

Toni morrison's, song of solomon essay



Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is the coming-of-age story of Milkman, an African American man who grows up in Michigan during the forties, fifties, and sixties.

Milkman goes on a search for gold, but ends up finding his heritage and the meaning and significance of his own life. During the course of the novel, several characters act as either aids or hindrances to Milkman: Ruth and Macon hinder his progress by providing false, conflicting, confusing, or upsetting information, whereas Pilate and Susan Byrd aid him by supplying the raw information to base his hypotheses and conclusions on. Ruth and Macon, Milkman's parents, provide information that confuses Milkman; moreover, the information that Milkman receives from them is largely ambiguous in nature. Milkman's family life, which largely shapes his personality, is unruly.

From the start of Milkman's life (and even before), Macon and Ruth aren't in agreement about certain key facts: did Ruth have an affair with her father or didn't she? The distrust between Milkman's parents causes at least part of Milkman's loss of identity. With encouragement, support, and love in his early years, Milkman could have been a better person. The neglect, animosity, and other strange treatment that Milkman receives from his parents not only turns his personality for the worse, but also hinders his reaching adulthood. The reader can see that Milkman never really becomes an adult until he is well into his thirties. The treatment that Milkman receives from his parents stunts his growth and keeps him from reaching his ultimate objective, maturity. Macon's equivocal (and partly incorrect) information leads Milkman down the wrong path.

In the literal sense, Macon gives Milkman false information about the location of the gold; in the figurative sense, Macon makes Milkman care too much about money and not enough about more important matters. When Milkman travels to Pennsylvania, he is truly looking for Pilate's gold, not his family history. It is only when he finds a bit of information on it that he becomes more interested in the history than the gold. Without these small clues to guide him, Milkman would have gone home without the gold and grown up to be just like Macon, who also never knew his heritage.

It is interesting to note that Macon himself has not completed the journey that Milkman is on; Macon is still not at peace with his past. Perhaps it is this that most hinders Milkman in his search: the bad example set by his father. Macon has convinced himself that his heritage is unimportant, and impresses this image on Milkman. Macon concentrates on his future, not realizing that his past is consequential in determining that future. One of the major sources for true information in this novel is Pilate, whose specifics are essential to Milkman's quest. Without Pilate's story to guide him, Milkman wouldn't have known where to go after discovering that the gold is gone.

Pilate is also one of the people who give him mostly clear, concise, and thorough information. Pilate's story about having "people" in Virginia, though quite an understatement, puts a seed of information in Milkman's mind. This seed eventually grows into a curiosity, which is the beginning of Milkman's search for his birthright. Without Pilate's guidance, Milkman would have never been able to find his heritage, nor would he have even begun to look for it. Though Susan Byrd can be seen as a minor character in Song of Solomon, it is undeniable that without the specifics that Milkman

receives from her, he would not have been able to piece together the puzzle of his family's legacy.

Though she provides erroneous information when Milkman first visits her, it is only because she doesn't want her family's reputation tainted by her friend Grace: " I just said it in front of her... she talks so much, you know. " Though Milkman has already figured out many of the things that Susan tells him, the specific things that she tells him of (such as Solomon's flight) are also important to the storyline. As one reads the end, one realizes that Milkman could not have foreseen this " power of flight" without Susan Byrd's assistance.

Also, without Susan's confirmation of many of Milkman's just-learned facts, he would have gone through his life with mostly speculation about his family's history. Milkman's " search" can be defined as many different things: his search for Pilate's gold, his search for his heritage, or his search for something that he is missing within himself. Overall, Milkman finds the most important of these things: his sense of " self," found through his sense of heritage. In the entire novel, Pilate is the only person Milkman is able to truly love, who essentially leads him to the answers he seeks.

He has help from nearly everyone involved with him - even some of his hindrances can also be seen as aids - but Pilate is the one who, in point of fact, helps him the most. As with all humans, Milkman's past governs his future. Though he has many obstacles while searching for his past (and consequently, his future), he also has many aids as well. By the end of the

novel, his life is no longer truly his, but a patchwork with each piece belonging to a different person.

Only when he puts these patches together does Milkman really find what he is looking for. It is Guitar who first introduces Milkman to Pilate. Pilate, who has "as much to do with his future as she did with his past"(36), is the gateway to Milkman's future. She brings him Solomon's song and Macon's past. Through Pilate, Milkman discovers a past that has many parallels to his current life.

With Pilate's help, Morrison is able to show us that Milkman's present life is actually family's past. At Milkman's birth, his family begins a journey that oddly resembles one his ancestors had already taken. From his early childhood, Milkman begins, perhaps tragically, to follow in his father's footsteps. His visit to Pilate's house opens the archetypal door to him, yet his father attempts to close it tightly.

Unexpectedly, Macon's effort to close the door to Milkman's past actually connects him closer to his father's childhood. Milkman's discovery at Pilate's house will place him on the path taken by his ancestors, whether he likes it or not. Macon, learning of Milkman's disobedient visit, sets about to make sure Milkman is barred from his past. Ironically, his decision to keep Milkman away from Pilate will open up more doors than Pilate herself.

In his speech to his son, Macon claims, "I worked right alongside my father, right alongside him"(51). So, in an effort to detach Milkman from Pilate, Macon tells the boy: "After school come to my office, work a couple of hours there and learn what's real..."

Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how"(53). Unbeknownst to him, his efforts to distract Milkman from his past are in vain. By making his son work "right alongside him," Macon is letting his son relive his own history. He lives it silently, but he lives it nonetheless.

As Milkman continues to follow this parallel, he grows increasingly frustrated with his father. Although he dislikes his father and his job, he gradually emulates his father's personality more and more. His clearest parallel is his desire for wealth. Dreaming about Pilate's gold, Milkman fantasizes about luxury and wealth. Such objects obscure Macon's and his hopes for the future, and the gold was something Macon, too, dreamt about when he was younger.

But despite those dreams, Milkman feels stuck in the life he is living. It is difficult for him to "visualize a life much different from the one he [has]"(179). Nonetheless, he cannot come to terms with his limited view of the future. He cannot stand living with his family. "He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present, and which was threatening to become his present as well"(180). His family's past is his present and future and no matter how much he dislikes it, he will continue to follow his family's path through history.

Milkman's journey to recover the gold takes him down to Pennsylvania - the birthplace of his father. Macon's home is a place rich with the past and Milkman becomes further enveloped in it. His quest takes him to the home of Circe, a surreal woman who is a hundred years older than she should be. In her many decades of history, she has "birthed just about everybody in the

county”(243). Through Circe, Milkman draws an even more distinct parallel to his father. When he first meets Circe she asks him, “ Remember the Weimaraners? “(240).

The significance of this statement is only second to what she says to him next. “ I knew one day you would come back. Well, that’s not entirely true. Some days I doubted it and some days I didn’t think about it at all.

But you see, I was right. You did come” (240). She mistakes Milkman for Macon. Even with her two hundred years of experience, she believes Milkman is his father. She sees not only the physical resemblance, but also a spiritual one. Again, Milkman is the embodiment of the past.

As he travels further backwards in his family’s path, he becomes more and more a symbol of their past. A woman with a history beyond anyone else’s memory sees him for what he really is, a concentrated dose of heritage. After Circe’s, Milkman moves farther forward into the past. His final destination is Shalimar. Coincidentally, it is the namesake of his great-grandfather.

History lives in Shalimar in the form of myths, legends, and songs. The history lives silently in the present. Children sing the songs not knowing their significance, and men tell myths not knowing from where they come. When he delves deeper into these rumored myths, there appears a striking resemblance to his own life, especially in the story of Ryna. When Solomon flew away and left her, “ she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely”(318).

Her story draws a very curious parallel to that of Hagar. When Milkman, like Solomon, flew free of Hagar, she lost her mind. She went insane with grief. Milkman's discovery of Solomon and his ancestry in Shalimar send him flying back up to Michigan. These revelations have a profound impact on his persona.

His newfound knowledge and appreciation of his ancestors have worked to free him of the material ties and monetary obligations that previously held him down. While before he was arrogant and self-possessed, he returned home and all he wanted was to "go to Pilate's first" (331). By becoming one with his past and fully recognizing it, Milkman frees himself of his worldly obligations. Through his recognition that Solomon "lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home" (328), Milkman surrenders himself to the past, which is his present, and frees himself to fly. On his final trip south, Milkman repeats the actions of his ancestors. Through his leap he is the final embodiment of Solomon.

Milkman's journey during the novel is one of drastic transformation. During his early life, Milkman embodies the conflict between the past and the future through the experiences of a child. Milkman plays no part in the life he is living, rather following silently in the steps of others. As he grows older, the conflict becomes more of an affliction and it forces him to seek out the past on his own. The past he finds, however, is not a clear one. It exists solely in memories and myths.

These stories are all slightly different, and they are all slowly fading, leaving a changing and decaying history for Milkman to discover. In his discovery

and throughout his life, Milkman, in effect becomes his history, embodying the stories that are told and the lessons that are learned. It is in his final trip to the south that he realizes just how close he is connected to the past. In the face of death he finally understands, "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it"(337). Morrison places Milkman in a world that is obsessed with looking to the future.

The future is what is at hand, and future is where dreams lie. His father, Macon Dead, is passionate about the future. Macon is constantly searching for more ways to squeeze money out of real estate. He has forgotten his past, his black heritage, and is striving for riches.

His goal is to earn as much money as he can, and thus reach the epitome of whiteness - wealth and well-being. Milkman's concentration on things past first conflicts with his father's search for future wealth during their trip to Honore. The only place that Milkman could sit was in the front seat between his parents, and "it was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window that he could see anything other than the laps, feet, and hands of his parents" (32). While Macon is thinking to the future, about "buying and the renting"(32), Milkman is looking out the back window.

When everyone around him is looking forward, he is gazing towards the past. He is fixed on the path that Macon has taken. While Milkman's focus towards the past finds its primary conflict with Macon's focus towards the future, it obstructs his other relationships as well. At this early point in his life, Milkman is unaware of his preoccupations with his past, much less with what is behind him. During the trip to Honore, Milkman finds himself needing to

pee. When Magdalene takes him out, she approaches him from behind, startled, he turns and pees on her.

Through Magdalene (and all the conflicts that rise behind Milkman) Morrison evokes the past that will haunt Milkman until he takes it upon himself to pursue it. This habit, " this concentration on things behind him"(35), is making him stand out among the characters. He is the sole embodiment of the past in this first branch of the story. Perhaps Morrison is foreshadowing the search for Solomon, or perhaps she has something different in mind.