How to Write about Toni Morrison

Song of Solomon

**From:** Bloom’s How to Write about Toni Morrison

# Reading to Write

Writing about Song of Solomon’ s rich narrative can be a deeply satisfying and intriguing experience; the layers of narrative that occur alongside one man’s quest for belonging leave the reader with many avenues to take when writing about the novel. One place to begin as a writer is with the epigraphs of the novel. The first epigraph is simply “Daddy,” while the second acknowledges: “The fathers may soar/ And the children may know their names.” Using these two epigraphs as entry points into the novel, one can begin to formulate ideas for an essay on the significance of names, identity, belonging, and the importance of family connections, all of which are central to the realities of many of the characters in the book.

In a fascinating scene in which Macon “Milkman” Dead III and Guitar Bains argue about their approaches to life, class-consciousness, and racism, among other issues, Guitar vehemently criticizes some of Milkman’s life choices. Later on, Milkman considers Guitar’s criticisms and reflects on his life purpose. A close reading of Milkman’s internal musings can help lead us into an exploration of many different topics for an essay, based on the epigraphs that frame the action of the novel.

If he had to spend the rest of his life thinking about rents and property, he’d lose his mind. But he was going to spend the rest of his life doing just that, wasn’t he. That’s what his father assumed and he supposed that was what he had assumed as well.

Maybe Guitar was right-partly. 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, inconvenience himself for ....

He ought to get married, Milkman thought.... Get a nice house. His father would help him find one.... And what? There had to be something better to look forward to .... He was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. (107)

This scene is a wonderful one to explore further and is rich with potential essay choices, all of which can be directly related to the two epigraphs mentioned earlier. Milkman’s malaise could be related to his lack of self-knowledge. The codependent and oppressive relationship between father and son is unmistakable. Milkman fails to realize the choke hold his father has had on his life and on his ability to make life-altering decisions. Both of them simply go along with the status quo-Macon Jr. making money, and Milkman following his example, simply because he does not have the creativity to view his life in any other way, even though if he continued that way, “he’d lose his mind. An essay could consider this life choice by examining Milkman’s unease and certainty that 11 [t]here had to be something better to look forward to. A writer could relate Milkman’s predicament to other characters who seem to be stuck in inertia, not able to improve their lives.

The epigraph suggests that knowledge of one’s name is crucial to one’s sense of well-being and self-actualization, and the quotation reveals that at that moment, Milkman knows neither the significance of his own and his father’s and grandfather’s name nor their legacy and his heritage. Years before, when Milkman was seventeen and came to his mother’s defense by hitting his father, not only did Milkman not know the origin of his name (which leads to the discovery of his mother’s inappropriate behavior with him), but he was ignorant about the relationship his mother and father shared, and his father’s efforts to have his wife abort Milkman. The secrets that Milkman has to uncover could provide material for many possible essays. Most of the characters have secrets, and these could be identified in a n essay and examined in light of the character’s self-awareness.

Inherent in this quotation is Milkman’s dissatisfaction with his “pointless, aimless” life. He is willing to marry someone just because society expects that of him, without a second thought to Hagar, his first cousin, who literally dies from a broken heart because he does not reciprocate her love. He lacks passion for love and life, and wants to continue living his life unconcerned for others’ well-being, and settling for a “nice” house. His insipid life that is devoid of passion could be contrasted to his ironic quest for the gold; he ends up caring for people, being more than concerned for others, and passionately unearthing his family history.

The above passage focuses on Milkman’s life, but the themes inherent in the passage could be applied to other characters in the novel. Who else in *Song of Solomon* is dissatisfied, going along with the status quo, not challenging their oppressors, and just surviving, rather than living passionately? Who in the novel is the antithesis to this detached way of life? The passage that we focused on also contains many of the novel’s themes and philosophical issues that could be elaborated on in an essay: the search for identity, people’s preoccupation with social status, finding one’s purpose in life, taking risks, following in your parents’ footsteps, and so on. The novel’s multifaceted characters and multiple themes can be explored in detail to create interesting and thought-provoking essays.

# Topics and Strategies

Here you will find a variety of topics to consider. It is up to you to interpret the events and characters in the novel in an original way. Doing your own research can help you to put some of the occurrences in the novel into historical context, and can also help you to identify a unique angle to the novel to address in your paper.

## Themes

The supernatural, freedom, literal and figurative flying, the healing and destructive power of love-these are some of the themes that could be explored in thematic essays about *Song of Solomon.* Because many of the themes are closely linked to character development, you could blend a study of a theme with a study of one or more characters to produce a multifaceted essay. Try to identify what the characters’ behaviors tell us about that particular theme, a nd what the theme may be telling us about the human condition. For example, how do Guitar’s complicated relationship with Milkman and his membership in the Seven Days tell us about loyalty and betrayal?

