

# Opposites Attract... and Then Collide

Michael LeGower

I pledge that I have not received unauthorized assistance during the completion of this essay, nor have I altered it since it was submitted to my instructor for final grading.

While the characters in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* explore the human experience in a very unique environment, they all behave in a very natural way. In fact, when examined closely, much of Freud's psychoanalytic theory applies to the characters in the novel. The most obvious examples of this are Milkman and Guitar. They have an interesting relationship in that they are what I have named "Freudian opposites". Milkman is a character who is always in pursuit of sexual pleasure, be it from Hagar, Sweet, or any other woman. He is satisfying the instinctual impulse for sexual love generated by his id and channeled through his ego. By doing this he is relieving the tensions that normally exist between the ego and the super-ego. This absence of tension is then reflected in his complete lack of aggression. On the other hand, Guitar is rarely focused on sexual pursuits. By denying this drive for sex, his super-ego internalizes it and transforms it into a drive for destruction. The tension built between his ego and super-ego through the denial of sex becomes too much for him and he becomes a violent individual. I believe that it is this striking difference in their personalities that brought them together, if only by intrigue. This vital difference, however, unquestionably tore them apart in the end.

Milkman's strong sexual drive is an interesting aspect of his character from the beginning of the book to the very end. The first mention of Milkman having sex in the book is rather early on. The text clarifies, "Milkman was twenty-two then and ... he had been fucking for six years, some of them with the same woman" (Morrison 64). This woman spoken of is undoubtedly his cousin, Hagar. The sexual experiences that he shares with her, however, do not seem to create

an obligation to her in his mind. This lack of obligation is illustrated by the fact that if “some of them” were with the same woman, some of them must have been with different women. Despite his relationship with Hagar, Milkman continues to actively pursue sexual love. He considered himself “the eligible bachelor to the Honoré crowd” (Morrison 107) and often went to parties on the Southside with the intention of picking up women (Morrison 83). He continues this behavior into his adult years when he meets Sweet and has sex with her (Morrison 285). Throughout his life, his drive for genital love is always satisfied and, as a result of a constant supply of this “overwhelming sensation of pleasure” (Freud 33), he can afford to sacrifice one of man’s less acceptable sources of pleasure: aggression.

While Milkman is constantly supplied with sexual pleasure, he is utterly deprived of another source of pleasure: his aggressive impulse. Early on the book states, “His life was pointless, aimless.... There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for” (Morrison 107). Also, in the text it asserts, “He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. He himself did nothing.... He had never acted independently” (Morrison 120). The ultimate testament to his passiveness is found at the end of the book when he does not try to fight Guitar to prevent his own death, but rather “surrendered to the air”, ensuring his demise one way or another (Morrison 337). Freud states that it is difficult “for men to give up the satisfaction of this inclination to aggression” (Freud 72). Milkman, however, is clearly not an aggressive person. Why does Milkman find it so easy to do away with an inclination that Freud sees as all but undeniable? Milkman does not require the satisfaction supplied by his aggressive impulse because of his constant sexual satisfaction. In other words, Milkman can theoretically afford to give up the satisfaction derived from aggression in order to conform to society’s rule of “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Freud 64).

Guitar is the diametric Freudian opposite of Milkman. Rather than pursue sexual satisfaction like his friend, he allows the tension between his ego and his super-ego to build.

Guitar declares, “My whole life is love” (Morrison 159). Yet, his commitment to the Seven Days, a militant group dedicated to the maintenance of the “racial ratio”, prohibits him from getting married or having children (Morrison 159). While this alone may not actually prevent Guitar from engaging in sexual activity, Milkman notices that eventually Guitar “didn’t want to talk about girls” (Morrison 106). In addition, while the book clearly delineates Milkman’s penchant for sexual activity, it never mentions a similar proclivity on the part of Guitar. This evidence leads me to believe that Guitar does not pursue satisfaction through sex. Contrarily, he seeks to avoid the disappointments of a sexual relationship. Although he claims he has this great love of all blacks and that his entire life is love, he does not satisfy any of his loving feelings through sexual intercourse for fear of emotional pain. This denial of man’s greatest pleasure builds tension between his ego and his super-ego, ultimately forcing him to look elsewhere for satisfaction, namely aggression.

Most people would agree that Guitar is an overly aggressive individual. The text avers that hunting and killing was one of the things that Guitar missed most about the South, his home (Morrison 278). This early aggression was employed more destructively when Guitar joined the Seven Days. Joining the Days gave him an outlet to release his aggression through the murder of innocent white people. Finally, more convincing evidence of Guitar’s aggression is found in his two attempts on his best friend’s life at the end of the novel. Milkman accurately predicts Guitar’s future predicament, and his own death, when he says about killing, “If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody.... You can off me” (Morrison 161). The characterization of Guitar illustrated by these examples fits perfectly into Freud’s theory. Although love is considered a good thing, when Guitar says he loves all black people he is revealing a flaw in his character. As a result of his history with loved ones, Guitar states, “I thought if I loved anything it would die” (Morrison 307). Therefore, Guitar is actually “directing [his] love, not to single objects, but to all men alike; and [he avoids] the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning

away from its sexual aims” (Freud 56-7). His universal love is a tool used to avoid focusing love on any one object, thus prohibiting the pains of a sexual relationship. Consequently, Guitar turns to aggression, for if civilization “imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization” (Freud 73). So, since the destructive instinct “is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment” (Freud 81), Guitar is ultimately able to achieve a degree of happiness and satisfaction with his life.

Freud claims that civilization is result of “the struggle... between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of” (Freud 82). If this is the case, it seems to me that Milkman and Guitar represent the polar extremes of that struggle. Milkman represents the struggle of Eros and life, reflecting great freedom of sexual activity. Guitar similarly weighs in on the side of Death and destruction, illustrating the epitome of man’s aggression. I believe that they became friends through mutual fascination with each other’s personalities. Each saw in the other a trait that they did not have and consequently did not understand. This vast difference, however, was too great an obstacle to overcome, and rather than maintain their friendship, their conflicting personalities caused them to want the other destroyed. Milkman and Guitar are “Freudian opposites” and, while opposites are said to attract, Milkman and Guitar found that their differences eventually gave rise to complete antagonism and caused them to turn on each other.