to the institutionalized Christian religion that is

more normative, and as a result, propagates oppressive practices. According to Romero, Morrison's texts are critical of normative Christian traditions because they contribute to the subjugation of women (416). "Baby Suggs, holy, offer[ing] up to them her great big heart," points to the efficacy of this "unchurched preacher." Unlike most conventional Christian preachers who define themselves in relation to the Church, Baby Suggs defines her role in relation to her community. Despite her unofficial status, she is not inferior. Baby Suggs is an individual, a person in her own right.

She preaches and works independent of organized Christian practices, and she builds a sense of community by connecting her people to their bodies by providing a message that empowers the traumatized to create a new vision of healing and redemption for themselves. By telling them "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine," Baby Suggs expresses a religious cosmology that finds redemption in unification. She encourages them to "love" their bodies "hard." She also recognizes traumatized individuals who "are encouraged to participate collectively in healing themselves through confronting and narrating their pasts." (Romero 417) She calls attention to their past physical suffering by describing the ways that their backs were "flayed" or their hands were "tied, bound, chopped off and left empty." However, she also encourages them to achieve a kind of harmony with their bodies by persuading them to raise up these parts and "kiss them," reuniting them with their tormented body parts. In contrast to the Danville sermon which encourages the men to "take advantage"--an aggressive, proactive approach to combat their legacy of oppression, Baby Suggs works differently to overcome the debt of racism. Her approach emphasizes communal healing. Where the farm's sermon preaches and directs a litany of instructions on "what a man can

do,” Baby Suggs leads with “her great heart” and recognizes that her people’s ability to heal is found in their capacity to imagine “grace.” Her message, “that if they could not see it, they would not have it,” hints at the importance of the Clearing. It literally provides the men, women, and children a space to break from their daily struggles and to exercise their imagination.

Unification of the body is even echoed in the way in which she calls children, men, and women to participate in the Clearing rituals:

It started that way: laughing, children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed,

Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

Her method of providing the people with her sympathies points to a highly personal and unconventional approach to healing. One reason she might be seen as a source of healing is that she is thought of as “holy,” which hints that she is worthy to be observed, and she is somehow consecrated. However, the fact that this description follows her name also implies that “holy” is less a title—as if it would be applied to God—and more of an explanation of her character. Even though the word “holy” is often applied to deities, the people in the Clearing may see Baby Suggs as someone who is to be respected, not as a Christ-like figure who is kept reverently sacred from human profanation, but rather one who nurses their psychological pain. She provides healing, not by God-like miracles, but by “offering up to them her great big heart,” telling “them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine.”

Cullinan redefines the traditional notion of redemption as it applies to motherhood. It is not a “release from punishment” or “the canceling of the debt of sin”; rather, it is about continuity and wholeness: “In maternal experience, pain and joy, suffering and healing, death and new life are so tightly bound together that one cannot exist without the other” (78). Cullinan investigates the degree to which being a mother influences the way one understands Christ’s work. She considers whether the story of Jesus can be understood as the story of a mother who unfailingly remains patient despite her pain and sacrifice. Christ’s work, in this sense, is maternal work, in part because much of the traditional images associated with Christ can be recast in maternal terms (for example, blood as milk). Understanding redemption from a mother’s perspective entails seeing it as a mother reassuring her children “rather than as an angry father demanding to be placating for slights against his honor” (Cullinan 81), or the image of a violent social activist Christ overturning the tax collectors tables in the temple. Even women’s language can be seen as a reflection of Christ’s work and redemption. Maternal voices, like those of many throughout *Beloved*, express confusion. Furthermore, mothers deal with their suffering by discovering it as it relates to redemption: mothers either embrace “all the contradictions of experience—suffering and joy, birth and death—or else they fall silent; they either enact a discourse of redemption, or their silence points loudly to where redemption is needed” (Cullinan 91). Of the mothers in *Beloved*, Cullinan describes this maternal discourse of redemption as an active acceptance of all their experiences. They do not strike out at others, nor do they passively accept their fate. Rather, they speak as mothers who determinedly recognize and embrace the good and bad of their lives because they see it as part of a larger whole. Baby Suggs illustrates this

when she did not tell them “to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more.” Yet, this acceptance is not easily achieved; nor is it permanent (Cullinan 92). The way that the company of men, women, and children who follow Baby Suggs to the Clearing and “wait among the trees” implies a dependence upon her to provide a way of thinking for their lives. She specifically instructs them how to love their flesh, in essence, guiding their healing. The Danville sermon, on the other hand, advocates independence, telling the men “what a man can do” and rejecting excuses by claiming they have “a home in this rock” and “if I got a home you got one too!”