### Sample Topics:

The search for identity: Milkman’s search for a sense of self can be analyzed by taking into account the many levels of identity that he struggles with. Describe some aspects of his identity that he uncovers and that he comes to terms with on his journey.

Focusing on identity in the novel could lead to a basic summary of the novel, which you would want to avoid doing in a literary analysis paper. Instead, you could isolate aspects of Milkman’s personality that are presented as character flaws, or realities of which he is unaware. For instance, you may consider his waking dreams. Milkman was born with a caul, which according to folklore, allows a child to see ghosts and inexplicable events.

Does he utilize these visions to improve his life? What does he learn about himself through these visions?

Success and failure: In what ways are characters concerned with their success and failure?

Writing about people’s success and failure in the novel could involve questioning who is responsible for the character’s sense of self. Not only do people’s character traits play a role in their success, but society and other people ca n be responsible. First Corinthians Dead, for example, feels ashamed of her job as Michael-Mary Graham’s maid, and is limited to that position solely because of her race. Her situation could be contrasted to her father’s fight against his limitations and his determination to succeed financially in spite of the blockades erected by society to stop him from succeeding. Integral to a discussion on success in the novel are class-consciousness and status, both of which often involve race. Of course, in any Morrison novel, typical thematic notions such as success and failure are going to be complicated. How are definitions of success skewed when one examines the philosophy of the Seven Days men?

The healing and destructive power of love: Verses 6 and 7 of chapter 8 of the biblical book Song of Solomon state: “[F]or love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love” (KJV). How can you apply these biblical verses to characters’ behavior in the novel?

For an essay on love, you could first read the biblical book Song of Solomon and then relate the verses to various characters’ experiences with love. Examine how people’s views of love and their actions are integral to the action of the novel. Hagar’s love is compared to an “anaconda,” (137), and she becomes quite “vehement” as the biblical verse states, in contrast to Milkman’s indifference. What light does knowledge of the biblical verses shed on the unfolding of events?

## Character

Dynamic characters are those who undergo some sort of permanent change by the end of the novel, whether the change is apparent in their behavior or because of some acquired knowledge. All of the characters, even minor ones, undergo a transformation, which is one of the major themes in the novel. For an essay on character, you could explore how these characters change and whether the change is convincing. You could also identify the catalyst that brings about the change, and if the change is at anybody else’s expense. Rather than present a list of characteristics or behaviors, link the personality trait to a theme or philosophical idea so that your essay explores a number of aspects of the novel, rather than simply a person’s disposition.

### Sample Topics:

1. Ruth Foster Dead’s character: What motivates Ruth, and does she show evidence of transformation?

In the Bible, Ruth is loyal, steadfast and devoted. In *Song of Solomon,* Ruth has all of these qualities, but instead of exhibiting love for a mother-in-law (which has been interpreted as lesbian love in the Bible), Ruth shows this devotion for her father. Macon interprets her love for her father as unnatural, and Milkman learns of the incestuous relationship through a conversation with his father. Why does Morrison allow us to see Ruth’s conflicting side of the story? How can you relate the two versions of the story to the form of the novel-and the ways various characters get their chances to tell their stories, but at different times?

Pilate Dead’s character: How do Pilate’s characteristics function in contrast to other characters in the novel?

Pilate’s complicated character could be explored in an essay in contrast to other characters. Pilate and her brother, Macon Dead, cold be contrasted, as could Pilate and her niece First Corinthians. What commentary is Morrison making by presenting us with African-American women who are confined by society (like Corinthians) and those who live completely on the outskirts of society’s rigid norms (like Pilate)? You could relate this juxtaposition to Milkman’s thoughts of Pilate in terms of “her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine” (38), and later as the story of her life is revealed to him, the fact that he changes his harsh and dogmatic view of her.

Guitar Bains’s character: What drives Guitar, and how does he become an antagonistic force in the novel?

Guitar is another character who could automatically be compared to others in the novel, and, of course, principally as a foil to Milkman. When writing about the two, though, avoid simplistic reductions of their characters to good and evil. Morrison’s depiction of the friends defies a simplistic interpretation, because their interactions are so complicated and both exhibit admirable and reprehensible character traits. How does Guitar develop as a character? In what way is Guitar a spokesperson for the frustrations that many African Americans were burdened with during this historical period? Why does Guitar turn against Milkman at the end of the novel?

First Corinthians Dead’s Character: How is First Corinthians developed as a sympathetic character?

Morrison’s clever naming of characters adds to the complexity of this sensitive character. You could look up the biblical verse and see how her character reflects some of the lessons from the Bible, and what personality traits endear her to the reader. The situation First Corinthians finds herself in and the emotions she experiences are echoed in other novels in characters whose potential is squashed by a racist and sexist society. Her longing for a better life is shared by the reader, and we want her to succeed in becoming “a grown-up woman that’s not scared of her daddy” (196) as Porter puts it. You could also include the effect that her brother Milkman and her sister Lena have on her search for autonomy.

