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Honors Thesis

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Beneath, Before and Beyond: How Characters Achieve a True Identity Through Alternative
Education in *Song of Solomon*, *The Bear*, and *Things Fall Apart*.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Let me tell you a story. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a black man named Milkman goes in search of his true identity. He had grown up learning to be a certain type of person: one who, like his father, valued commercial success, an affiliation with the white community, social authority, and conventional wisdom, and someone who distanced himself from all members of his family who were outcasts of this society. Pilate, Milkman's aunt, exemplifies everything her brother despised: a disregard for money, fashion, manners, school and socially acceptable behaviors, but also, Pilate is a woman who understands and accepts her black heritage. Milkman is forbidden to go near his aunt, but against his father's wishes, Milkman goes to meet Pilate, where he immediately realizes from her he cannot stay away. She becomes his guide on his journey toward a truer identity: one that is unique to him because it is rooted in the legacy of his ancestors. Thus, unhappy in Michigan, he heads to Virginia, where he is taught the history of his family and consequently, Milkman learns about himself. And so, reader, Milkman rejects an untrue identity inherited from his father and uncovers a true self-understanding via an alternative education: one not learned in the classroom, but through experience; one not taught by an unrelated teacher or American History textbook, but by his aunt Pilate; one not in mainstream

society, but in the Virginia country and society of his ancestors. Milkman discovers what it means to be an individual in a homogenizing world--a world that asks him to sacrifice his true identity because it distances him from his ancestors and the natural world. By showing us, reader, how to achieve identity through an alternative education, Toni Morrison not only suggests what we've lost from forgetting *our*story in favor of *history*, but shows us the value of finding our own narrative. She is not alone in this suggestion. William Faulkner, in his *The Bear*, and Chinua Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart*, suggest something similar through a similar story, and by showing the patterns among these three works, this thesis draws conclusions as to what it means to be a writer and reader in the 21st century.

So now reader, let me prove to you this pattern in *Song of Solomon*.

Macon Sr., a successful property owner in a small Michigan town, is entirely concerned with being successful--more successful than anyone else. He drives his family around in their pristine Packard in an effort to flaunt his financial prosperity; he marries the daughter of the town's richest black man not for love, but in hopes of inheriting his reputation; he disassociates himself from members of his family who don't fit into society, like his sister Pilate: "He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank—the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses—discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister who had a daughter but not a husband" (20)¹. And for his son, Milkman, Macon Dead wants a life that continues such prosperity. He wants Milkman's identity to be not like his family's, but like his own, and we know this because Macon Dead names his son after himself. Macon and his sister Pilate were both named similarly—their illiterate father pointed to a word in the Bible, but Macon think that "the giving of names in his family [was] always surrounded by what he believed to be

¹ All direct quotations of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* come from Penguin's 1987 edition of the work.

monumental foolishness,” so “he had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male” (15,18). So for Milkman, Macon saves the passing down of his own name hoping that his son will be like his father. And yet, at a young age, Milkman strays from the path paved by Macon Sr..

The first way in which Milkman deviates from fulfilling his father’s legacy is not through his own doing. It is, however, because of a name. Milkman does not go by his father’s name, but is given the nickname Milkman at an early age because he breast feeds from his mother, Ruth, for so long. Importantly, Macon Dead genuinely hates his wife—as mentioned before, the marriage was for property and propriety. So not only does Milkman not take the name Macon Dead, Jr., but he identifies with a name given to him based on the relationship he has with his mother, which not only strays from the path Macon tries to pave, but defies it. We know early on, because of this nickname, that Milkman will end up unlike his father.

Milkman has been taught by his father to stay away from his aunt Pilate, Macon’s sister. For Macon, she is nothing but a reminder of the kind of identity Macon has worked so hard to cover up: black, poor, and distant from society. He tells Milkman, “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I’m going to teach you how” (55). Macon fully expects his son to follow him into the property owning business, and from this speech, his motives for teaching his son the family business are clear. Obviously someone like Pilate, who disregards money, fashion, manners and socially acceptable behaviors, and who literally lives outside of town, would have nothing to teach Milkman of this world. But

Milkman cannot resist temptation, so in his decision to meet his aunt, Milkman defies his father's authority and dismisses the education his father is trying to give him.