In addition to using herself to inspire healing, Baby Suggs recognizes a cosmology that involves the power of the body. In leading the people to envision “the grace they could imagine,” Baby Suggs directs them to love their bodies:

Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!

Baby Suggs understand that these people fail to love themselves, so she takes it upon herself to impart to them a message of the body—that they must feel affection for their bodies in order to realize a kind of personal blessing. She wants them to favor themselves, to have free and unmerited respect for their flesh. Not only does Baby Suggs want the people to love their bodies, but she also wants them to adore specific parts of

their bodies, such as their eyes, skin, and hands because these can be a potential source of healing. Their hands, for example, can care for others. They can “touch” others, and they can “stroke them on your face,” which suggests that hands—which had previously been “tied, bound, chopped off, and left empty”—can nurture others and oneself.

Distinguishing herself from God, whom Christians consider the source of grace, Baby Suggs informs the people that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine,” as if they were the source of their own salvation, not some higher, transcendent power, who bestows blessing from afar.

On the other hand, the narrator’s use of the word “grace” implies that Baby Suggs sees healing in conventional, Christian terms. Western Christian theology defines grace not as a created substance of any kind, but as “the love and mercy” given by God because God desires people to have it, not necessarily because of anything people have done to earn it” (Our Wesleyan Heritage). Christians understand grace to be “the benevolence shown by God toward the human race” (Modern Catholic Dictionary), a spontaneous gift that takes the form of divine favor, love, clemency, and a share in the divine life of God (Komonchak 437). When Baby Suggs tells the people to imagine grace, she works more like a conduit for God’s healing power. She defines grace in the same way that Christians understand grace to be God’s unmerited gift of salvation: “She [does] not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more.” Baby Suggs is merely its messenger. So even though Baby Suggs centers her preaching on immanent, bodily power, her emphasis on “grace” and on “flesh that weeps” implies a Christian belief of salvation provided by a merciful God. Additionally, achieving salvation through Christ’s “flesh” is a central tenet of Christian theology. Baby Suggs recognizes physical

suffering, reminiscent of the pain Christ bore, and the need for “grace” in order to relieve one’s suffering.

Another feature of Baby Suggs’s cosmology that is incongruent with traditional Christian beliefs is Baby Suggs’s connection to the physical earth, as opposed to a spiritual life. Her sermon takes place in the Clearing, “a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place.” This is not only a piece of land free from trees and other obstructions. The word “Clearing” implies the removal of encumbrances. As the critic Melvin Dixon notes, images of landscapes in African American literature such as “the wilderness, the underground, and the mountaintop, often serve as sites for refuge and revitalization” (in Henderson 162). The Clearing can be understood in this context because it is the place where Baby Suggs preaches a form of resurrection of the body based on self-love. Moreover, this special, secluded location implies the way that blacks under slavery conducted their religious practices: “In such locations, away from the white gaze, the enslaved could define for themselves their relationship to the divine and to the enslaver. Similarly, in the Clearing, Baby Suggs can conduct a healing ritual that is not about sin and righteousness so much as it is about catharsis and self-love” (Byerman 197). Nestled among the trees, it is a place for the people to clarify their lives with laughter, dancing, and tears, and where they can exculpate themselves by trying to love their bodies, which had been the source of white people’s hatred. For healing to occur at a place so rooted in the earth questions the need for Christians to look to heaven for salvation. The Clearing, like the materialism of the Danville sermon and name “Lincoln’s Heaven,” implies that salvation might be found on earth.