## History and Context

Morrison alludes to many historical events in the novel. You could pinpoint some of these and do further research into them. Overall, the characters live in a society that requires social change, social justice, and a reprieve from racial violence. For example, Emmett Till’s gruesome murder, which is referred to in the novel, illustrates the violence that many African­ American men faced in the 1950s. The characters who make up the Seven Days answer this violent reality by creating a threat of their own. What does the novel say about revenge, calculated violence, and passivity?

### Sample Topics:

1. Land allocation: Identify the importance of land in the novel.

There are many examples of the importance of the land. Macon Dead Senior is murdered because of the land that he owned.In an essay on such a topic, you may want to research sharecropping and the allocation of land to slaves and freedmen during and after slavery to get a sense of the significance of land. Another approach to a study of the land could be the way the land features in a poetic and visual way during Guitar’s chase of Milkman when the group of men goes hunting; the chase through the forest is a memorable scene that is full of anxiety and fast-paced suspense.

Racial violence: How does the violence in the novel serve as a backdrop for the historical time period and frame the characters’ realities?

There are many types of violence-racial and otherwise-that you could discuss at length in an essay. The novel opens with self-inflicted violence, the suicide of Mr. Smith, the insurance agent, which could be representative of the plight of the average African­ American man at the time. His ability to thrive in the world is perhaps limited by his race. The reader later finds out the reason for his apparently inexplicable suicide. Avoid just listing instances of violence; instead tie them to character, theme, or language. For example, Mr. Smith’s suicide is linked to flight and freedom, and later on, once the truth comes out (another theme), his death is connected to racial hostility. Various characters also have flashbacks of his suicide throughout the book, so you could connect their responses and the poetic language used to describe the death to the characters’ memories.

Songs in African-American literature and folklore: How do literal and figurative song add to the narrative?

Song has been an important part of African-American creative expression, and this reality shows up in the literature. Many African-America n expressions of liberation from oppression have come in the form of song, so it is no surprise, since this book has freedom as a key thematic idea, that song would feature prominently. How do the songs that Milkman hears help him solve the mystery of his ancestry?

## Philosophy and Ideas

This novel encourages contemplation about a number of issues that poets, playwrights, philosophers, and religious figures have pondered for centuries. You may want to examine the way the book reflects upon revenge killing and all of the moral implications contained therein.

Interestingly, Milkman’s character deliberately tries *not* to think too much about his predicament and would rather go along with the status quo. In contrast, Macon Dead thinks too much about money, and when Porter is on the verge of suicide, all he can think about is getting ·back the money that Porter owes him. An essay on philosophical ideas could be fascinating since there are so many issues to choose from.

### Sample Topics:

Memory, and people’s relationship to it: Explore the role of memory in the novel.

A starting point for an essay on the intricacies of memory could be the part in the novel when Macon Dead tells his son Milkman, “Funny how things get away from you. For years you can’t remember nothing. Then just like that, it all comes back to you” (52). Milkman’s quest allows him to unearth the history that Pilate and Macon are ignorant of, when he is exposed to the collective memory of the old men in Shalimar. You could examine why so many characters block out the past or distort the past. Is it a deliberate attempt to obscure what really happened, or is it a survival skill? People’s distortion of the past and their selective memory is closely linked to the truth, and differing perceptions of the truth, as discussed below.

The “whole truth”: W hy does Macon Dead tell his son Milkman that it is imperative to know the “whole truth” rather than just one person’s story? Who else knows only partial truths, or half of the story?

To address these ideas in an essay, you could look at the prevalence of secrets that people harbor in the novel and how the secrets affect people’s sense of trust and identity. Some characters deliberately keep secrets from others. What are some of the reasons for these secret lives? Ruth tells Milkman, “I know, as well as I know my own name, that [Macon] told you only what was flattering to him” (124), and this revelation allows him to believe yet more of his father’s perspective. Guitar and Milkman share a deep friendship and are aware that they both have secrets that they are keeping from each other. How does Morrison share some of the secrets with the reader and carefully reveal them to the characters involved?

Literal and figurative death: What roles do literal and figurative deaths play in the lives of characters?

The men in Milkman’s family often point out that because their last name is Dead, they already are dead. In what ways are the male family members figuratively dead? Other characters fear figurative deaths, for example Ruth Foster is scared that she will die in a marriage with no intimacy (125). The irony present in the book is also that in order to figuratively and literally live, many characters have to “kill” an unhelpful or menacing aspect of their personalities. Guitar has to leave behind his compassion for others in order to survive as the Sunday man, for example.

