

**English 1102M**

**Student: Cameron Dye**

**Instructor: Ms. Billie Bennett**

### **Allusions to Bob Dylan and the Folk Music Revival in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"**

One important aspect of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" deals with the difficulty that lies in trying to remember history exactly as it happened. Since the story revolves around one event—Maggie's fall—it makes one question whether her fall may be a symbol of some specific event in our history. Considering the context and setting of Twyla and Roberta's beginning relationship at St. Bonny's, Maggie's physical description, job, name, and fall allude to Bob Dylan and the folk music revival of the early 1960s.

Bob Dylan began his career as a folk singer in New York City in 1960—the same city and approximate time Twyla and Roberta begin their relationship (Shelton 87). The folk music scene in New York brought "hundreds of guitar carrying youths" like Dylan to Greenwich Village (Denisoff and Fandray 31). Many of these young musicians were influenced by folk singers of the Dust Bowl era—especially Dylan, whose admiration of Woody Guthrie often came to the point of mimicry: "Dylan's appearance and manner, both on stage and off, were vintage Guthrie" (Hajdu 72). Twyla's description of Maggie is very similar to how one may have described this combination of old and young:

She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked . . . She wore this really stupid little hat—a kid's hat with ear flaps—and she wasn't much taller than we were. A really awful little hat. Even for a mute, it was dumb—dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all. (Morrison 211)

Maggie's description creates an awkward image of an old, rugged lady with a superficial youthfulness. The folk music revival was similar because it contained that same awkwardness only reversed, with youths having a superficial ruggedness. Maggie's hat makes her look like a child, but it is also similar to "a strange little corduroy hat that [Dylan] wore everywhere" (Shelton 92). Dylan's hat, which he wears on the cover of his first album, *Bob Dylan*, did not have the same ear straps as Maggie's, but it did have the same effect. After her first encounter with Dylan, fellow folk singer Joan Baez described his appearance: "He had that silly cap on, and he seemed like such a little boy" (qtd. in Hajdu 77). Baez's description of Dylan is very similar to Twyla's description of Maggie. Maggie's muteness is more metaphorical to show that folk music was not saying anything important. Also, Maggie's "sandy-colored" skin shows how the folk music revival was a blending of races, especially when Dylan became involved with the civil rights movement.

Folk music played an important role in the civil rights movement because it helped to keep the movement alive in the public's mind (Cohen 183). With songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," along with his role in the March on Washington, Bob Dylan became the icon of folk music's involvement with civil rights (Denisoff

and Fandray 32-33). Maggie's role at St. Bonny's is like Dylan's role in the movement. There is an importance placed on Twyla and Roberta's relationship at St. Bonny's which Twyla recalls later in life: "Those four short months were nothing in time. Maybe it was the thing itself. Just being there, together. Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew—how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed" (Morrison 218). Because Twyla and Roberta are different races, their friendship represents hope for a future of racial equality. St. Bonny's provides the environment for this hope to exist, which is what the civil rights movement struggled to provide. Maggie is "[t]he kitchen woman" at St. Bonny's, so by feeding the two girls, she provides the nourishment to allow this hope to live and grow (Morrison 211). By entering into popular culture with his songs, Dylan fed the civil rights movement by attracting more supporters. Maggie's role, like Dylan's, is a relatively small one, but it is an important one that helps to keep the cause alive.

In the middle of the 1960s, however, Bob Dylan began to depart from the civil rights movement and folk music in general. His 1965 release, *Bring It All Back Home*, shows this departure. "Maggie's Farm," the third track on the album, connects Maggie to Dylan once again because of the similarity in names. In the first verse of the song, Dylan sings:

Well, I wake up in the morning,

Fold my hands and pray for rain

I got a head full of ideas

That are drivin' me insane.

It's a shame the way she makes me scrub the floor.

I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more. (Dylan)

Dylan obviously feels that he is being held back artistically. He expands on this feeling in the final verse of the song:

Well, I try my best

To be just like I am,

But everybody wants you

To be just like them.

They say sing while you slave and I just get bored.

I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more. (Dylan)

From these two verses, one can tell that the song is “a declaration of independence against conformity,” but considering his situation with folk music and the civil rights movement at the time he wrote the song, it seems to be more of a personal protest for Dylan (Shelton 272). His frustration with artistic freedom in the civil rights movement can be seen in a conversation he had with a friend after receiving an award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee: “I’m not part of no Movement. If I was, I wouldn’t be able to do anything else but be in ‘the Movement.’ I just can’t have people sit around and mak rules for me” (qtd. in Shelton 202). Dylan shows these same feelings in “Maggie’s Farm.” Also, the fact that he once played at a farm called Silas Magree’s Farm in Greenwood, Mississippi, for a black voter registration rally in 1963 shows that the song is about Dylan not wanting to work for the civil rights movement anymore (McKeen 269). The Maggie in the song may be spelled differently, but considering that there are hundreds of names Dylan could have used instead, it seems highly unlikely that it is merely a coincidence. Maggie’s name in “Recitatif” is spelled the same way as the Maggie in Dylan’s song, so her name is another connector between the story and Bob Dylan.

Tying Maggie to “Maggie’s Farm” is important because it helps to connect Maggie’s fall to the fall of the folk music revival. “Maggie’s Farm” was the very first song Dylan played at the infamous 1965 Newport Folk Festival (Cohen 236). Even though the folk music revival was already in its decline at the time, Dylans’ performance at the festival stands as the revival’s symbolic ending, because that night at the festival he played with the universal symbol of rock and roll—an electric guitar (Denisoff and Fandray 34). Maggie’s fall alludes to Newport because the “gar” girls knocked her down. The “gar” girls are like Dylan’s electric guitar because they are also symbols of rock and roll. Since the “gar” girls “smoke and dance by the radio,” it can be assumed that they are listening to rock and roll music, because folk music is not music one can dance to (Morrison 214). The “gar” girls are connected to rock and roll again when at the Howard Johnson’s Twyla sees Roberta, who is on her way to see Jimi Hendrix, a famous rock musician known for his electric guitar playing. To Twyla, Roberta looked like a “gar” girl, only worse: “[s]he made the [gar] girls look like nuns” (Morrison 214). Maggie is kicked down by rock and roll in the same way the folk music revival was ended by rock and roll, which shows that Maggie’s fall is an allusion to Dylan’s performance at Newport in 1965.

By connecting Maggie and her fall to the folk music revival, an actual event in history, the reader is able to put him or herself into Twyla and Roberta’s position and ask the same questions they ask throughout the story: was folk music’s fall from popular culture inevitable? Did we, the fans, have some role in its decline? Were we actually glad to see it go? Given that Twyla and Roberta’s disagreements about Maggie only helped to distance the two, it does not appear that folk music’s decline was necessarily a good thing. Maybe if Dylan had stayed with folk music and the civil rights movement the social problems of the United States (or even the world) would not be as bad as they are today. But it is impossible to return to the past, so, like Twyla and Roberta, we are left wondering: What happened to Maggie?

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