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Finding Empathy in *Song of Solomon*

Empathy can be defined as being able to understand what someone else is feeling. Barack Obama once said, “Learning to stand in somebody else’s shoes, to see through their eyes, that’s how peace begins, and it’s up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.” One of the most important qualities a person can have is empathy.

Empathy allows people to understand a perspective other than their own, in turn, causing them to be less selfish and opinionated. In *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, we read the internal journey that Milkman goes through during his entire life. Through his relationships, we see Milkman grow from being selfish and egocentric to an empathetic man.

In the first part of the story, Milkman is very focused on himself and his wealth. He doesn’t seem to have any regard for people that he views as beneath him. For example, in chapter 3, Milkman refers to Hagar in an ignorant way even though she is the girl he has been seeing. Morrison writes, “She was the third beer. Not the first one...nor the second...But the third, the one you drink because it’s there, because it can’t hurt, and because what difference does it make?” (Morrison 91) It is very clear that Milkman doesn't seem to care for Hagar and he keeps her around because it’s easy. He treats her very selfishly. He doesn’t respect her but uses her simply because he can.

A similar occurrence happens in chapter 4. Milkman gets into an argument with Guitar while Guitar accuses him of not taking anything seriously. Milkman says, ““What’s wrong with Negroes owning beach houses? What do you want, Guitar? You mad at every Negro who ain’t scrubbing floors and picking cotton. This ain’t Montgomery, Alabama.” (Morrison 103-104) This quote demonstrates how disconnected Milkman is with the rest of the black community. Since his main focus is on wealth, he doesn’t consider what others like him may be dealing with in their lives. Guitar continues this argument by saying, ““This definitely is not Montgomery, Alabama. Tell me. What would you do if it was? If this turned out to be another Montgomery?” (Morrison 104) and Milkman responds with, “Buy a plane ticket.” (Morrison 104) This interaction shows how shortsighted Milkman truly is. He is not empathetic to others and we can see through his quick responses that he doesn’t stop to think about the perspectives of others. He doesn’t seem to have respect for or even think about the struggles that people in the South face. He is strictly focused on his own well-being.

As the story progresses, Milkman begins to gain empathy through his discussions and relationships with others. During his quest for information on his family history and lineage, he visits Susan Byrd’s house where she tells him stories of her past. From her stories, it is suggested that she is related to Milkman. This causes him to change his perspective on life. She reveals that Milkman’s grandfather, Solomon, left his family behind. This revelation causes Milkman to start thinking about life from the viewpoint of other people. After Milkman visits Susan Byrd’s house, he begins to become more compassionate and able to connect with other people. He begins to place himself into other people’s shoes, the main quality of an empathetic person. In chapter 12, Morrison writes, “He left the house feeling tired and off center” (Morrison 292) This alone demonstrates how he has begun to feel things he never truly has before. Up until this point,

Milkman had been very egocentric. This is the first time we see him “off center,” highlighting that he now has a different thought process than he previously did. He is finally able to think of people other than himself after he listens to Susan’s experience. Morrison writes, “He didn’t feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared.” (Morrison 293) Milkman now has the ability to understand people. He doesn't feel isolated anymore, the way he did when he was was an egocentric version of himself. Milkman has learned to deal with his feelings in a different way than he used to. He faces them intentionally and rationally instead of running away and bottling his emotions. This type of growth shows just how much Milkman has matured. Now that he is able to feel “connected” to people, it is clear that he is much more empathetic.

Milkman’s empathy is also apparent through the way he reflects on his own relationships. He thinks about his mother and, for a seemingly first time, feels homesick for her. Morrison writes, “His mother’s quiet, crooked, apologetic smile. Her hopeless helplessness in the kitchen...What might she have been like had her husband loved her?” (Morrison 300) Milkman is finally able to sympathize with her and her experience through life. He seems to show her appreciation, something he hadn’t previously been able to do. Milkman also thinks about his treatment of Hagar. Morrison writes, “Why did he never sit her down and talk to her? Honestly. And what ugly thing was it he said to her the last time she tried to kill him?...Even the last time, he used her.” (Morrison 301) Milkman has clearly learned how to treat someone with respect and in this moment, he feels guilty for the years he spent treating her as if she was nothing, as if she was “the third beer.” These reflections on his mother and Hagar are the result of his conversation with Susan. After learning about his family history in a way he hadn’t before, he is able to take his new thought process and apply it to the other situations in his life. Since he was

able to do self-reflection with Susan, he can now reflect on his mother and Hagar in a new way. He is no longer that selfish man he once was and now he can own up to his wrongdoings like a mature, empathic man.

Milkman's growth from the beginning of *Song of Solomon* to the end is extremely substantial. In the beginning of the story, he is extremely egocentric and only cares about himself. As the story progresses, he learns more about his family's history and in turn, learns what it means to be empathetic. He is able to reflect on his own actions and sympathize with others in a way he had never been able to previously.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage International. Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2019.