When Milkman and Pilate finally meet, we see Milkman clearly turn off the path towards achieving his father's identity. Morrison writes, "As [he] came closer and saw the brass box hanging from her ear, Milkman knew that what with the earring, the orange, and the angled black cloth, nothing—not the wisdom of the his father not the caution of the world—could keep him from her" (36). His father's wisdom is an education intended for success in the same world that cautions Milkman against meeting Pilate. Milkman rejects the education, the potential success in that world, and the identity that is like his father's.

Immediately after their meeting, Pilate begins Milkman's alternative education. She says, "You all must be the dumbest unhung Negros on earth. What they telling you in them schools? You say 'Hi' to pigs and sheep when you want 'em to move. When you tell a human being 'Hi,' he ought to get up and knock you down" (37). Pilate certainly doesn't sugarcoat her insult to her nephew that questions his manhood, but she blames "them schools," the institutions, for Milkman's stupidity—treating human beings like animals. So what she teaches Milkman is respect. When juxtaposed with the education given to Milkman by his father, above, we see that these educations are quite in conflict with one another. Macon wants Milkman to respect things, and own other people, and Pilate suggests that to be a man, to be a black man, Milkman must respect people as human beings, not as animals or property. This new knowledge doesn't immediately gel with Milkman: "She was the one who was ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk. The queer aunt whom his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about and whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, poverty, her dirt and her wine. Instead she was making fun of his school, of his teachers, of him" (37). Milkman feels "personally responsible"

for Pilate because she is family, bound by blood, so he understands that their identities are biologically and socially connected; but at this point in Milkman's life, the education he's been given tells him to reject what Pilate values and what Pilate can teach him. But through the listed syntax of this last quotation, "of his schools, of his teachers, of him," Morrison and Milkman connect the formal education to a certain identity, and it's one that Pilate makes fun of. Yet this quote continues as Milkman begins to see Pilate differently: "And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it" (37). Milkman looks beyond the eccentricities of her earring and her dress and sees something true: Pilate is not the way society has characterized her. Milkman begins, like Pilate, to take issue with the education and identity that has been given to him.

The rejection of one education and identity is not enough. In forming a true identity through a different education, Milkman looks to Pilate as a teacher. Pilate, having journeyed away from society in search of her own identity, years before Milkman retraces her steps, has already achieved a true sense of identity. Like Milkman, Pilate was given an identity that she had to reject: "Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be, she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero" (149). The assumptions that she learned were a miseducation. It is not until Pilate takes her education into her own hands, by traveling to Virginia, that she really achieves her true understanding of self, and this is reflected in Pilate's understanding of her name. After her father was shot, Pilate took the scrap of paper on which he wrote her name, put it in a box, and hung it from her ear. This earring becomes Pilate's most famous accessory and it is symbolic of the kind of identity she has—one that is directly connected to her family. Pilate accepts the name given to her because it was given to her by her

father. This is unlike Macon Dead. While his name is the same as his father's, Milkman asks at one point, "Say, you know how my old man's daddy got his name...Cracker gave it to him...Yep. And he took it. Like a fucking sheep" (89). As we have seen before, the giving of names is important. Macon Dead is not a name that reflects a true identity because it was assigned by a white man, someone outside of the family, someone without any care to the individual. Pilate's name reflects a true identity because it was given to her by her family, and reflects her as an individual. The latter is true because Pilate pilots Milkman on his own journey towards a true identity, thus her name reflects the actual role she plays in the protagonist's life. Milkman says, "Pilate knows. It's in the dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else's. Bet mine's in there too. I'm gonna ask her what my name is" (89). Milkman understands that Pilate is the key to achieving his own true identity.

