

***Song of Solomon* Study Guide Questions**

Free online version of *Song of Solomon*:

http://www.alanreinstein.com/site/Song_of_Solomon_files/Song%20of%20Solomon%20-%20Toni%20Morrison.pdf

Song of Solomon contains many Biblical allusions, especially within characters' names (Hagar, Pilate, and Corinthians are just a few examples).

This site offers an easily searchable reference for Biblical names and words. With this background information, you can consider why Morrison gave her characters the names she did and what the background of those names adds to characterization.

WebBible Encyclopedia. 25 Aug. 2005. Eden Communications. 25 Sept. 2005.

<http://www.christiananswers.net/dictionary/home.html>

Browse through the Toni Morrison Encyclopedia for further insight:

https://archive.org/stream/TheToniMorrisonEnciclopedia/TheToniMorrisonEncyclopedia_djvu.txt

Epigraph

What is the significance of the epigraph?

Read this critical commentary to the epigraph in *Song of Songs* on pages 17 and 18 in Cliff Notes: ☺

<http://www.academia.edu/4555292/SONG>

and page 20 in Spark Notes: ☺ Read the forward to get a clear outlook on Morrison's muses.

<http://www.africanafrican.com/folder12/african%20african%20american2/civil%20rights%20movement/solomon.pdf>

Part I

Chapter 1

1. Several motifs in the first pages of this chapter present different allusions, and senses of imagery:
 - Mr. Smith flapping his wide blue wings on the roof of Mercy Hospital
 - Red velvet rose petals spilled in the snow
 - The woman (Pilate) singing the song, "O Sugarman"

These motifs will reappear frequently in the novel, *Song of Solomon*.

What contrasts do they present to the world Macon Dead would like to build?

2. How are life and death juxtaposed in the introductory chapter?
3. Macon Dead yearns for “a name that was real...given...at birth with love and seriousness...a name that was not a joke.”
 - What is the history of his name?
 - of Pilate’s?
 - of Milkman’s?
 - of Not-Doctor Street’s?

What other attitude is possible concerning these names –other than Macon’s deprecating one?

3. Why does Macon watch Pilate, Reba, and Hagar singing, from a position outside, in the dark, where they cannot see him? Why does he not enter the house? What effect does the experience have on him?

Chapter 2

1. When Milkman at the age of twelve visits Pilate for the first time, what is her effect on him?
2. In this chapter we learn both how Guitar got his name and what happened when Reba won her ring. What do these two stories suggest about the experience of blacks? Explain. Connect these incidents to a theme and give support.
3. The origin of the name “Macon Dead” is explained here in more detail. Why did the grandfather keep it, since it was not really his name?
4. What do you think of Macon’s advice: “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things.”

Chapter 3

1. Why do you think Railroad Tommy catalogues the life of the wealthy: does he want to impress Milkman? Or does he have another purpose in mind?
2. What effect have the circumstances of Guitar’s father’s death had on Guitar’s attitude toward life?
3. In 1945, at age fourteen, Milkman feels physically inadequate: one leg is shorter; he has no mustache. How are these physical characteristics a reflection of his inner conflicts?
4. “The whole truth” which Macon decides now to tell Milkman will be modified by Ruth in a later conversation with her son. However, Macon’s story has a serious effect on Milkman. Explain the son’s conflicts.

Chapter 4

1. Now, at the age of thirty-one, Milkman is planning to end his relationship with Hagar. He remembers how he felt about her when he was twelve and seventeen. Why is she now “the third beer”?

2. As Milkman reflects on his relationship with Hagar, he remembers the crisis he walked in on when he was seventeen. Pilate was threatening a man who had acted violently toward Reba. Why does he remember the incident now? What might it foreshadow?
3. In chapter 3, Guitar had given Milkman the following advice: The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why. But look here, don't carry it inside and don't give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can't, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man. In writing Hagar his goodbye letter, has he followed Guitar's advice? Explain.
4. Do you agree with Milkman's reflection on Guitar –“The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all. He wondered what they would do if they didn't have black and white problems to talk about”? Explain.
5. Freddie's story about a woman who turned into a white bull is one example of the element of fantasy that occurs periodically in the novel. What is the symbolic value of this story? What are some other examples of fantasy in the narrative thus far?

Chapter 5

1. What does the conversation that begins this chapter tell the reader about the quality of the friendship between Milkman and Guitar?
2. What do the residents of Southside mean by “graveyard love”? What interest do they take in it? What judgment do they make of it?
3. The narrative of Pilate's power (saving Milkman's life) is juxtaposed with the story of her early life, experience of love, and sense of alienation and sadness. How does the one narrative relate to the other?
4. Pilate's decision to return to Pennsylvania for the bones of the man Macon killed and later seek out Macon are both made because of someone else's need. Does this show weakness or strength of character? Explain.

Chapter 6

1. Consider Guitar's commitment to the Seven Days and his concern for Hagar. Do the values implicit in these attitudes conflict or rise from the same source?
2. At the end of chapter 6, Guitar says, “I'm scared for you too.” What could be the concern Guitar is voicing?
3. What positive responsibility does Guitar see himself fulfilling by his commitment to the Seven Days? What human rights is he overlooking? What is illogical about his theory?
4. Is Guitar a tragic figure who functions as an instrument of the suffering of others? If so, explain how the suffering brought upon others by Guitar contributes to a tragic vision of the work as a whole.

