

Song of Solomon Study Guide



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Summary

Summary

Summary of the Novel

This *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel traces the birth, youth, and maturation of the protagonist, Milkman Dead. Born in Michigan in 1931 by miraculous means, Milkman is a gifted child until he learns at the age of four that humans cannot fly. Changed by this revelation, he grows up a spoiled, self-centered child. Torn between the magical, spiritual world of his father's sister, Pilate, and that of his greedy property-owning father Macon Dead, Milkman follows in the footsteps of his father and becomes Macon's assistant. Burdened by his parents' unspeakable confidences and troubled by his loveless household, he seeks solace at his Aunt Pilate's and by spending time with his best friend, Guitar Bains.

Living a spoiled, infantile existence until the age of 31, Milkman's sole reason for being is to seek pleasure. After a 14-year relationship with Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, loses its lustre, Milkman decides to end it. Hagar has become too accessible, and their love-making, which so tantalized Milkman when he was younger, has lost its appeal. Distraught by Milkman's mistreatment of her, Hagar repeatedly tries to kill him.

Guitar further complicates Milkman's life when he confesses to Milkman that he is a member of a radical organization, the *Seven Days*, that avenges the unprosecuted deaths of innocent blacks by randomly killing whites under similar circumstances.

Lacking a social consciousness and fed up with the seriousness of life, Milkman decides he needs to separate himself from his oppressive world by traveling. When Macon suggests that Milkman steal a sack which ostensibly has gold in it from Pilate's house, Milkman sees the gold as a way to finance his trip and finally be independent.

Macon tells Milkman that the gold is from a cave near Danville, Pennsylvania, the town Macon and Pilate grew up in. Macon explains that he and Pilate lived in the cave for several days after their father was murdered by a white family who wanted the Dead property. When a white man approached the cave, a fearful Macon killed him, suspecting him of being one of the men that killed Macon Dead I. Afterwards, he and Pilate discovered gold in the cave, but Pilate and Macon argued when Pilate told Macon it was morally wrong to keep it. This argument created a permanent breach in their relationship.

Macon now tells Milkman that he believes Pilate went back to the cave to retrieve the gold. Without expressing any concern for the morality of his actions, Milkman agrees to steal the gold with the help of Guitar, who wants the money to finance his vigilante organization. After stealing the sack, the two men discover there is no gold in it, only what they believe are a white man's bones. These are, ostensibly, the bones of the white man Macon killed in the cave, the bones that the ghost of Macon Dead I told Pilate to go back and retrieve because "You just can't fly on off and leave a body."

Undeterred by this first dead-end, Macon suggests that the gold must still be in the cave in Pennsylvania. Milkman agrees to go to Danville to search the cave for the gold. Milkman seeks out Circe, the midwife who delivered Macon and Pilate. Through Circe, Milkman learns the names of his paternal grandparents—Jake and Sing—and the location of the cave where Milkman believes the gold is. Milkman searches Hunter Cave and determines that the gold and the bones of his grandfather are no longer there. From what Circe tells Milkman, he concludes that the bones in Pilate's sack must be those of Pilate's father.

Less interested in his family history than in finding the gold, Milkman proceeds to Shalimar, Virginia, the

birthplace of his paternal grandparents. In the all-black town, he finds the men hostile toward his urban manners and his lack of community etiquette. Milkman is perplexed by this reception after he was treated with such “southern hospitality” in Danville, where his family was the “object of hero worship.”

The men of Shalimar invite Milkman on a hunting trip. On the trip, he discovers a new-found humility and an appreciation of community when he is forced to work with and rely on his fellow man. Milkman reflects on his mistreatment of his family, and of Pilate and Hagar, and develops a social consciousness. While in the woods, Guitar, who believes Milkman has hoarded the gold for himself, unsuccessfully tries to kill Milkman. Milkman protests that there is no gold, but Guitar doesn’t believe him.

No longer interested in gold, Milkman resolves instead to search for his family name and history. Ultimately, Milkman realizes the final piece of the puzzle to his family name can be found in the song the Shalimar children are always singing. Overjoyed at the realization that the Solomon that the children sing of in their song is Milkman’s paternal great-grandfather, he returns home to Michigan to share the information with his family.

Upon Milkman’s arrival, he discovers that Hagar has killed herself. Remorseful, and taking responsibility for something for the first time in his life, Milkman takes a grieving Pilate to Shalimar to bury her father’s bones at Solomon’s Leap, near his birthplace.

After the burial, Guitar appears, and in the darkness accidentally shoots Pilate dead. As Milkman makes out Guitar’s figure on a distant rock, he leaps from the cliff he is standing on and flies into the air toward Guitar’s arms.

The Life and Work of Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, the second of four children of George Wofford, a shipyard welder, and Ramah Willis Wofford. Morrison recalls a childhood filled with singing and oral storytelling. While Morrison was an avid reader of the great Russian writers, *Madame Bovary*, and Jane Austen, she also vividly remembers the African folklore and myths that were an integral part of her youth.

Morrison refers to the oral storytelling in her household as “a spoken library.” She describes it as “children’s stories my family told, spirituals, the ghost stories, the blues, and folk tales and myths, and the everyday....” Morrison “wanted to write out of the matrix of memory, of recollection, and to approximate the sensual and visceral responses (she) had to the world (she) lived in....” From this she wanted “to recreate the civilization of black people...the manners, judgments, values, morals....” (Morrison, 29)

Born into the Depression era, in a multicultural town near Cleveland, Morrison was exposed to the struggling masses who often went hungry. She was also exposed to the injustices of racism, although she had many white friends as a child. Morrison tells of her mother battling segregation by refusing to sit in the “colored” section on public buses. Morrison’s father “received shocking impressions of adult white people” while growing up in Georgia, and the bitterness never left him. (Strouse, 53)

Morrison completed high school at the top of her class and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. Upon entering college, she changed her name to “Toni.” While at Howard, she joined the Howard University Players, a repertory troupe, and toured the Deep South during several summers. “...Seeing its roads, its shotgun houses, its schools, its particular brand of segregation” left a deep impression on her. “Seeing first-hand what life was like for Southern blacks in the late 1940s and early 1950s” made the stories Morrison had heard her parents tell about the hardships of their lives in the South more tangible. Morrison’s maternal grandfather, John Solomon Willis, “had been cheated out of his 88 acres of Alabama land, land legally granted to his Indian mother by the U.S. government following the Civil War.” (Century, 33–35)

Morrison graduated with a B.A. in English in 1953. She completed an M.A. in English from Cornell in 1955.

Morrison taught at Texas Southern University for two years before returning to teach at Howard. Morrison's presence at Howard was important for her growing social consciousness. In 1957, the civil rights movement was just beginning. Living in the nation's capital and teaching at one of the most prestigious black colleges in the country, Morrison was exposed to many key black figures in the civil rights movement. Among others, she knew Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the radical black poet and had Claude Brown (the future author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*) as one of her students. Another student, Stokely Carmichael, the future leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee became "one of the most vocal advocates of the Black Power movement." (Century, 37)

In 1957, Morrison married Jamaican architect Harold Morrison. They were divorced in 1964, but not before having two sons.

In 1965, Morrison entered publishing. She worked first as an editor at Random House, in the Syracuse office, and subsequently was promoted to a senior editor in the New York office, where she worked until 1983. While at Random House, she edited works by Muhammad Ali, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and many other important black writers. She also worked on *The Black Book*, a compilation of slave narratives, news clippings, advertisements, and photographs that records three centuries of black history.

In 1989, after having taught at the State University at Purchase and at Albany, Bard College, Yale, and Rutgers, Morrison accepted an endowed professorship at Princeton University. She was the first black woman to receive such an honor.

Her first novel, the critically acclaimed *The Bluest Eye* (1970) deals with the issue of racism and its impact on young black girls growing up poor in Ohio. The novel centers around Pecola Breedlove, a little black girl who believes that she can right all the wrongs of her world if only she can have blue eyes. A major theme of the novel, and of subsequent novels by Toni Morrison, is the difficulty of maintaining a secure black identity in a world where the larger society conspires against that identity. Critic Jean Strouse adeptly points out the parallels between Pecola Breedlove's conflict and that of African-Americans historically by drawing an analogy with W.E.B. Du Bois's work *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois speaks of a "double consciousness" by which the African-American constantly experiences "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (Strouse, 54)

The Bluest Eye was followed by *Sula* (1974), a novel about the friendship of Sula Peace and Nel Wright and their attempt to re-create themselves because "they were neither white nor male, and that (therefore) all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them...." Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977) was a bestseller, and her first novel in which the protagonist was male. Susan Lardner describes the novel as "a domestic epic—a rhapsodic work, demonstrating the virtues of the spoken word and the abiding presence in certain corners of the world of a lively oral tradition." (Lardner, 217) Morrison believes it is important for black culture to know that it has "a legitimate source of language." Morrison emphasizes that black culture is "most accessible in the language, the structure, the sound, what people call slang, the metaphors, the similes, the paradoxes, the ironies...."(Morrison, 29)

It is Morrison's ability to convey this language both in her narratives and the dialogues of her characters that gives her work its strong expressive powers. Morrison describes language as "the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's; to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen (to black people) would be to

lose that language.” (LeClair, 27)

The African-American male writers who preceded Morrison—such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin—wrote about the problems of being a black man in a white society. The “black power” advocates of the 1960s such as Stokely Carmichael and Leroi Jones wrote “...books and political slogans about power...addressed to white men trying to explain or prove something to them.” Morrison explains that “The fight was between men, for king of the hill.” (Strouse, 55)

The voices of African-American women writers, and Toni Morrison in particular, have a different focal point than their male counterparts. Their intention, first and foremost, is to address the black community. Toni Morrison categorizes her fiction as “village literature.” Morrison writes fiction “for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people.” Morrison believes that writing is an act “to give nourishment” to her readers. Rather than accept the new “urban values,” Morrison looks to restore the “old values” and “the language that black people spoke to its original power.” (LeClair, 26) Morrison, like Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, and other African-American women writers, uses black oral history, myth, and folklore to restore black culture’s heritage.

In 1980, among other honors, President Jimmy Carter appointed Morrison to the National Council on the Arts.

Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby* was published in 1981. Seven years later, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel on slavery, *Beloved* (1987). Her next novel, *Jazz*, appeared in 1992.

In 1993, Morrison was the first African-American to win the coveted Nobel Prize in Literature for a body of work that is now internationally recognized for its high literary quality, its concern with moral issues, and its depth of imagination.

Estimated Reading Time

Since each page contains about 400 words, the average student would take approximately two minutes to read each page. The total reading time of the 341-page book would be between 11 and 12 hours. The best approach is to read the book according to the natural chapter breaks.

Summary

Part I

Song of Solomon begins with the flight of Robert Smith, an insurance agent, from the roof of Mercy Hospital. Smith appears on the roof of the hospital with two handcrafted wings on his back. A small crowd gathers to witness the impending jump. Many believe he won't jump, but to the amazement of some and horror of others, Smith does jump. Because of Smith's attempt to fly, Ruth Foster Dead is able to deliver her child inside the hospital instead of on its steps. Negro women during this time are not allowed to give birth inside the hospital due to segregation. Thus Macon Dead becomes the first Negro child to be born inside Mercy Hospital.

Four years later, young Macon acquires his nickname, Milkman, when his father's tenant Freddie catches Ruth nursing Macon at age four. Milkman's father, Macon, Sr.—who is a harsh landlord to other Blacks—does not know the origins of this nickname, but he thinks it must have something to do with Ruth, of whom he can think only with disgust. The elder Macon is also estranged from his sister, Pilate, but on a night that he mercilessly evicts one of his poor tenants, Mrs. Bains, Macon stands outside Pilate's house to hear her singing.

Time goes on and Morrison details certain events in Milkman's growing up. As a young boy, Milkman and his family go on Sunday afternoon drives. On a particular Sunday, Milkman accidentally urinates on his sister Lena, a memory that Lena remembers years later. When Milkman is twelve, he and his friend Guitar Bains

approach his Aunt Pilate. Milkman knows his father would disapprove of him approaching his aunt, but he decides to anyway. The two boys inquire as to whether or not she has a navel. She responds no, and invites them in for a snack. While inside, Pilate relates the history of the Dead family, and when her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar, come home, they are introduced to Milkman. Everyone has a nice time engaging in conversation that afternoon. However, when Milkman's father hears of Milkman's encounter with his Pilate, he is upset. He reminds Milkman that he does not want him consorting with his sister. Milkman asks his father why, and in response his father relates more of the family history. He then concludes by saying his sister is a "snake," and that he wants Milkman to stay away from her.

Following their discussion, Macon tells Milkman that he is to start working with him. Milkman's responsibilities include running errands in his aunt's part of town. Thus, he has even more opportunities to visit his relatives. A couple of years later, Milkman realizes that one of his legs is shorter by about half an inch. He tries not to dwell on what he believes is a deformity.

When Milkman is twenty-two, his father hits Ruth, and Milkman throws his father against the radiator in defense of his mother. He threatens to kill his father if he ever touches his mother again. Macon never hits his wife again, but he does explain to his son the reasons behind his poor relationship with Ruth. He claims Ruth and her father had had an inappropriate relationship; he even describes an incestuous scene he witnessed between Ruth and her dead father. After this incident, Milkman finds Guitar at the barbershop, where the men are listening to a report about the murder of Emmett Till. The news about Till reminds them of the atrocities suffered by the returning Black veterans of World War I and spurs Guitar to greater involvement in politics.

When Milkman is thirty-one, he ends a longstanding intimate relationship that he has had with Hagar, and she begins regular attempts on his life. Meanwhile, Freddie tells Milkman that Guitar has been hanging around another man, Empire State, whom he believes has murdered a white boy found dead in a schoolyard. He tells Milkman to pay close attention to Guitar from now on.

One night, Milkman lays waiting another attack from Hagar, and he recalls the recent night he followed his mother to her father's grave. Upon confronting his mother at the cemetery, Ruth explains her version of the rift between herself and Macon; she accuses Macon of lying about her relationship with her father. She denies any incestuous behavior, but does say that she felt her father was the only person who ever really cared about her. She also describes Pilate's efforts to restore sexual relations between herself and Macon and to protect Ruth's resulting pregnancy (which would result in the birth of Milkman) from Macon's violence. After pondering his recollections of his encounter with his mother, Milkman hears Hagar trying to enter Guitar's apartment; after she makes her way in, she is emotionally unable to kill Milkman. When Ruth finds out that Hagar has been trying to kill Milkman, she goes to confront Hagar. Pilate finds Ruth with Hagar, and to distract her she tells Ruth about her childhood and her travels across the country.

Meanwhile, Milkman finally asks Guitar about his relationship with Empire State. Guitar hesitates at first but then reveals that he has become a member of the Seven Days, an organization of seven Black men who murder whites chosen at random in retaliation for lynchings and other atrocities. Milkman does not approve of Guitar's involvement in this group and fears for his friend's safety, but Guitar is deeply committed to the cause.

Later, while talking to his father, Milkman mentions that Pilate has a green sack hanging from her ceiling that she calls her inheritance. Macon is surprised by this news and tells Milkman that as children he and Pilate had found some gold in a cave when they were hiding from the whites who killed their father, gold he believes belonged to a white man Macon had killed in the cave. Macon believes the green sack could contain the gold from the cave. With this knowledge, Milkman, with urging from his father and help from Guitar, steals the sack. Guitar's motives for stealing the gold include giving him the means to avenge the deaths of the four little girls in the church bombing in Birmingham.

At the beginning of chapter nine, the story shifts to Milkman's sister Corinthians, who is secretly working as a maid and having an affair with a man named Henry Porter. She has just returned from her first night of lovemaking with him when she is startled by the sounds of male voices in her kitchen. Milkman and Guitar have been arrested after they were pulled over without cause and found to have human remains in the car with them. The green sack that they had taken from Pilate's home had actually contained rocks and human bones, not gold. Pilate had to bail them out of jail by humbling herself to the police and saying that the bones are those of her dead husband.

Later, Milkman, who has figured out that Corinthians is having an affair with Porter, realizes that Porter is a member of the Seven Days. Worried for his sister, he decides to tell his father about the affair. His sister Lena does not understand Milkman's actions against their sister; she confronts him, saying that he has a habit of pissing on others (which also refers back to the time he urinated on her as a child). After this confrontation, Milkman decides to leave home.

Part 2

Milkman has embarked on a solo quest for the gold, though he still intends to split the proceeds with Guitar. Milkman starts by going to Danville, Pennsylvania, the site of the cave. He asks about a mysterious woman named Circe, who sheltered Macon and Pilate after their father's death, and is directed to the house of Reverend Cooper, who knew his father when he was a boy. Milkman learns that the Butlers, the same people Circe worked for, were responsible for his grandfather's death and never brought to justice. While Reverend Cooper's car is being repaired, Milkman meets the old men of the town, who tell him stories about his father's family.

Milkman soon encounters Circe, who looks incredibly old but speaks with the voice of a twenty-year-old girl. She tells him that his grandmother's name was Sing, his grandfather's original name was Jake, and that his grandfather's body floated up from its shallow grave and ended up being dumped in the cave. When Milkman gets to the cave there is no gold, and no body. Milkman decides that Pilate has taken the gold to Virginia during her travels around the country.

After Milkman arrives in his ancestral town of Shalimar, Virginia, he sees some children singing a song and playing, and remembers that he had never had friends as a child, until he met Guitar. However, Guitar's friendship has not lasted. While on a hunting trip with the old men of the town, Milkman fights off Guitar's first attempt to take his life. (Guitar believes Milkman has taken the gold for himself; thus he wants to kill him so he can obtain the gold.)

As the old men skin the bobcat they've caught on their trip, Milkman learns that his grandmother is one of the Byrds, related to a woman named Susan who lives in the town. After a magical night with a woman named Sweet, he goes to see Susan Byrd, who is evasive with him about their shared ancestry because of the presence of her gossiping friend Grace. Later, Milkman realizes that his ancestors are named in the song that the children of Shalimar sing; he then goes to see Susan Byrd again, excited by his discovery.

Chapter thirteen shifts the focus back to Hagar, who is profoundly depressed, rising from her bed only to go on a manic shopping spree. She then spikes a fever. Shortly afterwards, she dies, and Macon pays for her funeral.

When Milkman returns to Susan Byrd's house, she tells him all she had not told him earlier: that Sing left Shalimar with Jake, and that Jake was the youngest child of a man named Solomon who flew back to Africa. The story is that Heddy, Sing's mother, found Jake on the ground when Solomon dropped him and raised him after Ryna, Solomon's wife, lost her mind.

Having pieced together the story, Milkman returns home and tells Pilate that she has her father's bones, not those of the white man Macon killed. Milkman and Pilate return to Shalimar to bury her father's bones, but after they do, Guitar—who has been hiding nearby—shoots her. The novel ends on an image of flight, as Milkman jumps in attack from the ridge "into the killing arms of his brother [Guitar]."

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Epigraph

The purpose of an epigraph, or inscription at the beginning of a novel is to introduce the major themes of the text. The epigraph of *Song of Solomon* introduces the motifs of flying and naming as key elements to understanding the novel.

The flying motif derives from black spirituals and the gospels, and particularly from the legendary folktale of the flying African. This myth, which has been handed down from generation to generation, perpetuates the belief that black people can fly. The belief in the actual physical ability to fly is less important than the belief in flight as a metaphor for freedom, spiritual transcendence, or an escape from something unpleasant by divine means. Even after death, it is believed that the spirit flies back to the home of the ancestors of the dead person.

Milkman Dead, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, traces his family origins and discovers that his great-grandfather, Solomon, escaped from the oppression of slavery by magically flying away to his homeland. Reclaiming African myths of the past and, consequently, learning of his ancestral roots, are the keys to self-discovery for Milkman.

Equally important to Milkman's quest for identity is the recovery of his true name. Historically, Africans enslaved in America often lost their original names to slave names. Milkman's paternal grandfather's name was misrecorded, when he registered as a freedman in 1869, as Macon Dead. With the loss of its family name, the Dead family is severed from its ancestral roots. It is only when Milkman journeys to Shalimar, Virginia, from his home in Michigan, that he solves the riddle of the song of Solomon and recovers his family name.

"Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone, Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home," the children sing.

The song mythologizes and keeps Milkman's family history alive. With the recovery of his family name, Milkman redeems the history of his people that has been lost by an intentional erasure of African American culture at the hands of slavery.

Chapter 1

New Characters:

Robert Smith: life insurance agent and member of the Seven Days; he attempts to fly

Dr. Foster: father of Ruth Dead, and the only colored doctor in the city. "Not Doctor" street is named after him. Died in 1921

Ruth Dead: Milkman Dead's mother; Macon's wife, and the "first colored expectant mother" to give birth at Mercy Hospital

First Corinthians: Milkman's older sister by 13 years

Magdalene (Lena): Milkman's oldest sister by 14 years

Pilate Dead: Milkman's aunt and "spiritual mother." Macon's sister. The mother of Reba and grandmother of Hagar. Pilate sings the blues song about "Sugarman" in the first chapter

Freddy: one of the Dead family tenants, a janitor. He gives Milkman his nickname. Identified as the "gold-toothed man"

Midwife: character who delivers Macon Dead I's daughter, Pilate. Later identified as Circe

The Nurse: white nurse who gives orders at the scene of Robert Smith's suicidal flight

Mrs. Bains: identified as "the stout woman." Grandmother of Guitar Bains

Cency: Guitar Bains' mother and Mrs. Bains' daughter

Guitar Bains: Milkman's best friend and future member of the Seven Days. Referred to only as the "cat-eyed boy" in the first chapter

Macon "Milkman" Dead: the protagonist of the novel, and the only son of Macon and Ruth Dead; technically, he is named Macon Dead III

Macon Dead II: Milkman's father and Ruth's husband

Macon Dead I: Macon Dead II's father and Milkman's grandfather

Henry Porter: Macon Dead's tenant and member of the Seven Days. Attempts to commit suicide in the first chapter

Reba Dead: Illegitimate daughter of Pilate Dead and mother of Hagar; Milkman's first cousin

Hagar Dead: daughter of Reba, granddaughter of Pilate, and cousin of Milkman Dead

Summary

This chapter tells of the circumstances surrounding Milkman Dead's birth in 1931 in an unidentified, racially divided city in Michigan. The day before Milkman's birth, a crowd gathers on the street to watch Robert Smith jump from the hospital roof. His flying leap is accompanied by the singing of Pilate Dead.

Just as the singer predicts, a pregnant Ruth Dead experiences labor pains upon seeing Smith's suicidal flight. The next day, Ruth is the first "colored" woman to give birth at the hospital. Pilate nurtures and sings to the newborn Milkman until her brother Macon banishes her from the Dead home.

The entire Dead family lives "under the frozen heat of (their father's) glance." Ruth sustains herself by gazing at a watermark on the dining room table that marks the spot where a Waterford Bowl imported from England held flower arrangements when she was a girl. She is especially soothed by nursing Milkman, until the too-old child and mother are caught in the act by the probing eyes of Freddy.

Macon refuses to call his son by the nickname, Milkman. When upset, Macon fondles the keys to the properties he owns. The properties give the greedy landlord his only sense of self-worth. Macon is emotionally and sexually estranged from Ruth. Although, they continue to live together in her father's house, they are extremely bitter toward each other.

Macon forbids Milkman to visit Pilate, whom Macon had cared for when he was a boy. However, at the end of the chapter, Macon wanders to Pilate's house on a whim.

Pilate, who was born without a navel and has her name inscribed inside an earring that she always wears, is singing with her family when Macon arrives in her yard. Macon is hypnotized by their voices.

Analysis

The opening scene establishes many important themes of the novel. The flight metaphor, which begins and ends the novel, is accompanied by Pilate's blues song about flying. The singing of the song establishes a link between Sugarman and Solomon, Milkman's great-grandfather who flies home at the end of the story.

Pilate sings to Milkman when he is a child, and Macon is drawn to Pilate's singing at the end of the chapter. Singing brings people together; it is a metaphor for community and memory. Pilate's singing causes Macon to reminisce about his past, recalling the "fields, and wild turkey and calico" of his rural Southern youth.

Metaphors of singing and flying surround Milkman's birth. It is possible for Ruth Dead to be "the first colored expectant mother" to give birth at Mercy Hospital because of Robert Smith's flight. Flying is a metaphor for the impossible becoming possible. Milkman is filled with imagination and hopefulness until he learns that humans can't fly.

One of the most important conflicts in the chapter is the conflict of character-against-character. Macon is in conflict with most of the characters in *Song of Solomon*. However, his most significant opponent is Pilate. Macon, "a propertied Negro" who exploits poor blacks, is embarrassed by his sister, who he refers to as "a raggedy (wine) bootlegger." Once they had been very close, but now Macon fears her negative influence on his family. As characters, Macon symbolizes money, property or society while Pilate symbolizes myth, spiritual freedom, family roots, or nature. This creates a nature vs. society conflict. Pilate combines nature (she smells like a forest, and chews pine needles) and the miraculous (she has no navel).

Macon is symbolized by a set of keys which are a metaphor for property. Mrs. Bains says of Macon: "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see," when Macon denies her an extension of time to pay her rent. Mrs. Bains is being critical of Macon's lack of sympathy for poor blacks. Meanwhile, Macon boasts about his showy house and car, and dresses up his family to exhibit them like expensive possessions. Macon has forgotten about his community. He has acquired the values of the most mean-spirited of white capitalists. Macon forbids Milkman to visit Pilate because Macon wants Milkman to choose his material world over Pilate's natural one.

The naming motif is prevalent throughout the first chapter. After her father is killed, Pilate has her name encased in an earring so she will never be separated from it. Macon Dead chooses the name Pilate because the illiterate man thinks the word "looks like a tree" protecting a "row of smaller trees." The tree rooted in the ground by reaching toward the sky is a symbol of the cosmos—both earth and sky united in a harmonious whole.

The Dead family, whose name has been erased by a drunken, white, Yankee soldier, has lost touch not only with its original name, but as a result, its heritage. Macon, shamed by Milkman's nickname and aware of the history of misnaming and lost names that are the legacy of slaves, thinks: "Surely...some ancestor...had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness."

It is through a refusal to adopt the official names of the white community that the black community forges a history. Names such as "Not Doctor" street, and "No Mercy" hospital recall a meaning and therefore a past for the black community. Rather than using official names that have no meaning to them, the black community keeps their history alive through naming. Therefore, they can draw on these names to help recall their history

in the present and in the future.

The first chapter abounds with imagery. When Ruth nurses a too-old Milkman, she envisions that “his lips were pulling from her a thread of light,” (metaphor) as if she were “spinning gold.” (metaphor)

The author uses significant details and sensual descriptions to portray her characters. For example, Guitar is the “cat-eyed boy.” Freddy is the “gold-toothed man.” Ruth Dead is the “rose-petal lady,” and Pilate Dead is the “singing woman.” Pilate’s “signature” descriptions also include her earring, her lack of a navel, and her “moving lips.” In Chapter 1, her mouth is described as “chew(ing) pine needles,” and her lips are “alive with small movements.” These images will recur throughout the novel.

Hyperbole, or exaggeration for the sake of emphasis, is used when Mrs. Bains is described as being able “to move the earth” because of her imposing size.

There is much color imagery in the first chapter. Robert Smith’s “wide blue silk wings” contrast with Ruth’s “red velvet rose petals.”

Ruth’s watermark on the Dead’s dining room table is used as an extended metaphor when it is described as “a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured (Ruth) that the world was still there....”

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

New Character:

Mary: the barmaid and part-time owner of a bar in the Blood Bank, where Milkman and Guitar often go to drink

Summary

Macon Dead’s Sunday afternoon ritual is to show off his success by driving his well-heeled family across town to the wealthy, white neighborhoods in his expensive automobile. On these trips, Dead investigates new real estate markets. The year is 1936, and Macon contemplates the idea of an all-black vacation community in Honoré, similar to the summer resorts for white people.

A young Milkman is forced to sit backwards in the car in order to be able to see out the window. No one gets pleasure from the ride except Lena and Corinthians who pretend they’re fairy princesses being driven by a prince. When Milkman has to relieve himself in the woods, Lena is elected to go with him. While relieving himself, Milkman accidentally sprays Lena with urine.

The black people who see the car pass by make fun of the severe and passionless Dead family, which rides joylessly in its “hearse” without exhibiting any “real lived life” in the car.

When Milkman is 12 years old, his friend Guitar takes him to his Aunt Pilate’s house for the first time. There, Milkman learns that the image of Pilate portrayed by his father is untrue; she is neither dirty nor drunk. Instead, Milkman is entranced by this remarkable woman and the sights, sounds, and smells of the mythic Pilate’s world. The atmosphere and Milkman’s conversations with Pilate arouse deep feelings in him. Pilate tells Milkman about his grandfather’s death at the hands of white men. Milkman meets Pilate’s daughter, Reba, who repeatedly wins prizes without even trying and Pilate’s granddaughter Hagar, with whom he falls helplessly in love. Milkman believes that he is completely happy for the first time in his life.

When Macon finds out that Milkman has been at Pilate’s, he scolds him, but he grows sentimental. Macon tells Milkman stories of his Pennsylvania childhood, farming side-by-side with his father on the land they

called “Lincoln’s Heaven.” Macon explains how his father, Macon Dead I, got his name from a drunken, white Yankee when he registered as a freedman in 1869. His light-skinned mother, who looked white, told Macon I to keep his new name to wipe out the past. Macon Jr. confirms Pilate’s story of how their father was killed. In spite of Macon’s fond remembrances of his childhood, when he carried his baby sister Pilate to another farm in his arms every morning, Macon forbids Milkman’s return to Pilate’s house. Instead, Macon gives Milkman a job as Macon’s assistant.

Analysis

Macon Dead lacks any joy in his life, even when driving his big, flashy car. The townpeople refer to it as a “hearse” because Macon Dead is characterized as “life denying.” Macon Dead’s Sunday trips are both a way to display his wealth and to seek new real estate markets. Embracing the worst values of white middle-class capitalism, Macon worships a “god” of money and material possessions. By capitalizing on the new black bourgeoisie and the rise of land ownership among them, Macon is exploiting his own people. Additionally, by contemplating the creation of a separate black community, Macon is indirectly sanctioning segregation. His Sunday drives, which for another family might be pleasurable family outings are, instead, “too important to enjoy.”

In the traditional patriarchal or male-headed family, men, work outside the home, while the female sphere is the home, and not the world outside. While Macon functions in the public realm—the world outside is his reality—Ruth functions in the private realm.

Much evidence was given in the first chapter to reveal that Ruth is not very successful at domestic tasks. She cannot cook and she is not a traditional nurturing mother-figure. Therefore, Ruth doesn’t perceive her family members as subjects, but as objects of her domestic world which she is proud to show off: she wants to display her family.

The flying motif reappears in Chapter 2, and continues to structure the novel and to be associated with Milkman. On the Sunday drives, Milkman is forced to look through the back window of the car to see, and he feels like he is “flying blind.” Even as a child, Milkman is conscious of his lack of an identity: “not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him.”

Milkman’s urinating on Lena, although unintentional, is a premonition of things to come. Urinating functions as a metaphor, indicating that Milkman will “piss on” his sisters, and all women, in the future.

Contrasted to the patriarchal household of Macon Dead is the matriarchal, or woman-headed, household of Pilate Dead. The blackberry-lipped Pilate defies female stereotypes. She is comfortable in the domestic realm: she makes a perfect soft-boiled egg—a female fertility symbol—but unlike most women in 1943, she is self-supporting. Pilate earns her living by making wine (a symbol of youth and eternal life). Unlike Macon, however, Pilate has no interest in money or in accumulating possessions. Pilate disrupts female norms by dressing in men’s shoes and being almost as tall as Milkman’s father. She looks like a big, black tree (metaphor), and Milkman resolves “that what with the earring, the orange, and the angled black cloth (of her dress), nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her.”