So what does she teach him? Pilate teaches her nephew about his ancestry. Of Pilate, Milkman says it was she "who cooked him his first perfect egg, who had shown him the sky, the blue of it, which was like her mother's ribbons, so that from then on when he looked at it, it had no distance, no remoteness, but was intimate, familiar, like a room that he loved in, a place where he belonged" (209). The city, the office, his mother's house—none of these are places Milkman belongs. But what Milkman learns from his journey—a journey that importantly mimics Pilate's—is that he belongs in the sky because the sky is where his ancestors come from. This mythical dimension may seem, at first, quite strange, but the story of Milkman's family profoundly shapes the protagonist's identity.

During that same initial meeting with Pilate, Milkman hears, for the first time, the Song of Solomon. "Pilate took the lead:

*O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me*

*O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me...
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. ” (49).*

It is, of course, important that Pilate is singing this to Milkman if she is the teacher who transmits the family history to her nephew, but when Milkman is first exposed to this song, he (and the reader) don't recognize that this song is about his family. It isn't until he travels to Virginia, in search of the gold that he believes to be his inheritance, that he hears the song again. When he arrives in Shalimar, Virginia, he hears children outside of the store he stops in, Solomon's General Store, singing what he thinks to be "some meaningless rhyme" (264). This rhyme that the children sing is a part of the same song that Pilate sings, but Milkman still is clueless as to its personal significance. He thinks, "He'd never played like that as a child. As soon as he got up off his knees at the window sill, grieving because he could not fly, and went off to school, his velvet suit separated him from all the other children" (264). As a child, Milkman had the imagination to believe he could fly, but his formal education kept him on the ground. His childhood belief is intrinsic in the story of his ancestors, but it isn't until the end of his journey—after he visits Circe, the midwife who delivered his father and Pilate, goes hunting in the woods, finds the cave in which the gold is thought to be buried, etc.,—that Milkman hears the song for the third time, this time understanding its true meaning:

*“Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Left that baby in a white man's house
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Heddy took him to a red man's house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

*Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!*

*O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me*

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home*

He almost shouted when he heard “Heddy took him to a red man’s house.” Heddy was Susan Byrd’s grandmother on his father’s side, and therefore Sing’s mother too. And “red house” must be a reference to the Byrds as Indians. Of course!...They had mixed their Indian names with their American-sounding names....These children were singing a story about his own people! He hummed and chuckled and did his best to put it all together” (303).

Appropriately, it isn’t until this third time that Morrison reproduces the entire song, connecting for us the bits and pieces we’ve gathered up to this point. In this way, the reader is on the same journey as Milkman. With the help of this song, Milkman finally understands the story of his family’s history, and with this, comes a true understanding of himself. We know this because after he pieces this all together, he “ran back to Solomon’s store and caught a glimpse of himself in the plate-glass window. He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (304). The new understanding of himself is what reflects back at him in the plate glass window of a store named after his ancestor. The fact that he is most alive and most happy now ultimately proves that this knowledge of his family history and the achievement of this new self yield a true identity, one that connects Milkman to his ancestry and thus reflects him as an individual.

INTERMISSION

Hello again reader. We come to the part in my story where I need to make sure I've been clear and that you're still following along. The pattern I see in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is this: Milkman rejects an identity given to him by his family and by society; his new teacher, Pilate, guides him on his journey towards a true identity; from her and from his journey Milkman learns about the importance of names and his family history; and in the end, from this alternative education, Milkman gains a truer understanding of self. So let's pause and look at the overall theme and purpose of Morrison's work. *Song of Solomon* shows what personal and legendary truths lay beneath the surface of the textbook education. Outside of the institution are teachers that teach history, but as in *Song of Solomon*, the story is Milkman's own; it's *his-story*. And from learning one's own story, a very personal, rooted, and more complete identity is formed. It's important that the characters are taking the education into their own hands in rejecting one education and identity and uncovering another. If the mainstream, given identity is being rejected because it prohibits individuality, then part of achieving the true identity depends upon an autonomous education. For a character in the 20th century, for a 20th century writer of these characters, and for a reader in the 20th century of these authors, works like *Song of Solomon* challenge the stories told to us in school and the stories unspoken by society, and provide for us a way to find what lies beneath: the roots of our true identities.

