

# Song of solomon: milkman dead character analysis

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In the beginning of Toni Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, the character Macon Dead III, more commonly known as Milkman, struggles to discover his identity and individuality. While growing up as an upper-class African American in the twentieth century, his battles with his family and limitless love for materialistic objects further cultivate his immaturity and selfishness while concurrently alienating him from society. Although he originally experiences conflicts with family and confusion about his identity, they create an opening towards self-discovery and lead him on a journey to the south, which helps him cope with life, resolve relationships, and find his true character.

Furthermore, the significant message learned by the character John Thomas in "The Lesson" by Jessamyn West would additionally explain how Milkman's loss of prized possessions developed his maturity and formed his adulthood. Correspondingly to when John gains his maturity and realizes that all living things must come to an end after his cherished steer needs to be auctioned off and butchered, Milkman's development begins once he loses his love for gold and initiates the search for his individuality. To a significant extent, Milkman's difficult childhood negatively impacts his views towards the world and suggests the reasoning for his quest and exploration. Therefore, Milkman and John are not so different, affirming that with time and the loss of belongings, such as gold or a steer, growth, beliefs, and maturity will prevail in one's self.

In the novel *Song of Solomon*, certain characters explore and search for something particular while correspondingly allowing their reactions to be observed by the reader when they fail to find it. Characters like Hagar and <https://assignbuster.com/song-of-solomon-milkman-dead-character-analysis/>

Guitar are imprisoned by passionate cravings and make it appear that they would give the world to fulfill those desires. However, Milkman seems to be destined for a life of seclusion and separation because of his attachment to materialism and the improper guidance he receives from his father, Macon Dead Jr. Milkman is alienated from others since his father's cruelty and desire for money transfers to him and drives people away.

His memories from his childhood contribute significantly to his disengaged character and inability to understand the feelings of others, including the ones close to him. For example, from the beginning Milkman's father can be seen as a heartless landlord when he refuses to reschedule a rent payment from his tenant who is struggling to feed her children. When the occupant addresses her financial concerns she says, "I do know that, Mr. Dead, sir, but babies can't make it with nothing to put in their stomach" (Morrison 21).

Without hesitation, he replies, "Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money" (Morrison 21). Milkman's father's obsession with wealth and property also causes him to have no respect for women or children. Morrison's ability to demonstrate the background that Milkman originates from allows the reader to observe how his father's actions significantly influence his childhood and implant similar mentalities and mindsets.

Early on, Milkman is seen as an individual who has yet to discover his identity and character. However, as a result of his family's influence, he grows into a man whose attention centers around materialism while sharing several behavioral qualities with his father. For instance, his arrogance and

wealth blind his love for Hagar, a lower-class woman that he only uses for personal pleasure. In fact, Morrison confesses Milkman's purpose by stating, " While he had lost some of his twelve-year-old's adoration of her, he was delighted to be sleeping with her" (Morrison 98).

Rather than considering Hagar as a girlfriend or as a wife for the future, " She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there" (Morrison 91). These quotes exemplify Milkman's egotism and arrogance as an individual and display his immaturity because they reveal his absence of emotions and compassion for others. In addition, the reader can observe how he uses Hagar as an object rather than treating her like a woman. This further validates his limitless desire for materialism and property.

Ironically, because of his affluence and reputation in the neighborhood, he is alienated from the African American population and their heritage. The only ancestral knowledge he has about his family is that they were from Virginia and that his grandfather was killed on a farm in Pennsylvania. His lack of knowledge about his ancestors' struggles with slavery and persecution blinds Milkman from realizing his culture and overdevelops his ego.

This is confirmed when he tries to explain how to deal with racism to Guitar, a violent and victimized black male. As a result of Milkman's self-image, wealth, and disregard for the real world, he deems that one should fight racism by letting " white people know you don't accept your slave name" (Morrison 160). Although Milkman proposes valid advice, it would be foolish

to think it would fight hundreds of years of racism and validates his immaturity.