## Form and Genre

One way to analyze Morrison’s work is by assessing the way the author crafts the novel. The form of *Song of Solomon* has been described as “epic quest.” In addition, *Song of Solomon* incorporates many aspects of other types of literature, such the myth of the slaves who flew back to Africa to escape slavery, a common theme in African-American folklore. The use of literary devices such as irony and mystery are also prevalent in the book. The shift in setting from the city to the countryside also plays a role in characters’ sentiments and behavior.

Morrison allows us to see different perspectives regarding a situation, such as Milkman’s indifference to Hagar and her emotional response to him. How is the novel shaped by the many voices relating their stories?

### Sample Topics:

The protagonist’s epic quest: The novel is separated into two parts: Milkman’s and other characters’ lives before his quest in pa rt one, and then the quest and its aftermath in part two. How does the quest transform the protagonist and other characters?

Writing about Milkman’s figurative and literal journey could evoke comparisons to other archetypal heroes’ quests. Inherent within Milkman’s quest is a quest for self-improvement. At first, he is not sure what really needs to change in his life: All he cares about is finding the gold and improving his life financially, even though money bores him. As his quest progresses, he becomes more and more invested in actually finding out his history, and the gold is of secondary importance. Milkman’s physical journey, like that of many literary heroes, includes a figurative and literal baptism and cleansing when he slips in the river and is completely submerged under the water. He battles the natural landscape but emerges reborn.

Dramatic irony and irony of situation: How do dramatic irony and irony of situation work in the novel?

Dramatic irony occurs when a character is unaware of the significance of his or her actions, behaviors, or thoughts, but the reader can clearly see the reality. Irony of situation occurs when a character ends up in an unexpected situation, or one that is the direct opposite from how they started in the beginning of the novel. An essay could look at the irony of situation that occurs with Hagar’s death. It is ironic that while Milkman is experiencing a rebirth, Hagar is dying of a broken heart. Exploring the various characters’ lives allows a writer to look at the depiction of life’s ironies.

Mystery: How does mystery work in the novel?

Irony and mystery seem to work together in the book, in most of the characters’ lives and in the thematic content .Inherent in characters’ ignorance and quest for knowledge is, of course, a mystery to be solved or a secret that has to be revealed. Milkman’s quest begins with the mystery of the gold and ends with the mystery of his identity . He solves the latter, and the former mystery pales into insignificance. A writer could examine how much know ledge nd insight the reader acquires and how the characters’ lack of knowledge affects the reader.

## Language, Symbols, and Imagery

The language in the novel provides many opportunities for a writer to explore its richness in an essay. The conversations people engage in are witty and full of insights into life and human suffering and joy. The depth of human feelings is conveyed to us through people’s language and also through their silence. Sometimes language cannot express how a person feels, as with Corinthians’s figurative near-death experience. If she loses Porter, she feels she will truly die. She cannot convey that in words, so she says nothing and instead climbs onto his car and lies prostrate, full of emotion and fear. In an exploration of language, you could also comment on its failure to convey feelings.

### Sample Topics:

Figurative language: allusions: Allusions to the Bible abound in the novel. What role does the biblical Song of Solomon play in the novel?

The biblical Song of Solomon echoes many of the characters’ states of mind in the novel. Chapter 2 verse 5 seems to tell us Milkman’s feelings: “I am sick of love”, and in contrast, chapter 3 verse 4 could be interpreted as Corinthians’s feelings: “I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go.” Chapter 5 verse 6 could echo Hagar’s feelings about Milkman: “I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone” (KJV). You could familiarize yourself with the biblical verses and then explore characters who seem to act in the way the verse suggests.

Imagery: Sensory perception features widely in the novel. Explore the importance of smell in the novel, and its connection to character development.

Writing on the sense of .smell in the novel could uncover connections with a character, a theme, or language, for example. References to smell can be found in the biblical book Song of Solomon and can be connected to characters and their confusion or lack of awareness. For example, you could look at what Pilate’s and Circe’s smells represent. You could also analyze how Guitar Bains’s sensory memory of sweets invokes his father’s gruesome death and how the subsequent psychic pain follows him into adulthood. How is sensory perception used to illuminate life experiences?

African-American vernacular and naming: How are names and the act of naming used in the context of a society that is hostile to African Americans?

The names in the novel are curious and often have humorous connotations. Rather than provide a list of the obscure names in the book, you might contemplate names in relation to historical occurrences. Slave codes prohibited the enslaved from being taught how to read or write. Later on, African Americans were prohibited from voting unless they could spell their names. You could connect these historical realities to the names of characters in the book, such as that of Macon Dead. Macon Dead’s mother approved of her husband’s spurious new name, because as Macon says, she thought that a new name could “wipe out the past” (54). How is naming at the root of a lot of identity confusion in the novel? How is naming liberating?

## Further Information

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