Being associated with Pilate gives Milkman a sense of pride in his family name for the first time. Ruth may be Milkman’s birth mother, but Pilate is his spiritual mother, the “pilot” who will guide him on his journey to self-discovery. The earthy, but mythic, Pilate’s house is filled with a narcotic “piny-winy” smell and streaming sunlight. Her speech is organic, a stream-of-consciousness flow that doesn’t proceed in the normal, linear way. She tells the time of day by citing the sun’s position in the sky. Her sense of time is cyclical. It is not the traditional, linear clock-time, it corresponds to the life cycle and seasons.

Pilate embraces both the earthy symbols of nature—her smell is the smell of fermenting fruit—and myth. Guitar and Milkman’s burning question when they arrive at Pilate’s house is “Do you have a navel?” In their minds, her status rises considerably with her admission that she doesn’t.

Pilate defamiliarizes or shows language and color in a new and unfamiliar way. When Guitar greets her with “Hi,” she says, “What kind of word is that?” She explains that each color has many variations. Black can appear silky or woolly; green can be like a grasshopper or a cucumber. In this way, she challenges the preconceived notions, the “taken-for-grantedness” of daily existence.

Compared to the practical Macon who is fixed in a material reality, Pilate is an idealist who believes that reality is whatever one believes. As an example, she cites the story of the man who was standing in his kitchen but was certain he was actually falling off a cliff. Pilate, believing the man’s story because it is what is real to him, offers to keep him from falling. As soon as Pilate lets go of the man, he drops to the floor dead. For Pilate, “What you believe, is what is real.”

When Milkman arrives home from Pilate’s house, Macon scolds him. However, Macon becomes reflective about a past he usually never recalls because Macon has no use for his origins. Macon tells Milkman about his rural Southern youth, when family mattered to him. Macon Dead I and II shared a strong father-and-son bond, working the farmland at “Lincoln’s Heaven.” Macon recalls the “tender, sweet, juicy” taste of turkey, his affection for the farmyard animals, fruit trees, and “the prettiest mountain” Macon ever saw (nature imagery). This perspective establishes a now-severed bond that Macon Jr. once had with nature before he lost his sense of roots, family, and his Southern values.

It is because Milkman has gone to Pilate’s that Macon is flooded with memory; Pilate is a link to the past. When Macon reminisces about his father, Milkman notices the change in his tone of voice; it is “less hard” and sounds more “comfortable” and “Southern.”

Family history and values are associated with the South; the North is symbolic of the corruption of these values.

Although Macon Dead I died protecting the property he loved, Macon Jr. hasn’t learned the lesson of nurturing the land from his father. Instead, Macon has twisted his father’s values. Macon is merely a heartless slumlord, with no regard for the land. Rather than teach Milkman the lessons of his upbringing (respect and love for the land), Macon advises his son to “own things....Then you’ll own yourself and other people, too.”

Macon’s concept of land values is not only a result of greed it is also an act of self-protection. Money protects him against racism because he can insulate himself.

After telling Milkman the story of his father’s misnaming, Macon tells Milkman that Macon’s mother’s skin was light-colored: “Me and Pilate don’t take nothing after her. If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She looks just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans.”

Macon’s identification with Africa, like his earlier identification with the South, is indicative of those things from his past which he has lost in the refashioning of himself into a petty-minded capitalist.

Men’s names in the novel often describe a function, a wish, or a memory. Guitar’s name describes a wish. He doesn’t play guitar, but when he “was real little...(he) wanted to....”

Pilate’s household abounds with much nature and color imagery:

About Pilate:

“Her hair was wrapped in black too, and from a distance, all they could really see beneath her face was the bright orange she was peeling.” “They didn’t want an egg, but they did want to be with her, to go inside the wine house with this lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall, black tree.” “Her voice made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other.” “Her lips moved as she played an orange seed around in her mouth. Only after the eggs were split open, revealing moist reddish yellow centers did she return to her story.”

About Reba and Pilate:

“Her hands were stained with blackberry juice, and when she wiped her tears she streaked the purple from her nose to her cheekbone.” “Mama can go for months without food. Like a lizard.” “With the quickness of birds, the heads of Pilate and Reba shot up.”

Macon tells Milkman a fable or allegory about a snake, using the animal as a metaphor for Pilate.

Characters continued to be described by one or two characteristics: because of his imposing size Macon Dead is described by Milkman as “Bigger even than the house they lived in.” Ruth is associated with the flowers she cultivates: rhododendron, dahlias, geraniums, and imperial tulips. Corinthians and Lena Dead are described by their pale eyes and even paler skin. Corinthians’ hair is “lightweight...the color of wet sand.” Rather than being directly told that the girls have features that correspond to a white standard of beauty, these sparse characteristics allude to or hint at this information.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Feather: he is the pool hall owner in the crime-riddled section of town called the Blood Bank

Railroad Tommy: one of two owners of Tommy’s Barbershop on Tenth Street. He is a member of the Seven Days

Hospital Tommy: one of two owners of Tommy’s Barbershop and a member of the Seven Days

Anna Djvorak: the Hungarian woman who credits Dr. Foster with saving her son’s life in 1903. Ruth Dead comes to her granddaughter’s wedding

Father Padrew: the Catholic priest who presides over Mrs. Djvorak’s granddaughter’s marriage, and who gives communion to Ruth Dead

Empire State: he is a Seven Days member who kills a white boy in a school yard after the historic figure Emmett Till is lynched

Emmett Till: historic figure; a 14-year-old black boy who is lynched by whites after whistling at a white woman in Mississippi in 1955

Summary

Milkman continues to form an identity separate from Macon, but he is kicked out of Feather’s pool hall because Macon is his father. Railroad Tommy, one of the barbershop owners, lectures Milkman and Guitar about all the things they will never have or experience because they are black men.

When Milkman is 14, he discovers that one of his legs is shorter than the other. This imperfection assures Milkman that he could never emulate his father. Because of his limp, Milkman relates to President Franklin Roosevelt, who had polio.

Chapter 3 begins in 1934 and ends in 1955. In 1943, in the midst of World War Two, Milkman is 22 years old. He has been dating Hagar and other girls for six years. Because of his relationships with the opposite sex, he sees his mother Ruth in a new light. Rather than just being the woman who cared for him, Milkman sees the smallness and limits of his mother's pathetic world.

One day, Macon and Ruth's antagonistic relationship explodes. Ruth tells a self-deprecating story which enrages Macon when she ends it by saying she is "her daddy's daughter." Milkman defends her by pulling Macon off her and threatening Macon. Milkman is both ashamed and exhilarated by his action, but not one family member shows gratitude for his good deed. Confused, Milkman reflects on his identity and his place in the world.

Macon explains the reasons behind his actions to Milkman. In spite of Milkman's resistance, he is forced to hear Macon's version of the history of Ruth and Macon's relationship. Macon tells Milkman that his maternal grandfather was a racist snob and that he and Ruth considered Macon a "hick" from the South. They flaunted their upper middle-class Northern upbringing in Macon's face. Macon severed all sexual relations with Ruth, when in 1921, at the time of Dr. Foster's death, Macon discovered Ruth lying naked next to the dead man with his fingers in her mouth.

Unable to bear Macon's "truths," Milkman leaves the house and searches for Guitar, to get his best friend's sympathy and "read" on everything Milkman has just been burdened with. As he walks along the street, the incestuous image of his mother lying with her own father triggers a deeply buried memory of Ruth nursing Milkman. Gradually, the vague, piecemeal memory comes more sharply into focus. Ashamed and repulsed by his recollection, Milkman questions his self-worth and the value of his life. While he is walking he puzzles over an enormous flow of people passing him in the opposite direction at a time in the evening when the streets are usually empty.

Milkman finds Guitar at Tommy's Barbershop, where a group of men are gathered, listening to a radio report about the lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi. Guitar is incensed by the Till tragedy, but Milkman, lacking any degree of social consciousness, is indifferent to it. At the end of the chapter, Milkman tells Guitar about his defense of Ruth and the origin of his family name. Guitar tells Milkman he can empathize with him. Guitar makes an analogy between Milkman's act and Guitar's accidental killing of a doe on a hunting trip, hoping it will help elucidate why Milkman acted as he did.

Analysis

As the chapter opens, Railroad Tommy uses the rhythmic tone of the preacher and the repetitious phrasing of poetry to lecture Milkman and Guitar about all that will be denied them because of racism. The phrase "You (are) not going to have...." takes on a musical quality as it is repeated over and over again to give the effect of a sermon. The narrator uses both repetition and cataloguing, or listing, to emphasize all the things Milkman and Guitar will be denied over the course of their lives because of their race.

Milkman, however, is having difficulty enough dealing with the present, let alone the future. The reference to Milkman's different leg lengths is referred to as a "deformity" that is "mostly in his mind." Milkman's preoccupation with his shorter leg is typical of a self-conscious adolescent, but it is also a metaphor for Milkman's low self-esteem and a moral deficiency in Milkman's character.

Milkman is gradually establishing a separate identity from his father "...he (Milkman) differed from him (Macon) as much as he dared. Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a mustache. Macon wore

bow-ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands....”

Milkman feels “secretly connected” to President Roosevelt (FDR), in spite of the fact that President Truman “had set up a Committee on Civil Rights.” (These historical allusions ground the fictitious novel in a historic reality.)

Milkman’s preference for FDR emphasizes his self-interest. In spite of the fact that the people in the black community were “raving about Truman,” Milkman’s preferences are solely personally motivated; he has no race consciousness.

The narrator exhibits Milkman’s moral deficiency and alienation from his community in two ways. First, the crowd, agitated by the murder of Till, symbolically walks in the opposite direction from Milkman. Second, when Guitar makes an analogy between Milkman and Till, Milkman says, “Yeah, well, fuck Till. I’m the one in trouble.”

Since Dr. Foster’s death, Ruth is emotionally bereft. Her only companions are goldfish, rhododendron, and other flowers—things that cannot hurt her as her father did when he abandoned her by dying. Ruth’s only communication with Macon is based on self-humiliation. When Milkman is moved to defend his mother, Ruth, as usual, plays the role of the “honest buffoon” in order to provoke her husband. Ultimately, Macon berates her by telling her, “You make a fool of yourself.”

After Macon raises his fist to Ruth, Milkman tells him, “You touch her one more time, and I’ll kill you.” With Milkman’s bravado comes “infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities,” neither of which Milkman is mature enough to accept. At the age of 22, Milkman is still in a state of infantilism; that is, he is still a child who has not developed into a self-sufficient adult. In spite of this, no child should have to hear the illicit and intimate details of his or her parents’ personal relationship.

Milkman’s relationship with his sisters is not an interactive one. When he looks at their eyes after his brief “triumph” over his father, “they returned him a look of hatred so fresh, so new, it startled him.” All women are synonymous to Milkman. He admits he cannot “distinguish” his sisters “(or their roles) from his mother.” Like his father, Milkman sees all women as ancillary to “his privileged maleness.”

Milkman’s sisters have no illusion that he is defending his mother because he is acting “generous” or “wide-spirited.” Milkman admits to himself that his mother is someone “whom he almost never thought about.” Ruth is a non-person to Milkman, and when Milkman looks at his own reflection in his bedroom mirror, he becomes aware of his own deficiencies: his image lacks “coherence, the coming together of the features into a total self.”

Macon tells Milkman that Dr. Foster—always class-conscious—despised his own people, referring to the “Negroes in town” as “cannibals,” and adhering to a belief in the superiority of light-skinned “Negroes.” The refined Dr. Foster’s derisive treatment of the Southern “hick” who owns property in “Shacktown” incenses Macon, who feels he is made to feel worthless because of his social status.

The combination of Macon’s story and Milkman’s recollection of his mother’s illicit nursing of him disrupts his sense of identity and shatters his emotional bond with his mother. “His mother had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near—be it her father or her son.”

Therefore, Milkman’s self-worth is at its lowest ebb: “Milkman wondered if there was anyone in the world who liked him. Liked him for himself alone.”

When Milkman is finally with the sympathetic Guitar, the latter tells Milkman a story about accidentally killing a doe. Guitar can empathize with Milkman's distress: Defending a vulnerable woman is similar to protecting a doe. Guitar's story reveals not only his sympathetic nature, but also his strong relationship to the earth. He is a "natural born hunter," who has an instinctive bond with the land of his Southern youth, and he retains that bond.

Guitar exhibits his wisdom by telling Milkman: "People do funny things.... Things that make us hurt one another.... Try to understand it, but if you can't, just forget it. And keep yourself strong, man."

Upset by his nickname, and thinking about names in general—and Hagar's in particular—Milkman thinks "Pilate knows. It's in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everyone else's. Bet mine's in there too."

Consequently as the chapter concludes, Milkman continues to believe that Pilate has the answers to the questions of life, including naming.

The omniscient narration used by the author allows for a wide variety of points of view and is the appropriate narration for oral storytelling, which is the product of not one but many voices. The omniscient narration facilitates the interweaving of past and present, history and myth, fables and fairy tales, and song to create a rich tapestry of language. Dialogue is used prominently in *Song of Solomon*, allowing characters to tell their histories in their own words. Black dialect is prevalent throughout the text, and gives an authenticity to the characters.

Some visually impressive metaphors and similes in the chapter include:

"Guitar took the opportunity offered by Feather's new target to shoot his hand out like a double-edged hatchet slamming into a tree."

"There was quite a bit of pie filling oozing around the edge of the crust in 1945. Filling that could be his.... And years later when the war was over and that pie filling had spilled over and into his very lap, land stickied his hands and weighed his stomach down into a sagging paunch, he wished he had still strangled her back in 1921." (Also a historical allusion)

Money motifs that symbolize the Foster's "black bourgeois" values include the Waterford bowl and dining room table sent from England, Mr. Foster's two-horse carriage, and his "beautiful hands."

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

New Character:

Winnie Ruth Judd: convicted murderess whom the blacks in the novel identify as an example of "white madness"

Summary

Despite being 31 years old when the chapter begins, Milkman continues to face an identity crisis. He is bored with life and realizes he has no real goals or ambitions. Contemplating what Christmas gifts to give Hagar, Milkman decides that he has lost interest in her after a 14-year relationship. Rather than buy Hagar a gift, Milkman decides to enclose cash in the "Dear John" letter he sends to her. In the impersonal letter he writes, he abruptly ends their relationship, thanks Hagar, and expresses his gratitude to her for the time they have shared. Hagar is enraged by the inclusion of the word "gratitude" in the letter and "the flat-out coldness" of the "thank you."

Along with the deteriorating relationship with his family and Hagar, Milkman's friendship with Guitar has begun to suffer. Milkman feels Guitar has changed considerably from the street roaming, party-seeking companion whom Milkman once knew and loved. In Milkman's opinion, Guitar has become morally superior, racially obsessive, and overly serious. The two friends often find themselves in heated arguments about class and race issues. Milkman begins to wonder about Guitar's secret life. Milkman often finds Guitar among the group of men that gather at Tommy's Barber Shop to discuss the issues of the day. Similar gatherings take place in the poolrooms and wherever men congregate in Southside.

Milkman has a disturbing dream, if it is, in fact, a dream. He dreams that his mother is being suffocated by a gardenful of overzealous plants. What is particularly bewildering about the dream is his smiling mother's benign reaction to the plants' vicious onslaught.

Analysis

Milkman lacks both the Christmas spirit and a sense of community spirit. Having "stretched his carefree boyhood out for 31 years," Milkman reevaluates his life. He concludes that it "was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people." Milkman's total lack of respect for Hagar is indicated, for instance, by his reference to her as a "honey pot" (metaphor), a mere receptacle for his male pleasure.

Milkman is a product of upper middle-class complacency. He not only lacks values, he lacks ambition and initiative because he has truly been a superfluous existence.

Guitar criticizes Milkman's utilization of his free time because Milkman spends 50 percent of his "brainpower thinking about a piece of ass." (metonymy) Guitar tells Milkman it "looks like everybody's going in the wrong direction but you" when Milkman admits to Guitar that he continues to go "wherever the party is." Guitar's new asceticism (he doesn't want to "party," talk about girls, or get high) bothers Milkman. Milkman admits to being bored by everything. But Milkman is particularly bothered by "the racial problems that consumed Guitar" which were "the most boring of all."

In Milkman and Guitar's heated debates, they reveal various important conflicts. There is a class conflict between rich and poor. Milkman reflects the values of the Downtown, the black property-owning bourgeoisie. Guitar represents the considerations of Southside, the ghetto where incidents of racism are not averted by a "fat wallet." The men in Southside gather in the poolrooms and Tommy's Barbershop to discuss race issues. They are the chorus—the voice of the people, the social consciousness of the community. This class difference between Southside and the Downtown is reflected in the description of Christmas ornaments in the two locations. Southside has "feeble wreaths and lights" and "tacky Yuletide streamers and bells." In comparison, the rich Downtown had lights that were "large, bright, festive and full of hope."

Milkman and Guitar also represent the conflict between North and South. Milkman's all-black beach resort of Honoré, which his father owns, is symbolic of the rich North. In contrast, Montgomery, Alabama is symbolic of the South.

The year is 1963; it is the height of the Civil Rights movement. Montgomery is particularly renowned for its stand against racism, when its African American citizens, in the celebrated Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, refused to ride on segregated buses.

Guitar criticizes Honoré, a place where he says he will only go "with a case of dynamite and a book of matches." Milkman counters that by telling Guitar that Guitar is "mad at every Negro who ain't scrubbing floor and picking cotton." Guitar criticizes Milkman's inability to live in a place like Montgomery, Alabama, saying that Milkman is "a man that can't live there" because "if things ever got tough," Milkman would "melt."

Milkman continues to be oblivious to the struggles of African-Americans. His indifferent attitude is epitomized when he is asked indirectly what year Emmett Till is killed. Milkman responds by saying, “I don’t know. I can’t remember the dates of murders I haven’t committed.”

In the course of Milkman’s discussion with Guitar, he tells Guitar of a dream he had about his mother. The plants in Ruth’s garden “surround” and “smother” her. But instead of being scared, Ruth smiles as they take away her breath “with their soft jagged lips.” This use of personification, or giving non-human things human qualities, reveals the clandestine or secret life of Ruth. Her interaction with the living things in her garden is symbolic of a profound act of communion with the earth associated with female fertility. Milkman, because he is male, is unable to comprehend this life-affirming female act of creation.

The image of Pilate’s mouth continues to identify her. When her peace and well-being are disrupted, her lips are still. When Reba is attacked by a physically abusive boyfriend, (Pilate’s) lips “didn’t start moving again until he was out of sight and running down the road.”

Another recurring image is the facial features of women reflecting a white standard of beauty. When Hagar jealously observes Milkman’s new girlfriend’s “gray eyes,” it is the impetus that triggers Hagar’s desire to kill Milkman. “The gray eyes,” and “silky copper-colored hair” of the girl reflect a white standard of beauty that the dark, African-looking Hagar is unable to compete with.

The author also uses fairy tale allusions prominently in the text. Here is how Hagar is described in the chapter: “The calculated violence of a shark (metaphor) grew in her, and like every witch (simile) that ever rode a broom straight through the night to a ceremonial infanticide as thrilled by the black wind as by the rod between her legs; like every fed-up-to-the-teeth bride (simile) who worried about the consistency of the grits she threw at her husband as well as the potency of the lye she had stirred into them; and like every queen and every courtesan (simile) who was struck by the beauty of her emerald ring as she tipped its poison into the old red wine, Hagar was energized by the details of her mission.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Moon: character who aids Guitar in preventing Hagar from killing Milkman

Preacher: head of family who took in an orphaned Pilate at age 12 when Pilate decided to search for her extended family

Pickers: migrants who Pilate lived and worked with for three years when she lived in New York State. They evicted her from their midst when they found out she had no navel

Father of Reba: Pilate’s lover on the Virginia island where she gave birth to Reba

Summary

In this chapter, Milkman conceals himself in Guitar’s room in order to avoid a spurned Hagar, who is intent on killing Milkman. Guitar continues to criticize Milkman’s selfishness, his lack of a social consciousness, and his Northern ways, (ways Guitar equates with white middle-class materialism.) But regardless of Milkman and Guitar’s striking differences, they continue to care about each other.

In spite of their closeness, each of the friends knows the other has a secret. Guitar is afraid because Milkman is indifferent toward the prospect of death, and Guitar fears for Milkman’s life, but Guitar doesn’t know what

is at the source of Milkman's indifference. Milkman has his suspicions about Guitar's covert activities and is on the verge of discovering that Guitar is a member of the Seven Days.

One early morning Milkman confronts his mother after he's followed her out to the cemetery where her father is buried. He learns his mother's version of Macon's story. Ruth tells Milkman that Macon is responsible for her father's death and that he also tried to kill Milkman before he was born. Ruth tells Milkman about his parents' estranged relationship. She denies an incestuous relationship with her father. She tells Milkman the details surrounding his birth: Pilate's magic concoction enticed Macon to impregnate Ruth. When Macon found out about the pregnancy, he attempted to abort Milkman. Pilate intervened, and gave Ruth a protective girdle to guarantee Milkman's unobstructed birth.

Ruth admits to nursing Milkman, but she tells him she also prayed for him. "What harm did I do you on my knees?" she asks him, and the question unceasingly repeats itself in Milkman's mind.

The burden of this additional family information makes Milkman feel "like a garbage pail for the actions and hatred of other people." As a result, Milkman finds himself attracted to the prospect of death because "afterward there would be no remembrance of who he was or where." Hagar breaks into Guitar's room and manages to stab Milkman in the shoulder.

When Ruth discovers Hagar's intention to kill Milkman, she goes to Pilate's house to confront Hagar. But Pilate intervenes, telling both women Milkman "wouldn't give a pile of swan shit for either one of you." A discussion about death ensues, and Pilate tells Ruth that she still communicates with her dead father. Pilate tells Ruth the history of her life. After separating from Macon, Pilate travels for 20 years. She lives with a preacher's family, with "pickers" or migrants, and with an island clan in Virginia where she gives birth to Reba. After her daughter's birth, her father's ghost appears to Pilate. He tells her to "Sing," and adds that "You just can't fly off and leave a body." Responding to his words, Pilate believes she must return to Pennsylvania to bury the bones of the man she and Macon murdered.

Analysis

Chapter 5 continues to compare and contrast Milkman and Guitar's characters. They are divided along class lines—Milkman is rich; Guitar is poor. They disagree on race issues: Milkman is indifferent or "bored" with race issues; Guitar is developing a "black power" mentality, similar to Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam with its radical solutions to racism and belief in black separatism. They are vehement about their distaste for the other's preferred geographic locale: Milkman stereotypes the South as an unenlightened, poor, and backward community; Guitar stereotypes the North as an immoral, racist version of Babylon.

In this chapter, when Guitar challenges Milkman's beliefs, rather than attack him in his usual humorless, serious manner, Guitar uses what appears to be "jive-talk" or bantering to get his points across to Milkman. Guitar's playful, clever dialogue is highly ironic, i.e., its meaning is the opposite of what Guitar actually says. For example, Guitar tells Milkman, "I live in the North now. So the first question comes to mind is North of what? Why, north of South. So North exists because South does. But does that mean North is different than South? No way! South is just south of North...."

In another example of irony, Guitar says to Milkman, "Black? White? Don't tell me you're one of those racial Negroes? Who said anything about black people. This is just a geography lesson."

As the chapter progresses, Milkman's sense of self continues to deteriorate. Family history in the form of oral history (or history by word-of-mouth) is an important way in many cultures, including African American culture, that the past is transmitted from generation to generation. Unfortunately for Milkman his immediate family history is not only unbearably painful, it also exposes him to conflicting versions of this history and he cannot determine which version is true. This history tells Milkman nothing about the values of his African

American heritage. Milkman “wanted to escape what he knew, escape the implications of what he had been told.”

Chapter 5 contrasts not only Milkman and Guitar, it also portrays Ruth and Pilate in a character-against-character conflict.

Ruth grew up in “a great big house” but was “pressed...into a small package,” first by her father and then by her husband. Ruth is a symbol of the white plantation owner’s genteel wife, commonly referred to in literary criticism as “the ideal Southern white lady.” In spite of her Northern upper middle-class upbringing, she is representative of the oppressed Southern white woman of history. This woman’s function is to be a well-dressed mannequin, a decoration for the household, a pretty possession. Even as a child, Ruth is treated as a pretty object. She has no friends, she says, “only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings.”

In contrast, Pilate does not live in a “great big house.” Until she comes to Michigan, she lives, briefly, in a cave, on an island, and out in nature. Unlike Ruth, who has stayed in one place her entire life, Pilate travels extensively for 20 years and the landscape is her university.

While Ruth sees herself as Milkman’s “home,” it is not a home where the heart is. It is more like a museum that houses a “beautiful toy.” Milkman is a symbol, and Ruth perceives his death “as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to.” Her desire for physical pleasure is displaced onto her son.

The narrator incorporates a list of opposites to contrast Ruth and Pilate. Ruth is described as “lemon-skinned.” Pilate is described as black as night. Ruth is “corseted.” Pilate is “buck naked” underneath her dress. Ruth is well-read and ill-traveled. Pilate reads only a fourth grade geography book, but she collects a rock from every state she’s been to. Ruth needs money and exquisite possessions to live. Pilate is indifferent to both money and things. But in spite of their differences, the women share a ground of common understanding because of their concern for Milkman and their bonds with their dead fathers.

Pilate tells the story of her past, and her oral history helps to piece together the puzzle of the Dead family’s past. When Pilate tells her story, she reveals that she was “cut off from people early.” She “birthed” herself, and was discriminated against because she lacked a navel. People, being characteristically fearful of what is different, ostracized Pilate. When Pilate realized that all women didn’t lack navels, she asked “What’s it for?” “It’s for...it’s for people who were born natural,” she was told. So, Pilate lived from place to place, on the fringes of society. She never committed herself to a community or a man for any substantial length of time because it was inevitable that her lack of a navel would be discovered. This resulted in her extreme isolation, but this isolation gave her an opportunity to become independent, and to think for herself.

Ultimately, Pilate rejected the way the “civilized” world lived, and constructed her own values based upon what made her happy, what she needed “to know to stay alive,” and “what is true in the world.” Armed with an instinctively caring and moral nature, Pilate “acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships.”

Pilate is a natural healer and conjure woman. Evidence of her mythological stature includes the fact that she “birthed” herself, that she has no navel, and that she cast a spell over Macon to conjure him to desire Ruth. Then Pilate put a juju doll with “a round red circle painted on its belly” in Macon’s office and gave Ruth a protective girdle to safeguard Milkman’s birth.

Pilate exhibits the wisdom of a sage and the fortune-telling powers of a seer: “Ain’t nothin’ goin to kill him (Milkman) but his own ignorance, and won’t no woman ever kill him. What’s likelier is that it’ll be a woman save his life.”

This chapter contains many figures of speech; the following are a few examples:

“Fear lay like a pair of crossed paws on his chest.” (simile)

“Ain’t nobody giving up no head.” (pun)

“My name is Macon. I’m already Dead.” (pun)

Hagar’s obsessive love of Milkman is described by Ruth:

“She had no self left. She (Ruth) was not looking at a person but an impulse, a cell, a red corpuscle that neither knows nor understands why it is driven to spend its whole life in one pursuit: swimming up a dark tunnel toward the muscle of a heart or an eye’s nerve end that it both nourished and fed from.” (metaphors)

Pilate’s mouth continues to be characterized; in this chapter it is described as “busy lips.”

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Guitar tries to make Milkman take responsibility for Hagar’s anguished state of being after Milkman has severed their relationship. Milkman objects to Guitar’s constant criticism of him and Guitar’s new conservative ways. Guitar no longer wants to party or have fun. Guitar finally reveals the reason behind his behavior. He tells Milkman about his membership in the Seven Days society, formed in 1920. The organization has its own code of justice because the white laws and courts don’t protect the black community. In the event that an innocent black is victimized, and the criminal is not brought to justice, the Days seek retribution. An innocent white will be killed on the same day of the week as the black person. Each of the seven members has been assigned a day of the week, and the randomly selected victim must be killed in a similar way to the method of death experienced by the black. Guitar’s assigned day is Sunday. When Milkman objects to the Days’ killing of people, citing its lack of morality, Guitar tells him, “We’re not killing people,” we’re “killing white people.” Guitar does not see the killings as an act against humanity. He sees it as an abstraction, a mathematical equation in order “to keep the ratio (of whites to blacks) the same.” “There’s too much wrong with it,” Milkman says, and compares Guitar to Malcolm X.

Analysis

Milkman is unable to accept responsibility for his mistreatment of Hagar. Ever since he was initiated into sex, he has used women to sexually gratify himself and has never thought of them as anything but sex objects.

In Guitar’s racist view, he categorically identifies all whites as unnatural, as “an evil force.” While Milkman lacks a social consciousness, he can still recognize that what Guitar is doing is abominable and morally wrong. When Guitar says “There are no innocent white people,” that every one of them “is a potential nigger-killer,” he is making a judgment solely on skin color. “The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes,” he tells Milkman.

Milkman says, “I can’t see how it (the retributive killing) helps anybody.” Guitar talks about abstractions instead of the concrete act of murdering human beings. Guitar rationalizes his actions by citing the black man’s poverty, how he has no money and no court of his own to affect the balance of things. Milkman, who has never lacked money is, not as sympathetic to this as Guitar. Milkman is afraid of Guitar’s lack of morality, and tells Guitar, “if you do it enough, you can do it to anybody.”

Milkman suggests Guitar change his name to Guitar X, after Malcolm X, to replace his slave name. But Guitar shows no interest in replacing his slave name. He tells Milkman that “Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master’s name and “I’m all of that.” His name is part of his history. The name Bains contributes to his rage, and his rage allows him to act without conscience.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Chapter 7 continues the theme of Milkman’s search for self. Milkman concludes that he needs distance from his family, and “bit” by the “wandering bug,” he makes plans to leave. Macon tries to detain him, telling Milkman “Money is freedom.”

When Milkman lets slip that Pilate has a green sack in her house with her “inheritance” in it, Macon concludes it’s the long-lost gold that he and Pilate discovered in a cave after their father died when Macon was 16 years old. Macon relays the story of how he and Pilate were homeless after their father was killed. Macon buried his father in a shallow grave, and Circe, the midwife, took them into her white slavemaster’s house, where she hid them.

Children of nature, Macon and Pilate suffered greatly, cooped up in a room, eating “the soft, bland food” of white people. While there, Pilate had her father’s hand-written piece of paper with her name written on it put into her mother’s brass snuff box. A blacksmith fashioned it into the earring Pilate always wears.

Fearful of being discovered, the children return to nature and ultimately are led to a cave by the ghost of their father. While in the cave, Macon kills a threatening-looking white man, and they discover gold. Pilate forbids Macon from taking the gold because it is morally wrong. But “life, safety, and luxury fanned out before (Macon) like the tailspread of a peacock.” The once loving brother and sister suffer a rift over the gold. Macon continues to hold a grudge into the present. He tells Milkman the gold must be in the green sack in Pilate’s house. The “snake” has been in possession of the gold the whole time! Macon tells Milkman if he steals the gold from Pilate, Macon will give him half of it.

Analysis

The circumstances surrounding Milkman’s birth and his desire for travel recalls the mythological journey of the classical hero in Greek and other literature. The mythological hero experiences a miraculous birth, is initiated into manhood, separates from his family by taking a long journey, and then returns to share his new-found knowledge and take his place in the community.

Paramount in importance to this chapter is the lengths to which the Dead men will go for the sake of money without concerning themselves with the moral consequences. Macon is willing to direct his son to steal from his own sister. “Money is...the only real freedom there is,” he tells Milkman.

In the chapter, Milkman complains that he feels “used” by everyone, as they make him “the subject of their dreams of wealth, of love, or martyrdom.” But Milkman is a user, too. He uses Hagar and “throws her away”; he uses the place or sanctuary that is Pilate’s home, the only place he has ever really felt complete, as the scene of thievery and betrayal. Milkman repays Pilate’s love with \neg disloyalty and indifference. And his own father puts Milkman up to it.