He only suggests such an undeveloped idea because his outlook on life is significantly influenced by money-oriented values as well as prosperity, which ultimately blinds him from the real world. His attachment to materialism impacts his identity and heritage while sheltering him from society. However, after an infrequent visit to his Aunt Pilate's house, Milkman's desire for materialism begins to exemplify.

Earlier in the novel when Milkman and his father are having lunch at a park, Macon Jr.'s recollection of his past is quickly ignited when Milkman inadvertently mentions a heavy green bag in Pilate's home. After he says, "Don't do like Pilate, put it in a green sack and hang it from the wall" (Morrison 163), his father rapidly narrates to his childhood and mentions how the ghost of his father once led Pilate and him to a cave where he stabbed and killed a white man out of fear. Fortuitously, they found a green sack of gold that the dead man once owned and after disagreeing with what to do with it, Pilate threatened his life which forced him to escape the cave. Captivated by what Milkman discovers at his sister's house, his father pleads that he go back there and "Get that gold" (Morrison 172).

Milkman's acceptance and excitement to steal the gold reveals his evident cravings for materialism and show the reader the amount of affection he receives from it. In addition, it brands Milkman as being cruel and selfish since he agrees to go rob from his aunt. However, Milkman's maturity finally begins to develop when he gets pulled over by the police and realizes that

the gold was not there. He senses that the officers only stop him because of his skin color and feels sickened by them. For the first time in the novel, the reader can begin to witness just how overwhelmed with guilt and humiliation he is by stating, " He lay there in lukewarm water, still sweating, too hot and tired to soap himself.

Every now and then he flicked water on his face, letting it wet his two-day-old beard. He wondered if he could shave without slicing his chin open" (Morrison 209). Disgusted by his actions and stunned by remorse and self-hatred, he cannot perform simple day-to-day tasks. From this quote, the audience can also recognize how his maturity and character are beginning to develop as he becomes more selfless through the absence of materialism. Although Milkman's encounter with the police and sense of guilt did not correct his personality immediately, he embarks on a gold hunt to the south, which will change his individuality forever.

As Milkman's desperate desire for the gold still emerges, he starts his journey to a town named Danville in an attempt to find it. In that town, his father was born and his grandfather was brutally killed at the hands of white people. There, Milkman quickly learns a lesson about generosity and friendliness when a reverend offers to take care of him simply because of his hospitality and no monetary interests.

In Danville, he also meets Circe who was his father's guardian after the murder of his grandfather. Circe informs Milkman about the gaps he has in his legacy and tells him about the killing of his grandpa. She explains to him that his grandfather died defending his property, not because of its value but

because he was proud of his accomplishments there. Circe continues to talk about Milkman's grandfather and expresses how he loved "digging a well, fashioning traps, feeling trees, warming orchards with fire when spring weather was bad, breaking young horses, and training dogs" (Morrison 234).

This moment in Milkman's life is important because it reveals that his grandfather did not care about the materialistic features of the land but instead what he fulfilled there. It also shows that he would have rather died instead of letting someone deprive him of his accomplishments. This deeply moves Milkman and gives him an insight on the importance of his heritage and sentimental values rather than property. In addition, Circe makes an essential point to Milkman regarding people who only care about wealth and tells him, "she (the white landlady) saw the work I did all her days and died, you hear me, died rather than live like me...She killed herself.

All the money was gone, so she killed herself" (Morrison 242). The woman that Circe mentions ran out of money and took her own life because it meant more to her than living. This conversation that Milkman has with her forces him to realize that people who only live for wealth are essentially lifeless already. The reader can witness how with the absence of materialism, Milkman is beginning to mature and develop into a selfless individual.

This can be better illustrated when Milkman respectfully offers to help a white man load his truck. Although it is a small gesture of thoughtfulness, it is completely different from his character when compared to the beginning of the novel and illustrates his compassion towards others beginning to form. He helps the man from the kindness of his heart and expects nothing in

return, contradicting everything he used to stand for. Milkman's interaction with characters like Circe causes him to forget about the gold and search for his identity instead. This is a substantial scene in the novel because it displays his adulthood and maturity while revealing how his desires have changed from materialism to the importance of kindness and the search for his identity.

