

## **The Power of Song in Song of Solomon**

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Can a song unite people? Can singing bring peace, happiness, and courage? In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a motif of singing pervades the text; its characters, descriptions, and themes. Specifically, it is arguable that the motif of song defines the character Pilate and gives her exceptional traits and strength necessary to find happiness in a life marked by hardships. For Pilate, the power of song draws others to her, reflects her richness of spirit and generosity, and connects her to her family history. Through song, the qualities, values, and strength that characterize Pilate as the central figure in the novel are strikingly evident.

Song, in general, acts as a commonality between people, often representing the shared cultural backgrounds of a people. Pilate understands the harmony song brings. She is constantly singing, moving her lips, or humming. When Pilate "was neither singing nor talking, her face was animated by her constantly moving lips" (30). Her continuous movements, therefore, create an aura of mystery. However, this mysteriousness is not perceived as threatening or frightening, but rather, as magnetic and compelling. To elaborate, when Robert Smith is contemplating committing suicide, the people on Not Doctor Street are in total chaos. Yet, "their dilemma was solved when a woman suddenly burst into song" (5). As the reader later finds out, this woman is Pilate, who solidifies the crowd through her singing.

Moreover, Pilate's singing draws her brother Macon and her nephew Milkman to her. First, Macon admits to wanting "a bit of music" because in his own house, "there was no music" (28). As he walks towards Pilate's house in the darkness, he surrenders "to the

sound..." and "moved closer," wanting "no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (29). As an outsider, Macon is drawn towards the exotic quality of Pilate's song, as the strange, incongruent word choice of "fields, wild turkey and calico" (29) suggests. In the comfort of her song, Macon "felt the irritability of the day drain from him" (29) and "felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music" (30). It seems Pilate's emotions and love, expressed in her singing, passes onto Macon, changing him from a rigid, cold business man into a nostalgic, relaxed brother. The power Pilate possesses to draw others to her is a quality that repeatedly soothes and relaxes other characters in the novel. As a young boy, Milkman goes to Pilate's house with Guitar, and is immediately attracted to Pilate, and he describes her voice as "pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other" (40). The image created by this depiction is one of serenity, like a lazy river moving gently over pebbles and sand. Possibly, this description reflects the peaceful nature of Pilate's words, her voice, and her singing. When Milkman hears Pilate sing, he "could hardly breathe" (49). These qualities make Pilate stand out in the novel as an exceptional character whose constant singing creates a sense of compelling mysteriousness.

Singing, additionally, is an art form, a joyous, creative expression of feeling. By creating this art form, Pilate is more involved in the spiritual aspect of life, not the monetary or material aspects. Her love of singing, thus, fits perfectly with her way of life. Macon, first of all, is astonished by his sister's lack of concern over food, money, or possessions. Her way of life, to him, was "as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road" (27). Electricity, gas, and set meals just did not

warrant concern in her house. Yet, what Pilate lacks in belongings, she makes up in love. Macon may be the richest black man in town, but he has an extremely miserable marital life. When Ruth has troubles with her husband Macon, Pilate consoles her and tells Ruth "not to worry, she, Pilate, would see" (135) that Macon would never bother his wife again. Ruth, likewise, describes the house as "a haven then" and now "still, an inn, a safe harbor" (135). The diction of "haven" and "safe harbor" depicts Pilate's spirituality and generosity, which stem from her spiritual, not materialistic personality.

Furthermore, Pilate is always giving of herself to others, especially her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. When Hagar is depressed about Milkman rejecting her, Pilate tries to please Hagar by buying her clothes and makeup, cooking "special things" (308), yet after demanding more, "everything is what she [Hagar] got" (310). Without worry for herself, Pilate once again gives all of herself, her money, love, and effort, to her family. In the same way, Pilate bails Guitar and Milkman out of jail, subjecting herself to self-degradation, even though the boys steal from her. When speaking to the sergeant, "Pilate had been shorter," "she whined," and "her hands were shaking" (206). These descriptions are all out-of-character for the powerful Pilate, because when she leaves the police station, "Pilate was tall again" (207). Hence, Pilate sacrifices her dignity to help Guitar and Milkman, conveying her quality of generosity.

By being such a selfless and giving person, Pilate remains strong in face of rejection and hardships. Again, the constant movement of her mouth, her singing, and her love of song directly connect with her personal qualities. Because family and people mean more to her than material goods or money, she is able to live a joyous and strong life. Morrison offers

multiple character contrasts between Ruth and Pilate, clearly showing that although Ruth is materially more secure than Pilate, Pilate is ultimately happier in her life. Pilate's and Ruth's comparative wealth are contrasted in the illustrations of their clothes; "the latter [Ruth] had on a neat gray coat with the traditional pregnant bow, a black clothe, and a pair of four- button galoshes. The singing woman [Pilate] wore a knitted navy cap&. She had wrapped herself up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat" (6). Despite the obvious differences in the "neat gray coat" and the "old quilt" (6) that signify class distinctions, Pilate comforts the pregnant Ruth. While "humming the tune," Pilate whispers to Ruth to "make yourself warm, A little bird'll be here with the morning" (9). Morrison's image of a strange poor woman peacefully advising a lonely rich pregnant woman, while continuing to sing, is a testimony to Pilate's generous character.