Once Macon appreciated the land; the earth taught him how to live. He wanted to coexist with it, not own it. When Macon is with Pilate after their father’s death both children couldn’t bear being shut off from nature. Pilate cried for “her own cherries, from her own cherry tree.” “At night they slept in a haystack, so grateful for open air even the field mice and the ticks were welcome bedmates.” They knew the land “intimately,” and

Macon's instinct was to lead them to Virginia, "where Macon believed they had people." The "born-wild" Pilate and the 16-year-old Macon, who had worked on a farm since he was young, defined themselves and their values by their relationship with Nature.

When the ghost of Macon Dead I, their father, appears both of them are able to see him because they both are in sync with the cosmos. Later in life, only Pilate will be able to see her father; Macon will lose his gift of "sight."

The following example of nature imagery appears in this chapter:

"The sun was blazing down, the air was sweet, but every leaf that the wind lifted, every rustle of a pheasant hen in a clump of ryegrass, sent needles of fear through their veins. The cardinals, the gray squirrels, the garden snakes, the butterflies, the ground hogs and rabbits—all the affectionate things that had peopled their lives ever since they were born became ominous signs of a presence that was searching for them, following them. Even the river's babbling sounded like the call of a liquid throat waiting, just waiting for them."

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Guitar needs money for explosives to avenge the death of "four little colored girls" who have been "blown out of a church." Milkman offers Guitar one-third of the gold, if Guitar will help Milkman steal it. While discussing a plan of action, Guitar is ruthless in his conversation with Milkman. Guitar says he will "knock off" Milkman's relatives if it's necessary. "What you doin' with a heart anyway?" he asks Milkman.

Meanwhile, Milkman is preoccupied with the thought that Guitar may have already murdered for his vigilante organization. In spite of Milkman's moral opposition to the Seven Days, he is mesmerized by the prospect of murder as something "exotic." Milkman wonders how it must feel; he wonders how it would change a person. He is impressed "with the seriousness and the dread of the work of the Days," the fear they must inspire.

Milkman is giddy with the romance of him and Guitar "taking risks" again like when they were young "swashbucklers." Milkman associates the stealing of the gold with the "old times" when they "swaggered, haunched, leaned, straddled, ran all over town trying to pick fights or at least scare somebody...." As they discuss the theft, they see a peacock weighted down by the "jewelry" of its plumage. The image triggers talk of what they will buy with the gold once they collect it. As they approach Pilate's house on the night of the theft, Milkman and Guitar are immune to the sweet smell of the night air. They can only inhale the smell of money. Pilate observes the two men entering her house and is unable to fathom why they'd want a green sack filled with a dead man's bones.

Analysis

Milkman's sense of self continues to be unstable. While he desperately wants the mobility attaining the gold can give him, he finds it hard to make decisions not only about the gold but in life. To act, in general, is difficult for Milkman. He admits that he is unable to lead anything but a frivolous, lighthearted life because he is overburdened with his family's secrets. However, he is always quick to distribute blame to someone else for his condition.

When Guitar tells him "You got a life? Live it!" he jars Milkman into believing if he steals the gold, his self-worth will rise. Guitar's words make Milkman's Jack in the Beanstalk fantasy "into an act, an important, real and daring thing to do." (fairy tale allusion)

Milkman envisions himself after stealing the gold as “a self that could join the chorus at Railroad Tommy’s with more than laughter.” Milkman still believes that the way a man impresses another man is to show he can rule people by fear. Sharing this act with Guitar, Milkman believes, will also allow him to regain the irresponsibility and carefree feeling he experienced when he and Guitar used to terrorize the neighborhood when Milkman was 12 years old.

But Guitar has irrevocably changed from the street-roaming youngster, and subsequently, the free-thinking, caring adult he used to be. He not only makes judgments based solely on skin color, but he is gender-biased, as well. He thinks he can outfox and outslug Pilate, Reba, and Hagar because they are women. He also shows no regard for Milkman’s hesitancy to want to cause bodily harm to his relatives when the two men attempt to take the gold from Pilate’s house.

Two symbols stand out in Chapter 8. The pure white peacock is a metaphor for both material possessions and “emotional baggage.” While the theme of flight continues to structure the text, it is always flight of an unsuccessful nature. When Milkman shows “unrestrained joy” at the precarious flight of the peacock, Guitar tells him that the bird has “too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.” Guitar may give Milkman this advice, but he doesn’t seem to know that there are other forms of vanity besides material possessions, the baggage of vengeance, for example, that can weigh a body down.

The second symbol is a sensory impression: the “sweetish smell” of “crystalized ginger” as it drifts to the shore on the air. The presence of this smell in the industrialized city with its polluted lake and air which kills “the hair of willows,” and the “carp” in the lake sets up a conflict between society and nature. Again the theme of the corruptive force of industrialization and modernization is opposed to the regenerative and primeval healing properties of the ancestral past.

Those who have been corrupted by the comforts of modernization, such as air conditioning, are unable to smell the sweet ginger. The residents of Southside, however, who have screens or nothing covering their windows, have access to the “heavy spicy-sweet smell” of the East, the smell of the marketplace of Accra (the capital of Ghana in West Africa) with its images of “striped tents and the sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets” (onomatopoeia). Those residents of Southside who inhale deeply smell the spicy scent of memory, of hope and possibility, while Milkman and Guitar, when they smell the night-air think of “freedom...or justice, or luxury or vengeance.”

When Milkman and Guitar are on the verge of cutting down the green sack from Pilate’s ceiling, Guitar genuflects before a sack of fool’s gold as “the figure of a man” (Pilate’s father) looks disapprovingly on. The ghost here functions as a symbol both of moral conscience and of spiritual unrest.

In a lyrical passage, filled with sensual descriptions, the author uses the technique of cataloguing to portray vivid images of the pieces of cloth remaining from the dresses of the little murdered girls: “Every night now, Guitar sees little scraps of Sunday dresses—white and purple, powder blue, pink and white, lace and voile, velvet and silk, cotton and satin, eyelet and grosgrain.” The narrator compares these to “the heart-red pieces of velvet” of the artificial roses petals Ruth Dead spilled from her basket in the first chapter, but unlike the rose petals the scraps of the dresses “...did not fly; they hung in the air quietly, like the whole notes in the last measure of an Easter hymn.” (simile)

Again, as in the case of Emmett Till, the author makes historical allusions to events in the Civil Rights movement that impacted African American history. The date when Milkman and Guitar break into Pilate’s house, September 19, 1963, is four days after the murder of the “little colored girls” who were killed during a church service at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Michael-Mary Graham: the hack-poetess who hires Corinthians to work as a maid in her house

Mr. Solomon: the name Pilate gives to her imaginary husband, whose bones, she tells the police, are in the green sack that Milkman and Guitar steal from her house

Nero: member of the Seven Days that Milkman sees in Porter's Oldsmobile

Summary

At the age of 42, Corinthians gets her first job outside the house, as a maid to an affected, hack-poetess. In spite of Corinthians refined upper middle-class upbringing and her college education, she had led a dead-end life with no prospects for marrying. Refusing to be resigned to a home-life of making artificial roses, Corinthians finally acquires her own money and independence through her new job, but she lies to her family about her work.

On the bus to work, she meets Henry Porter, a yardman who is a member of the Seven Days, and a man who isn't her social equal. While Corinthians is ashamed of him, she comes to love him anyway. When Henry finally makes Corinthians choose between -being a "doll baby" (like her mother) or being a "woman," Corinthians chooses the latter. After spending the night with Henry, her "vanity" is transformed into "self-esteem."

After Milkman and Guitar are picked up by the police for stealing a sack of human bones, Pilate plays the role of "Aunt Jemima" to get the two men out of jail. Pilate tells the police the bones in the green sack belong to Mr. Solomon, her husband. She tells the police, she had been too poor to bury the bones. Guitar, sickened by Pilate's groveling and incensed that there is no gold, looks at Pilate "with jeweled hatred in his eyes."

At home in his bathtub, Milkman reexperiences the shame of having been arrested and handcuffed. He feels remorse for his betrayal of Pilate, the woman who has loved and nurtured him throughout his life. As Milkman reflects on his disgraceful actions, he notices his legs are both the same length.

Milkman has a conversation with Lena in which his sister accuses him of having "peed" on everyone his entire life. Lena ascribes his behavior to "that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs." Lena is infuriated that Milkman betrayed Corinthians by telling Macon that Henry Porter was her lover. Lena denounces Milkman for being "exactly like (their father)."

Analysis

The highly ironic portrayal of Corinthians and the poetess who has hired her as a maid has many humorous touches and is replete with examples of an appearance vs. reality conflict. Corinthians may be a maid, but she euphemistically refers to herself as an "amaneuensis," a "rickety Latin word" that meets with the approval of her mother and gives the appearance of a job that is "intricate, demanding, and totally in keeping with her education."

Corinthians keeps up social appearances by dressing in high heels, and only dons the necessary pair of loafers and dress once she arrives at the home of her employer.

Corinthians, like her mother, has all the qualities of the ideal Southern white woman. She is light in skin color, and has no real skills. She is a delicate-appearing ornament. She is "enlightened in education" so that she is "able to contribute to the civilization" or "civilizing of her (backward) community." In this ironic tone, the

narrator equates a liberal arts education at what she considers to be an uppity rich white woman's college (Bryn Mawr) to an act of futility where one develops no useful skills to function in the practical world.

Corinthians's employer, Michael-Mary Graham, is a parody of a poet. She is characterized by all the worst stereotypes of a creative person: she can't do domestic work because of the "heavy demand of artistic responsibility." She selects "colors and furnishings" for their "inspirational value." Michael-Mary Graham speaks and thinks in clichés: concerned with hiring a frail-figured woman such as Corinthians as a maid, Michael-Mary hires her anyway because of the poetic ring to Corinthians' name.

In keeping with the theme of hackneyed poetry, the "ill-dressed" and socially inferior Henry Porter gives Corinthians a trite, clichéd poem in a greeting card to introduce himself to her. Corinthians is ashamed to be seen with Henry as the result of a class conflict. Henry is a social inferior who "doesn't even own a pair of dress shoes." In Corinthians' eyes, Henry's outward appearance takes priority over his inner being. Corinthians explains to Henry that her father "never wanted us to mix with...people." She leaves out the word "inferior," or lower-class. When Corinthians tells Henry she doesn't know when she can tell her father about him, she finds herself gesturing in the fake manner of the affected Michael-Mary. Her "fake gesture" goes along with her "fake feelings of moral and filial commitment."

Henry's patience wears thin, and he demands that Corinthians stop behaving like a "doll baby" and behave like a "grown-up woman." The 44-year-old virgin thinks to herself that she doesn't know any "grown-up women." All her role models are "doll babies," not women, but ladies, who have ultra-refined manners, but lack much else. They know a lot about appearance, but they know little or nothing about passion or reality.

Pilate, too, plays a part when she attempts to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail. She does an "Aunt Jemima" imitation, compromising herself by playing the role of a "black mammy," a stereotypical black character in white Southern literature. Pilate intentionally gives the appearance of being slow-witted and extremely yielding to accomplish her goal of having Milkman and Guitar released from jail. After Milkman is freed, Pilate, who appeared shorter when she was playing the role of "Aunt Jemima," again looms tall with her head wrapped in her glorious silk rag.

Flooded by the shame of his jailing experience and his betrayal of Pilate, Milkman tries to wash the shame off in the bathtub. He recalls how Pilate "had brought him into this world when only a miracle could have, and yet he showed her no gratitude." With this admission, his legs appear to be the same length as he stares at them in the bathtub.

Pilate, who acted as an emissary between Milkman and nature, cooked him "his first perfect egg" and showed him the sky "so that from then on when he looked at it, it had no distance, no remoteness, but was intimate, familiar, like a room that he lived in, a place he belonged."

While Milkman reminisces about his fragile connection with nature, Lena's only connection with Nature is being severed. Her maple tree, a symbol of tolerance and endurance, is dying. The maple tree's presence allowed Lena to ignore what was "really wrong" in her life, including Milkman's dismissive and inhumane treatment of her, Corinthians, and their mother." Losing the natural (the maple tree) and condemned to a life of creating the unnatural in the form of artificial rose petals, Lena vows she will no longer make the fake petals. With that declaration, Lena also announces that she will no longer tolerate being "peed" on by Milkman. Lena attributes Milkman's narcissism to his "hog's gut...between (his) legs," a symbol for Milkman's single-minded pursuit of sexual gratification at the expense of all that is human. Lena, like Corinthians and Ruth, has spent her whole life imprisoned in the Dead household, serving the needs of men.

She relates a story to Milkman of how when she was young, she and Corinthians were dressed in their best clothes. Macon paraded them in front of a group of poor and dirty children so that the children could "see us,

envy us, envy him.” But Lena gives notice that she will no longer tolerate being an object manipulated by the men in her family. “I don’t make roses anymore and you have pissed your last in this house,” Lena tells Milkman, to end Part I of *Song of Solomon*.

Although the names, First Corinthians and Magdalene, called Lena, have biblical associations, the tradition of randomly choosing them from the Bible and then subverting their meaning is particularly important in the case of Milkman’s sisters. The name Corinthians derives from Corinth, the ancient Greek city infamous for its luxury and debauchery. Magdalene is the name of the reformed prostitute in the New Testament, who Jesus cured of evil spirits. Both the name Corinthians and Magdalene are associated with harlotry and licentious behavior. In *Song of Solomon* names are ironic: the Dead sisters spend much of their adult lives as passionless virgins who live the most chaste and austere of existences. Therefore, their names decry traditional symbolic meanings and form a new and separate history. The “red velvet rose petals” the sisters make symbolize artificiality and the unnaturalness of the Dead women’s lives.

While Ruth was associated with rhododendron, dahlias, geraniums, and imperial tulips earlier in the text, Lena too, was attracted to flowers as a child (Chapter 2) when she picked purple violet and wild jonquil. Sadly, these are both women’s only real associations with authentic life. Ruth also has her goldfish and Lena had her maple tree to nurture. Without it, Lena is disconnected from life.

Guitar’s “gold-eyes” or “cat-eyes” are now described by Macon as “yellow-eyed,” a color often associated with cowardliness or betrayal.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Reverend Cooper: the Reverend of Danville, Pennsylvania who Milkman goes to visit to learn about his family’s past. Milkman finds out information about where the cave Pilate and Macon lived in is located from the Reverend

Esther Cooper: Reverend Cooper’s wife

The Butlers: the rich white family Circe works for. They killed Macon Dead I (Jake) in order to take possession of his property

Singing Bird (Sing): Pilate and Macon’s mother. She is a woman of mixed races, including American Indian

Nephew: the nephew of Reverend Cooper. He is called Nephew because he is the Reverend’s only nephew. He drives Milkman to visit Circe

Jake: the original first name of Macon Dead I

Fred Garnett: driver of the 1954 Chevrolet who gives Milkman a ride toward Danville. Garnett is insulted when Milkman tries to pay him for the Coke and the ride that Garnett gives him

Old man in station house: the man who Milkman helps lift a crate. Guitar later tells Milkman that he is sure the crate is filled with the gold Milkman has kept for himself instead of sharing it with Guitar

Summary

Relieved to leave behind “Lena’s anger,” “Ruth’s stepped up surveillance” and Macon’s “bottomless greed,” Milkman begins his journey to Danville. Enthralled by an exhilarating airplane ride to Pittsburgh, Milkman

“felt free...away from real life” where “the wings of all those other people’s nightmares (had) flapped in his face and constrained him.”

Before his journey, Milkman and Guitar continue to debate race issues, and Guitar lectures Milkman on how “Everybody wants the life of a black man.”

On his journey, Milkman finds that the scenery his father raved about, because of its beauty, is repetitive and boring.

Milkman stands out in the “tiny farming town” of Danville in his “beige three-piece suit,” “beautiful Florsheim shoes,” and gold Longines watch. He is surprised by the community’s friendliness and Reverend Cooper’s affection for Milkman because Reverend Cooper “knows his people.” Milkman is impressed by “southern hospitality.”

His family history is more palpable to him now that he is physically in the place where it transpired. Milkman is amazed at the townpeople’s high regard for his paternal grandfather and, especially, for his father. He does not recognize Macon as the spirited country boy the Danville clan loved, but he is proud and moved by the stories.

Milkman decides to go look at the Dead family farm and instead ends up at the Butlers’ mansion. Milkman is surprised to find Circe alive. The ancient lady lives among a pack of dogs that have, to Circe’s pleasure, destroyed the mansion. Circe hopes only that someone will find her body at her death and bury her before the dogs eat her remains. Although Circe’s appearance reminds Milkman of the fairy tale witches in his nightmares, he tolerates her embrace. From Circe, Milkman learns the names of his paternal grandfather and his paternal grandmother (Jake and Sing) and the location of the cave where he believes the gold is buried.

In spite of Milkman’s exposure to a wealth of family information, his top priority is still the recovery of the gold in Hunters Cave. On his trek to the cave, Milkman battles the woods, creeks, and slopes of the outdoors. He begins to appreciate the difficulty and complexity of nature, not because of any sympathy with or understanding of nature, but only as an obstacle that obstructs him from reaching his goal.

When Milkman finds the cave empty, he lets out an anguished cry, and limping from the cave, he vows to continue his journey to Virginia where he concludes Pilate must have taken the gold.

Analysis

The text continues to be structured by the flight motif which for Milkman “encourages illusion and a feeling of invulnerability.” Milkman continues to equate flight with power, but power achieved not through knowledge but through escapism. As Milkman sits in the “glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could.” Flight is still a fantasy to Milkman, not something he believes it is possible to attain in “real life.”

Part I of *Song of Solomon* portrays the emotionally immature Milkman Dead’s growing-up years, but it does not show his transformation into a self-sufficient man with a secure sense of self. Part II, beginning with Chapter 10, follows the pattern of the epic poem, as Milkman embarks on his journey to self discovery.

Traditionally in epic poetry, the hero must wean himself from his mother (separation) and depart on a journey of initiation (a test in which he acquires some new-found knowledge of himself, usually through a heroic act). Finally, the hero, who has entered the realm of manhood, is ready to return to his home, able to put his knowledge to use (Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 35). Milkman will follow a similar journey.

Before Milkman leaves Michigan, his race debate with Guitar continues to surface. When Guitar is highly critical of both the “colored” and white woman’s demands on the black man, Milkman asks Guitar why he is defending the “colored” woman. “Because she’s mine,” Guitar says. “Can’t I love what I criticize?” But Milkman doesn’t believe its about “loving Negroes” at all, especially if you can’t tell the difference between the black and white woman “except for skin color.” Appearance (skin color) conflicts with reality (in the form of the inner person). “Everyone wants the life of a black man,” Guitar tells Milkman. Only black men don’t want to kill the black man. When Milkman gives his father as an example of a black man who tried to kill a black man (Milkman as a baby), Guitar dismisses it because Macon acts “white.” Guitar also considers it an egregious sin that Pilate “slipped into those Jemima shoes” when talking to the police. He considers her behavior a form of prostituting one’s self in front of white people.

While Milkman is in the South, he begins to comprehend the racial injustices his people experience. When Reverend Cooper discusses Macon Dead I’s murder, Milkman asks if there was a trial to bring the white men to justice. “Arrested for what? Killing a nigger? Where did you say you were from?” Reverend Cooper asks the naive Northerner. Milkman actually feels anger for the first time and wonders why “he hadn’t felt angry when he first heard about (his grandfather’s death).” But when Milkman continues to pursue the gold, he admits to himself that he doesn’t want it to seek vengeance on the acts perpetrated against his family. He wants the gold on its own merit in order that Milkman may “own it” and be “free.” Milkman has begun to be conscious of acting for reasons other than selfish ones; however, he cannot sustain these “fine” feelings. Milkman is still motivated by a concept of how he should act, rather than acting from genuine feeling.

The theme of nature is prevalent throughout Chapter 10. Milkman continues to be oblivious to both its beauty and its power, and especially its relevancy to his life. All the living things in nature, like a human being, have a life cycle of birth, life, and death. Milkman does not accept nature the way he accepted Pilate’s gift to him of the sky, as either a place of refuge or something to learn from.

When Milkman hears about the farm, “Lincoln’s Heaven,” growing peaches, the feasts after hunting, and “the backbreaking work of a going farm,” he feels that he “missed something in his life.” While in Danville, Milkman realizes that when Macon spoke of working side-by-side with his father on the farm, Macon wasn’t talking about “manliness,” but love of family, and of man’s coexistence with the land he nurtures.

The men of Danville understand the community’s connection to the land when they reminisce about the beauty and abundance of “Lincoln’s Farm.” Macon Dead I also makes them realize they, too, can take advantage of what the world has to offer them if an illiterate slave who lost his name can succeed. But success involves a reverence for the land, farming as a creative act, and an act of sharing: “We got a home in this rock, don’t you see!...Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers...kiss it.own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!”

Unlike Macon Dead Jr.’s view of the land as something to use to exploit and own your own people, the working of the land in Danville is accompanied by a deeply shared communal feeling among men. Up to this point, though, Milkman sees nature as something that knocks his hat off with its branches, that has creeks “too shallow to walk” and “too rocky to swim.” Milkman has “no idea that simply walking through trees, bushes, or untrammed grass could be so hard.” Rather than seeing nature as an entity that can teach Milkman about life, he still perceives of it as a powerful combatant who obstructs his path and must be conquered.

The mythic Circe appears in the text as a message-bearer who sees through Milkman’s “fine feelings,” telling him “You don’t listen to people. Your ear is in your head, but it’s not connected to your brain.” Unlike the beautiful enchantress of Greek mythology, Circe is described as a wizened, wrinkled old woman with skin of “pleats and crochet work” who conjures up the image of an ancient and decrepit witch. But in spite of her physical appearance, she is timeless “with the strong, mellifluous voice of a 20-year-old.” Her presence is accompanied by “the sweet spicy perfume” of ginger which connects her with Africa and the values and

memories of the past. The sage-like Circe is the messenger of the oral history of Milkman's people. She "birthed" everyone in Montour County, hid Macon and Pilate after their father was killed, and gives Milkman answers to many of his questions. She is the conjure woman who, using age-old folk methods, heals Pilate's infected ear with cobwebs. Like Pilate, Circe is a larger-than-life figure who combines the earthy with the mythological in a perfect union.

With her pack of "golden-eyed dogs" and with a vengeance worthy of the gods, Circe is behind the imminent demise of the "last room" of the Butler house, the house where the last Butler, Elizabeth, "killed herself rather than do the work I'd been doing all my life," Circe says. Circe, then, is one of the carriers of the oral tradition, bringing her message of the past into the present, so that Milkman will be able to apply it to the future.

The author continues to invert the meaning of names significant in the Western canon of literature, rendering their history as meaningless. The naming of the midwife as Circe is another example of this.

A vivid portrayal of Circe is drawn: She has "dry, bony hands like steel springs" (simile) that rub Milkman's back, and a "floppy mouth" that "babbles" into Milkman's vest. The author uses physical description sparingly, but with a sharp eye for detail which creates vivid, unforgettable images.

The chapter abounds with personification, metaphors, and similes:

"He was oblivious to the universe of wood life that did live there in layers of ivy grown so thick he could have sunk his arm in it up to the elbow. Life that crawled, life that slunk and crept and never closed its eyes. Life that buried and scurried, and life so still it was indistinguishable from the ivy stems on which it lay. Birth, life, and death—each took place on the hidden side of a leaf. From where he stood, the house looked as if it had been eaten by a galloping disease, the sores of which were dark and fluid." (personification)

"A farm that covered their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon." (simile)

"He glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride." (metaphor)

"As soon as he put his foot on the first stone, he smelled money, although it was not a smell at all. It was like candy and sex and soft twinkling lights. Like piano music with a few strings in the background." (similes) "He'd noticed it before when he waited under the pines near Pilate's house; more when the moon lit up the green sack that hung like a kept promise (simile) from her ceiling; and most when he tumbled lightly to the floor, sack in hand. Las Vegas and buried treasure; numbers dealers and Wells Fargo wagons; race track pay windows and spewing oil wells; craps, flushes, and sweepstakes tickets. Auctions, bank vaults, and heroin deals." (all metaphors, cataloguing)

"The crunch is here. The big crunch. Don't let those Kennedys fool you." (historical allusion)

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Mr. Solomon: the owner of Solomon's General Store in Shalimar, Virginia. He is no relation to the immediate Solomon family or Pilate's imaginary husband, Mr. Solomon

Children: a group of youngsters in Shalimar, Virginia who play a game and sing the song about Solomon that reveals the Dead family's origins

Saul: Shalimar resident who comes to blows with Milkman

Omar: Shalimar resident who invites Milkman on the hunting trip

King Walker: the gas station owner and ex-star pitcher of the black baseball leagues who helps outfit Milkman in hunting gear for the hunting trip

Luther Solomon: a Shalimar resident who goes on the hunting trip. He is not related to Mr. Solomon

Calvin Breakstone: Milkman's partner on the hunting trip. He tells Milkman about Ryna's Gulch

Small Boy: a Shalimar resident who goes on the hunting trip

Ryna (Ryna's Gulch): Solomon's wife; Ryna's Gulch is named after her. Legend has it that when the wind hits the ravine, it sounds like a woman crying

Vernell: the woman who prepares breakfast for the men after the hunting trip. She gives Milkman information about Sing and about Heddy Byrd

Heddy Byrd: an American Indian; She is the mother of Sing(ing) Byrd (or Bird) Dead. She is Macon Dead II's grandmother and Milkman's great-grandmother

Susan Byrd: Milkman's cousin. She is an American Indian who tells Milkman about his family history

Sweet: she is Milkman's lover in Shalimar. It is the first time Milkman has a loving and reciprocal relationship

Summary

Milkman arrives in the all-black town of Shalimar, Virginia. He is surprised by the small-town atmosphere, the customs of the people, and the facial features of the women, which resemble African features rather than those of black women in the North.

The children sing a song "about Jay...son of Solomon" and play a game that reminds Milkman of his alienation from other children as a youth because of his clothes (he was forced to wear a "velvet suit" to school) and his wealth.

Stopping at Solomon's store, Milkman is told that someone is looking for him. The man is driving a car with Michigan license plates and leaves a message which exact words should be "Your Day has come." Milkman thinks Guitar must be in trouble.

Milkman is the recipient of hostility from the townspeople. He is unaware that his behavior is superior, condescending, and inhumane. He treats the women of the town like sex objects, there merely for his pleasure. He flashes his wealth in a town where many of the men are unemployed, and therefore resentful of Milkman who treats them like "anonymous, faceless laborers." He doesn't even ask their names or introduce himself to them. Milkman perceives himself as "the object of hero worship" in Danville, and is perplexed by his cool reception in Shalimar.

After getting in a fight with the younger men of the town, Milkman accepts an invitation to accompany the older men on a hunting trip. He boasts of his hunting prowess, although he has never handled a gun before. He accepts the invitation as a dare, but also because "he had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties."

During the hunt, Milkman gets left behind. Alone in nature, he is disoriented by the sounds, distances, and the code of behavior he is supposed to follow: "...here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use...." Milkman hears the sobbing sound the wind makes as it blows through Ryna's Gulch. Alone in the darkness, he reassesses his actions and the impression he makes on others. Milkman begins to take responsibility for his behavior. Stripped down in the woods without his possessions, without "his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes," to buffer him from reality, he is forced to commune with his "true" self. While out in the woods, Milkman realizes that there is another way to communicate besides through language; something more basic than language. He listens to the hunters in the distance answering to the rhythms of the animals, each other, and the earth.

Guitar makes an unsuccessful attempt on Milkman's life. Guitar is startled and runs off when Milkman shoots into the trees to scare him. Milkman's soul-searching has made him come to understand Guitar, and the world that has somehow "maimed" him.

At the conclusion of the hunting trip, Milkman admits his fear to the other hunters, something he would not have been able to do before the hunt. Humbled by the experience, Milkman experiences a strong bond with both nature and the Shalimar community. Because the men of the community have now accepted Milkman, they offer the woman Sweet to him. For the first time, Milkman makes love with a woman, not as a selfish act to fulfill his own needs, but as an act of sharing between two giving and caring partners.

Analysis

The image of the strutting "black rooster" among the "white hens" and the images of the bobcat's heart and of the roots of the gum tree "cradling (Milkman) like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather" represent the two extremes Milkman experiences in Chapter 11. The first image is a symbol of machismo accentuating male bravado. Milkman wants to impress the men by being more "macho" than they are. Consequently, Milkman grandstands and makes threatening remarks to show he can be as tough as the Shalimar men. At the beginning of the chapter, Milkman's sense of self is still predicated upon what he considers the most desirable male characteristics, those based on power and intimidation. These coveted traits include physical courage in the form of aggressive action, the ability to rule by fear, virility and sexual bragging, and arrogance.

Milkman's combines this machismo veneer with a garish display of wealth in his talk about cars, his elegant clothing, and dismissive manner. This display of wealth and disregard for the Shalimar men give the men the impression that Milkman has "the heart of the white man." That is, Milkman has lost all sense of connection with or interest in communicating with men like himself.

He treats the men of Shalimar as "laborers," because they do not matter to him as human beings. They are only commodities, useful to achieve a means to an end for Milkman. Milkman is not interested in them; he is only interested in what he can get from them, be it, a ride somewhere, shelter, food or drink, information, etc. Milkman also treats their women as commodities that can be used and discarded, the way Milkman discarded Hagar.

No one in Shalimar cares about Milkman's northern pedigree or his family name that stands for "dread and grudging respect" in Michigan.

When Milkman accompanies the older men on the hunting trip, he is not interested in learning about them and their world. He accepts the trip as a dare and a challenge to his manhood. It is only after he isn't able to keep up with the older men in the hunt that he realizes how little he knows about this world. Only then is Milkman able to admit to himself that he was involved in both the fight and the hunt as a result of ignorance and vanity on his part.

The image of the maternal grandfather cradling Milkman in his hands is a symbol of the transformed Milkman. “The sweet gum’s surface roots” are personified as “the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather,” accentuating a union between man and nature. With this union of man and nature comes knowledge, the sixth sense, “the one that life itself might depend on.”

Once Milkman relinquishes his tired refrain that “he didn’t deserve some bad luck or bad treatment from others,” and instead, takes responsibility for himself and his acts, he is able to look outward away from himself and consider the feelings of others.

Milkman learns that, alone in nature and stripped of his possessions, “all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And Endurance.” Milkman realizes that this lesson of nature, translates to life, too. Whether Milkman is in the Blue Ridge Country of Virginia or in an industrial city in Michigan, the essence of a man is the same; he is what he knows, and nature is the best teacher. Nature is personified and asks man to honor “her” by honoring each other and, in this way, man honors the preciousness of life itself.

The hunting trip is an initiation rite for Milkman. Once he acknowledges nature’s place in his life, “he found himself exhilarated by just walking the earth, he became one with it—and ceases to limp.”

By accepting the embrace of both nature and his grandfather, Milkman develops a long-absent social consciousness and a moral integrity that allows Milkman to no longer limp.

When Milkman is given the opportunity to remove the heart from the slain bobcat’s body, the heart not only symbolizes Milkman’s acceptance into the Shalimar fraternity, but it is also a metaphor for Milkman finally possessing a loving and good human heart.

One of the oldest male rituals of acceptance is offering a woman of the community to a man outside the community. It is a sexist act, but an ages-old male act of belonging. When Milkman unites with Sweet, the two try to outdo each other in the kindnesses they perform for each other, not because of some competition, but out of a genuine caring for the well-being of the other.

The women of Shalimar are described at the beginning of the chapter as having faces with “wide sleepy eyes that tilted up at the corners, high cheekbones, full lips blacker than their skin, berry-stained, and long, long necks.” Their features are similar to Pilate’s, who Reverend Cooper referred to as “pretty” in Chapter 10. However, by northern standards Pilate is criticized as “ugly.” The standard of beauty in Shalimar differs from the ideal Northern view of beauty. African features are considered desirable features in Shalimar, rather than the white standard of beauty coveted by many “black” women in the North.

