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**Song of Solomon**

Toni Morrison

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# Song of Solomon | Themes

Morrison's themes are interrelated in complex ways. For example, racism has been instrumental in separating the Dead family from their ancestral heritage. As a result Milkman goes on a search for his identity, which involves regaining this heritage. Along the way he must acknowledge his complicity in the abandonment of the women in his life. The dead ancestors in Milkman's family have also suffered from racism and the abandonment of women, which affect the living members of this family.

## Searching for Identity

Searching for identity is the central theme of *Song of Solomon*. For [Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) ties to one's community and ancestral past are key to one's true, deep identity. Without these ties, life is disconnected and it is difficult to relate in truly meaningful ways with others. All people yearn for this connection; however, like Milkman people often disregard at an early age this yearning and thereby become disconnected and disillusioned about life. For example, Morrison uses the metaphor of having faith in the ability to fly as central to black men's identities. Flying represents the ability to assertively deal with and transcend life's difficulties. Milkman lost this belief when he was young but eventually regained it as he embraced his ancestral heritage.

Morrison conveys the theme of searching for identity mainly through Milkman, Pilate, and Macon. Pilate has kept a strong connection with her family roots, enabling her to heal people and show compassion for them. Because of a misunderstanding, however, her sense of family unity remains incomplete. Perhaps this is why she wandered throughout the United States for many years. Macon has disconnected himself from the black community where he lives and also from his ancestral past. Milkman grows up disconnected like his father but eventually goes on a quest to find his true self. Morrison also shows how for some women, such as Ruth and [Hagar](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Hagar), a sense of identity is based on their connections to men and abandonment results in a severing of identity. Ruth believes she needs to attach herself to a strong male figure to endure life. As a result she becomes unnaturally close to her father and to her son for the first four years of his life. Hagar becomes obsessed with having a man, which drives her insane.

## Racism

[Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) conveys the theme of racism by showing its effect on the friendship of [Guitar](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Guitar) and Milkman and on members of the Dead family. For Morrison racism is an alienating force that drives wedges between people. People affected by racism tend to view life in opposing terms. For instance, the Butler family is racist because they believe white people, most of all the members of their family, are superior to black people. Because of this belief they treat blacks in abusive ways. Also Morrison shows how racist perceptions can spread to the people being abused. Such is the case with Guitar. Since childhood he has suffered from the horrors of racism, causing him to develop a hatred for white people. He sees the entire white race as being unnatural or inferior. As a result he has no qualms about murdering innocent white people.

Morrison also shows how the hatred caused by racism can split a person's inner self, as with Guitar, who becomes a divided person. One side of him loves his friends, including Milkman; another side becomes an avenging force fueled by hatred that can be directed at anyone, white or black. In addition Morrison delves into how racism can harm a family. The racist Butlers cheat Jake out of his land and murder him. Shocked by this killing, Jake's son Macon pushes away his ancestral past and focuses on owning things and getting money from what he owns, attempting to find security in these actions. Macon's adopted way of life, however, has severe consequences on his family, including Milkman.

## Abandonment of Women

[Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) explores the theme of the abandonment of women by linking it with the search for identity. Morrison shows how the idea of flight, which is central to the psyche of black men, can have negative implications for women and families. For example, Morrison describes Solomon as a patriarchal figure who lived in Virginia with his wife, Reba, and 21 sons and worked hard as a farmer, likely a sharecropper. Solomon escapes the burdens of his life by literally flying away. As a result, though, he abandons his wife to take care of the family. Devastated, Reba goes insane. The dynamics of this story are evident throughout the Dead family. Although Milkman had intimate relations with [Hagar](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Hagar) for more than 10 years, he harshly breaks off their relationship. As a result, Hagar goes insane. And in an emotional and physical way, Macon abandons his wife, Ruth, which has severe consequences for her and her children.

Women whose identities involve reliance on men, such as Hagar and Ruth, are more severely affected when they are abandoned. Similarly, black men who derive their identities from white communities, such as [Macon Dead I](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Macon_Dead_I) and II, are devastated when those communities abandon them. In contrast Morrison shows Pilate as a woman who can persevere against such abandonment. When people find out that Pilate does not have a navel, she is abandoned not only by her male lover but also by the entire migrant community she works with. However, Pilate's life does not revolve around having a man. Instead she has a strong connection with her ancestral heritage, which helps her endure abandonment and other hardships. Pilate serves as a role model for both women and black men seeking to discover an identity rooted in ancestral heritage.

## The Living and the Dead

In *Song of Solomon* the relationship between the living and dead forms a broad theme that includes the themes of searching for identity, racism, and the abandonment of women. [Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) conveys this comprehensive theme in three ways: the connection between the living and ghosts, the influence of dead ancestors on family dynamics, and the stories of the living about the dead. However, no matter how this theme is conveyed, Morrison shows the relationship between the living and the dead to be a concrete reality that has a powerful influence. For example, Pilate's relationship with the ghost of her father is as real for her as her relationship with her brother. Because of this, the spirit of old Macon Dead helps shape how Pilate lives.

