

# Milkman's journey to maturity



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's progression from an immature teenager to an adult possessing moral rectitude is displayed through encounters where Milkman learns about and pursues knowledge about his past. We first meet Milkman as a young man who goes about life without a specific sense of direction, but as he grows older and his family's past unravels, he seems to become more wise. Toni Morrison chooses to express this growth through Milkman's attentiveness when it comes to listening to others. We see time and time again instances of Milkman pushing away the advice of others, only concerned with his own opinions and desires. From grabbing a beer with Guitar at Railroad Tommy's to being scolded by Magdalene, Milkman always seems emotionally detached and unaffected. Only when he grows up and learns about his family's past does he mature and acquire a sense of morality.

In the beginning of the book, Milkman is introduced to us as an ignorant teenager who does not seem to have an aim in life. He wanders about, minding his own business, and fails to find meaning in the things he does and the things people tell him. One example is when he and Guitar take a day off from school and decide to go grab a beer at Railroad Tommy's store. They are refused the beer and lectured by Railroad Tommy about things they cannot have in life, yet Milkman sees it as a futile harangue. After the lecture, Milkman's reaction is of disinterest: "'What's a baked Alaska?' They left the Tommys just as they had found them and continued down Tenth Street" (61). Finding absolutely no significance in Tommy's talk, he is more interested in Guitar's taste preferences: "'You can't?' Milkman was amazed. 'Why not?'" (61). At this point in Milkman's life, he is just going about life

without worrying about what others think or say about him. He is immature in that he only considers his own thoughts relevant while pushing out the thoughts of everyone else. He does not try to uncover a life lesson when he is denied a beer, but rather he ponders about a dessert that Tommy mentioned.

Milkman is not forever stuck as this self-centered version of himself though. As he grows, he begins to recognize others' opinions as more important than he did before. When Milkman comes home early one morning from drinking with Guitar, he finds Magdalene waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He tries to ignore her because of how tired he is, but she persists in telling him a story from his childhood. Milkman recalls that when he was a child, he peed on Magdalene, and it was not a big deal. However, Magdalene sees it differently because Milkman also peed on the purple violets and wild jonquils she had picked earlier, causing them to die. After hearing her side of the story and how she had the feeling to kill him, he ponders his decisions: "Milkman turned and walked across the room. It was good advice, he thought. Why not take it? He closed the door" (216). This reaction from Milkman is similar to how he responded to Railroad Tommy's lecture earlier in his life in that he takes it very nonchalantly. On the other hand, he listens closely and seems to recognize his error. He acknowledges that Magdalene's criticism of him is wise and ought to be taken seriously. This instance of Milkman growing up learning about his sister's past is a step for Milkman toward gaining a sense of morality and respect toward others, while becoming a better listener at the same time.

Later on, when Milkman is off in search of Reverend Cooper for more information about his family, he ends up at a gas station, King Walker's, in a town named Shalimar. There, he meets a group of men who invite him to a hunting trip, and he accepts. In the woods is where we see Milkman's first sign of active listening: "What were they saying? 'Wait up?' 'Over here?' Little by little it fell into place. The dogs, the men - none was just hollering, just signalling location or pace. The men and the dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things. That long yah sound was followed by a specific kind of howl from one of the dogs. The low howm howm that sounded like a string bass imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood and executed" (277-278). This quote shows the beginnings of his transformation, becoming a more active listener. It seems as though his thirst for knowledge about his family's past has led him to this forest, where he hears and interprets voices of the hunters and their dogs. This sharply contrasts the Milkman we saw earlier on in the book who disregarded others due to his self-centered nature. Now, he is in the woods, listening closely to his surroundings, trying to find meaning in it. Although he does not find out exactly what they are saying, he knows that each rhythmic call and response possesses a definition.

Another instance of this concentration during listening is when Milkman listens to the children in Shalimar play a game while singing a song about his family's history: "He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang... Of course! Sing was an Indian or part Indian and her name

was Sing Byrd or, more likely, Sing Bird. No - Singing Bird! That must have been her name originally - Singing Bird. And her brother, Crowell Byrd, was probably Crow Bird, or just Crow. They had mixed their Indian names with American-sounding names" (303-304). He actively listens to, memorizes what is being sung about Solomon, Heddy, and his other ancestors. Then, he makes a fury of connections between what he heard, interpreted, and remembered from prior knowledge about his family.

Lastly, Milkman's final stage of evolution is evident when he alas genuinely reflects on the magnitude of his misdoings. When he finally comes home and visits Pilate, she knocks him out with a bottle, and he awakens in her attic. He starts thinking to himself: " What did Pilate knock him out for? About the theft of her sack of bones? No. She'd come to his rescue immediately. What could it be, what else could he have done that would turn her against him? Then he knew. Hagar. Something had happened to Hagar. Where was she? Had she run off? Was she sick or...Hagar was dead. The cords of his neck tightened... He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead—he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying... It was his fault, and Pilate knew it" (332). At this point in his life, he has returned from Shalimar, and he has great knowledge of his family's history, and with it, a newfound sense of morality. Milkman finally recognizes his error in breaking Hagar's heart with money and a cold note. He was able to derive this conclusion when considering Pilate's feelings from her point of view rather than his own. His respect for other human beings besides himself is also displayed, for he sees value in Hagar's life and her significance to Pilate. Milkman also finds issues of morality in Solomon's abandonment of his

children: " Sweet's silvery voice came back to him: ' Who'd he leave behind?' He left Ryna behind and twenty children. Twenty-one, since he dropped the one he tried to take with him. And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children!" (332). Even though he has never known Solomon in real life, he feels strongly enough to scold his treatment of his children, which shows that he now has powerful views toward the subject of morality that were unseen in Milkman before.

Milkman changes tremendously throughout the course of his life. We are able to follow his evolution with Toni Morrison's use of his attentiveness in listening to the those around him to show his growth. In addition, this increasing awareness of others is proportional to Milkman's expanding sensibility of moral integrity. He develops from a naive and indifferent teenager into a morally upright man who is attentive in listening to and interpreting the voices, calls, and songs that he encounters. Milkman stops shoving away the advice of others and instead accepts them, like with Railroad Tommy's lecture and Magdalene's criticism of him. We even see him go as far as to " close his eyes and concentrate" while the children sing their little song. By expanding his ability to listen, he grows as a person by letting go of his self-centered tendencies while becoming a more principled human being.