Folk etymology explains the confusion with the name Solomon, which variously becomes Shalimar (the natives’ name of the town) and Charlemagne (the mapmakers’ name for the settlement.) The pronunciation of the natives—“Shalleemone”—blends the various words being used.

Example of figures of speech used in this chapter include:

“All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid howm howm, the reedy whistles, the thin eeeee’s of a cornet, the unh unh unh bass chords. It was all language.” (onomatopoeia, musical metaphors)

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Grace Long: a local school teacher in Shalimar and a friend of Susan Byrd's. She flirts with Milkman and steals his watch

Lilah: cousin of Susan Byrd's who "passes" for white

John: cousin of Susan Byrd's who "passes" for white

Summary

Having absorbed the lessons of nature, Milkman forges his identity by pursuing his family history and the origins of his family name.

Milkman goes to see Susan Byrd and finds out that Susan's grandmother, Heddy, is Sing's mother.

Milkman continues to be puzzled over Guitar's attempt on his life.

He marvels over his feeling of "connectedness" with the people of Shalimar: "as though there was some cord or pulse of information they shared." In Michigan, with the exception of Pilate, Milkman felt as if he didn't belong "to any place or anybody."

Guitar confronts Milkman and accuses him of hoarding the gold the two men had agreed to share by secretly shipping it in a crate to Virginia. Guitar compares Milkman to his father because of his greed. Milkman realizes it is useless to try to convince Guitar that the crate Guitar saw Milkman helping a man move at the bus station wasn't a crate of gold. Milkman realizes Guitar will never believe that Milkman was helping a fellow human being because "Guitar had never seen Milkman give anybody a hand, especially a stranger."

Milkman continues to dream about flying, but now the manner of flying is less ostentatious. The flying does not resemble the wings and structure of a powerful airplane, but is the "floating" or "cruising" pose of a man "lying on a couch." Flying is not a man-made form, an airplane, a symbol of modernization, but a form of human transcendence or transformation.

Milkman continues to see the children play the circle-game and sing the song they always sing, but this time he hears a different part of the song. The melody and words of the song are the same as the song that Pilate always sings, but instead of the name "Sugarman," the children sing the name "Solomon."

Milkman is reflective about his relationship with his family members. He experiences a new tenderness for and understanding of his parents. He regrets the feelings of hatred he felt in the past for his sisters. He is especially remorseful about his betrayal of Pilate and his mistreatment of and indifference toward Hagar.

At the end of the chapter, when Milkman determines from the children's song that the "Solomon" they are singing about is his paternal great-grandfather, Milkman "was as eager and as happy as he had ever been in his life."

Analysis

The sense of community Milkman feels for the people of Shalimar triggers an even deeper interest in Milkman's own family history than he had felt in Danville. Armed with "the sense of lightness and power" his dream about flying has given him, and the fact that "Pilate did not have a navel," Milkman eagerly pursues the answers to his questions: "...why did (Sing) want her husband to keep that awful name? ...To wipe out...his slave past?...And why didn't his own father and Pilate know any of their relatives?"

As Milkman hears the old blues song Pilate always sings about “Sugarman,” he is filled with homesickness. Repulsed by his mother in the past, Milkman grows sentimental about her “quiet, crooked, apologetic smile” and sympathizes with her “sexual deprivation.” Milkman now possesses the knowledge to be able to understand his father’s perversion of Macon Dead I’s love for the land: Macon “distorted life, bent it for the sake of gain” because of Macon’s profound loss “at his father’s death.”

Most of all, Milkman is shamed by his betrayal of Pilate in the house that was his sanctuary “without one article of comfort in it, a place where material goods weren’t necessary but the things that mattered most—peace,” “energy,” “singing,” and “his own remembrances”—were present. Milkman also admits that he abused Hagar just to prove that “he was one bad dude, that he had the power to drive a woman out of her mind, to destroy her.”

As Milkman is “finding his life” through his reflections, he is losing all his earthly possessions. When he loses his watch to Grace Long, Milkman thinks “All it could do was tell (me) the time of day” and “he really wasn’t interested.”

At the same time that Milkman is losing his material possessions, Guitar is attempting to make Milkman “lose his life.” Unlike Milkman, who has gone through a rite of passage and become a stronger and more complete man because of it, Guitar is slowly being eaten up by his hatred. As Milkman’s identity grows and blossoms, Guitar’s being has lost its individuality. Guitar has become his cause, and the person behind that cause has been lost.

In the song the children sing about Solomon, Milkman learns part of the history of his family. “Jake the only son of Solomon...whirled about and touched the sun,” the song says. From this reference, Milkman determines that Solomon is Jake’s father and Milkman’s paternal great-grandfather.

The image of Jake, the son of Solomon, touching the sun and falling back to the earth recalls the classical Greek myth of Icarus. Icarus, the son of Daedalus, flew on a pair of artificial wings too close to the sun. When his wings melted, he drowned in the sea.

The biblical Solomon who authored three books of the Bible, was the King of Israel in the tenth century. He was known for his wisdom, wealth, and sense of justice. The name Solomon derives from Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Lilly: the owner of Lilly’s Beauty Parlor

Marcelline: an employee of Lilly’s Beauty Parlor

Summary

Chapter 13 is a flashback to Michigan, and opens with Guitar finding Hagar after she’s made her final attempt on Milkman’s life. Guitar lectures Hagar on love, telling her “you can’t own a human being,” and a person “can’t value you more than you value yourself.” Hagar’s love is described as a “stingy little love that ate everything in sight.” He blames Pilate and Reba for spoiling her and not giving her the necessary tools to cope in the world outside the home.

Hagar is no longer a functioning human being, and lies comatose in her little “Goldilocks-choice” bed. Finally, when Pilate holds a mirror to her face, Hagar responds with “No wonder.” She condemns the face in

the mirror that looks back at her. Reba pawns her diamond ring to supply money to buy Hagar all the beauty products she requires to beautify herself. None of the products can make Hagar look “white” enough—the only acceptable standard of beauty she believes will give her the opportunity to lure Milkman back to her. Crushed by this knowledge, Hagar dies of a broken heart.

Ruth shames Macon into giving her money to pay for Hagar’s funeral. She is the only family member that attends the service at first. Halfway through the mass, Pilate enters the church singing “Mercy....Mercy?” In singing response, Reba joins her mother as they express the loss of “(their) baby girl.”

Analysis

Hagar is representative of the women who “kill for love, die for love.” They are women who were “spoiled children,” whose every “whim had been taken seriously.” They have lacked discipline or any sense of restriction from parents; they’ve never had to live by the rules imposed by society.

Pilate and Reba are able to create their own worlds and values: Pilate because she is “strong enough,” and Reba because she is “simple enough.” But Hagar, brought up in a household of unimpeachable freedom that made up its own rules as it went along is ill-equipped to cope in the real world.

Hagar “needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it.” Pilate and Reba can only love her; they cannot help her to better arm herself to function in the outside world. Both Pilate and Reba are immune to and choose not to live in that world; both wouldn’t have the slightest idea how to help Hagar because they are isolated and only function in a limited world.

Without a large enough support group to dispel the corrupt values of the outside world, Hagar is seduced by the rhetoric of advertising ads about beauty. She believes she must look and behave a certain way in order to be loved. Since she perceives Milkman’s preference for white features, she strives to achieve such features. Hagar is the ultimate consumer. Hagar purchases cosmetic commodities, and buys into the slogans of her purchases, “read(ing) hungrily the labels and the promises,” so that she, too, could “(create) for him a world of tender privacy where the only occupant is you.”

Driven by white standards of beauty in society, Hagar is “set up” for failure even before she attempts to change the face she has with “Sunny glow” and “Mango tango.” She cannot change her African features into “white” ones. She cannot have “silky hair the color of a penny,” or “lemon-colored skin,” or “gray-blue eyes.” She has no other way to define herself except by her appearance. Therefore, when Hagar is rejected by Milkman, she has nothing else to fall back on. The only love she knows is “nervous love,” love as an “affliction.”

Guitar uses a metaphor to explain to Hagar how love should be between two people:

“Did you ever see the way the clouds love a mountain? They circle all around it; sometimes you can’t even see the mountains from the clouds. But you know what? You go up top and what do you see? His head. The clouds never cover the head. His head pokes through, because the clouds let him; they don’t wrap him up. They let him keep his head up high, free, with nothing to hide him or bind him.”

Similies are also used in this chapter:

“Pilate and Reba, seated beside the bed, bent over her (Hagar) like two divi-divi trees beaten forward by a wind always blowing from the same direction. Like the trees, they offered her

all they had: love murmurs and a protective shade.”

Milkman reflects on the transforming qualities of life and its ability to metamorphosize from one thing to another, crossing the boundary from the real to the surreal, from the expected to the unexpected. This example combines a collage of concrete images, movie stars images, Walt Disney characters, food, nature, and myth:

“For a long time now he knew that anything could appear to be something else, and probably was. Nothing could be taken for granted. Women who loved you tried to cut your throat, while women who didn’t even know your name scrubbed your back. Witches could sound like Katherine Hepburn and your best friend could try to strangle you. Smack in the middle of an orchid there might be a blob of jello and inside a Mickey Mouse doll, a fixed radiant star.”

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Milkman returns to Susan Byrd’s house, hopeful that she can further enlighten him about his family history after he has decoded the children’s song about Solomon. Susan fills in the gaps about Sing and Jake’s relationship and tells Milkman Jake was one of Solomon’s (or Shalimar’s) children; the names are synonymous. Susan also tells Milkman about the tale of the flying African: according to the legend, before witnesses Solomon flew off “like a bird” back to Africa to escape slavery, leaving his grieving wife Ryna and 21 sons behind, although he had tried to take Jake, his youngest, with him.

Analysis

Chapter 14 features a conversation between Susan Byrd and Milkman which helps to assemble the final pieces of the Dead family puzzle.

Of the greatest significance in the chapter is Milkman’s revelation that his paternal great-grandfather Solomon could fly and that the town of Shalimar is the very home his family originated from. Unbeknownst to him, Milkman has been in the town of his origins the entire time he has been unraveling the mystery behind his family name and history.

The flying motif that has structured the novel reaches its near-conclusion. For Milkman, flight, which had been a possibility before the age of four, has again become a possibility. If Macon Dead I can appear as a ghost and Pilate can have no navel, then flight, too, can be a reality.

Milkman’s first revelation was his discovery of his “authentic” self, while he was only “breath” and “thoughts” in the darkness of the hunting grounds near Solomon’s Leap and Ryna’s Gulch. His identity, however, lacked wholeness and a sense of completion without the knowledge of his family name and the place of their origin. Now with these two mysteries solved and the knowledge that Solomon was a flying African, Milkman cannot wait to return to Michigan to bring the message home.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Summary

Elated by his discovery of the story of the flying African, Milkman shares his exultation with Sweet by frolicking joyfully in the waters of Shalimar while yelling at the top of his lungs “my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him.”

On his return trip to Michigan, Milkman reads the road signs with interest and wonders “what lay beneath the names.” Milkman knows that “under the recorded names were other names, just as ‘Macon Dead,’ recorded

for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning”—names whose history was lost with their erasure.

Upon arriving in Michigan, Milkman hastens off to Pilate’s house to tell her that the green sack she’s been carrying is filled with the bones of her father. Milkman also wants to tell her that the ghost of her father wasn’t telling her to sing; he was calling out her mother’s name. Instead, when Milkman arrives, Pilate “knocks him out” and puts him in the basement next to a shoe box filled with Hagar’s hair. Milkman realizes that “while he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying.” It reminds him of his great-grandfather Solomon, leaving Ryna behind. Milkman explains to Pilate the meaning of the words “You just can’t fly on off and leave a body.” Milkman tells Pilate that her father wants her to bury him in Virginia, at Solomon’s Leap “where he belongs.”

As Pilate and Milkman prepare to bury Macon Dead I (or Jake), the smell of ginger permeates the air. Instead of putting a rock or cross on the grave, Pilate yanks off her earring “with the single word Jake ever wrote” on it and puts it in his grave. A concealed Guitar shoots Pilate, and she dies as Milkman, at her request, sings her into death. Milkman realizes he loves her because “she could fly...without ever leaving the ground.” Yelling to Guitar, “You want my life? You need it?” Milkman turns toward Guitar and leaps into the air, surrendering to “the killing arms of his brother.” Like the mythic Greek hero, Milkman returns to the bosom of his family to share his new-found knowledge.

Analysis

As *Song of Solomon* concludes, the themes of the novel resurface to frame the text, as they did in the beginning of the novel. At the onset of Chapter 1, Pilate sings to soothe Ruth, as pregnant with Milkman, she goes into premature labor. As the novel ends, Milkman sings, sending Pilate off into the final phase of the life cycle—the death phase. But Pilate’s death is a form of rebirth because in cyclical time, as one phase ends, another begins.

As Milkman speaks the words to the old blues song Pilate sang at his birth, he links the past—the song of Solomon, and the song of Sugarman—with the present, the song of Sugargirl. The song embraces both the oral tradition of song as memory and history, and naming. And once again, the song is accompanied by flight. First, as Pilate is laid to rest, a bird flies off with her earring, carrying her name and her spirit back to Africa. Then Milkman, who has acquired the knowledge to “sing his aunt off,” follows her, as his “pilot” takes her last journey, leading him to his final destination.

Armed with the knowledge he has acquired from the lessons of his family history and naming, Milkman realizes what is necessary for flight. The key to flying is not trying to master the air the way an airplane does; the key is to surrender yourself to the air. Once Milkman realizes that, he learns flying is as natural as breathing.

Ocean and water motifs are found in Milkman’s desperate need to swim in the ocean, a delayed reaction to the feeling of being landlocked in Chapter 7. Milkman is ecstatic and feels he is on the verge of something—the actualization of flight.

The ocean is a symbol of “universal life,” of “ceaseless movement,” and it is “the source of the generation of all life.” (The Dictionary of Symbols, Cirlot, 230)

For Milkman to submerge himself in water, even if it is not in the sea, is not only a cleansing act, but it is a regenerative act. Earlier, Milkman washed off his shame in the bathtub, but in this instance, the washing of himself in the waters of nature has much greater moral consequences. It is a joyful baptism, in anticipation of a new self that embraces life. This cleansing is a final step before flight.

The following sense impression also appear in this chapter: “A deep sigh escaped from the sack and the wind turned chill. Ginger, a spicy sugared smell, enveloped them.” At the moment of Jake’s release, the air is permeated with the scent of ginger. Ginger continues to be associated with memory, the past, and the flight back home to Africa.

Themes

Themes: Themes and Meanings

A primary theme in *Song of Solomon* is the journey or quest for identity. Milkman is assisted by a number of guides as he seeks and discovers community, including Circe, who helps him in a symbolic return to the womb, and the men of the hunt, who serve as elders guiding a youth to manhood. In the course of his journey, Milkman is initiated into knowledge. One critic has written that he “journeys from spiritual death to rebirth . . . symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight.”

Morrison acknowledges that flight, her central metaphor, is everybody’s secret dream. Flight, symbolizing freedom or escape and found frequently in African American writing, is seen in the Flying African, Milkman’s great-grandfather, who embodies the many folktales of the escaped slave. The novel opens with the failed flight from the hospital roof of a man wearing blue silk wings and closes with the triumphant flight of Solomon and the redemptive flight of Milkman, who has finally learned to “ride” the air.

As a child, Milkman longs to fly; at age five, he feels uncomfortable riding while facing backward on a train because “it was like flying blind.” This comment also suggests that he does not want to look at the past. Later, as he and Guitar are planning to steal Pilate’s sack of gold, they notice a white peacock with a “tail full of jewelry,” apparently escaped from the zoo, and try to catch it. Milkman notes that the bird “can’t fly no better than a chicken,” and Guitar tells him that is because of the weight of its tail; in order to fly, Guitar says, one must give up the things that weigh one down. After he visits Shalimar, Milkman is able to give up the material things that weigh him down, and finally he, like his ancestor, is able to soar.

Character names are used both symbolically and ironically. Milkman—a name that suggests his immaturity and also his symbolic hunger—is emotionally and spiritually “Dead.” Guitar, through his desire for social justice, becomes an instrument of vengeance. The Dead women’s biblical names are allusive and sometimes ironic. The biblical Ruth is famed for her steadfast companionship; Morrison’s Ruth is a companion only to her father, for her husband shuns her. Hagar, named for Abraham’s outcast slave, is cast aside by her lover Milkman. Pilate, named by her illiterate father, who liked the way the name looked in the Bible, does not, like Pontius Pilate, abdicate authority but instead embraces it; she is also the “pilot” who guides both Ruth and Milkman, though Macon rejects her.

The ancient midwife Circe is an ironic counterpart to the beautiful enchantress of Greek mythology; in *Song of Solomon*, she is surrounded not by swine but by dogs with the eyes of children. The scent of ginger and sweet, spicy perfume, symbolic of Africa and the past, lingers around Circe, Shalimar, and the bones of Pilate’s father.

Themes

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's suggested solution can be summed up in the transformation that occurs as Milkman goes on his quest for what he believes is gold his father and his aunt Pilate hid shortly after his father's death. As an alienated Detroit African-American youth of the 1960s, Milkman seeks wealth, the white culture's symbol of power and freedom. He wants to possess things, to control people, and to become free of the influence of his father's materialism. Milkman never finds gold; what he finds is true wealth, knowledge of and pride as well as delight in stories about his ancestors — his family's and his culture's myth.

As a youth wanting power and wealth, Milkman was far more like Macon Dead II than he ever believed. As his sister Magdalena charges, in a very funny but powerful scene, Macon III, like Macon II, has been pissing

on everyone he knew all his life. True to form, Milkman undertakes the quest for selfish reasons. He and Guitar attempted to rob his aunt Pilate, and even Guitar's reason, while troublesome, was less selfish than Milkman's. He wanted money to finance the Days' operations, while his friend robbed the only relative who ever treated him well so he could leave town. Milkman was also in an exploitative relationship with Pilate's granddaughter Hagar, whose suicidal love he was incapable of returning. It is only as his quest imposes its shape on Milkman that he learns that knowledge is more valuable than gold, and that obligations to the family history are more liberating than physical freedom.

His quest forces him into several redefinitions, all of which involve renewed appreciation for the importance of narrative as cultural myth. When he gets to his father's childhood home in Danville, he learns through the old men's stories the value his grandfather had as a cultural hero. Although a martyr, Macon I left a legacy of successful competition with the whites in the agricultural and economic arenas, and his death created a legend of heroic defiance. Milkman had heard all this from his father, but he had refused to understand how the stories of the ancestors function practically as narratives of heroes. Before he leaves Danville, he tells stories of his own father's success to an eager audience, not out of arrogance, but out of an awareness that Macon II's stories can have a similar effect for these old men. Although Morrison quite clearly does not endorse it, Milkman now sees his father's grasping materialism differently.

One final symbolic event in Danville helps prepare Milkman for his redefinition of myth and his ancestral legacy. While seeking information about his grandfather and the gold Pilate supposedly hid, Milkman is instructed by the ancient Circe to find his grandfather's grave. On this journey he falls in a stream, soaking his money, tearing his suit, and breaking his watch. With these assaults pointing out the puniness of his emblems of wealth and power, he is prepared for a more fundamental encounter with his history in Virginia, the heart of the slave country from which his grandfather escaped.

In Virginia Milkman is astonished to learn that the very symbols of his power and influence that served him well in Detroit now emphasize his alienation. He must fight, hunt, bond with the men there, and learn to listen to the earth — it saves his life by warning him of Guitar's first assault — to prepare himself for the final discovery, the pride and lore of his ancestors. Decoding a variety of Shalimar texts, he learns that his grandfather was "Jake" before he was Macon Dead, and that Jake was the youngest son of the legendary Solomon, who flew back to Africa. Solomon was unable to carry Jake with him, although he tried. For Milkman, Solomon's flight is liberating. From a man possessing little self-esteem except what his possessions could bestow, he experiences Dionysian joy in discovering his past. While swimming in a pool, another significant bond with nature, Milkman articulates his glee: "He didn't need no airplane. He just took off; got fed up. *All the way up*. No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby!"

Morrison has told interviewers that she did not intend Solomon's flight as a metaphor, but as a literal homage to slave stories of Africans who repudiated slavery and flew back home. In Solomon's flight she encodes the longing to escape the horrors of slavery, but more significantly for the novel the importance of myth, which transmits the extraordinary doings of heroes. Milkman is liberated by this knowledge, and he returns to Detroit with a far more other-directed vision. He seeks to understand and communicate with his father, whom he now understands to have been too much affected by materialism. He returns eager to share his pride in their ancestors with Pilate, whom he takes to Shalimar to bury her father, whose bones she has unwittingly carried all her adult life. But their return to Shalimar leads to Guitar's final attempt on Milkman's life, and Pilate is his unintended victim. As the novel ends, Milkman "surrenders to the air" and flies to meet his old friend, now his nemesis, in a battle to the death. Whether his flight is literal, thus reenacting Solomon's legendary exit, or figural, suggesting his own liberation, is left for readers to decide.

Finally, Morrison complicates the issue of flight by acknowledging that for liberation there is a cost. Her epigraph suggests that the fathers "may soar" but that the remaining children "may know their names." The story of Solomon's flight is also the story of Jake's abandonment; the twenty-first of Solomon's children must

learn his adulthood alone, and Shalimar's legend of "Ryna's Gulch" grows from the abandoned wife's lamentations. Thus, while Morrison emphasizes that the flight legend is liberating, she also makes it clear that liberation is not without its costs, and on Milkman's return he must acknowledge his responsibility in Hagar's despair and death. Pilate's dying by a bullet Guitar meant for Milkman compounds the costs associated with freedom. But the central theme of *Song of Solomon* is that only by knowing and celebrating the legends of the past can a culture learn freedom.

Themes

Coming-of-Age

In some respects, Milkman's story is a classic *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story about the moral and psychological development of the main character. However, Milkman is thirty-two when he finally comes of age, unlike traditional heroes and heroines of the *Bildungsroman*. In part, Milkman postpones his adulthood because he is comfortable as the pampered only son of an upper-middle-class family. But Milkman also resists the sense of connection and commitment to others that are required of adults. As he seeks the lost gold, he discovers instead his family's history: the ambivalent legacy of his great-grandfather, who abandons his family to fly back to Africa, the injustice of his grandfather's murder, the Indian roots of his grandmother, and the child his father had been. He begins to define himself as the descendant of a man who could fly, but also to recognize the costs of his great-grandfather's transcendence. In so doing, he learns his duty to his family and community. One major turning point occurs when he is lost in the woods, and he realizes that "[a]pparently he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted. And in return he would be ... what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness." Milkman's growth into maturity depends on his realization that in order to share the happiness of others, he must also share their unhappiness and that in some cases he is in fact responsible for the pain of others. It is this lesson that he learns throughout the course of the novel, ultimately becoming a mature, responsible adult.

Atonement and Forgiveness

Closely related to Milkman's coming-of-age is his quest for atonement and forgiveness. He begins to see how selfish he has been, taking from his mother and his sisters, coldly casting his lover off, feeling like he doesn't deserve the few things people ask of him. In order to get the gold, he had been prepared to assault Pilate, a woman who has only been generous to him, an intention of which he is deeply ashamed. But Pilate also teaches him how to seek atonement, for it is Pilate who has returned to the cave for the bones of the man her brother killed, knowing that once you take another human life, you own it. Milkman tries to live up to this, taking a box of Hagar's hair home with him as a way of seeking to atone for his actions. He also hopes to reconcile his fractured family, inspiring forgiveness among them, but he cannot. Morrison shows the limits of atonement and forgiveness when she writes that Milkman's newfound knowledge does not change those around him.

Class Conflict

The class conflict in the novel manifests itself in the relationships of those in the novel. Macon Dead feels ashamed of his lower-class status in relation to his wife and father-in-law. Milkman feels estranged from other Blacks by virtue of his privileged position. Macon feels that his sister threatens his newfound propriety. Guitar's killing rage is in part directed toward Milkman's inherited advantages, and toward Milkman's blasé attitude to life. Corinthians feels ashamed of her poor lover, Porter. Class jealousy, superiority, and shame prevent the characters from having close relationships with each other; although in relation to whites, they are only recognized as having one status: being colored, which is something brought home to Milkman when he is picked up by police for no particular reason other than his race.

Language and Meaning

A continuing preoccupation in the novel is language and meaning, particularly with regard to names and naming. The Deads get their name because of the mistake of a drunk Yankee soldier, yet they claim it anyway. Milkman eventually discovers his family history through his interpretation of the words of a childhood game. Pilate's name comes from the Bible, and she keeps it in a box that dangles from her ear. The Blacks of Southside try to claim the power of naming by calling Mains Avenue Doctor Street. When they are told that it is not Doctor Street, they call it Not Doctor Street, continuing to honor Doctor Foster while acknowledging their powerlessness to name the streets of the city. Language, then, is a double-edged sword: it is imposed on African Americans, but they must claim it, make it their own, and find meaning in it.

Characters

Characters: The Characters

Song of Solomon is the first novel in which Morrison uses a male protagonist. She has said that she chose a man because “he had more to learn than a woman would have,” but she also has noted that she was “amazed at how little men taught one another in the book.” Most of Milkman’s teachers are women, especially Pilate and his mother, but he also learns from Hagar and his two sisters, Lena and Corinthians, who turn on him after enduring years of his indifference. Pilate tells him that “if you take a life, then you own it,” and Milkman eventually accepts his responsibility for Hagar’s death.

Milkman’s moral imperfection is suggested by his shortened left leg, which creates a barely noticeable limp. After the communal hunt, in which he is initiated by the men of Shalimar into comradeship and respect for life and nature, he ceases to limp. The cold, self-centered Milkman matures into a sympathetic, caring man through the discovery of his own past, his ancestors’ suffering, and their struggles against poverty, racism, greed, and pride.

At the same time, Guitar, who is at first wiser and more aware than Milkman, becomes narrower and more fanatical as he immerses himself in the zeal of the Seven Days, a group organized to avenge the murders of blacks with the killing of whites. Guitar loses perspective, locked into a mathematical balance of life that must be maintained without any degree of mercy for either side. However, enough is seen of his past—for example, sugar makes him sick, because his childhood grief for his dead father was stifled with a stick of candy—to allow him to be a sympathetic character rather than a stereotyped terrorist.

Morrison’s women characters still remain her strongest suit, and the best of these is “wide-spirited” Pilate. She is the ancestor, the guide, the pilot, one of the free-walking dark women of Shalimar, wise and unafraid. Pilate is also given mythic overtones. She birthed herself, expelled from the womb after the death of her mother, and she has no navel. Pilate’s knowledge of herbs and magic helps Ruth to conceive Milkman by means of a powder mixed into Macon’s food, and her juju doll warns Macon against harming his wife or the child he does not want. It is Pilate who carries the burden of the past with her in her green tarpaulin, and Pilate who is equally at home in the present.

Ruth, the lemon-skinned daughter of the first African American doctor in town, is a child of privilege but is far less capable of dealing with life than Pilate is. She worships her father in life and death, but she bravely confronts Hagar, who is trying to murder her son.

Hagar, the child-woman whose name means “to forsake,” has had everything she wanted and has been spoiled by the love of her mother and grandmother, yet she cannot have Milkman, and that destroys her. Guitar warns her that if she has so little regard for herself, she cannot expect Milkman to have more, but she cannot hear him. She is an outcast almost by choice, childish and emotionally immature—indeed, Pilate’s “baby.”

Morrison uses the warm, omniscient voice of the storyteller for the novel. This voice, which enables her to move into the minds of her characters whenever she wishes, also echoes the oral tradition that is so much a part of African American history. Moreover, the past is an integral part of her characters’ lives.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Macon Dead III

Macon Dead III, also known as Milkman, the protagonist, a black man in his twenties who grows up when he discovers his connection with his ancestors, especially the founder of his family, his great-grandfather, Solomon. At first, Milkman is a spoiled, self-centered, confused, and immature boy affected greatly by the tense atmosphere of his unhappy home and family. Milkman's family is ruled by his domineering and unsympathetic father, who has no interest in his past and his family heritage. Milkman, however, with the help of his aunt, Pilate, and his friend, Guitar, manages to complete his journey of cultural, historical, and personal discovery with satisfaction even though it puts his life in jeopardy at the conclusion of the novel.

Macon Dead II

Macon Dead II, Milkman's materialistic and unsympathetic father. He is the richest black man in town and cares nothing for people in general, including his wife, daughters, and sister. He rules his household autocratically. His primary interest is in obtaining money and land, and he admonishes Milkman to make this his primary goal.

Ruth Foster Dead

Ruth Foster Dead, Milkman's mother. She is dominated first by her father and then by her husband, Macon Dead II, who rejects her and abuses her physically and mentally. She is spiritually frail and weak. She focuses her life on a water mark on her dining room table and clandestine visits to her father's grave. She is the reason that her son acquired the nickname Milkman—from her extended nursing of him in an attempt to hold on to her son in some way.

Pilate

Pilate, Milkman's aunt and Macon Dead II's sister. Her outstanding physical feature is the absence of a navel, supposedly because her mother died before Pilate was born. She lives with her daughter and grandmother in complete absence of all the material things that her brother finds so necessary. Her value system is in complete opposition to all that her brother and her nephew, at first, find important. She represents family and folk values and aids Milkman in his quest for identity. She also symbolizes humanistic values in that she aids Ruth before the birth of Milkman, enabling her through folk charms to achieve a third pregnancy in spite of the past rejection of her husband. She also aids Ruth in bringing about Milkman's safe birth.

Reba Dead

Reba Dead, Pilate's daughter, a lesser version of her mother. Unlike her mother, Reba has little strength of character and no folk wisdom. Like her mother, she has little regard for materialist things and is unselfish and giving. In the household of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar, Milkman finds warmth, love, and a safe harbor until he can begin his quest.

Hagar Dead

Hagar Dead, Pilate's granddaughter and Milkman's cousin, who becomes Milkman's lover. Like her mother and grandmother, she is unmaterialistic. She gives Milkman her complete love and devotion. She is finally spurned by Milkman and attempts to kill him several times, but she can never carry out her murderous intentions. She believes that Milkman rejects her because her hair and skin are too dark. Finally, she becomes insane and dies of unrequited love.

Guitar Baines

Guitar Baines, a young black man who is a bit older than Milkman and befriends Milkman as a young boy. Guitar and Milkman become best friends, and their friendship grows throughout their youth and young adulthood. Guitar becomes a member of the Seven Days, a racial consciousness group that takes revenge for the unjust murder of African Americans by killing white people. He and Milkman become enemies during their search for gold that they believe was hidden by Milkman's ancestor. At the conclusion of the novel, Guitar is trying to murder Milkman.

Magdalena (Lena) Dead

Magdalena (Lena) Dead and

First Corinthians Dead

First Corinthians Dead, Milkman's boring and dominated sisters. Lena eventually rebels and leaves her parents' household.

Characters

The special appeal of *Song of Solomon* is its well-developed characters, and the principal male characters articulate variations on the theme of materialism and transcendence. Minor characters, including members of the Days, the hunting party in Shalimar, and especially the old men Milkman meets in Danville, are deftly and effectively drawn.

The female characters also create an impressive enrichment on the roles of minorities in a white and male-dominated role. Except for Pilate, none of these efforts could be called successful, but Morrison offers them as sympathetic portraits of women trapped in a culture that does not respect their autonomy.

Milkman's mother is the most submissive, and her deference to white culture and to her father's respectability in the white community is a constant source of friction with her husband. Her behavior, which she explains to Milkman as a result of her feeling "small," suggests resistance to change and desire to exert control. Her nursing Milkman well past his infancy results in his nickname and expresses a reluctance to let her son develop his autonomy. His father tells him of her unnatural reverence for her dead father's hands, a perversity Ruth denies. Milkman later discovers, however, that she makes nocturnal pilgrimages to Dr. Foster's grave site decades after his death.