The Clearing is not just a place where the people's physical needs are addressed. Some critics see the Clearing as a place that implies a critique of Christianity. Henderson, for example, sees the Clearing as a space that refigures the "problems of the inheritance of Christianity" and "the racism associated with that inheritance" (151). The rituals that Baby Suggs leads in the Clearing contrast the Christian worship of the sacred flesh of Jesus. Instead, Baby Suggs provides an opportunity for the people to reclaim their own flesh, part by part, by reflecting upon the numerous ways that they experienced suffering at the hands of white people. "For Baby Suggs, Christianity takes the shape of her mangled flesh as her spirit becomes framed by and affected by" by slave experiences (Henderson 154). The ceremonial rituals that Baby Suggs performs—dancing, singing, crying—implies a tacit rejection of European Christianity as it was delivered to her in America and it points to her attempt to replace it with a communal healing, a spiritualized worship where everyone in the Clearing is offered a chance of imagining a better life for themselves.¹¹ It is in the Clearing where Baby Suggs both promotes and celebrates a cosmology that acknowledges the wounds of the flesh and where she preaches a salvation from past slave experiences.

In addition, as the location of their healing, the Clearing is where Baby Suggs acts as a preacher. Her name, which comes from the word "sug"(a soft, marshy piece of ground such as a swamp or bog), is itself an image of the earth and implies a cosmology where her preaching operates like the natural word. Her name suggests this location on earth matters, and it hints at how her preaching works: "Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass." The repetition of "here"

¹¹ A number of African American churches have, as a regular part of their religious practice, dancing, singing, and crying.

and the image of “flesh in grass” signal the healing powers, which take place at the Clearing. It is a place in nature that seems conducive to communal healing, a place where Baby Suggs can encourage the people to imagine grace and free themselves from the debt of racism: “exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath.” It is also a place where Baby Suggs might be seen to exert her Aje, a spiritual force believed to be found in African women. These women who possess Aje are commonly thought to have special powers that connect them to the Earth and imbue them with a cosmic force that allows them to govern the behavior of others (Washington 171). Baby Suggs’ connection with the Earth points to the cosmology in which she operates: it involves elements of African spiritualism. Baby Suggs can be understood in this sense because she can be seen to move through a space charged with “creative and spiritual development” as she attends to the spiritual healing of the people (Washington 173). Additionally, the physical space of the Clearing might be seen as a sacred ground for Baby Suggs’ rituals of community healing because it functions as the “African American equivalent of the sacred spiritual groves where West and Central African initiations and rituals, including sacrifice, take place. Similar to the Grandmother deity of the Anlo people, Baby Suggs, holy consecrates the Clearing and uses it to help her community determine its destiny” (Washington 175). She soaks them in the exhortation of her heart, first with words that direct them to love, then with her dancing body.

One implication of Baby Suggs’ universe is that it relies upon people—not Christ—to bear witness to their own suffering in order to achieve salvation. Throughout Baby Suggs’ sermon, she emphasizes a responsibility to love one’s flesh: “*You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.” The word

“you” is mentioned twenty-four times in her speech, indicating a personal duty to recognize past sufferings and to feel affection for oneself. Unlike the Danville sermon that builds repetition through a cascade of energetic verbs to establish a rhythm and to control the emotional buildup, the anaphoristic “you” in Baby Suggs’s speech works more like a managed conversation or a “conversational introduction,” an organizing principle characteristic of black folk sermons (Pitts 137). Repeating the word “you” suggests that her sermon involves her audience, and its vernacular speech (for example, “you got,” “pick em,” and “’cause they don’t”) indicates her familiar connection to them. These rhetorical devices create a sermon that implies that these men, women, and children have an obligation for their own healing: it is their responsibility to imagine “grace.” According to Baby Suggs, if the people “could not see it, they would not have it.” By encouraging them to imagine, Baby Suggs advances a kind of personal freedom. In addition to acquiring grace, “imaging” supports the people to think creatively and to express themselves freely, which presumably they were not able to do as slaves. Even though “slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,” Baby Suggs understands that slavery involves more than physical suffering. To be enslaved is to lack the ability to imagine a healthy, loving life for oneself. By encouraging them to “imagine” grace, Baby Suggs draws upon a cosmology where people can escape their painful experiences and achieve freedom.

In conclusion, Baby Suggs participates in a broad cosmology that mines the personal, physical, and natural world. Although there is a sense that her universe corresponds with traditional Christians beliefs, specifically as she encourages the people at the Clearing to achieve “grace” for them to experience salvation, the cosmology in

which she operates is rooted in a corporal world, which implies a theology of salvation apart from conventional Christian practices.