As Milkman continues his expedition to Shalimar, Virginia, he hopes to find additional information about his family since his grandfather was born and raised as a slave there. However, Milkman quickly receives a reality check when he gets beaten up and stripped from his fancy clothes. In Shalimar, the people show him that he cannot purchase their respect with money and teach him an important lesson about modesty.

This humbling experience causes him to dress as an ordinary African American male, and for the first time in the novel, he feels united to his black ethnicity. Morrison states, " Back home he had never felt this way, as though he belonged to any place or anybody" (Morrison 293). Since Milkman does not have any of his wealth with him or is attracted to the gold anymore, the reader can witness Milkman's transformation and perceive how satisfied he is with the absence of materialism. This quote displays his development as an individual and demonstrates that he acquires a genuine understanding of the morals and values of his culture. After Milkman finds his identity and learns his lesson about materialism, he returns to his hometown to conclude the chapter on his past and to look forward to the future.



During his journey, he realizes that he took advantage of Hagar and reveals his everlasting love for her. This demonstrates another example of Milkman's maturity and adulthood since he understands her true value as a woman and is ready for a serious relationship rather than a one-night-stand. He confesses the pain he caused her and feels deeply regretful for his actions. This can be seen when Morris states, " His mind turned to Hagar and how he had treated her at the end.

Why did he never sit down and talk to her?" (Morrison 301). Although the reader can witness Milkman's remorse, it was too late since she already symbolically died from a broken heart when Milkman decides to leave her. For the first time, he understands his transgressions and takes accountability for her death by accepting a portion of her hair from Pilate. This illustrates Milkman's maturity and demonstrates his ability to have compassion towards others, revealing actions that were not observable at the beginning of the book.

In the novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison mainly concentrates on the growth and development of one particular character, Milkman. Before his maturity, the audience can witness that his primary motivations in life were centered around materialism, gratification, and gold. However, when he went on his expedition to the south, he learns valuable life lessons about modesty and humility.

His experiences there allow him to recognize women as people, prosperity as insignificant, and most importantly, the prominence of true identity. This allows for Milkman's transformation and teaches him life-altering lessons

that are only able to be explained through the absence of materialism and the presence of humbleness. His affection for life and the ones close to him became existent when he was away from all money-orientated objects and understands the triviality of avaricious. From his journey, Milkman is able to gain maturity, become kindhearted, and discover the meaning in life.

Correspondingly to the novel, "The Lesson" by Jessamyn West, presents a similar message to John Thomas that Milkman learns on his journey to the south. By having West teach John a significant lesson about injustice, he is able to gain maturity through the absence of a prized possession.

In the beginning of the text, John is seen as the youngest in his family whose only pleasure in life is Curly, the steer that he raises. However, West makes it apparent to demonstrate the strong relationship that John has with Curly by illustrating their friendship and attachment to one another. He states he "had awakened thinking of Curly----or, rather when he woke up, he did not stop thinking of Curly" (West 25).

This exemplifies the powerful bond that they have and allows the reader to witness John's connection to the steer. Nevertheless, after putting Curly into what John had simply thought was a contest and when Curly ultimately wins, his father forces him to auction him off for money. Similar to Song of Solomon, his father is seen as being attached to prosperity rather than to the feelings of others.

This conflict within the text allows the readers to spectate the potential separation that John will have with Curly and is also similar to the one that

Milkman has with materialism since he learns a valuable lesson from it. However, that message is indeed absorbed when the auctioneer states, “ Only one thing left-the auctioning of these animals-and, believe you me, the enjoyment you’ve had here is nothing to the enjoyment you’ve going to have when you bite into one of these big, juicy baby-beef steaks” (West 30).

This quote validates John’s separation with the steer and develops his maturity because he learns a significant life lesson. He realizes that all living things must come to an end and that he must accept this new change because life will go on. Similarly to Milkman, John had his adulthood developed through the loss of a prized possession which causes him to grow-up more quickly by apprehending that death is simply a part of life.