Another female character who cannot let go of the past is Circe, the wraith-like inhabitant of the mansion owned by the Butlers, who killed Milkman's grandfather in Pennsylvania. She rescued Macon and Pilate after the murder occurred, but she remained a servant of that evil family, and tenaciously keeps the mansion after the final Butler's death — to watch with her own eyes the downfall of the oppressors.

Ruth Dead's daughters, Magdalene and First Corinthians, like their mother, are trapped in ethnic and gender roles from which they do not escape. Both are well educated and able, but Magdalene lives in enraged memory of Macon II's and Milkman's assumptions of male power, and First Corinthians aspires to be a colleague of, but is really a maid for, Michigan's Poet Laureate. Corinthians falls reluctantly in love with a laborer, an attraction she feels demeaning but compelling. Her love, however, may be ennobling. Porter has by the end of the novel resigned from the vigilante group the Seven Days.

The pattern of submission and its consequences, to both ethnic and gender roles, is represented at its extreme by Macon's niece Reba and her daughter Hagar, who is Milkman's lover as well. Both women, while sharing Pilate's unconventional lifestyle and life-affirming qualities, cannot escape from their own perceived need for

male approval. Reba cannot keep her self-esteem without its being reflected in a lover, and her dependency leads to her being exploited and occasionally abused. In a powerful scene, Pilate forcefully persuades Reba's lover that he must cease to harm her daughter or face death at Pilate's hands. Hagar's love for Milkman is, like her mother's dependence, finally suffocating. Guitar warns that Hagar's repeated attempts to kill Milkman represent an obsessive kind of love. When her efforts to force his attention fail and Milkman departs on his quest, Hagar loses all self-esteem. Convinced that she is ugly and poor, she seeks to "improve" herself, to make herself worthy of Milkman's love, by buying clothes and having her hair styled. Her disappointment as these accessories fail leads to despair, then to wasting away and eventually death.

The female character with a healthy self-esteem depends neither on ethnic models nor on men's approval for her self-idea. Always the outcast because orphaned by her mother's death in birthing her, her father's death, and Macon II's disappearance, then consistently ostracized because of her biological anomaly (she has no navel), Pilate is through her life's journey rejected by lovers and communities. She creates her life on the periphery of respectability; in Detroit she sells homemade wine with the result that her brother shuns her.

Yet Pilate is the novel's source of life and forgiveness. She does not despise the men and communities that reject her, and she aids Ruth in her efforts to bring Milkman into the world. Macon II sought to force a spontaneous abortion. Pilate later assumes an Aunt Jemima's role to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail after they have robbed her. Morrison implies that Pilate is capable of genuine metamorphosis when Milkman believes she actually diminished in stature when acting deferential toward the white cop, then resumes her natural height. Although she fails to prevent Hagar's plunge into despair, her song at the funeral is one of the novel's finest moments, affirming the distinction between eros, in this novel generally a destructive emotion, and agape, or universal love. Her epitaph for Hagar is "And she was *loved*" She echoes this sentiment with her own dying words. Shot by Guitar, she tells Milkman her one regret: "I wish I'd a knowed more people ... If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more."

Thus the novel's most ostracized character is its apostle of love. Morrison supports this paradox by showing that Pilate differs from other characters in her veneration for the past and her respect for places. She mentions frequent ghostly visits from her father and mother and she looks to these ghosts for guidance (Morrison also spoke often with her dead father while writing *Song of Solomon*). From every place she stays, she keeps a rock as remembrance and her confused obedience to her father's ghost's comment "You just can't fly off and leave a body" — actually a complaint against his father, Solomon — leads her to carry her father's skeleton for years in the mistaken belief that they are those of a man she thinks her brother inadvertently killed. By design Morrison associates Pilate's respect for the past and for places with her powers of love and forgiveness.

Critical Essays

Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are designed to test your understanding of the novel by giving you the opportunity to analyze some of the important themes of *Song of Solomon*. Following each topic is a sample outline to help direct you to the main points of the topic and to encourage your own ideas.

Topic #1

Milkman goes through several stages in the growing-up process to become a humane and morally-responsible adult. Discuss the most significant turning points in his march toward manhood in *Song of Solomon*. Explain their impact on Milkman's character.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Milkman's progress in becoming a morally-responsible and humane character in Song of Solomon is primarily a result of his becoming educated in his family's past, in his understanding of nature, and in his new-found respect for women.*

II. Learning about his family's past

- A. Pilate's values as an alternative to Macon's
- B. Milkman's father did not always have such values
- C. His grandfather Jake's importance to the Shalimar community
- D. Finds out Solomon was a flying African

III. Learning from nature

- A. Material possessions are useless in nature
- B. Man cannot control nature
- C. Nature can overpower man
- D. Man can communicate with and learn about living from nature

IV. Learning about women

- A. Learns Ruth and his sisters are not subservient to men, and do not exist only to nurture men
- B. Hagar and other women do not exist solely for his physical pleasure
- C. Pilate and Circe (and to a lesser extent, Reba) do not fit in "traditional" gender categories
- D. Sweet is Milkman's first reciprocal relationship

Topic #2

There are essentially three types of women in *Song of Solomon*. The Macon Dead family women (Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians) live in the domestic realm where they are oppressed by men. Pilate, Circe, and to a lesser extent Reba, live in a mythic world of their own making where they are essentially self-sufficient. The impressionable Hagar exists in the gap between these two worlds and is ill at ease in both. Compare and contrast these three types of women and the worlds they inhabit.

Outline

I. Thesis statement: *Compare and contrast the three types of women in Song of Solomon and the worlds they inhabit. Compare the domestic realm of Ruth and her daughters, the mythic realm of Pilate, Circe, and Reba, and the consumer-oriented realm that Hagar inhabits.*

II. Domestic realm (Ruth, Lena, Corinthians)

- A. Function as domestics in the household
- B. Are inferiors to and serve men
- C. Have no independent existences throughout most of the novel; dependent on men
- D. Cultivate nature to compensate for life-denying existences symbolized by the artificial rose petals
 - 1. Ruth's flowers and goldfish; Ruth's garden in Milkman's dream
 - 2. Lena's maple tree

III. Mythic realm (Pilate, Circe, Reba)

- A. Create own rules and codes of behavior
- B. Are conjurers or sage-like, use incantations and folk remedies
- C. Are not male-dependent
- D. Act from a source of power and are in sync with nature

IV. Consumer-oriented realm (Hagar)

- A. Struggles in gap between Pilate and Ruth's world
- B. Lacks support group to determine what is of value
- C. Has a perverted sense of self
- D. Dependent on a white standard of beauty as basis for self-worth; male-dependent

Topic #3

Consider the circumstances that contribute to the change in Guitar Bains' character. How was he scarred in his childhood to such a degree that at one point in the novel he says, "Fair is one more thing I've given up"?

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Guitar Bain's character changes from a living, breathing human being to one who lives for an ideal. Consider how his childhood conflicts, the death of his father and the aftermath, contribute to his adult biases.*

II. Childhood conflicts

- A. Father killed when Guitar was four years old
- B. Mother accepts payoff from white sawmill owner
 - 1. Four ten-dollar bills
 - 2. Divinity candy
- C. Mother cannot cope with husband's loss and runs away
- D. Guitar avoids relationships because everything he ever loved died

III. Adult Biases

- A. Respect for nature (life of a doe) changes to lack of respect: does not value human life
- B. Joins Seven Days and judges people based on their skin color
- C. Eventually ceases to trust even Milkman
- D. Calls association with Seven Days an "act of love" as he hones ability to kill

Critical Essays: Masterplots II: Juvenile & Young Adult Literature Series Song of Solomon Analysis

Although not intended for a young adult audience, *Song of Solomon* does have several themes useful for mature teenage readers. Most important for this audience is Milkman's coming-of-age as he learns to understand his sexuality, his relationship to his parents and family, his role in society, and his position on important social issues.

Incest is a prominent theme in the book and greatly affects Milkman's sexual identity. Readers learn that his mother and her father had an intimate sexual relationship. Milkman received his nickname because someone saw his mother breast-feeding him during his late preschool years. His first sexual experience is with his cousin Hagar, and their relationship lasts for several years until he breaks it off and she becomes violent toward him and herself. Evidence also suggests improprieties between Macon II and Pilate: He cared for her as an infant, and his intimate knowledge of her body holds a permanent place in his imagination.

The strained relationship between Milkman and his parents provides a related theme. As a child and young man, he worships his mother and cannot understand his father's seemingly cruel treatment of her. When his father tells him about her incestuous relationship with her father, Macon remembers the breast-feeding incident and comes to reject both of his parents—his father for telling the truth, and his mother for her role in the truth. Milkman seeks surrogate parent figures: As a paternal confidant, he turns to his friend Guitar, and, as a mother figure, he relies on Pilate. Milkman must also learn his role in his sisters' lives by recognizing that they are women with human desires and that he has no right to hinder their relationships with men.

While many of Milkman's family issues are settled during the novel, he never fully understands his position in society. At the age of thirty-one, he works only sporadically for his father and spends most of his time loitering with Guitar. Milkman does not know what it means to be a mature, responsible adult. Morrison suggests reasons for this failure in themes relating to race and class. The most prominent of these is black exploitation of other black people. Milkman's mother is the daughter of Mercy's only black doctor. An ether addict, Dr. Foster is not a good doctor: He is elitist and racist, and he fools people into respecting him. Macon II owns most of Mercy's black housing and is a slumlord; he extracts high rents but does not maintain the houses. Macon II does not reinvest his profits into existing black working-class neighborhoods; instead, he builds a lakeside resort community for rich black families. Milkman cannot accept this aspect of his father's business. A more political issue is introduced with Milkman's friend Guitar, who is a member of the Seven Days, a group of seven black men who seek to even the score between black and white people. When white crimes against black victims go unpunished, members of the group commit identical crimes against white victims. While Milkman recognizes racism in the white legal system, he cannot commit himself to helping to change the way things are, at least not in Guitar's manner. Milkman must come to terms not only with his family history, but also with his role in society.

Critical Essays: Masterpieces of Women's Literature Song of Solomon Analysis

In many of Morrison's stories, seeking or denying one's cultural roots is a major concern. Milkman Dead, the young man who is searching for independence in *Song of Solomon*, leaves his home to find gold. Instead, he discovers the intricacies of his family's heritage, a discovery that connects him to life and, ironically, simultaneously frees him from life. Milkman begins to recognize the links between past experiences and present circumstances. Consequently, he develops an understanding of his mother's abnormal sexual behaviors and his father's obsession with owning things.

Ruth is dead inside, frightened of her husband and bored by her life. She searches for some sign of her own purpose and usefulness in life by creating elaborate arrangements to cover a watermark on her mahogany dining table. Much more alarming, she breast-feeds her son until he is old enough to walk and talk, a fact that is discovered by a town gossip who gives the boy the nickname "Milkman," which stays with him for the rest of his life.

Macon's obsession with gaining wealth and owning property is symbolized by his keys, which he counts constantly and fondles frequently in order to gain a sense of security. Macon believes that class elevation will protect him and his family from racism. He marries Ruth because she is a doctor's daughter, not because he

loves her. He parades his well-dressed daughters before his lower-class tenants but rushes to guard the girls when a tenant tries to touch them. Furthermore, when Macon collects rent from these tenants, he shows little compassion for the plight of those who have limited funds. Although Morrison does not focus primarily on the class/race relationship in this novel, this concern appears to be a major theme. Rather than seeking truth or taking flight, Macon decides to live by the standards set by his capitalistic society.

Pilate refuses to do the same thing. Her only participation in society is her business of selling homemade wine, the profits from which she, Reba, and Hagar either squander or give away. Milkman says that he cannot identify the source of comfort in her home, a home of so few material comforts. Pilate's daughter, her granddaughter, her bag of bones, and her homemade earring, with which a bird flies away after she dies, seem to be her only treasures.

The flying motif of the story is based on the African myth of enslaved Africans flying back to the African continent. Whether Milkman's great grandfather died, simply left, or actually flew away from the field is undetermined. Yet the empowerment of such a myth and the oppression it suggests—an oppression so strong that it engendered such wishes or such power—attest the Africans' faith in their ability to transcend their subjugation.

The importance of ancestors and history is indicated by Morrison's emphasis on naming. The incorrect, altered, and denied names in the story create distance between the characters and their identities. When Macon's father, who is actually named Jake, registers with the Freedman's Bureau, a government organization that requires the registration of all emancipated slaves, the clerk makes errors that result in the name "Macon Dead" becoming his legal name. Macon's father begins the Dead tradition of blindly choosing the names of female children from the Bible. This is how Pilate, Reba, Hagar, and Milkman's sisters, Magdalene "Lena" Dead and First Corinthians Dead, get their names.

The names in the community are also important indications of the struggle between those in power and those in subjugation. The African Americans in the city decide to refer to the street on which the only "colored doctor" had lived as "Doctor Street," but the city's legislators order that any mail addressed to "Doctor Street" be directed to the dead letter office. In an official notice, the legislators note the street's name as "Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street." Therefore, as "a way to keep their memories alive and please the legislators as well," the African Americans refer to the street as "Not Doctor Street." In a similar way, they rename the Mercy Hospital "No Mercy Hospital," to emphasize the hospital's refusal to treat African American patients.

Critical Essays: Critical Context (Masterplots II: African American Literature)

Although early critical reaction was somewhat muted, *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's third novel, won the 1977 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and became the first novel by a black writer chosen as a main selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club since Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). In this book, Morrison seems to have found her true voice as a storyteller, although from the beginning of her career she has included in her work features of the oral tradition.

Morrison has always been aware of her audience. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), was written because she saw no stories about black girls growing up, and she decided to write a book that she would have wanted to read. She has frequently stated that her writing is an attempt to present the world from an African American perspective. Morrison uses many characteristics of African American art in her writing, stressing the importance of involving readers directly in the work and including a chorus, "meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action," and always an ancestor-figure as a guide. She believes that a historical connection is essential for awareness. "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself," she has

written.

Song of Solomon includes numerous references to civil rights figures of the 1950's and 1960's. Emmett Till, murdered in Mississippi, and the four girls who died in the 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church are specifically mentioned, as are Malcolm X and Arkansas governor Orval Faubus. Morrison believes strongly that "black people have a story, and that story has to be heard." Morrison's receipt of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature provided clear evidence that "that story" was being heard—and appreciated—around the world.

Critical Essays: Critical Context (Masterplots II: Juvenile & Young Adult Literature Series)

Toni Morrison was awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, and *Song of Solomon*, her third novel, is one of her best works. Young adult protagonists coming to terms with their African American culture are common to all of her novels, but especially *The Bluest Eye* (1972) and *Beloved* (1988). Similar themes can be found in works by other African American writers. The gothic use of family history to explore generations appears in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and *Mama Day* (1988). Critiques of African American class systems and black landlords also appear in *Linden Hills*, as well as in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* (1958). In its historiographical reassembling of a dislocated past—as a cultural detective story—*Song of Solomon* resembles Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). If one interprets Milkman's journey to self-knowledge as a growing connection with his extended family and the larger African American community, his story is the converse of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the protagonist severs all ties with society. Morrison's use of Magical Realism to narrate a family history disrupted by slavery and racism has much in common with such postcolonial fiction as Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967; *One-Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981).

Song of Solomon is taught primarily in college literature classes, but it would also be appropriate for mature high school readers and in African American culture classes.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

The first African American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993), Toni Morrison has achieved a place in the first rank of American writers and is considered by many critics the greatest American novelist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Born Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931, Morrison earned a bachelor of arts degree from Howard University in 1953 and a master of arts degree from Cornell University in 1955, writing her master's thesis on the theme of suicide in the fiction of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, whose influence is apparent in her novels. She later taught at Howard and at the State University of New York at Purchase and served as a senior editor at Random House. She received a National Book Award nomination in 1975 for her second novel, *Sula* (1973), the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977 for her fourth novel, *Song of Solomon*, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987). Perhaps more than any other writer, Morrison is responsible for asserting the influence of African American literature and culture on American culture as a whole. She uses modernistic techniques such as multiple narrators, interior monologues, and discursive, nonchronological narration, so Morrison's fiction is highly complex, but because she possesses a rare skill in breathing life into settings and characters, her prose is also highly readable. *Song of Solomon* combines these qualities in a narrative that frequently employs the grotesque and occasionally the bizarre, yet seldom strains credulity. Telling the story of one man's quest for identity, the novel explores several important African American themes.

The primary theme of the novel is gaining identity through the recovery of a stolen and a forgotten past. Multiple narrators in *Song of Solomon* reveal the plot slowly, as Milkman learns his own story piecemeal from his father, his mother, Guitar, Pilate, and the people he meets in Pennsylvania and in Virginia on his search for the lost gold. In one sense these characters serve as guides on a journey in the long tradition of the epic quest in Western literature. In another sense, they are red herrings, tempting the reader to a misreading of the novel just as Western materialism tempts Milkman and his family to misread their own history, from which they are cut off by slavery, by the drunken Union Army officer's accidental renaming of Milkman's grandfather, and by their quest for a materialistic white lifestyle. Milkman's parents and sisters have little knowledge of their history. Like many African Americans, they derived their identities from absence rather than presence. They are, after all, the Deads, they live on Not Doctor Street, and their values are borrowed from the dominant white culture. Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster Dead, is known chiefly as Dr. Foster's daughter, and her family history seems to begin with her father. Milkman's father, Macon Dead, remembers very little of his heritage but, like his father, embraces the American values of rugged individualism and the relentless pursuit of profit. He disowns Pilate, evicts Guitar Bains's family from one of his rental properties because they owe four dollars in back rent, coldly demands that the deranged Porter pay his rent before committing suicide, and develops lakeshore vacation homes in which other middle-class black families isolate themselves from the African American community. Milkman's middle-aged, unmarried sisters, Corinthians and Lena, are defined chiefly by the absence of husbands. Milkman himself acquires his own identity from his mother's nursing and from his father's success in business. In seeking Pilate's gold, he seeks his own identity through the materialistic success valued by his father.

The gold, like the quest motif, is a red herring, one of many in the novel. Milkman finds no gold but instead discovers his own identity through a rite of passage in Shalimar, Virginia, where he becomes a warrior (he fights a local man with a broken bottle) and a hunter (the locals take him raccoon hunting, but they kill a fiercer animal, a bobcat). He becomes a part of a community (nearly everyone in Shalimar is surnamed Solomon, the real surname of Milkman's grandfather), and for the first time he gives and receives love. He also learns that the real gold in Shalimar is his African heritage, recovered through his rite of passage and through the song of the children. The novel's Old Testament title, *Song of Solomon*, is itself a red herring. It refers not to the Bible of the dominant white culture but to African American folklore. It allows the reader to experience vicariously Milkman's epiphany. Milkman's journey is not an epic quest in the Western tradition but a rediscovery of African roots.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Song of Solomon, the first of Toni Morrison's works to become a best-seller, also established her as a major American writer. As Carol Iannone wrote in *Commentary*, "[i]n *Song of Solomon* Miss Morrison at last permits herself to work her material through." The novel won Morrison the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977, and though most critics found flaws in the book, on the whole they praised Morrison's blend of fantasy and reality and her use of myths and folktales to portray Black life. In an early review, Anne Tyler commented, "I would call the book poetry, but that would seem to be denying its considerable power as a story. Whatever name you give it, it's full of magnificent people, each of them complex and multi-layered, even the narrowest of them narrow in extravagant ways." Other critics have also praised the power of her language; Vivian Garnick, in *The Village Voice*, wrote that "[t]he world she creates is thick with an atmosphere through which her characters move slowly, in pain, ignorance and hunger. And to a very large degree Morrison has the compelling ability to make one believe that all of us ... are penetrating that dark and hurtful terrain—the feel of a human life—simultaneously." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Reynolds Price praised the novel's "negotiations with fantasy, fable, song and allegory" as "organic, continuous and unpredictable," while Maureen Howard noted in *The Hudson Review* that *Song of Solomon* is both "rich in its use of common speech" and "sophisticated in its use of literary traditions and language."

Song of Solomon was the first of Morrison's books to have a male hero, but some critics, including Vivian Garnick, have written that Milkman never really comes to life as a character. Some scholars, including Reynolds Price and Bill Moyers, have also wondered at Morrison's exclusion of white characters, but as Cynthia Price wrote, "the destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of Black lives." Price noted that Morrison's artistic challenge is one in which her characters must act in spite of the limitations placed on them, and that Morrison turns to myth because of, as Roger Rosenblatt suggested, its "acknowledgement of external limitation and the anticipation of it."

Critics have also commented on the "diffuse" nature of the narrative; as Rainwater pointed out, "Chapter 4, for example, skips to Milkman's adulthood, some twelve years after the events of the previous chapter. However, almost immediately, the narrator begins to search backward through time to account for the present. This attempt, however, laterally deflects attention onto the stories of other characters. Before the chapter concludes, the narrative has taken at least four different directions in an effort to amass information convergent upon, and apparently explanatory of, Milkman's life." Some early critics, such as *Newsweek's* Margo Jefferson, saw "a structural conflict between these embellishments and the demands of Macon's tale which weakens the focus" but later critics have seen, with A. Leslie Harris of *MELUS*, that the plot is not "meandering and confused" but rather "enhanced by its very discontinuity." Harris called Morrison's subplots "meticulously articulated," and with other later critics, saw Morrison's inclusion of the stories of other characters as enriching the novel as a whole.

In addition to noting the parallels between Milkman's story and the myth of Icarus, recent critics have examined the implications of Morrison's use of an African-American folktale as a source for her flying African, Solomon. As Michael Awkward noted in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*, the most common variants of this tale present a group of flying Africans, who undertake a communal exodus. By contrast, Morrison's version of the myth presents a solitary flyer and, "while the narrative suggests that the offspring of the legendary Solomon do not perceive themselves as adversely affected by his act—they, in fact, construct praise songs in recognition of his accomplishments—his mate Ryna, who bears his twenty-one children, is so aggrieved by her loss that she goes mad." As Cynthia A. Davis maintained in *Toni Morrison*, this artistic choice makes Morrison's version of the Icarus story a conflict "between 'absolute' freedom and social responsibility," suggesting Morrison's alteration of Western ideas and forms to fit the concerns of the Black community.

Song of Solomon remains one of Morrison's most well-regarded works, as well as a novel beloved by readers. In the twenty-three years since its publication, its positive critical reputation has grown even stronger, and it continues to be read, taught, and studied.

Essays and Criticism: Morrison's Depictions of the Male Characters in *Song of Solomon*

In *Toni Morrison*, Cynthia A. Davis writes that the narrative trajectories of Toni Morrison's novels are driven by "the Black characters' choices within the context of oppression." In *Song of Solomon*, as Jill Matus notes in her *Toni Morrison*, Morrison investigates "how Black men in America survive and how they position themselves in relation to dominant social and political structures" as well as to their own families and communities. Morrison presents the limited array of choices available to Black men through her portrayals of three living Black men, Milkman and Macon Dead and Guitar Bains, and through her mythic evocation of Dead ancestors, the first Macon Dead and his father, Solomon. As Matus notes, each man must either choose between "fight" and "flight" or find some way to combine the two alternatives. In this essay, I will examine each of the "choices within the context of oppression" that the Black male characters make as a way of

illuminating Morrison's concerns in *Song of Solomon*.

Though Morrison's novel is a coming-of-age story, it follows the coming-of-age of a character, Milkman Dead, who is thirty-two years old and has been able to avoid making any choices about his life. Milkman is trapped by the circumstances of his life: within his family and the Black community, he is privileged and pampered, but in the larger world, he is limited by his race. He is separated from the Black community by his class, and hindered from advancing in the larger world by his race. As a result, Milkman avoids making choices or commitments, and is disconnected from his community. As Guitar notes, "[y]ou don't live nowhere. Not Not Doctor Street or Southside." Milkman doesn't "live" on Not Doctor Street, the home of his family, because of the negative history between his parents, but he is also disconnected from Southside, the working class Black community, because of his privilege. Indeed, Milkman's father, Macon, owns rental property in Southside and does not hesitate to evict tenants who have not paid their rent, as he does to Guitar's grandmother in one early scene.

Macon is portrayed by Morrison as angry and harsh, but throughout the course of the story we develop some sympathy for him. We learn that Macon's father valued many of the same things that Macon does, but that his death perverted Macon's values. Morrison writes of Milkman's realization that

[a]s the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what his father loved: property, good solid property, the boun-tifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring—that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death.

Milkman's father, the second Macon Dead, loves what his father loved, but he also makes choices to try to keep himself safe from his father's fate. Instead of competing with whites, as the first Macon Dead did, he exploits his fellow Blacks. This is a historically accurate portrait of the Black middle class during this period; unlike today, the Black middle class of the 40s, 50s and 60s mostly worked in, and earned their living from, the Black community. But Macon's harshness toward the members of that community also separates him from it, in contrast to his father. An early scene in the novel has Macon listening to his estranged sister singing, emphasizing the joy and life that Macon has given up for the sake of propriety. Unlike the men of his father's community, the Blacks of Southside do not see Macon's success as belonging to them in any way, perhaps because his success comes at their expense. By contrast, the first Macon Dead was an example to all, as Milkman learns when he journeys to Danville and meets his grandfather's contemporaries:

He had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and as broke as a convict, with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife, and in one year he'd leased ten acres, the next ten more. Sixteen years later he had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. "You see?" the farm said to them. "See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back to it. Stop sniveling," it said. "Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too!"

The first Macon Dead's triumph tells the men of Danville to "stop picking around the edges of the world." By contrast, his son Macon knows that "as a Negro he [isn't] going to get a big slice of the pie" and is content with the "bit of pie filling oozing around the edge of the crust." Macon's caution comes from the trauma of his

father's death: the first Macon Dead was killed by whites who wanted his farm. Though he sat with a shotgun for five days and nights, willing to fight for his farm and his family, the first Macon Dead still couldn't protect himself or what he owned. In a world in which whites control both the courts and the culture, Macon's choice to fight resulted in his death, a death which haunts his descendants.

The first Macon Dead's choice to fight is contrasted with the choice of his father, Solomon, who chooses flight. The first Macon Dead claims his right to an American life, while his father has despaired of ever being accepted into American society and flown back to Africa. This action, which Morrison bases on an African-American folktale, is both a celebration and a loss; as Michael Awkward notes in his *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*, "the empowered Afro-American's flight, celebrated in a blues song whose decoding catapults Milkman into self-conscious maturity, is a solitary one ... He leaves his loved ones, including his infant son Jake, whom he tries unsuccessfully to carry with him, with the task of attempting to learn for themselves the secrets of transcendence." In giving up the fight for a place in American society, Solomon also abandons his American-born offspring. This corresponds with Milkman's own quest for flight, in which he abandons his lover Hagar and abdicates his familial and communal responsibilities.

Throughout the novel, in fact, Milkman's friend Guitar Bains reminds Milkman that he should feel a sense of connection to his community. Guitar himself takes the "fight" strategy to its logical extreme; he defines "self-defense" as defense of the community, and charges himself with keeping the ratio of Blacks and whites constant through "eye for an eye" justice. Yet Guitar also rejects love and familial ties, and in what A. Leslie Harris calls "his total commitment to death," ultimately tries to kill his "brother" Milkman. Guitar justifies his violence by arguing that it comes from love, but he separates himself from the very community he claims to be protecting. In her portrayal of Guitar, Morrison suggests that the "fight" strategy costs too much, just as in her portrayal of Solomon, she suggests that "flight" comes at too high a price.

In her portrayal of Milkman, Morrison begins to suggest a viable strategy for Black men struggling in a racist society. Milkman honors both the "fight" and "flight" strategies, as Matus notes when she writes that "the alternatives of flight and fight come together in the final scene of the novel" when "as fleet and bright as a lodestar [Milkman] wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother." Milkman has learned to honor both strategies by coming to respect his ancestors, who were forced to choose between the two, and through his love for Pilate, who has fought for his life and who could fly without leaving the ground. He has also learned a deep appreciation for the power of language, which Morrison seems to argue is the most effective strategy of both fight and flight. It is through language that the past can be acknowledged, mourned, celebrated, resisted, and transcended. Milkman realizes that names, words and stories can keep the past alive in spite of death: "Shalimar left [his children], but it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive." It is through a sense of commitment and respect for the past, then, that Milkman, unlike his ancestors, can both fly and fight.

Source: Jane Elizabeth Dougherty, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2000. Dougherty is a Ph.D. candidate at Tufts University.

Essays and Criticism: Song of Solomon: Raising Dead Fathers

Song of Solomon (1977) is a novel about fathers, or more specifically, the loss of fathers. At its heart are two revelatory incidents of traumatic loss which govern the novel's investigation of the history and future of African American men in relation to society and their own families. A brother and sister, Pilate and Macon Dead (the second), witness their father being shot to death by greedy white neighbours who resent his prosperity and covet his land. But this father himself experienced the traumatic loss of his father, who, legend

has it, decided to fly away from America and his condition of enslavement. He attempted to take his baby son Jake with him, but dropped the child a few moments after he took off in flight back to Africa. His bereft wife lost her mind through grief and the child was reared by others. Knowledge of the second of these traumas, withheld almost to the close of the novel, explains not only the riddle on which the novel turns, but reveals the generational transmission of traumatic effects that hampers all the Dead men, descendants of Jake, who is also known as the first Macon Dead. The multivalent meanings of Solomon's flight in the novel allow Morrison to celebrate an early and marvellous escape from slavery, while also registering the trauma of those who must function without the father. Though Solomon's flight may offer inspiration as a version of the celebratory legend of the Flying African, the novel also emphasises the grief and mourning of those who were abandoned.

The trauma of the father's abandonment or death infects the descendants of Solomon—as it does the text—with a series of distortions in memory and obstacles to interpretation. Among these, for example, is the cryptic admonition that Pilate's father utters when he appears to her on a number of occasions after his death. Guiltily, she interprets his saying that you can't just fly off and leave a body as an injunction to return to the bones of the man she and Macon left dead in the cave. When we later learn the history of Jake, we understand that his poignant refrain relates repeatedly the central loss of his own childhood—the fact that he was the body left when his father flew off. Another example is the name of Macon Dead, created by a slip of the pen. Failing to fill the information in the correct boxes, the Yankee clerk at the Freedmen's Bureau takes the place of origin as the first name, writing the condition of the father in the box for the surname. Though one point about this history of naming is that a careless drunk official has the power to change the name of a family, another, and more significant, point is that the new name further emphasises the death of the father. Like the riddle of the children's song, which tells the story of Solomon's flight but cannot be understood until Milkman can hear it properly, the name 'Dead' is a riddle, which also draws attention to the question of the father's survival. In Milkman's world, the 1930s to the 1960s, the father is 'already Dead'. Milkman tells his friend Guitar about the naming:

'Say, you know how my old man's daddy got his name?'

'Uh uh. How?' 'Cracker gave it to him.' 'Sho 'nough?'

'Yep. And he took it. Like a fuckin sheep. Somebody should have shot him.'

'What for? He was already Dead.'

In the genealogy of the Deads, the trauma of paternal loss reveals one father who flew away and one who died violently at the hands of whites while trying to make good in America. The two instances record different responses to life in racist America, each of which entails traumatic consequences—Solomon miraculously flies off, becoming a symbol of transcendence and escape, but bequeathing also a legacy of bereavement, loss and forgetting; Jake stands his ground but is cut down, leaving his family similarly bereft. Both modes raise the question of how black men in America survive and how they position themselves in relation to dominant social and political structures. In confronting the loss of the father, Morrison's novel looks at the ways in which the history of its consequences might be rewritten.

The extent to which the novel is focused on the traumatic loss of the father may be gauged in the narrator's accounts of Macon Dead's death. Early in the novel, after Milkman has returned from talking with his strange aunt Pilate, whom his father has forbidden him to visit, Milkman raises the question of his grandfather's death. In the course of this clandestine visit, Pilate has given Milkman her account of her father's violent death and now Macon is moved to remember and talk about the event:

His son's questions had shifted the scenery. He was seeing himself at twelve, standing in Milkman's shoes and feeling what he himself had felt for his own father. The numbness that

had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching violently in the dirt.

