

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead becomes a man by learning to respect and to listen to women. In the first part of the novel, he emulates his father, by being deaf to women's wisdom and women's needs, and casually disrespecting the women he should most respect. He chooses to stray from his father's example and leaves town to obtain his inheritance and to become a self-defined man. From Circe, a witch figure, he is inspired to be reciprocal, and through his struggle for equality with men and then with women, he begins to find his inheritance, which is knowing what it is to fly, not gold. At the end, he acts with kindness and reciprocity with Pilate, learning from her wisdom and accepting his responsibilities to women at last. By accepting his true inheritance from women, he becomes a man, who loves and respects women, who knows he can fly but also knows his responsibilities.

In the first part of the novel, Milkman is his father's son, a child taught to ignore the wisdom of women. Even when he is 31, he still needs "both his father and his aunt to get him off" the scrapes he gets into. Milkman considers himself Macon, Jr., calling himself by that name, and believing that he cannot act independently (120). The first lesson his father teaches him is that ownership is everything, and that women's knowledge (specifically, Pilate's knowledge) is not useful "in this world" (55). He is blind to the Pilate's wisdom. When Pilate tells Reba's lover that women's love is to be respected, he learns nothing (94).

In the same episode, he begins his incestuous affair with Hagar, leaving her 14 years later when his desire for her wanes. Milkman's experience with Hagar is analogous to his experience with his mother, and serves to "[stretch] his carefree boyhood out for thrifty-one years" (98). Hagar calls him into a room, unbuttons her blouse and smiles (92), just as his mother did (13). Milkman's desire for his mother's milk disappears before she stops milking him, and when Freddie discovers the situation and notes the inappropriateness, she is left without this comfort. Similarly, Milkman ends the affair with Hagar when he loses the desire for her and recognizes that this affair with his cousin is not socially approved, leaving Hagar coldly and consciously, with money and a letter of gratitude. He is as deaf to the needs of women and as imperiously self-righteous as his father, who abandons his wife when he believes she loves her father too much.

Macon teaches his son well the art of "pissing" on women. As Pilate attempts to awaken Macon to the inappropriateness of taking a dead man's gold and to their father's ghostly message, he urinates, enjoying the idea of "life, safety, and luxury" resulting from the gold (170). In his unnatural act, taking a man's life, he has become deaf to his past and to Pilate. Though Milkman urinates on his sister by accident, his act has the same implications as his father's. By inertia, he assumes his father's attitude toward women, placing them in the periphery of his mind, though they are the center and the source of his life. Pilate and Ruth saved him from his father's attempts at abortion, and his female relatives have done all of the work of raising him. He spies on his mother, he feels the same "lazy righteousness" as that which leads him to disrespect Hagar's claim to her rights in their relationship (120). He attempts to steal from Pilate, his aunt, in order to follow his father's instructions and to obtain the inheritance he feels will make him a man. At the end of part 1, his sister Magalene attempts to awaken his sensibilities to this through her diatribe on the effects of his blindness to his sisters' autonomy and their contributions to his well-being (215). He follows her advice, and leaves, not only her room, but the town and the identity he has been molded into by his father.

Milkman leaves to get the gold which he believes is his inheritance, feeling that this will allow him freedom from his family, which he equates with the freedom to at last become a man. He tells Guitar, "I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more" (221-2). His fruitless attempt to gain his inheritance as his father advises him, by stealing from Pilate, inspires him to try his own way of finding his inheritance, and therefore, his manhood. He quickly learns that to obtain this inheritance, he must listen to women as he never has before.

Circe is the first woman who he listens to and treats with reciprocity. At first glance, he is overcome by the idea that she is a witch (241). Women who kept alive the knowledge of their ancestors were considered witches in the patriarchal, Christian culture. Circe has been the midwife in most of the townspeople's births, and is so ancient that she is believed to be dead. She is knowledgeable, and he learns that must take her seriously to find his inheritance. Circe tells Milkman, "You don't listen to people" (247), and he begins to truly listen to her and treat her as an equal. She informs him of the last known location of his grandfather's bones, of his grandmother's name, and of where in Virginia the family originated (243-5). Milkman has his first urge for reciprocity with her, and she tells him that he has unwittingly already returned the favor with his company and his news of Macon and Pilate (248).

Milkman must learn to treat other men as equals before he can treat women as equals. For a boy brought up in an atmosphere of blind bourgeois elitism, the road to equal relationships is difficult. He attempts to repay a man for a ride and a coke, only to realize that this is offensive to the man's dignity (255). He learns real kindness when he helps an old man with a crate who gives him information (256). However, in Shalimar, the home of his ancestors, he must relearn the significance of others' dignity. He receives a cold reception because of his careless showiness, and must then pass initiation rituals to be allowed equal status in the town. Through his gradual lessons in reciprocal relationships with men, he is prepared for equality with women. With Sweet, he gives as well as receives loving gestures, learning at last that others, no matter sex or status, deserve his sacrifices (285).

The initiations include a hunt that leaves Milkman alone to ponder his life. Challenged to join the men in a hunt in which he has nothing but himself on which he can rely, he begins taking his identity and his relationships seriously. He realizes that humans are responsible for each other, that his family's dependence on him is natural. At last he discovers that Hagar's homicidal urge is justifiable: "if a stranger could try to kill him, surely Hagar, who knew him and whom he'd thrown away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone < she had a right to kill him too" (276-7). Milkman learns what it means to be human when he is left with only that: "out here ... all a man had was what he was born with, or has learned to use" (277). Finding his own identity, he realizes the right others have to demand responsibility from him.

At last, he can receive the knowledge of his ancestors through discussions with a woman who at first seems shallow and lacking in knowledge, and through the songs of children. Susan Byrd appears to be full of empty gossip (292), but by listening to her and then to the children's game, he learns that she does have a story to share (302). He returns to her and learns the real story (320-4). He learns men can fly, and begins to understand the responsibilities that come with this knowledge. This is the inheritance that makes him a man.

How do this makes him a man? At last, he can return to Pilate some of the history she has bequeathed him. He can give her peace by adding to her history of herself. Her beloved granddaughter has been sacrificed to him, and this is the only way he can make amends. Pilate does not only release him because she is overcome by this new understanding of her past, but because he has learned to be a man. He accepts the box of Hagar's hair, a reminder that "you can't fly off and leave a body" as he abandoned Hagar (334). With this act, he ritualistically accepts his inheritance of responsibility for others, specifically the women in his life. As Pilate dies, he sings for her, an act of kindness, signifying a new paradigm in his relationships with women. She tells him, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all" (336), reinforcing the significance of kindness and responsibility. He realizes that she can fly, but that she also embraces responsibility for others: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). He learns from her the meaning of true freedom, which includes responsibility.

Macon Dead, a patriarch, leaves his son an inheritance of imperious indifference to women's knowledge and needs. Milkman realizes that he is not yet a man, and tries, first through his father's and then through his own way, to find

the missing inheritance that will set him free. To get the inheritance, he must listen to women, which necessitates relationships of reciprocity with men and with women. His inheritance, knowledge of his ancestors, helps him to create a relationship of reciprocal kindness with the matriach of his family, who gives him another inheritance, the burden of responsibility to others. In Toni Morrison's novel, Song of Solomon, Milkman becomes a man by choosing to respect and learn from women.