I see the protagonists in *The Bear* and *Things Fall Apart* both following a similar pattern and to achieve a similar meaning. Let me show you, dear reader, how they all connect.

The Bear

Isaac McCaslin is expected to be just like his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, and his second cousin McCaslin, who raises Isaac as if he were his son. These progenitors of Isaac are

not unlike Macon Dead. All are property obsessed and use this property to gain superiority over others. All want their descendents to continue this legacy: “and for this reason, Old Carothers McCaslin, knowing better, could raise his children, his descendants and heirs, to believe the land was his to hold and bequeath”²(253). Isaac is taught that this white, southern, enslaving, property owning identity is the one he is supposed to assume. Part of this identity depends on a formal education. When Isaac proposes to skip school to continue a hunting trip, Boon, a fellow hunter who is fiercely loyal to Isaac’s family members, tells Isaac, “Where in the hell do you expect to go without education? Where would Cass be? Where in the hell would I be if I hadn’t never went to school?” (248). In order to be like Boon and Cass (McCaslin), Isaac needs a formal education. Likely, the teachers of these schools would reinforce the Carothers’ history of white male dominance over slaves and natives, so it’s in the Carothers’ family interest for Isaac to attend school. But Isaac rejects this—he does not leave the hunting trip to return to school, so we as readers know early on that Isaac will be unlike his family.

As Macon Dead believes if you own things, “then you will own yourself and other people too,” Isaac’s family believes that owning land means owning other people too. Symbolic of this are the Carothers’ family ledgers. The pages of these tell the family history and record “the slow outward trickle of food and supplies and...in title at least, of Carothers McCaslin’s slaves” (254). Like the land, Isaac is intended to inherit the story of enslavement that these ledgers have written down. The entries are difficult to read and make sense of because they are in a language that completely objectifies humans—literally using the same vernacular that is used for the people as if they were kerosene or harnesses. This legacy, as McCaslin argues, is for Isaac to continue. But he does not. He rejects the education and identity given to him by his family.

² All direct quotations from William Faulkner’s *The Bear* come from *The Portable Faulkner*, the revised and expanded edition, edited by Malcom Cowley and published by Penguin in 1983.

This may, at first, seem unlike *Song of Solomon*, because while Milkman achieves a true identity in connecting to his family legacy, it is the family legacy that Isaac rejects. It is best to think of Isaac's entire family as similar to Macon Dead—bound by white society, taught by formal institutions and forced to sacrifice dignity and individuality. But Isaac will not be a third generation of Old Carothers, so in his journey to find himself, Isaac looks to someone outside his blood relations.

For years, Isaac travels to the wilderness with McCaslin, Boon and others for an annual hunt. Sam Fathers, of Indian and African descent, is the leader of this group, and becomes Isaac's teacher. Of Chickasaw blood, Sam's predecessors understood a humble relationship between the wilderness and the hunter, and this is what Sam Father's teaches Isaac: how to be a hunter and student of nature. *The Bear* begins with the narrator relating: "It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document...It was of the men, not white or black or red, but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive...in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules...the best game of all" (197). The fact that the wilderness is older than any recorded document suggests that it is a history that predates the one manufactured in those ledgers. The repetition of "ancient" suggests that what Sam Fathers will teach Isaac about the hunt is for a balance between man and the wilderness that existed before Old Carothers distorted this relationship by buying the land to bequeath it to his heirs.