The death of the first Macon Dead affects not only his son, but, as Milkman later learns, an entire community of men who took Macon as an exemplum of success and self-improvement. Talking to the men of his father's generation in Danville, Pennsylvania, Milkman functions as

the ignition that gunned their memories. The good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same—and head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time. Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog slaughterer....

Macon Dead seems to preach to them in the same style in which Baby Suggs in [Morrison's] *Beloved* will speak to the feed slaves. Whereas she tells black folk that they have to love themselves because no one else is going to love their flesh, Macon's farm and attitude to life speak of helping oneself:

We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! Grab it. Grab this land. Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!

But, the narrator continues, 'they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches. And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still'.

Macon Dead (the second) takes to heart that injunction to 'rent it, buy it, sell it, own it' by becoming a heartless landlord. Setting great store by the symbols of power and success—the keys in his pocket, the big Packard in which he takes the family for a joyless Sunday ride—he relentlessly pursues the bourgeois dream. Only his visit to Pilate, secretly at night in order to hear her sing with her daughter and granddaughter, suggests the vestigial remains of an emotional life. 'As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down'. For the most part, Macon Dead has spent his life suffering from a dissociation of feeling. Milkman meditates on his father's life:

And his father. An old man now, who acquired things and used people to acquire more things. As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring—that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death.

The loss of the father as a central concern of the novel is also expressed in the case of Guitar Bains—'my father died when I was four. That was the first leaving and the hardest'. Bains' s father dies from traumatic amputation—his body is sawn in half in an accident that exposes the exploitation of 'coloured' workers in unsafe working conditions. The children are given a sack of 'Divinity'—candy to recompense them for the loss of their father, and forever afterwards Guitar is sick to his stomach at the thought, let alone the taste, of sweet things. However, he confesses later in the novel that it was not really the candy that made him sick but his mother's smiling gratitude for the four ten-dollar bills that the foreman gave her. Guitar recalls the horrific sight of his father, lying in the coffin, his body sliced vertically in two halves, and the fact that his mother bought the children peppermint rock with some of the money the sawmill owner gave her. In Guitar's reckoning there are no blandishments, no sweet things capable of buying off black claim and rage. 'Don't let them Kennedys fool you' is the warning that concludes this account of his father. His desire for the gold that

Milkman believes now hangs in a sack in Pilate's house is not cupidity but vengeance—he wants it to fund the Seven Days' reprisal activities.

The quest motif in the novel, to which critics have drawn much attention, is specifically a quest to understand the father's trauma and the genealogy of the paternal line. By following the trail that brings him to understand the fate of his grandfather and great-grandfather, Milkman feels 'on his own skin', as it were, the inextricability of personal and public history. To understand the trauma of the lost father in the Dead genealogy is to recognise the forces of history that have produced that trauma. If history is 'precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas' then the personal, quotidian, mythological history of Milkman's family is not just Dead history; it implicates a wide range of others and it is relevant not only in the context of the novel, but also to the 1990s. Morrison engages Milkman in his people's collective history by sending him on a quest for his own familial, paternal past. It is indeed a quest to raise the Dead fathers. When Milkman is alone in the forest during the night of hunting, it is as if he is protected and aided by a mothering grandfather: 'Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather'. The quest functions as quests traditionally do, and Milkman predictably recovers pride in his heritage, wisdom to face difficult tasks, and a newly crystallising sense of identity. "'My great granddaddy could fly! Goddam! ... He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!'"

Milkman was born, we recall, to discover the meanings of flight. His mother went into labour at the time that Robert Smith leapt from the top of a building in what appears initially to be a suicidal imitation of Icarus. Smith's cryptic note, 'I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all' cannot be decoded until much later in the novel when we understand his involvement with the Seven Days, but it serves usefully at the outset of the novel to raise questions about flying, and in particular, flying away. Milkman's governing desire as a child is to fly, to the extent that when he learns humans are not fitted for it, he is profoundly disappointed: 'To live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother'. Flight, however, as Morrison gradually reveals in the novel, is not always what it seems. Whereas Robert Smith looked like a 'nutwagon', an Insurance Agent who had flipped out, he turns out to be a member of the Seven Days, strained to the point of suicide because he is unable to deal with the pressures of his commitment. The Seven Days is a group that responds in kind to racial violence, representing the 'fight' rather than 'flight' alternative to oppression and persecution. Milkman's grandfather, Solomon, represents the alternative of 'flight'. The alternatives of flight and fight come together in the final scene of the novel as Milkman leaps into the air to grapple with Guitar—an act of confronting, surrendering and soaring.

Yet even as Morrison allows Milkman to experience elevation and pride in the legends of his flying ancestor, the text does not lose sight of the loss on the other side of celebration. For every joyous escape, every transcendent flyer, there is a grounded wife and mother. For every Leap there is a Gulch, a Ryna for a Solomon. The quintessential 'blue note' in the Solomon myth is Ryna, whose weeping and wailing symbolises the distress of those left behind. Morrison therefore uses the myth of the flying African both to celebrate and to mourn. As Milkman discovers that he is the successor of his flying forebear, the reader begins to see the hapless Hagar as a latter-day incarnation of her ancestor, Ryna. When Milkman hears the song the children are singing in the playground, his recriminations about Hagar are associated with the line that bemoans Solomon's leaving: 'And she stood there like a puppet strung up by a puppet master who had gone off to some other hobby. *O Solomon don't leave me here*'. And when Susan Byrd is telling Milkman the history of Solomon and Ryna she remarks,

You don't hear of women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess, but I always thought it was trying to take care of the children by themselves, you know what I mean?

Hagar is the price of Milkman's ticket to self-understanding and maturation, just as Ryna and her children were the price of Solomon's triumphant flight.

In the light of ongoing debates about father-lessness in relation to African American families (debates initiated to a large extent by the Moyni-han report of the 1960s and manifested in the 1990s in Louis Farrakhan's orchestration of a 'million man march' on Washington) Morrison's novel speaks to concerns about male commitment and responsibility. In some ways, *Songs of Solomon* can be characterized as a mythologising of desertion. Solomon gives leaving a good name because his reasons for escape are inarguable and his mode of leaving is spectacular enough to command awe, inspiration and celebration. Rather than pathologise the father who leaves, Morrison recovers the history of good reasons for taking flight. The flying African myth also functions here as a consolatory myth—men leave, but they do so in response to intolerable pressures and constraints.

In its multiple versions, the myth of the flying African does not necessarily focus on the father. There are many myths dealing with escape from slavery: the Ibo version is that the people who arrived in America took one look at what life would be like there and simply turned round and walked back over the water to Africa. Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* draws on this version. Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* has a tale about the power of flight in which a young slave woman successfully flies away with her baby. With the magic words, '*Kum ... yali, kum buba tambe*' she takes to the air and escapes the cruelty of the overseer. Morrison's particular deployment of this well-known escape myth is therefore significant. She chooses to make her flying African the father of twenty-one sons, who leaves his wife and family. Instead of invoking only the familiar blues theme—a woman bemoaning her abandonment; a man leaving a woman—Morrison puts a new and favourable spin on the history of male peripateticism.

At the same time, however, that Morrison's version of the myth places emphasis on the man's miraculous flight and on the woman's loyalty and love, she also draws attention to the fact that women are left to bear the brunt of the desertion. Though Susan Byrd affirms that women who die of grief for their men are few and far between—'You don't hear of women like that anymore, but there used to be more'—she certainly has a point in her initial understanding of the grief and madness of women like Ryna: 'I always thought it was trying to take care of the children by themselves, you know what I mean?'. The myth of the flyaway father offers a grand drama of male escape and female pining, but in more quotidian terms, whatever the provocation to escape, Solomon does leave Ryna holding the baby—twenty-one of them, in fact.

Once in touch with his history, Milkman's pride in his flying ancestor alerts him now to the significance of the place names: 'He read the signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country'. He can now make sense and knowledge of the random facts he knows: 'He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness'. Possessing some history, and aware of how much more awaits excavation, Milkman is newly and appropriately empowered. It is as if the rekindling of memory, fading but embedded in oral histories, has animated those dead lives and consequently the Dead fathers come to life in Milkman's possession. He now presents the strongest contrast to his increasingly desperate friend Guitar, who is also struggling to memorialise a dead father and to vindicate the dead, the casualties of racism.....

When Milkman returns from the quest that has presumably altered his relationship to his history, his family and himself, we learn that his mother is thankful that he is unhurt, and Lena, 'though unforgiving as ever, was civil enough to him since Corinthians had moved to a small house in Southside, which she shared with Porter'. Although Milkman returns from his quest having experienced a wonderful reciprocal relationship with Sweet, his new-found awareness of female needs and entitlements seems superficial. He berates himself for the death

of Hagar and realises that the women in his life have done so much for him and that he has never so much as made them a cup of coffee, but there is not much to suggest that the situation of women is altered. The law of the father—even, of course, the Dead father—is that women serve, love, wait and suffer abuse or abandonment.

Unsurprisingly, mothers are marginally significant in this novel about fathers: Ruth's father is her only important parent; Pilate's mother dies giving birth and is little remembered by her elder brother, Macon Dead. Her only significance is her name 'Sing' and her Native American status, which allows Morrison (through Susan Byrd and her friend Grace Long) to give a condensed account of hybridity and intermixing in African American genealogy. Pilate is an exception in the novel as a free-standing woman, whose knowledge and way of seeing the world provides a contrast to the bourgeois values Macon has adopted, and who represents a matrilineal line. Although there is something free and exciting about her household of women, its nutritional and other eccentricities, wonderful singing, and hand-to-mouth existence, Pilate's line neither thrives nor survives. Her descendants become less independent and self-possessed. Her daughter Reba, who shares many qualities with Hannah Peace in *Sula*, lives for pleasure, and although wonderful, winning and generous, is never quite an adult. As she lies dying, Pilate enjoins Milkman to look after her daughter. And whether we see Hagar as constrained by a crude determinism in the novel that constitutes her as an incarnation of her grieving, mind-tossed maternal ancestor, Ryna, or whether we see her as a version of Pecola in her absorption of white consumer culture, she too is an increasingly pathetic, doomed woman. Whereas Milkman's quest serves to raise the Dead fathers through possession of paternal history, the mothers, daughters and wives associated with the Dead are yet to be raised. The ways of Pilate, who could fly without leaving the ground, are an inspiration for Milkman—'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'—but in the world of the novel, there are no others like her; nor does she have female descendants who will raise and possess her for their futures.

Source: Jill Matus, "Song of Solomon: Raising Dead Fathers," in *Toni Morrison*, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 72-84.

Essays and Criticism: Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

In *Song of Solomon* Toni Morrison has faced the tale-spinner's recurring problem—making contemporary, localized events and characters speak to those who cannot share her characters' background or experiences. Morrison's solution in this dilemma is not new. She turns to myth to underpin her narrative, but does so without transforming her novel into pure fantasy or overloading her story with literary allusions. Morrison's success in making one black man's struggle for identity universal is partly explained by her structural use of myth to show man's constant search for reassurance in myths.

According to Mircea Eliade, myth is sacred history, the breakthrough of the supernatural or divine into the human to explain the origins, destiny, and cultural concerns of a people. Man, then, has always turned to myth to explain the inexplicable and to tie narratives into a larger cultural and perceptual framework. We would expect our modern predilection for scientific fact, psychological speculation, and historical verification to have supplanted the role of myth in explaining reality. In fact, genuine myth, living myth, has traditionally been associated with primitive societies in which the myth presupposes not "a tale told but a reality lived." Even our sophistication, however, does not preclude our depending on myth for more than entertainment. If we no longer look to myth for reality, we are still drawn to mythopoesis, where gods, heroes, and supernatural conflicts exist on a purely symbolic level, trying us to our past and showing us our origins. Myths become "agents of stability," not restricting us to a specific place or even to a specific culture but using the specific to ponder the enduring questions of all men. Perhaps mythic absolutes reassure us because, as Kerenyi proposes, the constant themes of myth involve not the "why?" (the causes) but the "whence?" (the groundwork of

human nature, belief, and endeavor), which remains as timely as it is timeless.

In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, we have genuine mythopoesis, the mythic impulse shaped and translated into symbolic art. Morrison fuses Afro-American myth with the cultural, moral, and religious beliefs of both the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman heritages to fashion her own myth. She does not simply rework archetypes but blends the natural with the supernatural and the historically factual with the fantastic. More particularly, she selects one of the oldest and most pervasive mythic themes, the hero and his quest, to inform and control her narrative structure.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison creates a world both realistic and dreamlike, peopled with amusing, endearing, quirky, and frightening characters. Her deft handling of high drama, low comedy, and dialogue have all been commended. Her structure, however, has not been as widely appreciated. *Song of Solomon* is undeniably episodic, but whether the plot is "meandering and confused," lacks linear development, or is enhanced by its very discontinuity is open to question. If we follow Morrison's lead and concentrate on the growth of Macon Dead, known as Milkman because his mother nursed him too long, we find that her novel is cohesive, following the clear pattern of birth and youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration common to mythic heroes as disparate as Moses, Achilles, and Beowulf. Such a mythic chronology emphasizes the hero's rejection of and eventual assimilation into his society. Slochower has argued that the hero's victory lies in curbing his early rebelliousness without submitting completely. An Oedipus or a Hamlet attains both tragic and mythic stature by remaining true to himself even as he becomes an agent of the social consciousness. As we watch Milkman grow up and reject the restrictions of his Southside life, we see him undergoing not only psychological and physical maturation but an approximation of the development of a true hero, so that by the end of the novel he knows himself and his obligations to both present and past, to himself and his world.

Western man has always looked to childhood as the mythic time, when the individual is closest to his origins. In the novel's opening Morrison toys with this idea by describing Milkman's birth in terms of signs, omens, and portents, and by presenting Milkman's childhood in a rapidly-passed-over series of narrative events resonating with symbolic and archetypal significance. The second stage in Morrison's structure and Milkman's maturation is the period of alienation. Milkman, thirtyish, resentful of, yet dependent on his father, wants to leave home but lacks the resolution to do so. His home, Southside, is both reassuringly familiar and confining, like Milkman's own comfortable but loitering and wasted life. His recognition that he is just drifting and lacks both internal and external coherence in his life directs him toward his third stage of development—a quest. Searching for the gold his father and his Aunt Pilate had found hidden in a Pennsylvania cave many years before becomes less important for Milkman than unraveling his family's tangled and confusing genealogy, meeting those who remember his father and Pilate as children, and, finally, realizing that the song he had heard Pilate sing, the "Song of Solomon" of the title, is a children's retelling, a mythologizing, of his own heritage. In his journey through Pennsylvania and Virginia, Milkman rediscovers himself. However, he cannot complete the final stage of his growth into heroic stature, the return and reintegration into a world whose values he can champion, until he defeats the enemy. This enemy is his boyhood friend and adult nemesis, Guitar, who objectifies Milkman's own denial and despair. The confrontation with Guitar in the Pennsylvania woods represents Milkman's complete reintegration and triumph, so that the Lady-or-the-Tiger quality of an ending that stops as the two combatants meet for a fight to the death is less ambivalent than it appears. The novel does not end with a cliff-hanger; the final battle is both a confrontation and a confirmation, marking Milkman's emergence as a champion who understands and will defend his world.

By examining key passages and symbolic turning points in each of these major stages, we will see how Morrison adopted—but adapted—mythic themes and images in her narrative structure. If the brief summary above indicates that the structure of the novel is chronological, it is a chronology imposed through reordering the events of the novel. The textural richness of the novel derives from a present which spans three generations, with each narrative tied back into the development of the novel's hero. The digressions, explanations, and expansions which interrupt Milkman's own story suggest not a serial or chronological

unfolding but an interlace, in which the dominant narrative is embellished and enhanced through meticulously articulated subplots and images threading their way through Milkman's life. It is these embellishments which carry much of the burden of the myth.

The opening pages give us the mandrel on which Morrison forms her own myth. Although many of his observations on living myth in primitive societies do not touch directly on mythopoesis, Otto Rank's discussion of the birth and childhood of the mythic hero illustrates the clear connection of Morrison's hero with a mythic heritage. The young hero is traditionally born after a long period of barrenness, and subterfuge is frequently involved in both his conception and his delivery. Milkman's mother seduces her husband, who had not touched her in thirteen years, with a love potion given her by Pilate and later saves her unborn child's life only through Pilate's intervention. Pilate, a moonshiner and a social outcast, certainly qualifies as a member of the humbler orders, whom Rank identifies as significant attendants at the hero's birth. This interference and trickery make the baby the focus of the father's hostility against his wife.

These mythic parallels are, however, only the basis for Morrison's highly allusive narrative. Milkman is born, the first black baby admitted to Southside's Mercy Hospital, on the day after Mr. Smith, the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent, leaps from the roof of Mercy. As we learn later, Mr. Smith is also one of the Seven Days, a black secret society pledged to avenge any black's murder by the random slaying of a white. Smith tumbles headlong from the roof, vainly flapping homemade blue silk wings as he falls, Icarus-like, to his death. His death signals Milkman's birth. Henceforth, the motifs of Icarus and flight are inextricably connected to the vengeance of the Seven Days. The hero's birth is accompanied by ritualized celebration—his Aunt Pilate singing in the street, and virgins (Milkman's elder sisters) strewing rose petals as a black Icarus dies. But also in attendance is Guitar, the boyhood friend who becomes the Sunday man of the Seven Days and avenges any black slain on a Sunday—until he turns from killing whites to ambushing Milkman. Morrison offsets the Fury-like society of the Seven Days by pairing her Icarus motif of failure and death with references to Lindbergh, drawing together two famous soarers but suggesting that an Icarus' doomed escape must always be balanced by a Daedalus' success. As a child, Milkman yearned to fly and "lost all interest in himself" when he discovered "the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly." The novel follows his attempt to overcome this disaffection and learn to fly again, figuratively, if not literally.

Through the use of the Icarus motif, the opening of the book draws together the thematic concerns of a novel, but the second stage of Milkman's growth, the period of both explanation and alienation, illustrates one of the enduring concerns of myth, the need to create order and bring understanding out of apparent chaos. Milkman's heritage is explained in family histories which he tries, resentfully, to shrug aside. His family's past is dead for Milkman, and he feels increasingly stifled by the greed, anger, and frustration of his home. He remains isolated, alienated from his family, his culture, even from Hagar, his cousin who has been his lover since he was seventeen. One morning,

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face..... But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed.

Milkman's decisions during this period are indeed haphazard and uninformed. He strikes his father for slapping his mother, tries to break up the one love affair of his forty-year-old, unmarried sister, and determines to send Hagar a Christmas present and farewell letter at once. Rather than acting from any belief or commitment to another, Milkman only reacts. Each event is a rejection—of parental authority, of family

ties, of love. He realizes that his "life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconveniencing himself for." Moreover, he thinks constantly of escape, of slamming the door of his father's house and never returning, of flying away. He tells Guitar that he feels increasingly off-center, disaffected by his family and society, and detached from the racial tensions which increasingly control Guitar, who is moving more completely into the circumscribed world of the Seven Days. Milkman accuses Guitar, "You mad at every Negro who ain't scrubbing floors and picking cotton. This ain't Montgomery, Alabama." To which Guitar responds,

"You're right, Milkman. You have never in your life said a truer word. This is definitely not Montgomery, Alabama. Tell me. What would you do if it was? If this turned out to be another Montgomery?"

"Buy a plane ticket."

"Exactly. Now you know something about yourself you didn't know before: who you are and what you are."

"Yeah. A man that refuses to live in Montgomery, Alabama."

"No. A man that can't live there."

But, of course, without knowing what is worth risking everything for, Milkman cannot live anywhere yet. He is like Joyce's young Stephen Daedalus, wanting only to fly away.

The single moment during this period of Milkman's life which best illustrates both his yearnings and his vacillation occurs when Milkman and Guitar see a white peacock perched on the roof of a defunct Buick in Southside. The bird, at once beautiful and ludicrous, cannot fly because, as Guitar says, it has "too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weights you down." For Guitar, this means abandoning family, friends, and society, and channeling himself completely into the vengeance of the Seven Days. Although Milkman laughingly accedes to Guitar's jeering interpretation, he is fumbling toward a more positive significance for the peacock—escape into adventure. But he does not see that the incongruous juxtaposition of the peacock and used cars suggests how the exotic appears unexpectedly out of the prosaic, just as his quest rises out of Southside and his family. The way to escape Southside is to get money, the gold his Aunt Pilate and father stumbled across in a Pennsylvania cave.

His quest leads Milkman to Pennsylvania and then to Virginia, where he traces his father's and Pilate's youthful wanderings. He meets his father's boyhood friends, who remember the elder Macon Dead as an almost superhuman figure and who accept the success of the father in Southside real estate as an inevitable extension of his youthful exploits and talents. Milkman drinks in their tales of Lincoln's Heaven, the Edenic Pennsylvania farm which still represents to these old men an ideal world, a flourishing, rich farm hacked out of the woods by an ex-slave, Milkman's grandfather. Milkman finds himself continuing the myth, spinning out, to the wonder and delight of his audience, his own elaborate version of his father's efforts to buy the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad.

He next visits the old plantation where his father and aunt had been hidden by a house servant, Circe, after their father was murdered by whites jealous of a black man's success and greedy for Lincoln's Heaven. The narrative becomes progressively eerier when he finds the ancient servant still alive and presiding over the ruins of the estate, supervising its decay, a witch in the land of the dead. More a Sibyl than her siren namesake, Circe guards this entrance into the past. She initiates Milkman into his own past, showing both the

power and the destructiveness of his heritage, and channels his rebelliousness into a quest for his own identity. He could not reach the dream-like core of his quest, his journey into Virginia, without direct contact with the world of the past and the dead. Lincoln's Heaven, Circe, and the decayed plantation all represent the past which still exerts its influence on Milkman. Like Aeneas, like Ulysses, Milkman needs to look into his, his family's, and his people's past before he can move into the future. Circe tells Milkman where the cave holding the gold was, how Pilate and Milkman's father argued and opened the rift which has lasted for decades, where Pilate wandered, and where Milkman's grandfather originally came from—Shalimar, Virginia.

Just as contact with the underworld has traditionally meant knowledge for the living, so Circe's revelations turn Milkman south to Virginia where he abandons the search for the missing gold to regain his self-esteem. Shalimar offers new skills to measure self-worth—hunting, fighting, and surviving, the only prowess these Virginians acknowledge. The city man adapts to their code and participates in a midnight cougar hunt where he suddenly realizes that *he* is being hunted by Guitar, who wants a part of the long-lost gold for the Seven Days and thinks Milkman has found the gold and refuses to share it.

Guitar, the hero's antagonist, threatens the particular virtues and values of the world and the past that Milkman is slowly coming to accept. He is not as much Milkman's opposite as his double, an extension of the very negations Milkman has practiced. Guitar has abandoned his family and his heritage in the South. More importantly, he has rejected love and ties just as Milkman has spurned his family and Hagar. The only brotherhood Guitar acknowledges is the Seven Days, a brotherhood based on death. He is total sterility, wintry and steely in his dedication to vengeance. His name, Guitar, comes from a childhood love of creativity and music which he has denied; Milkman's name suggests the fertility and life which he has been running from. In the dark woods Milkman suddenly understands Guitar and himself. Guitar's total commitment to death is only the logical extension of Milkman's constant attempts to fly away.

Milkman is still not ready to challenge the enemy, and when Guitar's ambush in the Virginia woods fails, the protagonist runs. His return to his own world is thus ambivalent. Although Milkman's relationship to his family and his world improves, his trip brings about no reconciliation between his father and his aunt. The traditional pattern of reintegration and defense of the society cannot be effected, perhaps because he has recognized his own weakness and the values which he tried to deny, but he has not yet fought for them. He returns to Virginia with Pilate to bury his grandfather's bones at Lincoln's Heaven, and there Guitar shoots Pilate, the novel's clearest representative of personal and racial heritage and continuity with the past. The novel ends as Guitar steps from hiding to try, once again, to kill Milkman.

Although the final confrontation offers two possible resolutions, its thematic unity is not ambivalent. If Milkman kills Guitar, then he will return home the conqueror, the hero who has bested his and his society's opponent. If, however, he falls to Guitar, he remains a hero. Milkman himself tells us that he thinks he can beat Guitar in a straight fight but stands little chance if Guitar has a gun, which he has. But success is not the measure of the mythic hero's stature. More frequently than not, he dies in his last battle. The death is less important than its symbolic affirmation of his and his world's values. Hector and Achilles fall, and Beowulf dies to save his people from the dragon. Milkman, too, has to face, within himself, the dragons of despair, nihilism, and sterility. When Milkman leaps toward Guitar, he has already fought and won his battle.

One of Morrison's strengths is the subtlety with which she ties together the stages of her hero's development through imagery, specifically imagery of flight. If the opening consciously evokes the classical myth of Icarus, her subsequent use of this pattern makes it her own. On the one hand, we have Guitar, who says that only by shedding the burden of personal and past responsibilities can one fly. On the other hand is the "*Song of Solomon*" which weaves its way through the novel. Rather than a Judeo-Christian love song, Morrison creates an Afro-American history of a slave, Solomon, who flew away, quite literally, from Virginia to Africa. The song becomes a celebration of a family's and, by extension, a people's past. By the time Milkman realizes, at the novel's close, that he must face Guitar, accept and love him, even if he kills him or is killed by him,

flight has become soaring:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.

This is the control, the coherence, he has sought—acceptance of his past in both its historical and its supernatural aspects and acceptance of himself. When Solomon of the song flew back to Africa, he tried to carry away his favorite son, Milkman's grandfather, but dropped him. However, rather than picking up the Icarus motif of escape and doomed flight, Morrison creates her own myth of those who fumble in their efforts to fly and then soar higher—more Daedaluses than Icaruses. The structure of the novel is not then confusing, nor is it circular, simply moving from one black man's attempted flight to another's. Whether he kills Guitar or is killed by him, Milkman's joyful acceptance of the burden of his past transforms his leap toward Guitar into a triumphant flight.

Source: A. Leslie Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," in *MELUS*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall, 1980, pp. 69-76.

Analysis

Analysis: Places Discussed

Shalimar

Shalimar (SHAL-ee-mahr). The ancestral home of Solomon and Ryna, Jake (Macon Dead), and Sing (Singing Bird). According to legend, Solomon could fly. Close by are Ryna's Gulch and Solomon's Leap. The mysteries of Pilate's behavior, and Macon's, are found here, and memorialized in a children's song. Here Milkman finds his truth. Pilate finds peace as they bury their father's bones in the land of his birth. She discards the burden symbolized by the earring she has worn all her life. As Milkman jumps from Solomon's Leap, he knows he can soar. He has found truth, a connection through time and place that is forever unbroken by earthly bonds.

Dead home

Dead home. Michigan home of the well-off family of Macon Dead, his wife, Ruth Foster Dead, and their two daughters, Magdalene, called Lena, and First Corinthians, located at 12 Not Doctor Street in a large city. It is a home filled with nice things, including a polished mahogany table and fresh flowers. They have a certain social status. Ruth is the daughter of the late Doctor Foster. Her husband Macon is a man of property and pride. His self-worth is tied to what he owns. Yet their home is truly a "dead" house. There is no life, no love within its walls. The Dead home is haunted by past secrets. Ruth is sad and loveless. Macon is angry and dissatisfied; he equates money with freedom. The daughters are troubled and frustrated, and Milkman is puzzled and angry at the rigid structure, and at his lack of personal peace and contentment in the constantly changing world of the 1960's. The Dead home has a history, but it lacks roots.

Pilate's house

Pilate's house. Home of Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter Hagar; a small house backed by pines, without gas or electricity. The house has no modern conveniences and smells of wine and spices, and sometimes peaches. It is disorganized, not well kept, and lacking status; yet this house on Darling Street is rich with music, love, and history. Here one finds connections to the land in the trees, the grapes, the earthy attitude of Pilate, and the thread of affection and loyalty that binds the three generations of women together. There is mystery here as well, in the green tarp hanging from the ceiling. Pilate calls the contents her "inheritance." She speaks of personal and spiritual substance. She has much though she lacks wealth. Her home embraces her physical and emotional history. Her music and her joy connect her to people and places beyond the confines of her meager walls. She has found peace.

Hunter's Cave

Hunter's Cave. Scene of what Pilate and Macon believed was a murder. In fact, the bones Pilate retrieves and carries with her, literally and figuratively through the years, are those of her own father. Her history is always with her no matter where she travels.

Lincoln's Heaven

Lincoln's Heaven. Homestead of the original Macon Dead located outside of Danville, Pennsylvania, a town 240 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. For Macon Dead, land ownership was a tangible symbol of his freedom. His farm is small, with room for crops and fruit trees, a pond, and a rich forest of mahogany and pine. To a

hard-working man, a former slave, unable to read, stripped of his dignity and even his given name by the oppression of slavery, this rural setting in Montour County was his own personal heaven on Earth.

Literacy was not required to work the land. He could provide for his family and put down roots. He owned this land and would protect this emblem of freedom to the death. His love for his land would be passed on to his son and grandson, but their understanding of this inheritance would be tarnished by the money, the grit and greed of the cold, and often heartless, city skyline. As the generations progressed, ownership became for Macon and Milkman not a sense of pride, but an occasion for greed and profit. The spirit of Macon (Jake is his given name) will speak to Milkman and to Pilate until they understand their connections to the land, to their heritage, and to one another.

Analysis: Form and Content

Song of Solomon is a novel whose third-person, limited omniscient narrator is sympathetic to the protagonist, Milkman Dead. To illustrate Milkman's journey to self-knowledge as specifically African American, Toni Morrison uses Magical Realism, a worldview incorporating a culture's myths, religion, and superstitions as natural, believable components of reality. The plot resembles a gothic detective story centered on four generations of one African American family, the Deads. At the age of thirty-one, Milkman knows little of his family history; he is caught in limbo, isolated from his past and uncertain about the future. His father tells him nothing of his own boyhood in Pennsylvania or about their relatives in Virginia; his aunt Pilate tells him a bit more, but her knowledge is limited. To become a man, Milkman needs to understand his heritage.

A former slave, Milkman's grandfather received his name from information incorrectly recorded on a form. When asked his place of birth, he replied "Macon"; when asked about his father, he replied "Dead." A careless clerk entered both words on the line marked "name," so that the man's name became Macon Dead. Such "accidents" impede Milkman's quest for history. His grandfather became a successful farmer by cultivating wild forest into fertile farmland, but white neighbors coveted his land, offered to buy it, and killed him when he refused to sell, leaving Macon II and Pilate orphans. Pilate roamed from state to state, job to job, and man to man. Macon II finished high school, became a successful businessman, and married the daughter of the only black doctor in Mercy, Michigan. It was a loveless marriage, but it produced three children: Lena, First Corinthians, and Macon Dead III (Milkman).

Milkman's motives for searching out his ancestors are not noble. Through a series of events involving his friend Guitar Baines's political activities, Milkman learns a Dead family legend about bags of gold supposedly hidden in a Pennsylvania cave. He wants to find the gold and claim it for himself. To do so, however, he must return to the birthplaces of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Milkman is soon hooked on finding the missing pieces to his family tree. In Danville, Pennsylvania, he meets his father's old friends and hears pleasant stories that almost make the son proud. Milkman also visits Circe, the old woman who took care of Macon II and Pilate after their father died. Circe tells Milkman where the cave is, but when he gets there, he finds not gold but bones. Thinking that Pilate might have moved the gold elsewhere, he remembers rumors of family members in Virginia and searches there. In Shalimar, he hears children singing a song about Solomon and Reena, his great-grandparents. Although he never finds any gold, Milkman pieces together his family history. Yet, the novel does not end well for Milkman. His friend Guitar, with whom he had agreed to share the gold, believes he was betrayed and kills Milkman.