To be sure, both the Danville sermon and Baby Suggs's Clearing speech show connections to traditional Christian practices. For instance, both reference or allude to images of the divine: the men of Danville see Macon Dead "like an angel," a customary image in Christianity frequently used to reinforce spiritual values; Baby Suggs is described as "holy" as if she were sacred and devout. Another similarity between these passages that reinforces conventional Christianity—particularly those practiced by blacks—is the rhetorical structure of the sermon. Both sermons rely heavily on repetition, back channeling cues, and vernacular language. One notable difference, however, is the degree to which these passages deviate from Christian conventions and what this may say about their efficacy. The Danville sermon adopted the lyricism of Christianity—and with it, inherent prejudices associated with orthodoxy and patriarchy. In fact, the sermon feels much more like a homily that would be delivered in a church. It is dogmatic in nature and an exhortation designed to set some kind of policy on the way the men should live their lives. However, the Danville sermon offers hope in the form of materialism. Even though Christianity usually stresses looking toward heaven for salvation, this sermon preaches a kind of materialism that implies that the accumulation of possessions and one's ability to command property leads to prosperity, security, and freedom. This message, delivered in the form of a sermon, suggests that these values are spiritually uplifting, as if preoccupation with earthly materialism is able to replace the divine. Macon Dead's death, however, suggests a disbelief or a danger in this approach.

On the other hand, the Clearing speech strays from Christian conventions in how it advocates for healing and spiritual redemption. Baby Suggs's Clearing speech feels much more organic, much more like a response to the people's needs, and much less assertive. This sermon works as an extension of Baby Suggs herself—she is a black woman who feels a responsibility from her cultural traditions to be a spiritual agent. That is, because of her differences from traditional preachers, she is able to meet the needs of her black community. Baby Suggs finds a pocket of expression that exists both within traditional Christian practices and at the same time extends beyond conventional Christian beliefs.

Works Cited

- Byerman, Keith. "Secular Word, Sacred Flesh: Preachers in the Fiction of Baldwin and Morrison." *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Ed. Lovaleria King and Lynn Orilla Scott. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 187-204.
- Cullinan, Colleen Carpenter. "A Maternal Discourse of Redemption: Speech and Suffering in Morrison's *Beloved*." *Religion and Literature* 34.2 (2002): 77-104.
- "Grace." *Modern Catholic Dictionary*. 2013.
- "Grace." *Our Wesleyan Heritage*, 16 March 2017, www.umc.org/what-we-believe/our-wesleyan-heritage.
- Hardman-Cromwell, Youtha C. "'Freedom From' In Negro Preaching of the Nineteenth Century." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 14.4 (2000): 277-295.
- Henderson, Carol E. "Refiguring the Flesh: The Word, The Body, and the Rituals of Being in *Beloved* and *Go Tell It On The Mountain*." *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*. Ed. Lovalerie King and Lynn Orilla Scott. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 149-165.
- Holloway, Karla F. C. "The Lyrical Dimensions of Spirituality: Music, Voice, and Language in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*. Ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 197-211.
- Holloway, Karla F. "The Lyrics of Salvation." Holloway, Karla F. C. and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos. *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

101-114.

- Hubbard, Dolan. "In Quest of Authority: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and the Rhetoric of the Black Preacher." *College Language Association Journal* 35.3 (1992): 288-302.
- Komonchak, Joseph A (1990). *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan. 437.
- Miller, Keith D. "Epistemology of Drum Major: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Folk Pulpit." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 18.3/4 (1988): 225-236.
- Murray, Rolland. "The Long Strut: Song of Solomon and the Emancipatory Limits of Black Patriarchy." *Callaloo* 22.1 (1999): 121-133.
- Pitts, Walter. "West African Poetics in the Black Preaching Style." *American Speech* 64.2 (1989): 137-149.
- Romero, Channette. "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 415-430.
- Snead, James. "On Repetition in Black Culture." *Black American Literature Forum* 15.4, *Black Textual Strategies* 1 (1981): 146-154.
- Washington, Teresa N. "The Mother-Daughter Aje Relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review* 39.1/2 (2005): 171-188.
- Wilentz, Gay. "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *African American Review* 26.1 (1992): 61-76.
- Wyatt, Jean. "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *PMLA* 108.3 (1993): 474-488.