So as Milkman must reach back beyond his father's unnatural, contrived self—towards his ancestors—Isaac too must go back to an ancient history. And fittingly, Sam Fathers' own history predates Old Carothers because he is of indigenous American descent. So like in *Song of Solomon*, our protagonist's teacher is not a part of the society that our protagonist rejects—he is

of the lineage that has been oppressed and exploited by the Carothers family when they purchased the infamous land from Sam's ancestors.

Sam first teaches Isaac about Old Ben, the legendary, almost mythic bear that the company of men has annually tried to but failed to kill. Of Old Ben, Sam says, "He come to see who's here, who's new in camp this year, whether he can shoot or not, can stay or not. Whether he got the dog yet that can bay and hold him until a man gets there with a gun. Because he's the head bear. He's the man" (203). Because Sam goes beyond merely personifying the bear, to say "he's the man," Sam shows his respect for the creature. This personification and respect is also in direct opposition to Isaac's father, uncle and grandfather who liken animals to people to dehumanize them, like in the ledger entries. And finally, it is like Pilate's first advice to Milkman: to greet people as human beings, not as "pigs and sheep". In learning an appreciation for the bear, Isaac rejects the values of his family.

Dominance, whether over people or over nature, is essential to the Carothers identity. We know it is over slaves because of the ledgers, but we know it is also over nature because the other men in the company, including Isaac's cousin McCaslin, come to the wilderness to kill the bear, not to engage in the "ancient game of the hunt". And because their motives are misguided, the bear escapes their vision. However, Isaac blatantly states that it is the continuance of the hunt, not the death of the bear, that he wants most. And for the longest time, his greatest desire is to meet the bear. Through Sam's education, Isaac learns the humility required to see Old Ben. Desperate to catch a glimpse of the bear, Sam tells Isaac, "It's the gun...you will have to choose" (210). Sam is really telling Isaac that the choice he will have to make is between keeping the weapon to shoot the bear, or relinquishing the potential to kill the bear in order to meet him. Isaac leaves the gun. When he does so, he feels like "a child, alien and lost in the green and

soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquishes completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted” (212). From this quote, it is clear that in order to see the bear, Isaac must become its equal, and not only surrender his weapon, but the accessories that tie him to the world of men—the watch and the compass. He must leave behind man-made time and enter the bear’s world that is innocent of arbitrary dates and hours. In fact, the bear himself has mythically lived beyond the years of a normal man’s lifespan, suggesting that the wilderness keeps a different, prehistoric sort of time. Then Isaac must give up the man-made tool, the compass, for direction, and find the bear another way. Understandably, Isaac feels lost, but because he, “did as Sam coached and drilled him...did next as Sam coached and drilled him...did what Sam had coached and drilled him...then [Isaac] saw the bear” (212, 213). Through Sam’s education, his coaching and drilling, the bear allows Isaac to glimpse him. Were it not for the humility and skill that Sam teaches Isaac, the boy would be bound by the perspective of Boon, McCaslin and the other men. But Isaac tells McCaslin, “Sam Fathers set me free” (292).

Let us pause for a moment and return to *Song of Solomon*. Much has been written on the influence Faulkner had on Morrison, and the parallels between this scene with Isaac and a scene with Milkman clearly illustrate this influence and unquestionably show that Morrison and Faulkner are joined in the purposes of their work.

In Virginia, men in the town of Shalimar challenge Milkman to hunt alongside them, and in his arrogance, Milkman agrees. But in the darkness, he gets lost: “He had come here to find traces of Pilate’s journey...How had he got himself involved in a hunt, involved in a knife-and-broken-bottle fight in the first place? Ignorance, he thought, and vanity” (275). Milkman’s vanity is like the Carothers’ assumed dominance over everything—an impediment in finding the bear or