Morrison's use of time is complex. As the story progresses chronologically, Milkman traces his family history further into the past. The beginning of the novel is set in 1931, the year of Milkman's birth; at the end of the novel, Milkman is physically in 1962, but he has psychologically joined his great-grandparents in the late days of slavery. Milkman's location changes as he traces his family history: He travels from a Michigan city, to a small Pennsylvania town, and finally to rural Virginia. Morrison divides the novel into two unequal parts

with a total of fifteen chapters. Chapters 1 through 9 take place in Mercy, Michigan, and deal with the background of Milkman's immediate family, as well as his sexual initiation with his cousin Hagar. Chapters 10 through 15 deal with Milkman's quest for gold and his extended family history.

Analysis: Song of Solomon

The title of the novel refers to a children's song which is sung in part in the opening scene of the novel, recurs at intervals later, is heard in its entirety about four-fifths of the way through, and is the litany Milkman sings for the death of Pilate in the final scene. Associated with the song throughout the novel is death, bereavement, and flying. The bereaved sing this song of loss, this ballad of the flight into oblivion of Solomon, who leapt from a high outcropping of rock to return to his native Africa, leaving a grief-stricken wife and twenty-one children. And children chant this song as part of a game, a ritual remembrance of the event of long ago. Pilate sings the refrain as a funeral dirge, and finally Milkman himself sings the song as a lamentation for Pilate's death, as a final statement of his identity, and as an assertion of his love and courage to face life or death. The novel is laced with references to the supernatural or transcendent: ghosts appear to Pilate, Solomon flies, weird sounds of monas issue forth from Ryna's Gulch, and when the once passive Milkman leaps, and even soars, to his life-or-death confrontation with Guitar, his courage and assertion of willingness to fight for his life are an almost miraculous change from his former behavior.

The underlying theme of the whole story is love—the transmuting power of love to make life worthwhile: to give people the courage to live despite grueling adversity. Counterpoised to this theme of love is that of hate, and its deadly souring effect on all who harbor it within themselves. As the Biblical Song of Solomon is a song of love, so this novel is a song of the love of people for one another, and the effect it has on making the people who love, and those who are loved, endure and flourish.

It is the anguish of his loneliness and hatred which drives the insurance agent Smith finally to seek escape through his mad attempt to fly with cloth wings from the cupola of Mercy Hospital out across Lake Superior. We learn later that he is one of the Seven Days, who have dedicated their lives to murder. From the development of the character, Guitar, we learn how corrosive hate can be, so that finally Guitar suspects, condemns, and attempts to execute his best friend Milkman, who is blameless in the matter of deception which Guitar accuses him of. Guitar, who has tried to justify his murderous ways by saying that they were acts of love for his own people, undertaken only as retribution against white people for their murders of blacks, finally is murdering for anger, suspicion, greed, and even pure carelessness, as when he kills Pilate arising from her father's graveside.

In the narrative, the action develops out of the static situation of the Macon Dead family, in which the parents live in a state of continual antagonism, erupting frequently into verbal confrontations and occasionally into physical assaults against the mother by the father. The mother's passiveness is deceptive, however: she provokes the father's anger by her remarks, and the children have learned that this is so.

The parents' warfare, which has blighted both their lives, is based on their perception of their relative social status. The mother was the daughter of the most prominent black man in town, a doctor of some wealth and social connections. She grew up as the adored and adoring only child of the widowed doctor. When the young, ambitious Macon Dead appeared in town from obscure and obviously lowly origins, he sought to marry Dr. Foster's daughter to enhance his own social status and to increase the amount of money available to him to invest in real estate. In short order he became embittered by the doctor's only slightly veiled haughtiness and scorn, and jealous of his young wife's continued ardent devotion to her father.

It is a triumph of the author's character development that even though we have been told of the relationship between the father and daughter from the father's point of view (it was not sexual, and he was somewhat

embarrassed by her continued childlike closeness into her later teens), when Macon Dead tells Milkman of his conviction that his wife and father-in-law had been somehow sexually connected, the reader is, like Milkman, very nearly convinced. When finally the mother tells her version of the relationship she had with her father, Milkman and the reader are finally able to fit the confusing pieces together and see the situation with compassion and with despair—despair because there is no love to heal the breach between the husband and wife, despair because the anger and outrage at being rejected have poisoned them and are destroying their capacity to love and grow.

Milkman and his sisters are used by both parents. Both want to make the children into images of their own ideals and to make them reject the values and lifestyle of their mate. The mother wants Milkman to become a doctor like her father, and even suggests that he might take her maiden name as his own last name. She wants her daughters to marry well, and will consider as suitors only professional men. Then finally, when no such suitors appear, she considers that perhaps some civil worker like a postal employee might do. The father wants his son to join him in the real estate business he owns, and is adamant that the daughters shall choose men of ambition and status.

The father's covetousness, his manipulation of his power in the community, and his inability to love people or be loved by them, drives his children and his wife and indeed everyone from any warm relationship with him. Contrasted to Macon Dead's greed, suspicion, and self-righteousness is his sister Pilate's openness, trust, and love. She is all that he is not. She lives in the utmost simplicity, with generosity, kindness, and love motivating all her actions. Macon cannot accept her love, her generosity, her ethics, nor her forgiveness. He tells Milkman, "You want to be a whole man, you got to know the whole truth"; yet he himself is the one who is constantly diminished by his lack of knowledge or acceptance of the truth. He relies instead on suspicion and conjecture. Just as he suspects his wife of incestuous relationships with her father, he suspects his sister of taking and hoarding a cache of gold. Milkman realizes the hopelessness of trying to arouse any feeling for people in his father when the father makes it plain that he has no interest in going to Virginia to renew family ties with his people. He would only like to return to Pennsylvania where he could display his wealth and power proudly to the men who remembered him as a small boy, and who would admire him for attaining wealth and prestige.

The boy Milkman is much influenced by the people who touch his life and urge him to adopt their ways. He is essentially passive, accepting all, choosing none. He accepts his father's offer to work in the real estate business, and conducts the business according to his father's ways. He accepts his mother's friends and social position, and enjoys parties and the social contacts of the best black social stratum. He accepts the love and generosity of Pilate and Hagar, and uses them both, without reciprocating in any real way.

Milkman joins Guitar and his "lower class" group for companionship and pleasure, but while he is personally loyal to Guitar as a friend, he rejects the code of ethics which Guitar espouses. But if he rejects this code of life based on hate, he likewise rejects the love and the responsibility of love which Hagar represents. He would seem, like his father and Guitar, to be eschewing love and espousing greed and selfishness when he rejects Hagar and plots to rob Pilate. The abortive robbery whets his appetite for wealth. What had been a half-hearted, clumsy attempt at a robbery becomes, after it is frustrated, a spur to him to seek the gold wherever it may be: in the hills of Pennsylvania or in Virginia if it is not in Michigan. Then he does not want his father or Guitar to go with him. He wants to get it himself. This shift from a passive to an active stance is the beginning of a change in Milkman. Guitar notices it at once, and is suspicious, believing that his friend has decided to cut him out.

But once out of his home community, Milkman encounters kindness, generosity, warmth, welcome, and acceptance by strangers. Confused at first, he finally responds in kind. He aids the freight yard worker who needs help to lift a heavy load. He accepts the embrace of the aged Circe and suppresses his revulsion at the filth and decay in which she lives. He feels a genuine chagrin when people are affronted by what they

consider to be his arrogant ways. He is challenged, and fights for his right to be in Shalimar. But he finds peace among these people when he sinks exhausted against the tree and acknowledges that they can do things he cannot, and that these people, his people, have merit and pride in their accomplishments and talents which have nothing to do with wealth or social status.

In this new knowledge, in this revelation of the truth, the desire for the gold vanishes. Nor does it return again. He has found something more precious: a genuine respect for people, which rapidly ripens into affection. He seeks to learn from his past, his forbears, and his relations living still. He enjoys Sweet as he has never enjoyed a woman before. He even tries to convince the murderous Guitar that he is still his true and honest friend.

Returning home, he learns of Hagar's death, and while he acknowledges that he never loved her and never could, he accepts his guilt and regret that he caused her such anguish. He takes from Pilate the box of Hagar's hair, and takes it home to keep, to remember his guilt and his relationship to her. Earlier Hagar had told Pilate that Milkman hated her hair, that he liked smooth, silky, copper-colored hair. The black kinky hair of Hagar is a potent symbol of Milkman's change of attitude. He has accepted his relationship to his people, though they be poor, uneducated, and strange in their ways.

With this acceptance, with this new evaluation of the worth of man and his worldly goods, he comes to see Pilate as the ideal person. Her death transforms him. He is infused with her spirit of love—her dying wish to have been able to love more people—and he sings louder and louder the Song of Solomon. It is chanted as a dirge, a conviction, and a promise. He rises, in the splendor of his love and grief, and literally soars to his confrontation with hatred and evil in the person of his friend Guitar.

The magic of flying and the association with love and loss are pervasive throughout the book. Solomon leapt from the bluff to fly back to his beloved Africa and his people there. When Jake the son of Solomon was shot, he soared five feet into the air before falling dead to earth. As he cradles the dying Pilate in his arms, Milkman observes that she could fly without ever leaving the ground. Then he flies too, in his new control of himself, in his new awareness of his power to make his life increase in all the important ways of loving and giving.

The strength and complexity of the main characters make it difficult to label them simplistically, although they certainly embody thematic concepts within their character development. For if Guitar embodies the idea of the curdling of righteous resentment into evil for its own sake, he is also the one who chides Milkman for his cavalier treatment of Hagar, and who solicitously urges him to give up smoking and drinking. Again, Milkman's father seems to have almost no warmth or affection in him, yet he becomes tender and gentle when reminiscing about his father and recalling the happiness and affection they shared when working in the fields together many years before. Even Freddie's gossipy malice hides a wistful loneliness, and Milkman's sisters turn out to have unexpected depth of character when First Corinthians finally falls in love and defies the family to be with Henry.

The world of this story is entirely black. No white characters really enter it at all. The whites exist only as a nebulous menace, a reported encounter, a faceless power. If this is possibly unrealistic, it has the artistic merit of eliminating the unessential and concentrating the story on the thematically important issues, without introducing elements which might be confusing or distracting in the development of the central idea.

Some potentially interesting and complex characters are introduced and then dropped or minimized. One could wish to learn more about them, but the story would have had to be longer to do that, perhaps without being any better, only richer in subplots and characterizations. But the novel does not need that; it has all it needs of people and events. It moves swiftly and effortlessly through its time and space, as events, encounters, and narrations impinge on the consciousness of Milkman. Then in Part Two, Milkman comes alive and begins to shape events, and to formulate his own design for living. The Song of Solomon, the song of love and flying

and total commitment, has become his song, and he understands it even as Pilate did. The dialogue has such a ring of authenticity that the melody of the words is almost audible in print. Descriptive passages fit in well and are notably clear and concise.

The book ends just as the battle to the death between Guitar and Milkman is beginning. And yet the book seems complete, for the most important thing has happened. Whether he lives or dies, Milkman has become a courageous, actively committed, loving human being, indifferent to wealth, appearances, and superficialities. He is his own man, knowing what he believes, and ready to fight to the death for it, but eager to live and to seek out and share love.

This story of a life is really a story of many lives, for all his people share in Milkman's life, as he shares in theirs. And this is part of the story too, that belonging, support, and understanding are more precious than gold, and more lasting. Pilate is the strongest character in the book, by far; but this is finally Milkman's story. For he learns from her and from others, and chooses her way, although the way of the fliers is disruptive, anarchic, unrealistic, and unprofitable. Indeed, it is dangerous unto death, the story tells, but it is also the way of fulfillment and life, and Milkman chooses his way with rejoicing.

Analysis: Form and Content

Song of Solomon, winner of the 1978 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, is an intricately woven, thematically complex novel that addresses ancestral history, class-versus-race bonds, and sexism. Milkman Dead begins searching for gold and freedom from familial ties; in the process of searching, he discovers his family history and learns about his own tribal power. Although the opening scene occurs in 1931, the characters tell stories that date back to the late nineteenth century, when Milkman's great grandfather, Solomon, flew away from a field in which he worked as a slave, leaving behind twenty-one children and an African myth of flight.

Milkman is born despite his father's efforts to make Ruth perform a home abortion. The problems in Macon and Ruth's marriage stem in part from Macon's discovery of Ruth lying naked in bed beside her father's corpse, kissing his hands. Moreover, Macon denies his wife and two daughters any respect or autonomy, using them instead as gauges of his financial success. Macon defines life as "learning to own things," and the things he owns include his family members.

When Milkman becomes a teenager, Macon tries to involve Milkman in his business of renting property in a low-income district. Macon constantly counts and rattles his keys to the properties he rents, indicating his pride in ownership. Nevertheless, it is during these years that Milkman meets Pilate, the sister from whom Macon was separated for more than twenty years; she inspires Milkman's curiosity about his family history.

Strongly connected to her own history, Pilate wears an earring that is made of a small silver box containing the original piece of paper on which her father first wrote her name. Pilate and Macon were twelve and sixteen when they witnessed their father's murder. While in hiding, fearing that the same people would kill them, they encountered a white man, whom Macon killed, and they discovered several bags of gold near a cave. Pilate and Macon argued over whether to keep the gold. They separated, and when Macon returned to the cave a couple of days later, the gold was missing. He decided that Pilate had stolen it from him.

Instead, she has carried around the bones of her father for more than twenty years. Pilate does not realize that they are her father's bones until the end of the novel. She thinks that they are the bones of the white man whom Macon killed.

After putting together pieces of stories from Pilate and Macon, Milkman travels to Virginia, where he learns that his great grandfather is the subject of folk songs sung by children and folktales told by adults. Milkman realizes his rich history, his ancestral power, and his connection to nature.

Aware of the truth, Milkman returns to Michigan. He shares his stories of the places, songs, and stories dedicated to his people. Milkman tells Pilate that the bones are her father's and takes her to Virginia to bury them on Solomon's Leap, a flat outcropping of rock that overlooks a deep valley. A participant in the search for gold, Guitar, standing in the valley, shoots and kills Pilate, thinking that he has been cheated out of his share of the gold. Empowered by his discovery of his ancestors and himself, Milkman surrenders "to the air" and leaps toward Guitar's arms.

Analysis: Context

Morrison's women in this novel are fascinating, and they are necessary to Milkman's maturity and development as well as to the fulfillment of his journey. The magnificent Pilate, juxtaposed with her brother Macon, illustrates for Milkman how far removed his parents and sisters are from natural lives. During Milkman's search in Virginia, women provide significant pieces to the puzzle of his history. An examination of Pilate, Ruth, and Hagar indicates, however, that Morrison wishes to point out that women are not allowed the freedoms that men enjoy in this society.

Milkman's mother and aunt are the two important women in his life. As the daughter of the only African American doctor in town, Ruth is bred to an upper-middle-class existence. She is presented in the novel as the underside of the ideal Southern lady image. She is totally cut off from life, benevolently imprisoned by her father, and spitefully contained by her husband, who marries her because of her class position and despises her for her inherent weakness. Ruth's life is one of uneventful waste. As critic Barbara Christian explains, her life is symbolic of the terror that awaits those women who become the emblem of a man's wealth and class position.

Unlike Ruth, Pilate exists totally outside societal structures, as is indicated by her lack of a navel. Her home, which is not even equipped with electricity, stands outside town. She sees little value in material things and sells homemade wine to provide an income for herself, her daughter, and her granddaughter. Pilate possesses admirable strength and energy, but, in order to grow and survive on her own terms, she has to move outside society.

Hagar's acceptance of European standards of beauty, such as light skin, straight hair, and thin noses, illustrates the ill effects of society's tendency to objectify women who live within it. When Milkman rejects Hagar, she concludes that her woolly hair, unfashionable clothes, and lack of makeup are the reasons. Frantically, she shops for stockings, lipsticks, and other cosmetics, hoping to transform herself into something she imagines Milkman finds acceptable.

By the end of the novel, Milkman recalls and regrets his treatment of Hagar. His experience with her and his exposure to the other women in his life lead him toward the fulfillment he enjoys as his journey closes. Morrison seems to imply that women are necessary participants in the development of males. Meanwhile, male-dominated cultures impede female development.

Analysis: Historical Context

Post-World War I America

Though *Song of Solomon* is set during the 1950s and 60s, much of its action results from events that happened at the turn of the century, including the Great Migration and World War I and its aftermath. The Great

Migration involved the movement of millions of southern Blacks to the urban North in search of jobs and freedom in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. In her novel, Morrison gives voice to one of those families, the Deads, showing their progression from Virginia to Pennsylvania to Michigan. Likewise, Guitar has left the South with his family after his father's death, and no doubt many of the other inhabitants of Southside are relatively recent migrants from the rural South. The Great Migration, though it represented marginal material progress, is also portrayed by Morrison, among others, as representing the loss of a traditional rural culture. Certainly her characterization of Macon Dead, whose loss of his father and his rural lifestyle makes him emotionally stingy and materially greedy, represents this loss.

In addition to heading north, many Blacks enlisted in the armed forces during World War I as a way to improve their status in society. They were subject to discrimination even during their time in the armed forces, but they hoped that the war's end would bring new opportunities in economic life and in civil rights. After all, the war had been waged ostensibly to protect and extend democracy. Instead, the war's end marked a renewal of Ku Klux Klan activities; some Black soldiers were lynched while still in their uniforms. The summer of 1919, after the end of the war, marked the greatest period of interracial strife in the nation's history. In part, the violence escalated because Blacks were more willing to defend themselves from racist attacks. Morrison echoes this in her treatment of the Seven Days, the older members of which are World War I veterans who speak bitterly of their mistreatment on their return. Other Blacks fought back against racism by increasing their level of activism; some historians credit the period immediately following World War I with the birth of the modern-day civil-rights movement.

Civil Rights Movement

One of the important moments in *Song of Solomon* is the moment when Milkman finds Guitar in the barbershop listening to a report about the murder of Emmett Till. Till was a fourteen year old from Chicago visiting Mississippi in 1955. He allegedly whistled at a white woman and was murdered by whites. No one was ever convicted for his murder, but it was one of the catalysts for a renewal of the civil-rights movement. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been arguing against the legality of segregation in the courts, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and others began using nonviolent direct action to desegregate facilities in the South. In 1963, King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, which inspired many Americans. Shortly thereafter, though, whites bombed a Black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. This would later be described as a pivotal moment in the struggle, a moment when many Blacks began to despair that freedom would never be attained. Some civil-rights workers became radicalized, no longer believers in nonviolent action. This is echoed in the character of Guitar, whose violence becomes more acute—and misdirected—after the little girls are killed.

Analysis: Literary Style

Motif

The main motif in *Song of Solomon* is flying: the novel begins with Robert Smith's flight from the roof of Mercy Hospital and ends with Milkman's flight from Solomon's Leap. The motif of flight is a complicated one: it represents transcendence as well as loss. Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon was able to transcend his circumstances by flying back to Africa, but in doing so he abandoned his wife and children. Milkman finds a better example of flight in Pilate, who can fly without leaving the ground.

Narration

Though the main focus of *Song of Solomon* is Milkman's story, the narrator repeatedly turns to other stories to show how they intersect with Milkman's story. The narrative jumps back and forth in time to give the reader the necessary background for understanding the current situation being discussed. For example, in chapter nine the narrative shifts to the story of Corinthians and her affair with Henry Porter. When Milkman realizes that Porter is a member of the Seven Days, he tells his father about the affair, and Macon reacts punitively,

forbidding Corinthians from leaving the house and evicting Porter and garnishing his wages. This provokes Lena to confront Milkman, which in turn spurs him to leave home.

Another aspect of the narration is the point of view of the narrator, which, as Catherine Rainwater noted in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, sometimes merges "with that of a character, but later undercuts or problematizes this point of view by presenting its alternatives." Though the narrator of *Song of Solomon* seems omniscient, all-knowing, in fact the narrator does not present any absolute truths, only the narrow perspectives of the characters. In this way, readers are forced to interpret the history and the meaning of the story's events and the character's lives for themselves, just as Milkman does when he hears the song of Solomon.

Bildungsroman

The *Bildungsroman* is the classic Western coming-of-age novel. The *Bildungsroman* usually presents a young hero struggling to find his identity. In Milkman's case, he is at thirty-two much older than the classic *Bildungsroman* hero, but Morrison shows how Milkman's race, class, and natural inclination to passivity keep him trapped in his carefree boyhood until events in the story compel him to grow up. Cynthia A. Davis writes in *Toni Morrison* that "Milkman's life follows the pattern of the classic hero, from miraculous birth ... through quest journey to final reunion with his double" as Milkman comes of age. The *Bildungsroman* is sometimes called the "novel of education" or "apprenticeship novel." In this case, Milkman's education is not the formal education he learns in school, but an education in his family's mythic past. He apprentices himself to his mythic great-grandfather and learns to fly as a result.

Analysis: Ideas for Group Discussions

Because *Song of Solomon* is an accessible novel, and because it involves an exciting version of the quest for cultural solidarity, it should provoke lively discussions on matters like gender and ethnic stereotyping and variations on economic independence for minorities. Another focus for conversation might be Morrison's treatment of the Seven Days. She does not defend the attitudes and values of the group, but to what degree does she suggest that such groups are inevitable in a climate of racism? To what degree are Guitar and his associates creations of a repressive white economic culture?

1. What are we to make of the irony that Milkman's first other-directed deed in the novel, helping a man load a crate in the Danville station, convinces Guitar that he deserves to be hunted down and killed?
2. Is Circe, the ancient crone he encounters in the Butler mansion, a living anomaly, or has Milkman encountered a ghost (note her youthful voice and see *Beloved* for another ambivalent treatment of a ghostlike presence)? What readings of the novel are implicit in either response?
3. What specific experiences liberate Milkman in Shalimar? Which are the most important, and why?
4. Is Milkman responsible for Hagar's death? Pilate seems to think so, but she later forgives him. Do we as readers hold him accountable for Hagar's dependence? If so, is his carrying her hair, presumably accepting his role in her death, an adequate gesture of responsibility?
5. What does happen as the novel ends? Does Milkman fly? Will he defeat or be killed by Guitar? What understanding of the novel is implicit in either reading? Why does Morrison end the book on such an ambiguous note?

Analysis: Social Concerns

Morrison's place in American literature was assured with the publication of her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, by far her most penetrating inquiry into the sources and causes of cultural alienation among African-Americans. The book earned many awards and established her as both a popular and as a serious novelist. Few writers of her generation would be so simultaneously admired by the critics and by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Building on the critique of materialism and racism in American society developed in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973), with this novel Morrison deepened her understanding of the causes of African-American cultural malaise. Although her emphasis remains on discrimination and limited opportunities for minorities, the problem central to *Song of Solomon* concerns strategies among the fragmented African-American community to deal with institutional racism. Each generation of her central family attempts strategies to deal with minority status in America, but the novel as a whole indicates that these are dead ends without a rediscovery of the lore and legends of African-American culture.

These tactics correspond with the generations of the main family, whose eldest male heir is always named Macon Dead. The eldest Macon received this as his name when a drunk reconstruction officer registered the ex-slave as a free man. Entries on the wrong lines resulted in the new freeman's first name being listed as that of a city, and his family name was listed as the condition in which his parents were believed to be. The cracker who made the error thought it was funny, but the family persisted, perhaps perversely, in keeping the strange name. As Guitar Baines, another character whose destiny mingles with that of the youngest Macon, argues later in the novel, ex-slaves were given the names of the oppressors, and denied their own (a theme Morrison will develop fully in *Beloved*, 1987) — thus the central confusion in the book about the three names of the legendary Solomon: In contemporary songs he is called "Sugarman"; a Virginia town named after him is "Shalimar." If names are one public symbol for identity, as Morrison argues in this and subsequent novels, African-Americans are uniquely encumbered by names that belong to Euro-Americans and were imposed as residual vestiges of slave culture, or have been verbally garbled in the oral transmission of "ourstory."

The eldest Macon Dead responded to white economic power by establishing an African-American enterprise separate and equal economically if not socially with the majority culture. Establishing himself as a freed slave in Danville, Pennsylvania — having fled the overt racism of the south — he enacted the pioneer ideal by converting a piece of land no one else thought tillable into a model farm he called, in honor of the great Emancipator, "Lincoln's Heaven." But as his enterprise succeeded, white neighbors came to envy his success and to covet his riches. When Macon resisted a takeover by the Butler clan, then took up arms to protect his home, they murdered him on the very fence that symbolized his effort at separatism while his children watched in horror.

Scarred emotionally by watching his father die, Macon Dead II did not attempt to compete with white America, but chose to outscramble his fellow African-Americans for what white people leave behind. He emigrated to Detroit and eventually became a slum lord. He married the daughter of the town's only black physician and transformed his struggling real estate firm into an investment company that buys up unwanted properties and rents them, at exorbitant rates, to blacks. During the novel he evicts sympathetically drawn characters: Guitar Baines's widowed mother, whose husband dies in a sawmill accident implicitly because of the white owners' negligence, defaults on her rent, so out she and her children go; Howard Porter, Macon's daughter First Corinthians's lover, is evicted because, as laborer and lover.

He represents a threat to the respectability Macon so desperately craves. Macon's pride is in the fine automobiles he drives; his dream is to develop a beach front community for wealthy blacks in a section of lakefront whites do not want anyway.

Macon's material success, while impressive, is a hollow victory, won at the expense of other struggling African-Americans. Because his power is merely materialistic, he does not command respect or love from his family, and his son, whom he grooms to follow in his footsteps as he believes he follows in his father's, is so bound up by materialism that he lacks a strong self-concept. He sees little value in himself or in his family. As he accepts his role as his father's successor, he finds no happiness or meaning in his role as landlord and collector. Throughout the first half of the novel, Milkman (so called because of his mother's nursing him beyond his infancy, suggesting her reluctance to grant him freedom and autonomy) unwittingly struggles with his father's materialistic aesthetic, in which ownership is the only way to establish parity with the whites, but, with no idea that his real enemy is materialism, not just Euro-American culture, seeks to find happiness by adding possessions: autos, fine clothes, money, women. He is, however, locking himself more inescapably into the cycle of materialism, which cost his grandfather his life and his father his soul. Morrison's point is that a materialism emulating that of Euro-American culture will not liberate black American culture from the delayed effects of slavery.

Finally, Morrison treats the growing militancy of some African-American groups of the 1970s, such as the Black Panthers and SNCC, through her creation of a radical, militant, vigilante group "the Seven Days." Drawing on historical accounts of injustice, in cases like the Scottsboro Boys and Emmett Till (Morrison later wrote a play, *Dreaming Emmett*, 1986), the Seven Days concoct a desperate, mad plan for responding to racist terrorism. Basing their theory on the (racist) assumption that only white people are capable of deliberate violence, Guitar and other men Milkman believes to be sensible commit themselves to systematic, passionless acts of violence in retaliation for that done to blacks by whites. The act must be taken against a randomly-chosen white victim, and it must emulate the crime against the blacks. The Days concoct a theory of numbers to justify their protocols, claiming that if white violence against blacks is not answered in kind, over many generations the numerical majority that now permits injustice will lead to genocide. Morrison represents the Days as a desperate effort to respond to cruelty by whites, but she also shows that their way is flawed and a form of racism itself. Although two fundamental codes of the Days are that blacks must never commit violence against blacks, and that materialism is the basis of social injustice, Guitar, representing the Days, becomes so obsessed with gold he believes Milkman is keeping from the Days for selfish ends, that he makes repeated attempts on Milkman's life, eventually taking the life of the novel's most sympathetic character. Milkman's aunt Pilate, Morrison suggests that, although the anger driving the militant Days is real, their solution is inherently flawed. Like materialism, militancy is another false solution to the problem of finding an African-American identity in European-American culture.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1963: President Kennedy is assassinated, plunging all Americans into mourning.

1970s: President Nixon resigns after being implicated in the Watergate scandal.

Today: President Clinton is impeached, becoming the butt of jokes because of his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

1963: Civil rights leader Medgar Evers is assassinated and his assailant brags about the murder before being acquitted by an all-white jury.

1970s: Americans of all colors are inspired by the television miniseries *Roots*.

Today: Byron de la Beckwith, the murderer of Medgar Evers, is sentenced to life in prison by a mixed-race jury.

1963: Many schools are still racially segregated by law.

1970s: Because of "white flight" to the suburbs, many schools become resegregated.

Today: Some Blacks begin to question the value of integration and instead work to strengthen all-Black institutions.

Analysis: Techniques / Literary Precedents

By most standards, *Song of Solomon* is technically conservative for the author of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. It is unique in Morrison's canon because it takes an essentially masculine view of the quest and in that the central figure is a male. It follows the logic of the quest one of literature's true archetypes. The hero sets out looking for one thing, but learns as the quest develops that what he really needs to find is something else. Traditional variations on the quest motif involve some form of renewal — the grail quest behind much modern literature leads to a cultural and agricultural renewal — and as Milkman reshapes and defines his quest, he brings back to Detroit a new and vital appreciation for African-American culture and folklore, presumably something that liberates his life and can empower others as well. Morrison, however, qualifies this traditional quest result by introducing the killing of Pilate and the ambiguity of the final confrontation between Milkman and Guitar; will their embrace, surely resulting in the death of one, prevent Milkman from taking his new view back to Detroit?

The novel is organized into two quests, one false and one true. While Milkman seeks gold, he commits to an end that compounds rather than solves his problem. Discovering, through perils reminiscent of traditional quests such as caves, mansions haunted by ghostlike figures, hostile strangers, night-hunts, and attempts on his life, that his goal is destructive, Milkman adapts his quest to one for sources and knowledge.

During the 1970s, a large movement toward discovery of the familial and cultural origins of African-Americans took place. Perhaps the most spectacular commercial success was Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), which was later adapted as a television miniseries, about a family's discovering its origins in Africa. Although Morrison does not take her characters back to Africa, she offers us a very sophisticated version of the quest for roots in American post slave culture.

The final unifying symbol of the novel is flight. The epigraph mentions the fathers' flight as a matter of legend, and Milkman is energized by learning the story of Solomon's flight. His own birth took place in a white hospital because Ruth went into labor when a man tried to fly but fell to his death, an event accompanied by Pilate's song about "Sugarman," which we eventually learn is a corruption of the song of Solomon. Milkman's low self-esteem as a child is traced to his discovery that he could not fly. Solomon's flight is a legendary defiance of the slave code, and Milkman may literally or figurally take flight to confront Guitar. The figure's full implications, like many themes and motifs in *Song of Solomon*, are manifested by Pilate, who, Milkman realizes as she dies, could fly all along — because of her transcendent love and forgiveness.

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Short-Answer Quizzes

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 1 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Mercy Hospital have an unofficial name, and what is that name?
2. What is the name of the poor section of town?
3. What does Robert Smith wear to help him fly?
4. What does the narrator say Milkman thinks of himself after he learns he can't fly?
5. Why does Dr. Foster want a centerpiece on his dining room table, and what does it signify?
6. What fairy tale does Ruth compare nursing her son to? What is the significance of it?
7. What are the two names of Macon Dead's office?
8. How is Pilate named?
9. How are pine needles significant in Pilate's life? What do they symbolize?
10. Why does Macon go to Pilate's house?

Answers

1. Mercy Hospital is called "No Mercy" Hospital by the black residents because they are not permitted to enter the hospital.
2. The name of the poor part of town is Southside.
3. Robert Smith wears "wide blue silk wings."
4. Milkman "lost all interest in himself" when he learned he couldn't fly. "To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother."
5. Dr. Foster sees the centerpiece as a symbol of wealth and refinement to distinguish his family from "the people among whom they lived." He wants to show his superiority over the lower classes.
6. Ruth compares the nursing of Milkman to the spinning of gold in Rumpelstiltskin because it gives Ruth a feeling of possessing a magical form of power.
7. The names of Macon Dead's office are "Office" and "Sonny's Shop."
8. Pilate's father chooses her name randomly from the Bible, based on the shape of the word's letters, because he is unable to read.
9. Pilate sleeps on pine needles in her mattress, and she likes to chew them. Pine needles symbolize nature.