The manner in which the theme of the relationship between the living and the dead incorporates the other three themes can be seen in the character of Milkman. As Milkman searches for his identity, he has to constantly deal with how his dead relatives have affected his family dynamics. For instance, Ruth had a strong dependence on her father. After his death she searches desperately to regain the intimate connection she had with him. She nurses Milkman for the first four years of his life, thereby forever affecting her son's identity. Also Milkman takes more responsibility for his abandonment of women, especially [Hagar](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Hagar), when he learns about his deceased great-grandfather abandoning his wife. In addition, through the stories about his ancestors, Milkman learns not only how racism has harmed his family but also how his family has triumphed over racism. Finally, when Milkman comes to believe in the reality of the spiritual world of his dead relatives, he becomes more empowered. He realizes his life has possibilities for transcendence beyond the confines of the material world.

# SYMBOLS

## Flight

[Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) uses the symbol of flight to represent black people's desire to transcend problems. This desire has its roots in the ancestral past of black people, as can be seen through the character of Solomon. For Morrison, black men often manifest this desire in ways that have negative results, as demonstrated in the opening of the novel when Robert Smith jumps off the roof of a hospital and dies in an attempt to fly.

However, the desire for flight is significant not only to black men. The narrator states that Milkman loves Pilate because "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." Pilate has the ability to transcend difficult life circumstances without harming or abandoning those around her. Morrison interjects symbols that represent flight throughout the novel, including the winged costume of Robert Smith, the silver-winged woman on the hood of Macon's Packard, the airplane that Milkman rides in, and the bird that takes away Pilate's earring.

## Names

For [Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) the symbol of names represents the effect of white oppression and the strength of black oral history, and names also serve as allusions. Milkman's family was given the name Dead because of white racism, when a drunk soldier mistakenly registers Jake in the Freedmen's Bureau under the name of Macon Dead. The soldier obviously could not care less what name he gave Jake. Also because of racism, Jake is not taught how to read and write. He thus picks names for his children based on how they look in the Bible, resulting in strange choices. Because of his family's unusual names, Macon grows up being ashamed of his own name. However, Pilate shows how a negative situation can be turned into a positive. Pilate loves the unusual names in her family. In fact she places her name written by her father on a piece of paper in a snuff box and makes an earring out of it. It is the only word he ever wrote. Pilate takes her father's illiteracy caused by racism and turns into something she is proud of. Despite all the hardships her father endured, including a poor education, he chose his daughter's name with love and wrote it down, even though he was illiterate.

Morrison also uses names to show the strong tradition of black oral history. When Milkman attempts to trace his roots he comes in contact with a confusing array of names, many of which have been changed over generations when passed down as oral history. For example, Milkman has trouble finding his ancestor's hometown of Shalimar because he originally thought it was called Charlemagne. Circe remembers the town's name but thinks the town's name is Charlemagne because that's what it sounds like. Later when Milkman listens to the rhyme, he hears a name that sounds like Reiner. He has to infer that the song is really referring to Ryna. Despite these modifications, however, oral history has succeeded in keeping the heritage of Milkman's family alive. Over decades nothing was written down about his family. Indeed Milkman finds out many details by listening to Susan talk about family legends. So these legends have successfully been passed down through the family to Susan, who relates them to Milkman.

In addition Morrison uses names to convey allusions. For example, the family name Dead implies that Milkman's family suffers from an inner or spiritual death by being separated from its ancestral past. Pilate's name sound like the word pilot, which alludes to Pilate being a person who guides Milkman toward his family history. The name of Milkman has a double meaning. First it refers to Milkman being dependent on his family, like a baby. Also it alludes to Milkman being used by his family for comfort. Macon has come to rely on Milkman to run his business, and both Macon and Ruth dump their problems on Milkman. As a result Milkman feels burdened by his family. Finally Milkman provides true nourishment for his family by discovering his ancestral past.

## Singing

Song in African American communities, perhaps even more so than folk tales and legends, has been a major form of communication, used to record family history; to complain, or "talk back" to white folks; and to share coded messages. [Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) uses singing in the novel to bring black characters into closer alignment with their communities, their families, and their own personal identities.

Pilate is the most powerful purveyor of this symbol, singing from the first moment readers are introduced to her, first about Sugarman's flight and then to Macon creeping outside her cabin. Her singing connects Ruth to the crowd, Macon to his land, and Milkman to his ancestors. Later children's rhymes will complete Milkman's voyage of self-discovery.

## Gold

The symbol of gold represents the false lure of wealth that is in some ways the antithesis of the land, community, and personal identity. [Morrison](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/) uses the desire for capitalistic wealth as a catalyst for the novel's plot. In an effort to get gold, Milkman and [Guitar](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/character-analysis/#Guitar) steal Pilate's sack. Frustrated by this effort, Milkman continues his search for gold by traveling to his ancestral home, which ultimately leads to his discovery of his ancestry and his identity. However, the search is not always beneficial. Pilate has become separated from her brother because of an argument over gold, an instance of how wealth can separate family. Guitar tries to kill Milkman because of his supposed betrayal concerning gold. When Milkman replaces his desire for gold with a desire to find his ancestral past, he begins to head down a positive, healing path that empowers him.

[Symbols](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/symbols/) [Author Biography](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Song-of-Solomon/author/)