a way out of the dark wood. Morrison continues, “He was only is breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the sight of himself” (277). Again, Milkman mimics Isaac as he “relinquish[es] completely” to the wilderness. The things his father taught him to possess, his untrue identity and the “sight of himself” no longer obstruct his thoughts. [Appropriately, the next time Milkman sees himself is after his recognition of the Song of Solomon’s personal significance, in the plate glass window of Solomon’s Store.] Milkman, exactly like Isaac, realizes “His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help to him out here, where all a man had was what he was born wit, or what he had learned to use” (277). This final quote mimics Faulkner’s symbolic use of the watch and thematic use of the importance of alternative education. We have seen how the rejection of one identity and use of an alternative education lead Milkman to the achievement of a new and true identity. But this essay had only shown the rejection and alternative education in *The Bear*. The bear himself is the key to Isaac’s achievement of a true identity and to understand this, we return to the importance of names.

Sam Fathers metaphorically compares Old Ben to a man by saying, “He’s the man,” but the fact that the bear has a name demands Isaac’s respect for the creature as well. Our narrator says that Isaac, “had already inherited then, without ever having seen it, the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot that in an area almost a hundred miles square had earned for himself a name, a definite designation like a living man” (198). Isaac can inherit the bear’s legacy because he is like a man in that he has a name. It is such a powerful name that our narrator later says, “only Old Ben was an extra bear (the hear bear, General Compson called him) and so had earned a name such as any human man could have worn and not been sorry” (232). So Isaac inherits something earned, not something given, which of course, mimics the way Isaac and Milkman

reject a name that was given (metaphorically for Isaac in that by rejecting the Carothers' legacy rejects the Carothers' name, and literally for Milkman, who does not go by Macon Dead) and earns a true identity.

Again, the parallels between *The Bear* and *Song of Solomon* clarify the meaning of both. Macon Dead passes on his name to his son, shaping Milkman's identity for him. In this same way, Isaac's father and uncle name their slaves. But one slave, Lucas Quintus, recognizes the power of names and uses it to his advantage: "Not *Lucius Quintus @c @c @c*, but *Lucas Quintus*, not refusing to be called Lucius, because he simply eliminated that word from the name; not denying it, declining the name itself because he used three quarters of it, but simply taking the name and changing it, altering it, making it no longer the white man's name but his own, by himself ancestored, as, for all the old ledgers recorded to the contrary, Old Carothers himself was" (277). The name doesn't fit him because, like Macon Dead's name, it was assigned to him by a white man, someone outside of the family, and someone without any care to the individual. So in changing the name, Lucius changes his ancestry and changes his identity.

The inclusion of this minor character and minor scene in Faulkner's work is important because Isaac, too, ultimately changes his ancestry to create his new identity. We see this through the fathering of Sam Fathers (whose name reflects Isaacs self-ancestoring, and works in the way that Pilate's does in that Pilate pilots Milkman), but the wilderness and the bear become a part Isaac's ancestry as well: "If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater" (214). If any quotation is indicative of an alternative education shaping a new and true identity, it is this. The bear, like Lucas Quintus, shapes his own history; Isaac, in allowing

the bear to be his alma mater—from the Latin meaning literally “nurse mother”, or wet nurse—and Sam Fathers to be his father, shapes his family history. And in doing so, he achieves a true identity—an identity that cannot, will not, inherit the land and all that comes with it. Isaac relinquishes his inheritance when he realizes his story includes “not only the whites but the black ones too, who were as much a part of his ancestry as his white progenitors, and of the land which they had all held and used in common without regard to color or titular ownership” (264). He learns that he cannot own the land because it was never his grandfather’s or his father’s land to own—he has nothing tangible to inherit.

And so we find a similar pattern in Faulkner and Morrison. Morrison shows us the stories that lay beneath the ones told to us in school and unspoken by society. Faulkner shows us the stories that lay before the textbooks and homogenizing history written and told by people like the Carothers. So while Morrison provides for us a way to see ourselves as individuals against society’s teachings, Faulkner allows for us to see a way in which humanity is unified in a common, unstratified, ancient and natural identity that came before social and economic dominance.