Later in the novel, Morrison develops Pilate's character in another detailed contrast between the two women. When Ruth goes to Pilate's house to confront her about Hagar seeking to kill Milkman, the two women's differences are striking. First, their varied composure in tense situations is noticeable. While Ruth presses "her hands together in her lap to stop the shaking" (139), Pilate holds "up her hand, imperiously" (138). Pilate's strength and firmness, her "equilibrium" (138), contrasts sharply with Ruth's emotional selfishness. Pilate frankly states Ruth's protection over her son is not out of love, but out of need, "like he [Milkman] was a house" (138). Morrison even lists their differences, "One black, one lemony. One corseted the other buck naked, one wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it." However, the most notable difference is Ruth's dismal, miserable life in spite of her higher class rank and wealth compared to Pilate's self-reliant, confident life. In this situation, Pilate comforts Ruth by

telling Ruth her life story, "making the story deliberately long" because "her brother's wife" seemed to be "dying of lovelessness" (151). By being concerned more with people and their needs, Pilate's life is marked by richness in spirit, not in money. Morrison, thus, clearly depicts Pilate's strength through multiple contrasts with Ruth. In Pilate's commitment to loving others, she is able to live a fortunate life. As she dies, her only regret is that she did not love to her fullest potential. Her dying words, "I wish I could have loved everyone" (336), evoke feelings of pathos because Pilate, more than anyone else in the novel, displays true feelings of love and compassion. If Pilate did not believe she loved enough people, then no other character loved others at all.

Song in Pilate's life, hence, depicts her generosity and spiritual greatness, but it also connects Pilate to her family history. One of her strongest values is family loyalty, the belief that "You can't just fly off and leave a body" (332). As Pilate explains to her brother Macon, her father told her "first to sing, to keep on singing," then he told her later, "You just can't fly off and leave a body. A human life is precious (208). By singing, Pilate brings joy to others' lives, drawing them to her, obviously, and not leaving anyone behind. To elaborate on her father's second piece of advice, Pilate also does not physically leave a body behind. She collects the bones of the person she believes is the dead white man in the cave and carries the bones with her throughout the rest of her life. Evidently, this mantra accurately illustrates the values Pilate upholds in her actions. Pilate additionally remains loyal to Macon despite his apparent hatred of her. Pilate, successful in her own right, decides to find Macon, in order to "make peace between them" and even though she finds "her brother truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving"

(151), Pilate vows to live in Macon's town and help his family. The sharp diction of these four adjectives possesses enough vehemence to turn anyone off, but Pilate remains. In her own way, by helping Ruth with her marital problems and aiding Milkman with his troubles, Pilate remains loyal to Macon and, thus, to her family.

Since the first thing her father told her to do was "sing, sing" (208), Pilate feels that through her singing, she upholds her father's wishes and values. Ironically, Pilate's mother's name was Sing and as Milkman finds out, Pilate's father was probably not telling her to sing, "he was calling for his wife" (333). Yet, despite this confusion, Pilate still is connected to her family because she carries on an aspect of her mother, Singing Bird, through her constant singing. Likewise, the song that Pilate sings at the beginning of the novel, "O Sugarman done fly away, Sugarman done gone, Sugarman cut across the sky, Sugarman gone home," (6), actually is a version of the song that Milkman hears the children of Shalimar singing, "Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone, Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home," (303). In some way or another, Pilate learned the song of her family's past, replacing the name of her grandfather, Solomon, with Sugarman. Quite possibly, Pilate's natural ties to her family, to Solomon, and to Singing Bird explain why Pilate's character stands out in the novel as the central figure.

Additionally, by becoming more like Pilate and recognizing his family's past, Milkman is able to find his own identity. When Pilate is shot by Guitar, he asks Milkman to "Sing, Sing a little something for me" (336). Although "Milkman knew no songs, and had no singing voice," (336), he sings for Pilate. By singing for Pilate, he not only carries on his

family's song, "Sugarbaby don't leave me here," (336), but he also recognizes what creates Pilate's strength and uniqueness. Milkman realizes that Pilate may have been poor, uncultivated, and looked down upon by society, but "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Pilate did not need to leave the ground, like Solomon, to truly fly, or be her own person, when the power of her singing elevates her to her own levels of distinctiveness and rareness.

As an overarching motif in the novel, singing defines Pilate's character and also illustrates why she is able to live a triumphant life in spite of hardships. In her life, the power of song attracts others to her, points to her traits of compassion, kindness, and spirituality, and ultimately, ties her to her family history. Pilate, as the exceptional character in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, uses the power of song to love others unconditionally, without seeking repayment. Anyone who searches for peace, harmony, or identity, finds Pilate. In this way, a song can indeed unite people and signing can bring peace, happiness, and courage.