Chapter 7

1. How does Macon Dead's counsel, “Money is freedom,” relate to his story of his father's death and his and Pilate's escape? In earlier chapters Milkman felt “used.” At this point, is he being used again by Macon as he listens to the story and to Macon's request?
2. Identify these details and describe the circumstances surrounding each:
 - a. Lincoln's Heaven
 - b. Circe
 - c. The gold

- d. The ghost's utterances
- e. The dead man in the cave

Chapter 8

1. Consider the thoughts of Guitar in the first paragraph of this chapter and his behavior with Milkman. What facet of his character is revealed?
2. Why do you think the author describes the white peacock in such detail? What does it symbolize?
3. When you add to the author's analysis of Milkman's character ("[h]e avoided commitment") the influence of Guitar ("[h]e felt a self inside himself emerge"); do you perceive a lasting change in Milkman? Explain.

Chapter 9

1. How much of Corinthians' inability to secure work commensurate with her education and social position is due to the social setting of the time? To her family upbringing? To her character?
2. The author sets out clearly Corinthians' feelings of being trapped and her motivation to risk everything else in her life for a relationship with Porter. As the situation is described, do you think it is the wisest decision she could make?
3. What is the function of Lena's verbal assault on Milkman for her? For him? As a final scene in Part I?

Part II

Chapter 10

1. The beginning of this chapter, includes fairy tale allusions to emphasize the illusory world in which Milkman lives. What are they? What do they represent?
2. What does Morrison mean when she comments about Milkman, "In the air, away from real life, he felt free"? Connect this to the motif of flight/flying.
3. Give at least two examples of Milkman's increased involvement with other people and/or his imaginative projection into the life situation(s) of another?
4. Review the pieces of the family puzzle that Milkman is now setting into place:
 - a. The life of his grandfather on the farm, Lincoln's Heaven
 - b. The help Reverend Cooper's father once gave Pilate
 - c. The help Circe once gave Pilate and Macon
 - d. The names of his grandparents
 - e. The disposition of the grandfather's body
5. The story of Milkman's encounter with Circe seems at first almost too fantastic to be real. What details in the story or phrases of the author seem intentionally set to make the reader think it is all a dream? What details root the story in reality?
6. What is Milkman's pivotal moment/epiphany? What does it tell us about his character and his quest? Connect to a theme.

Chapter 11

1. What aspects of Milkman's behavior are challenges to the residents of Shalimar? Comment on Milkman's two tests and subsequent reward.

2. What are two elements of fate or chance which determine that Milkman will stop in Shalimar and that he will live a while longer?
3. What facts does Milkman discover about Ryna's Gulch? About Sing's people?
4. "It sounded old. Deserve. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve. Now it seems to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others." ... "They were troublesome thoughts, but they wouldn't go away. Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self –the cocoon that was 'personality' – gave way." Explain the growth in Milkman described by this passage.

Chapter 12

1. Which of Milkman's actions support that he is now less preoccupied with himself?
2. Explain the reference here and in other chapters to "passing". What characteristics of the society do these references reflect? How does this connect to the universal theme of Death and Dying?
3. When Guitar and Milkman talk in the road, which character seems more rigid, which more open? What is ironic about possible results of Milkman's search?
4. As he listens to the children's song in Shalimar and memorizes it, what facts about his ancestral roots does Milkman learn and infer? Connect the content of this song to the motif of song in *Song of Solomon*. Connect and relate this song's message to the chosen title for the novel, *Song of Solomon*. What does it symbolize?
5. At what new understanding about his mother and father does Milkman arrive?

Chapter 13

1. Explain how some of the details that are supplied about Guitar's and Hagar's growing up give insight into their behavior.
2. Comment on Guitar's statement: "I thought if I loved anything it would die."

Chapter 14

1. In the story of the flying Africans –and Jake's story –how much do you take as literal truth? How much of it as magic or fantasy? If it is fantasy, why does Toni Morrison use it:
 - As a motif to tie together parts of the story?
 - As a symbol of some quality she sees as needed or admirable in certain characters?
 - As symbolic of a broader world beyond Southside or Shalimar?
2. In the act of Milkman's allowing Grace to keep a watch he didn't give her, what character trait is demonstrated? What would his father have done, faced with the same situation?

Chapter 15

1. What is the function of the swimming scene, placed as it is so close to the crowded succession of events at the end?
2. In the following paragraph, what are the reasons Milkman suggests for Guitar's actions?

Even as he phrased the thought in his mind, Milkman knew it was not so. Either Guitar's disappointment with the gold that was there was so deep it had deranged him, or his "work" had done it. Or maybe he simply allowed himself to feel about Milkman what he had always

felt about Macon Dead and the Honoree crowd. In any case, he had snatched the first straw, limp and wet as it was, to prove to himself the need to kill Milkman. The Sunday-school girls deserved better than to be avenged by that hawk-headed raven-skinned Sunday man who included in his blood sweep four innocent white girls and one innocent black man.

Which is the most plausible reason?

Which is the most reasonable to Milkman, considering the end of the novel?

3. Interpret Milkman's last thought: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it."
Has he surrendered "to the air" by living through his search?
Other than the suggestion of his flying that we are asked to accept here at the end, how would you say he has "learned to ride the air"?