Things Fall Apart

In *Things Fall Apart*, it is actually our protagonist’s son, Nwoye, who illustrates the pattern found in *Song of Solomon* and *The Bear*. Like Milkman and Isaac, Nwoye rejects the identity given to him by his father, Okonkwo. Okonkwo “wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father’s household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices” (53). For Nwoye, Okonkwo wants the legacy of his honorable household continued, and this sentiment makes it clear that this continuance depends on acknowledging and

respecting the ancestors. If Okonkwo is anything, he is a man that is loyal to his the African village of Umuofia and his Igbo culture. So if this is the identity that Nwoye rejects—one connected to his ancestors and his culture, then we know early on that while Nwoye follows the pattern of the other protagonists, his journey will lead to an untrue identity.

Nwoye receives two kinds of education, one from his father and one from his mother. Both kinds of knowledge are transmitted through story telling. Okonkwo tells him “stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed...he told [Nwoye] of the past” (53,54). His mother tells him “stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the car” (53). These stories are much more like the stories told by Pilate and Sam Fathers than the ones told by Macon and McCaslin. His father’s stories about “tribal wars” are stories of the men that came before Nwoye and are intended to inspire in Nwoye a sense of manliness and duty to his own tribe. The land that Okonkwo speaks of is about Umuofia, so in this sense it is more like the Virginia Milkman hears about from Pilate and not to be confused with the kind of land that Isaac relinquishes claim to. Nwoye’s father’s stories are meant to root Nwoye’s identity in the identity his male progenitors. Nwoye’s mother’s stories are also didactic—through the parable-like stories of animals who act like people, his mother is teaching him the values of the his specific culture. We know this because Achebe includes the name of the Igbo bird “*eneke-nti-oba*” to underscore the “Igboness” of these stories. And by personifying the animals, the stories work in the same way the lore of Old Ben affects Isaac: the animals are worthy of giving man an education and as a result, man is humbly connected to nature. But Nwoye does not learn from theses stories. For example, the tortoise story is about a tortoise that pretends to be a bird in order to trick the gods of the sky and partake in the feast in the sky that is offered by the gods for the

birds. But the tortoise is not a bird, so in the end, he falls from the sky and crashes to the ground. We know Nwoye does not learn from this parable because if he were to realize the true worth of the tortoise story, Nwoye would not reject his ancestral and cultural identity and adopt the one given to him by the white man. But instead, Nwoye misguidedly replaces this real education intended for him with the education of the white man who comes to colonize Umuofia.

Immediately, Nwoye is attracted by the new religion that the white man brings to Umuofia and when he concedes that after a few market weeks, “he was already beginning to learn some of the simple stories they told,” we can see that Nwoye is taking his education into his own hands and exchanging one kind of story for another, betraying his ancestry and family education for the teachings of an outsider. Nwoye admits that “He did not understand” the new religion, and how could he (147)? It is not in his language, it is not about his people, and it undermines the Umuofian identity, dependent on the belief that the gods and the ancestors influence the mortal world, because it claims that their “gods are not alive and cannot do [them] any harm” (146). This new religion is just as effective in distancing Nwoye from his ancestral spiritual beliefs as it is in “whitening” him, and homogenizing him to his colonizers. Because it is translated, foreign and blasphemous, this new education cannot lead Nwoye toward a true understanding of self.

As expected, Okonkwo is outraged because his son has defied the Igbo culture to which Okonkwo is so loyal. Nwoye’s actions cause Nwoye to go on his own journey, to “where the white missionary had set up a school to teach young Christians to read and write” (152). We should know from Milkman and Isaac’s journey that traveling towards the institution, instead of away from it, is a misguided journey. But like Milkman and Isaac’s, Nwoye’s journey leads to a new ancestry. His Christian teacher says, “Blessed is he who forsakes his father and mother for

my sake” (152). Yet as we have seen in the other protagonist’s journeys, it is not only what they react against, but what they react toward that shapes their identity, so the teacher continues:

“Those that hear my words are my father and my mother.” From this we can see that the pattern is distorted. Milkman, with Pilate as his guide, uncovers his ancestral family history; Isaac, with Sam Fathers and Old Ben as his guides, replaces his mother and father and lineage in favor of a different history; Nwoye’s Christian teacher writes Nwoye’s new lineage for him by assigning him the father and mother role. Nwoye’s lack of autonomy, lack of effort in achieving his new identity, further highlights its falsity.