10. Macon goes to Pilate's house because there is no music in his own home. Macon says "he wanted just a bit of music—from the person who had been his first caring for."

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 2 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What meaning did the Sunday afternoon rides have for Macon and Ruth?
2. Which direction does Milkman ultimately face in the car? What does he see when he faces forward?
3. Why is the car called Macon Dead's hearse?
4. How does Guitar describe Pilate's house?
5. Does Milkman feel differently about his last name (Dead) after he visits Pilate? How?
6. What does Pilate say about the color black and the color green?
7. What does Pilate know about her mother's bonnet? What doesn't she know about her mother?
8. Why does Pilate say a brother and a cousin are the "same thing," even if they don't have the same mother?
9. What does Pilate think of being scared of something that isn't real?
10. Why doesn't Macon want Milkman to visit Pilate?

Answers

1. For Macon, the Sunday afternoon drives were a way to show off his wealth and look for new real estate markets. For Ruth, the drives were a way to display her family.
2. Milkman faces backward in the car. When he faces forward, he can only see "the laps, feet, and hands of his parents, the dashboard, or the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard."
3. The car is called Macon Dead's hearse because with the exception of Lena and Corinthians, the car has "no real lived life at all."
4. Guitar describes Pilate's house as "Shiny and brown. With a smell."
5. Milkman always disliked his name, but with Pilate he acts as if "having the name was a matter of deep personal pride."
6. Pilate says there are five or six kinds of black and green, like the colors of bottles, a grasshopper, a cucumber, lettuce, or "green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm."
7. She knows her mother's bonnet is blue like the sky, but she doesn't know her mother's name.
8. Pilate says they are the same because you have to treat them both the same.
9. Pilate believes that believing something is real is enough to make it real. Belief is reality.

10. Macon doesn't want Milkman to visit Pilate because Pilate "can't teach (Milkman) a thing (he) can use in this world."

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Milkman feel closer to President Franklin Roosevelt than to his father?
2. Why is Ruth jealous of death?
3. What does Ruth say to Macon that precipitates Macon smacking her in the jaw?
4. What word did Dr. Foster use to refer to the "Negroes" in the town? What was he most interested in when he delivered Milkman's sisters?
5. How were Lena and Corinthians' names chosen? Who else's name was chosen by this method?
6. Why does Macon tell Milkman the story about his mother?
7. Does Milkman love his mother? Why or why not?
8. What horrible secret does Macon tell Milkman?
9. What does Macon's story compel Milkman to remember?
10. What news is being broadcast over the radio when Milkman arrives at Tommy's Barber Shop?

Answers

1. Milkman feels closer to the late FDR because FDR had polio and Milkman believes one of his legs is shorter than the other. Milkman's father is too perfect for Milkman to be like him.
2. Ruth is jealous of death because when her father died, she felt he purposely chose death because it was "a more provocative companion" than she was. Ruth felt "personal failure" and "rejection."
3. Ruth tells Macon, "I certainly am my daddy's daughter."
4. Dr. Foster called the "Negroes" in the town "cannibals," and wanted to know if Milkman's sisters' skin color was light or dark.
5. Lena and Corinthians' names were picked randomly from the Bible. Pilate, Reba, and Hagar's names were also chosen from the Bible.
6. Macon wants Milkman to understand his actions and to explain why he hit Macon's mother.
7. Milkman doesn't love his mother because "she was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love."
8. Macon tells Milkman that Ruth had some kind of sexual relationship with her father.
9. Macon's story compels Milkman to remember that Ruth nursed Milkman when he was too old to be nursed.

10. The news broadcast at Tommy's Barber Shop is that (Emmett) Till, a young "Negro," was "stomped to death" in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 4 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What are some of the metaphors Milkman uses to describe Hagar?
2. What one gift that Hagar receives is especially out of place in her house?
3. What book does Pilate read?
4. What happens to Pilate's mouth when she is upset?
5. Why does Reba want to be a patient in a hospital?
6. Does Guitar like Honoré? What does he call it?
7. What does Milkman equate being serious with?
8. What are some of the violent flower images the narrator uses to describe the garden in Milkman's dream?
9. Who does Freddy say killed his mother?
10. Who else besides Guitar does Freddy say should know about the "strange things" going on in town?

Answers

1. Milkman refers to Hagar as "his private honey pot" and "the third beer."
2. The one gift Hagar receives that is especially out of place in her household is a bathrobe, because she has no bathroom.
3. Pilate reads a fourth-grade geography book.
4. When Pilate is upset, her mobile mouth becomes still.
5. Reba wants to go to the hospital because she thinks it's a "nice hotel."
6. Guitar doesn't like Honoré. He refers to it as a "nigger heaven."
7. Milkman equates being serious with being "miserable."
8. Some of the violent flower images the narrator uses to describe Ruth's garden are the "bloody red heads," and "the bobbing snapping heads" of the flowers with "their soft jagged lips."
9. Freddy says that ghosts killed his mother.
10. Freddy tells Milkman that besides Guitar, he should ask Corinthians about the "strange things" going on in town.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 5 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Do Guitar and Milkman get along better or worse after their quarrel about Honoré versus Alabama? Why?
2. Why does Guitar say Southerners can relate to Jesus?
3. Why does Guitar tell Milkman that a “Negro” can’t be an egg?
4. How often does Hagar attempt to kill Milkman?
5. Where does Milkman follow Ruth to?
6. What words does Ruth use to describe her father’s moral character?
7. Who aided Ruth in saving Milkman when Macon tried to abort him?
8. When was the last time Ruth and Macon had physical relations before they conceived Milkman? How many years elapsed between then and when Milkman was conceived?
9. What did Pilate give Ruth to entice Macon into sleeping with her?
10. What piece of fruit does Pilate offer Ruth both times that she visits? Why can’t Ruth eat it?

Answers

1. Guitar and Milkman get along better after their quarrel because of its cleansing effect on their relationship: “They were easy with each other now that they didn’t have to pretend.”
2. Guitar says Southerners can relate to Jesus because they can relate to his being “strung up on a tree.”
3. Guitar says a “Negro” can’t be an egg because his genes won’t allow it: “Nature says no.”
4. Hagar attempts to kill Milkman at least once every month.
5. Milkman follows Ruth to the Fairfield Cemetery where her father is buried.
6. Ruth describes her father’s moral character by saying he “was not a good man,” and that he was “arrogant,” “foolish,” and “destructive.”
7. Pilate aided Ruth in the preservation of Milkman’s life.
8. The last time Ruth and Macon had physical relations was before Dr. Foster died. Therefore, they didn’t have relations for ten years.
9. Pilate gives Ruth “some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff” that has to be mixed with rain water, and then put in Macon’s food in order to entice Macon to sleep with her.
10. Pilate offers Ruth a peach both times she visits, but Ruth can’t eat peaches because the fuzz tickles her nose.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 6 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. According to Milkman, what vices has Guitar given up?
2. What does Guitar say about white people as a race? Does he believe all white people have the potential to kill?
3. Does Milkman “buy into” Guitar’s views of white people? Why or why not?
4. What does Guitar say about the Mafia and the Klan?
5. What historic names does Guitar cite as potential killers?
6. Why did Robert Smith commit suicide and why did Henry Porter try to?
7. What does Guitar mean when he says of Robert Smith, “we do that rather than crack and tell somebody?”
8. Can Guitar have a family life as a member of the Seven Days?
9. What does Guitar say when Milkman says that there’s “no love in it,” referring to the Seven Days?
10. Why does Milkman “take Guitar to task” when Guitar says “we don’t off Negroes”?

Answers

1. According to Milkman, Guitar has given up “smoking,” “fucking,” and “drinking.”
2. Guitar says that as a race, white people are “unnatural.” He believes because they’re “unnatural” that any one of them has the potential to kill.
3. No, Milkman does not agree with Guitar. He thinks Guitar is unfairly stereotyping white people.
4. Guitar says the Mafia “kills for money,” and the Klan “kills for fun.”
5. Guitar cites the names of John F. Kennedy, Albert Schweitzer, and Eleanor Roosevelt as historic figures who would kill black people if the opportunity arose.
6. Robert Smith and Henry Porter tried to commit suicide because they were Seven Days’ members, and the responsibility got to be too much for them.
7. When referring to Robert Smith, Guitar means that Seven Days’ members would take their own lives before betraying their cause.
8. No, as a member of the Seven Days, Guitar cannot marry or have children.
9. Guitar tells Milkman that the Seven Days is about love. Guitar says, “It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love.”
10. Milkman criticizes Guitar when Guitar says, “We don’t off Negroes” because Milkman has said to him, “You can off me.” Rather than think of Milkman as an individual, Guitar categorizes him first by what race

Milkman is.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 7 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What does Macon tell Milkman that freedom is?
2. Why doesn't Macon know that Pilate has a green sack hanging from her ceiling?
3. Where do Pilate and Macon go after their father is killed?
4. Who buries Macon's father, and where?
5. Why did the "slavemaster's" house where Circe hid the children repulse Pilate and Macon?
6. What two possessions did Pilate have that belonged to her mother? What possession of her father's did she have?
7. What happened to Pilate's ear after she put on her earring? What did Circe do to help her?
8. Where were Macon and Pilate originally headed once they left Circe's house? Why?
9. What happened to Pilate and Macon on the third day after they left Circe's house?
10. What remained in the cave and what was gone when Macon returned to it after his rift with Pilate?

Answers

1. Macon tells Milkman that "money is freedom."
2. Macon doesn't know Pilate has a green sack hanging from her ceiling because Macon has never been in his sister's house.
3. After their father's death, Macon and Pilate are hidden by the midwife Circe at the house where she is employed. When they leave there, they live out in nature and then in a cave.
4. Macon buried his father near a stream where he and Macon Dead I used to fish together.
5. The "slavemaster's" house repulsed Macon and Pilate because they couldn't stand the stillness; they were bored cooped up in a room and shut off from nature and the sky. They couldn't eat the "soft bland food" that white people ate.
6. Pilate had her mother's brass snuffbox and sunbonnet, and the brown scrap of paper that her father had written her birth name on.
7. Pilate's ear became infected, and Circe put cobwebs on it to heal it.
8. Once they left Circe's house, Macon and Pilate were headed to Virginia because Macon believed they had family there.

9. On the third day after they left Circe's house, Macon and Pilate awakened to find the ghost of their father sitting near them.
10. When Macon returned to the cave after his rift with Pilate, the dead man was still in the cave, but the tarpaulin and the gold were gone.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 8 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does the narrator say Milkman includes Guitar in the plan to steal the gold?
2. Why does Milkman suddenly start buying newspapers? What kind of reports is Milkman looking for?
3. As Milkman and Guitar discuss their plan for stealing the gold, what image does Milkman see as he stares "off into the sky for inspiration"?
4. Why is Milkman aware of a falseness in his voice when he talks to Guitar about what he will buy with the gold? Why does he really want the gold?
5. What does Milkman say about the way Pilate's household tells time?
6. Where does Milkman tell Guitar are the only places Pilate, Reba, and Hagar go together?
7. What smell fills the air on September 19, 1963?
8. How is the lake described at the beginning of the chapter?
9. What does the green sack hanging from Pilate's ceiling "promise"?
10. What does Guitar see in the moonlight as he and Milkman leave Pilate's house?

Answers

1. Milkman includes Guitar in his plan to recover the gold because "maybe he wanted to see Guitar warm and joking again, his face open and smiling instead of with the grim reaper look." Milkman also wants Guitar involved because "he could look forward to both fun and fear."
2. Milkman buys the newspaper to look for "reports of murders that appeared suspicious, pointless" to determine if they are committed by the Seven Days.
3. As Milkman stares "into the sky for inspiration" he sees a white peacock.
4. Milkman notices a falseness in his voice because he is not really interested in buying things with the gold because he's always had money. He wants the money in order to be independent from his family and in order to seek new adventures: "New people. New places."
5. Milkman says that Pilate and her family are "not clock people" and that he doesn't think Pilate knows "how to tell time except by the sun."
6. Milkman tells Guitar that the only two places the Pilate household goes to together are funerals and circuses.

7. The smell of ginger fills the air on September 19, 1963.
8. The lake is described as “full of mill refuse and the chemical wastes of a plastics manufacturer.”
9. The sack hanging from Pilate’s ceiling “promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart’s lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice.”
10. As Guitar and Milkman leave Pilate’s house, Guitar sees “the figure of a man.”

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 9 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Corinthians’ mother approve of the title “amanuensis”?
2. What is the actual work Corinthians does?
3. What work had Corinthians done up until this point?
4. Why don’t the men of the community want to marry Corinthians?
5. What college did Corinthians attend? What colleges would the men have preferred?
6. According to the narrator what did a “four-year dose of liberal education” do to Corinthians?
7. What kind of shoes did Corinthians wear to and from work?
8. How does Henry Porter introduce himself to Corinthians?
9. What covers Henry Porter’s walls? What do the dates signify?
10. What kind of imitation does Pilate do to get Milkman and Guitar released from jail?

Answers

1. Corinthians’ mother approves of the word “amanuensis” because “it was straight out of the 19th century” and “the rickety Latin word” makes Corinthians’ work seem important.
2. Corinthians’ actual work is as a maid.
3. Up until this point, Corinthians had made red velvet roses.
4. The men of the town didn’t want to marry Corinthians because she “lacked drive.” They believe women like her are too “accustomed to middle-class life” and that they have “no ambition, no hunger, no hustle in them.”
5. Corinthians attended Bryn Mawr. The men would have preferred that she attend black colleges such as Fisk, Howard, Talladega, and Tougaloo.
6. A “four-year dose of liberal education” guaranteed that Corinthians “had no real skill’s” and that she was “unfit for 80% of the useful work of the world.”

7. Corinthians wore high-heeled shoes to and from work.
8. Henry Porter introduces himself to Corinthians by giving her a greeting card with a poem in it.
9. Henry Porter has calendars covering his walls. The dates signify the days when the Seven Days are to commit retaliatory murders.
10. Pilate does an “Aunt Jemima” imitation to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 10 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Milkman tell Guitar he intends to go to Danville on his own?
2. What does Guitar answer when Milkman tells him “Everybody wants something from me...”?
3. What does Guitar tell Milkman about his father?
4. What does Guitar see in the eyes of his mother after the “white man” gives her \$40?
5. When Guitar says “just recently one of us was put out on the street,” who is he referring to? Who is the “us” in the phrase? Who is responsible?
6. What are some of the things that indicate Milkman is wealthy when he goes to Danville?
7. When Milkman meets Reverend Cooper, why does the Reverend become extremely friendly and solicitous with Milkman?
8. What does Reverend Cooper offer Milkman to drink? What is it stored in?
9. Who made Pilate’s earring for her?
10. How do the men of Danville describe Milkman’s father as a youth?

Answers

1. Milkman tells Guitar he needs to go to Danville by himself because he wants to be independent and that it would look “suspicious” if two men were “roaming around the woods” looking for gold.
2. Guitar tells Milkman “They want your life, man.”
3. Guitar thinks Milkman’s father is “a very strange Negro” who “behaves like...and thinks like a white man.”
4. “A willingness to love” was shining in the eyes of Guitar’s mother when she took the \$40 from the “white man.”
5. When Guitar talks “about one of us being put out in the streets” he’s referring to Henry Porter. The “us” refers to the Seven Days Society. Milkman is indirectly responsible for Henry’s eviction because he told his father about Henry’s relationship with Corinthians.

6. When Milkman goes to Danville, he has two bottles of Cutty Sark in his suitcase, and he is dressed in a three-piece beige suit, expensive shoes, and a gold watch.
7. Reverend Cooper becomes extremely friendly with Milkman because after Milkman tells the Reverend his name, the Reverend realizes that “I know your people!”
8. Reverend Cooper offers Milkman pure rye whiskey stored in a large mayonnaise jar.
9. Reverend Cooper’s father, a blacksmith, made Pilate’s earring for her.
10. Milkman’s father is described by the men of Danville as being as “strong as an ox.” He “could ride bareback and barefoot.” He “outran, outplowed, outshot, outpicked and outrode” everybody.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 11 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What do the Shalimar women carry in their hands? What does Milkman expect to see them carrying?
2. Why does Milkman end up buying a car to travel to Shalimar?
3. What does Milkman say about “southern hospitality”?
4. How does Mr. Solomon pronounce Shalimar?
5. What message does Guitar leave with Mr. Solomon for Milkman? What does it mean?
6. Why didn’t Milkman play as a child the way the children of Shalimar do?
7. How did Milkman and Guitar originally meet?
8. What are the two major things Milkman does wrong to incite the men of Shalimar?
9. What is the name of the place where the wind sounds like a sobbing woman?
10. What does the earth tell Milkman when he listens to it?

Answers

1. The Shalimar women carry nothing in their hands where Milkman would expect to see a pocketbook, change purse, wallet, keys, paper bag, comb or handkerchief.
2. Milkman buys a car to travel to Shalimar because the town is so small that he can’t get there directly by train or bus.
3. Milkman says that southern hospitality is “for real.” He wonders why “black people ever left the south,” and he thinks “the Negroes are as pleasant, wide-spirited, and self-contained as could be.”
4. Mr. Solomon pronounces the name Shalimar as “Shalleemone.”
5. The message Guitar leaves with Mr. Solomon for Milkman is “Your Day has come.” It means Guitar is going to kill Milkman.

6. Milkman didn't play as a child the way the Shalimar children do. He was excluded from their games because he was dressed in a "velvet suit," and because of his wealth, which isolated him.
7. Milkman and Guitar first met when Guitar pulled four boys off Milkman after Milkman's nose had been bloodied in a fight.
8. Milkman talks about the Shalimar women as if they are sex objects and he announces to the men that he may have to "buy another car to get back home." He doesn't introduce himself or ask their names. He refers to the Shalimar men as "them" in their presence.
9. The place that sounds like a woman sobbing when the wind hits it is Ryna's Gulch.
10. The earth tells Milkman that Guitar is standing behind him. This realization gives Milkman enough time to "catch the wire" that Guitar is about to fasten around his throat.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 12 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Who does Milkman specifically go to see in Chapter 12 to find out more information about his family? What specifically does he want to know?
2. What is Sing's relationship to Susan Byrd and her father?
3. What is Susan Byrd's grandmother's name?
4. Is it true that it isn't important for Milkman to find his people?
5. What does Milkman realize the ghost is telling Pilate when it says, "Sing"?
6. Since Pilate doesn't have a navel, what else does Milkman figure can also be true?
7. What does Milkman realize he's left behind at Susan Byrd's house?
8. Why does Guitar try to kill Milkman? Why doesn't Guitar believe Milkman's explanation?
9. Why wasn't Milkman really afraid of being killed by Hagar?
10. What does the reference to the "red man's house" in the children's song mean?

Answers

1. Milkman goes to Susan Byrd's house because he wants to find out about his grandmother, Sing.
2. Sing is Susan Byrd's aunt. Susan Byrd's father, Crowell, Byrd is Sing's brother.
3. Susan Byrd's grandmother is named Heddy Byrd.
4. No, at this point it is important to Milkman to find his people.
5. Milkman realizes the ghost isn't asking Pilate to sing (a song); rather the ghost is saying his wife's name.

6. Because Pilate doesn't have a navel, Milkman figures that it is possible ghosts can exist.
7. Milkman realizes that Grace Long has kept his watch, but he decides that "a watch is not worth worrying about."
8. Guitar tries to kill Milkman because he believes Milkman has recovered the gold and is keeping it for himself. Guitar doesn't believe Milkman's explanation because, as he knows, Milkman never helped anyone in his life.
9. Milkman didn't really believe Hagar would succeed in killing him because of her "weapons" and because of a "complete lack of cunning or intelligence even of conviction, in her attacks."
10. The reference to the "red man's house" in the children's song referred to the Indian heritage of the Byrds.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 13 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What metaphor does Guitar use to symbolize what love should be like?
2. Pilate and Reba are credited with being able to "make up (their lives)" each because they have a quality Hagar lacks. What are those qualities?
3. What happens now when Reba tries to win things?
4. What facial descriptions are used to describe Pilate and Reba's anxiety over Hagar's condition?
5. What does Reba pawn in order to get Hagar the necessary money for her shopping trip? How much money does Hagar take with her to shop?
6. Why does Marcelline of Lilly's Beauty Parlor agree to take Hagar as a customer in spite of the late hour?
7. What happens to Hagar's shopping bags on the way home?
8. What happens after Hagar dresses up and presents herself to Pilate and Reba and sees herself in their eyes?
9. Who pays for Hagar's funeral and why? What lone member of the Macon Dead family attends?
10. What three words does Pilate repeat to refer to Hagar at the funeral mass?

Answers

1. Guitar uses the metaphor "the way the clouds love a mountain" to explain to Hagar how love should be.
2. Pilate is "strong enough" and Reba is "simple enough," Hagar is neither.
3. When Reba tries to win things, for the first time in her life, she is unable to.
4. Pilate's lips are described as "still." Reba's eyes are described as "full of panic" to exhibit their anxiety over Hagar's condition.
5. Reba pawns her diamond ring to get Hagar money to shop. Hagar goes shopping with \$200.75.

6. Marcelline agrees to take Hagar as a customer at the Beauty Parlor because she is afraid Hagar or Pilate might be dangerous.
7. Hagar's shopping bags split because it is raining.
8. After Hagar realizes how she must appear, she cries for hours and then develops a fever.
9. Macon Dead pays for Hagar's funeral at the insistence of his wife, Ruth. Ruth is the only member of the Macon Dead family to attend the funeral.
10. Pilate calls Hagar "my baby girl" at the funeral mass.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 14 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why doesn't Susan Byrd tell Milkman the truth about his family in front of Grace Long?
2. According to Susan Byrd, what is Jake's last name?
3. Who did Solomon leave behind when he flew back to Africa?
4. Approximately how many families consider themselves the kin of Solomon in the town of Shalimar?
5. What place besides the town is named after Solomon? What is its significance?
6. What other reason does Susan Byrd give to explain why Ryna lost her mind besides the reason of "love"?
7. How does Susan Byrd explain to Milkman why the children's song says, "Jake the only son of Solomon?"
8. Who took care of Jake after he slipped out of Solomon's arms as Solomon flew back to Africa?
9. Why did Jake have to register at the Freedmen's Bureau?
10. What does Milkman say when Susan Byrd offers to get Milkman's watch back?

Answers

1. Susan Byrd doesn't tell the truth in front of Grace Long because Grace is a "gossip."
2. Susan Byrd tells Milkman that Jake didn't have a last name because he is "one of those flying African children."
3. Solomon left his wife, Ryna, and 21 children behind when he flew back to Africa.
4. More than 40 families in the area consider themselves Solomon's kin.
5. A big double-headed rock over the valley is named after Solomon because it's where Solomon took flight to Africa. It's called Solomon's Leap.
6. Besides love, Susan Byrd reasons that Ryna must have lost her mind because she had 21 children to care for by herself.

7. Susan believes that the song says “Jake the only son of “Solomon” because Jake was the one Solomon was trying to take with him when he flew back to Africa.
8. Heddy, Sing’s mother, took Jake into her home after Jake slipped out of Solomon’s arms and fell to the ground.
9. Jake had to register at the Freedmen’s Bureau because he had been a slave.
10. When Susan Byrd offers to get Milkman’s watch back from Grace Long, Milkman tells her “never mind.”

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 15 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Where does Milkman want to swim?
2. Once Sweet learns that Solomon flew back to Africa, what is her next question? Why?
3. Why does Milkman read the road signs “with interest” on his ride back to Michigan?
4. What is the official name of “Not Doctor” street? Why isn’t it used?
5. Why doesn’t the narrator include a list of names in the last chapter?
6. What does Milkman conclude that all human relationships “boil down to”?
7. What does Pilate do when, upon Milkman’s return, he tries to embrace her?
8. Where is the “something of Hagar’s” that Pilate has put near Milkman in the cellar?
9. Why didn’t Milkman and Pilate fly to Virginia when they traveled there to bury Jake’s bones?
10. What does Pilate put on the grave instead of a rock or a cross?

Answers

1. Milkman wants to swim in the sea.
2. Sweet’s second question is about whom Solomon left behind. As a woman she is concerned with the welfare of the women and children.
3. Milkman reads the road signs with interest because he knows that beneath the names of the signs are other buried names that have meaning.
4. The official name of “Not Doctor” street is Mains Avenue, but the black community doesn’t use it because it has no meaning or history for the people who live there.
5. The narrator includes a list of names that bears witness to a past. Through the names the past can be recalled and memorialized. The list of names also celebrates both the fictitious figures of Song of Solomon and the historic figures and referents in African American history.

6. Milkman concludes that all human relationships boil down to: “Would you save my life? Or would you take it?”
7. When Milkman tries to embrace Pilate after his return from Michigan, she breaks a “wet green bottle over his head.”
8. Pilate has put Hagar’s hair in a shoe box near to Milkman.
9. Milkman and Pilate don’t fly to Virginia because Pilate will not “step foot on an airplane.”
10. Pilate put her earring in the grave, instead of putting a rock or cross on it.

Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: Suggested Essay Topics

Chapter 1

1. Discuss the way different characters are named. Are some names more valid than others? Why or why not?
2. Show the conflict of nature vs. society in the characters Pilate and Macon. How do their homes, possessions, and behavior reflect this conflict?

Chapter 2

1. Discuss “food and animal imagery” in Pilate’s house. Consider the five senses, especially sight and smell, to describe the atmosphere of the household.
2. Why is Milkman drawn to Pilate’s house? What do he and Guitar observe? What does Milkman say and do differently than when he is in his own house?

Chapter 3

1. Describe Dr. Foster. Consider the evidence and use it to indict him as a snob and a racist.
2. Discuss the difficulties Milkman has growing up. Explain the symbolism of his “limp.” Describe what he sees in the mirror, and how family “truths” skew Milkman’s whole sense of identity. Discuss his relationship with the members of his family. How do these relationships impact his sense of self?

Chapter 4

1. Discuss why Milkman is no longer interested in Hagar. Explain what attracted him to her in the first place and what has changed. Why does Hagar’s accessibility make her less attractive?
2. List the different crimes mentioned in the chapter. Determine if all of them are real or if some are fictitious. What is the impact of interweaving history with fiction?

Chapter 5

1. Discuss the things in Ruth’s cloistered world that makes her life bearable. Why do these things comfort Ruth?
2. Discuss Pilate’s association with magic in the chapter. Cite all the magical aids she uses to achieve her ends. Is her magic always benevolent magic?

Chapter 6

1. Discuss Guitar’s criticism of white people. Why do you think his views are so extreme? Does the novel or your own experience suggest that any of his views are justified? Give reasons why or why not.
2. Discuss Milkman’s condemnation of Guitar’s organization, the Seven Days. What important points does Milkman make? Is he able to influence Guitar’s thinking? What additional arguments could Milkman have brought up to oppose Guitar’s views?

Chapter 7

1. Discuss the role of nature in Macon and Pilate’s lives as children. Refer to specific descriptions of nature in the chapter. Show how nature is perceived as benevolent and as sinister by the children. Explain the

discrepancy.

2. Discuss how Macon changes in the presence of the gold. Give specific examples.

Chapter 8

1. Compare and contrast Guitar's and Milkman's attitudes as they discuss stealing the gold. How are their words, thoughts, and actions different? Why does Guitar say Milkman is "defeatist" about the gold? Why does Milkman call it "common sense"?

2. Discuss why Milkman's adolescent adventures, when he and Guitar "terrorized" the neighborhood and instilled fear in everyone, remain so important to Milkman. Give examples of some of their adventures and their symbolic meaning for Milkman.

Chapter 9

1. Discuss the narrator's opinion of a "liberal education." Consider the advantages to this type of education and make an argument in its favor. Then contrast these to the disadvantages. Explain the differences between different types of education. For example, compare a liberal arts' education to a vocational education or to the type of "real-life" experience education Pilate has had.

2. Consider the conflict between appearance and reality in the character Corinthians. Describe it by her physical appearance and her actions. Does Corinthians ultimately make a choice between appearance and reality? What are her reasons for her choice and how does this choice change her life?

Chapter 10

1. Discuss images of aging and decay in Chapter 10. Cite examples of both plant life, human life, and inanimate life in your essay. Discuss the relationship between the three forms of life.

2. Discuss why the death of Macon Dead I was "the beginning of (the Danville men's) own dying." What did he symbolize for the men? What were his accomplishments? How did these accomplishments affect his moral nature?

Chapter 11

1. Discuss why Milkman offends the men of Shalimar. List all the things that Milkman does to alienate the men. Compare and contrast Milkman's Northern behavior to the acceptable behavior expected in the South.

2. Discuss Milkman's uneasiness with nature. Give examples of the difficulties Milkman has while hunting and how this gradually changes. Discuss the relationship between Milkman's search for self and his understanding of nature. Be specific.

Chapter 12

1. Discuss the encounter between Milkman and Guitar in the chapter. What is the reason for Guitar's lack of faith in Milkman after they have been best friends for so many years? Is this loss of faith believable to you as a reader? Why or why not? Discuss how the Seven Days and Guitar's childhood have influenced the person Guitar has become.

2. Discuss the meaning of Milkman's dream about flying. Compare it to other references to flying in the text. If the significance of flying has changed for Milkman, explain how. Consider flying symbols throughout the novel, and analyze them.

Chapter 13

1. Consider Guitar's advice to Hagar. Is he a sympathetic character in this chapter? If you believe he is,

consider what character traits make him sympathetic. How do these character traits compare with your other impressions of Guitar throughout the novel? Compare and contrast them.

2. Discuss how society's standards influence how we think about ourselves. How is Hagar a victim of these standards? How are both black and white women victims of standards of beauty? Is there one "true" model of beauty for white women? Discuss standards of beauty in different cultures. Consider whether men are also victims of standards of beauty.

Chapter 14

1. Discuss the reasons Susan Byrd didn't tell Milkman the truth about his family when Grace Long was present. Is Susan's concern with the gossip based on racism or not? Discuss the narrator's point of view on intermarriage between Indians and blacks.

2. Reconstruct a brief genealogical history of the Dead family. Explain how oral history has kept the Dead past alive. Consider all the characters that have contributed stories to this history.

Chapter 15

1. Discuss the theme of flying with regard to those who are left behind. Is it always the men who "fly off" and the women and children who are left behind? Consider male responsibility to family in your discussion. Draw on your own experiences. Do you think the narrator, in *Song of Solomon*, takes a stand on this issue? Cite examples in the text.

2. Consider Pilate's behavior in the final chapter. What makes her a simple and what makes her a complex character. Discuss her belief system and how it influences her behavior. Do you think she is a believable character? Does it matter whether she is believable? Why or why not? Why does Milkman say, at the end of the book, that "without ever leaving the ground, (Pilate) could fly?" Explain what Milkman means.

Teaching Guide: Topics for Further Study

One of the catalysts for Guitar's increased involvement in politics is the Emmett Till case. Discuss the impact of Emmett Till's lynching on the political involvement of Blacks at the time.

Song of Solomon appeared at the same time that the miniseries *Roots* was playing on television.

Compare Morrison's text to Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, considering a topic such as the authors' treatment of African-American folklore, portrayal of male characters, or characterization in general.

Choose one of the scenes in the book, and write about how you would stage it as a scene from a play.

Imagine that Milkman has researched his mother's family history, and write an imaginary history of the Fosters.

Teaching Guide: What Do I Read Next?

Beloved, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel of a former slave haunted by the ghost of her daughter, won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature.

Paule Marshall's *Praise song for the Widow* (1983) is the story of a woman who discovers her family's origins on a small island on the Atlantic Coast.

Cane, a 1923 work by Jean Toomer, lyrically records the demise of traditional Black Southern life.

Based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres* (1991) by Jane Smiley tells the tale of a family unraveled by its secrets.

Published in 1952, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison is the classic modernist novel of an African American in search of his identity.

Rule of the Bone (1996), by Russell Banks, is a coming-of-age novel about a teenager who journeys from upstate New York to Jamaica.