Of course, the pattern in *Things Fall Apart* would be incomplete without showing the significance of naming. In this final way, the naming ritual surrounding Nwoye’s new identity distorts the pattern, resulting in the formation of an untrue identity. Okonkwo, for a time, is exiled from Umuofia as punishment for an accidental murder he committed. When he returns, he learns that one of the Christian teachers “had just sent Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru” (182). In the way that Isaac gives up the land and thus the Carothers’ name, in the way the Milkman does not go by Macon Dead, Nwoye is called something other than the name given to him by his family. This new name’s meaning is inextricably tied to its biblical association; as Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to acknowledge to glory of God, Nwoye sacrifices his real name, and his real identity to honor the power of his colonizers. And yet, there is no ritual surrounding this new name; the fact that Nwoye “is called” Isaac suggests that this new name, like the new ancestry was given to him instead of earned by him. Again, the absence of individual power over one’s new identity continues to prove its truthlessness.

Arguably, in Morrison's work, Milkman's new identity gives him a happiness he never had before. The Song of Solomon and understanding of his ancestors doesn't allow Milkman to literally fly, but sets him free from the identity that enslaves him to society—a society that disregards him as an individual and forces him to sacrifice his humanity. In Faulkner's work, Isaac's achieved identity also frees him, in a way, from responsibility of perpetuating an expected identity that depends on the oppression of others—and because of this freedom, he too, in the end, content. But Nwoye is forgotten. Having sacrificed his ancestry and connection to his culture, he uproots himself from Igbo history. But because his identity as 'Isaac' is impressed upon him, because it does not reflect him as an individual, because it is unnatural, and therefore untrue, he fittingly is not remembered in the white man's history either. When the Commissioner, head of the English authority that comes to colonize Umuofia, writes the history of the people he conquers, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, he thinks to include Okonkwo, not Nwoye. This ultimately suggests that in Nwoye's journey towards a new identity, he sacrificed everything and gained nothing.

Conclusively, Achebe, like Morrison and Faulkner, shows how an alternative education can create a new identity. His *Things Fall Apart* emphasizes, like the others, the importance of names, family heritage, individual experience and true teachers in the creation of a true identity, because he offers a story that shows what kind of identity is created when those factors are warped and disfigured.

CONCLUSION

For now, reader, we have reached the end. It was this essay's intention to tell you a story about characters in 20th century English literature who reject a given identity and through a journey and alternative education, and with teachers, achieve another understanding of self.

When the teachers are outside of the society that the protagonists escape, when the education is outside of the classroom, when the characters genuinely understand their given name, a truer identity is formed. This is the pattern I want to share with you in *Song of Solomon*, *The Bear*, and *Things Fall Apart*. I want to conclude with that this pattern means for you, reader. Remember that all three of these authors were themselves, formally educated; all three of these authors wrote fiction for readers who would be considered a “mainstream” audience, living in the same society that their characters abandon. Despite the pattern, they are not telling readers to abandon society and forgo a formal education. But because of the pattern, these works give readers the tools to see beneath, before, and beyond the inadequate identities given to them. Beneath, because under the stories told to Milkman by his father lay a rich family history with which he can truly identify. Before, because an ancient identity predates the one Old Carothers gives Isaac. Beyond, because Nwoye’s false identity is not a part of the story the white man will tell for years to come. These character’s stories are our stories. I’m reminded of what my grandfather said to my grandmother when my mom was a little girl. He said, “Edna, if Jean stays in school any longer, she’ll have no sense at all.”