

# **Song of Solomon Study Guide**

## **Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Song of Solomon Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-2.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3-4.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 6-7.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 8-9.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 12-13.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 14-15.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>



# Plot Summary

Song of Solomon opens with Robert Smith, an insurance agent in an unnamed Michigan town wearing blue silk wings. He leaps from the roof of Mercy Hospital, claiming he will fly across Lake Superior. He does not fly, but instead dies from the fall. The next day, the first black child born in Mercy Hospital is born to Ruth Foster Dead, who is the daughter of the first black doctor in the town. The baby's name is Milkman Dead.

At the age of four, Milkman discovers humans cannot fly, which causes him to withdraw into himself. He is loved by his mother and aunt, Pilate, but does not reciprocate. He is described as odd by most people because of his withdrawn personality. His sisters, First Corinthians and Magdalene (called Lena), take care of him.

Milkman has an emotional disease that has origins in the oppressions endured by previous generations and passed to future ones. Milkman's father, Macon Dead, got his odd name when a drunk Union soldier filled out his documents incorrectly. Macon Jr. and his sister, Pilate, witness the murder of their father when they are younger, which scarred them, and caused them to be estranged from each other. Macon Jr. becomes obsessed with acquiring wealth. He is hated by his tenants as well as his family.

When Milkman is thirty-two, he learns from his father that his aunt, Pilate, may have millions of dollars in gold hidden in a green tarp hanging from her shack. Milkman robs Pilate, and finds out the green tarp is filled with rocks and the skeleton of Milkman's grandfather, Macon Dead I. Guitar Bains, who helped Milkman with the robbery is disappointed there is no gold because he needs it to carry out a mission for the Seven Days, which is a secret group dedicated to avenging African-Americans who have been wrongly accused of murdering innocent whites.

Milkman suspects the gold is in a cave near Macon's old farm in Pennsylvania. He leaves Michigan and heads south, promising Guitar a share of whatever he finds. Before leaving, Milkman ends his relationship with Hagar, which causes her to go crazy and attempt to kill him on several occasions. When Milkman gets to Montour County, Pennsylvania, he learns there is no gold. Instead, he decides to search for his family history. He meets Circe, who is the midwife who delivered Macon Jr. and Pilate. She tells him Macon's original name was Jake, and he was married to an Indian woman named Sing.

Milkman does not know Guitar is following him, and Guitar wants to murder Milkman because he feels cheated out of his share of the gold. Milkman is encouraged by what he learns from Circe, so he continues south to Shalimar, which is his grandfather's family's home in Virginia. Initially he is uncomfortable there, but grows to love the small-town atmosphere when he begins to learn more and more about his family history.

Milkman learns his great-grandfather was Solomon, the legendary flying African. The story is that he escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. He tried to take Jake, Milkman's



grandfather, with him, but dropped him. Solomon abandoned his wife, Ryna, and their twenty-one children. Ryna went insane with grief over the loss of her husband, which left Jake to be raised by Heddy, the mother of Sing.

Milkman is changed by what he learns about his family history. He becomes a compassionate, responsible person with a sense of purpose. After surviving an attempt on his life by Guitar, Milkman returns home to tell Macon Jr. and Pilate what he learned. When he gets home, he finds out that Hagar died of a broken heart, and his family still faces many emotional problems.

Milkman goes with Pilate back to Shalimar, where they bury Jake's bones on Solomon's Leap, which is the mountain that began Solomon's flight to Africa. After the burial, Pilate is accidentally shot and killed by Guitar, who intended to kill Milkman. Milkman is heartbroken by Pilate's death, but because he is invigorated by his transformation, he calls out Guitar's name and leaps toward him.



# Chapters 1-2

## Summary

The story opens on Wednesday, February 18, 1931 in an unnamed Michigan town when Robert Smith, an insurance agent with North Carolina Mutual Life, stands on the roof of Mercy Hospital in blue silk wings intending to fly from the roof across Lake Superior. Two days earlier, he had tacked a note on the door of his yellow house that said, "At 3:00 p.m. On Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all. (signed) Robert Smith, Ins. agent" (chap. 1, pg. 3).

Smith's show draws a crowd of around fifty local African-Americans, and some members of the hospital staff come outside to see why there is a gathering of people in front of the hospital. The hospital is at the end of a street called Mains Avenue by the post office, but recognized as "Not Doctor Street" by residents. The town's first black physician, Dr. Foster, lived on the street, which earned it the nickname "Doctor Street" by residents. The post office issued a notice that explained the street name was "Mains Avenue not Doctor Street," which led to residents calling Mains Avenue "Not Doctor Street."

Dr. Foster's daughter, Ruth Foster Dead, is among the crowd at the hospital, dressed in an expensive gray coat with a black bow and four-button ladies' galoshes. She is there with her two daughters, Magdalene (called Lena) and First Corinthians Dead. Ruth is pregnant with her son and suddenly goes into labor in front of the hospital.

Also in the crowd is Pilate Dead, who is Ruth's sister-in-law. She is wrapped in an old quilt instead of a coat, and stands singing "O Sugarman done fly away," staring at Robert Smith. Also present is an elderly woman with several grandchildren. A white nurse approaches one of the grandchildren, a six-year-old boy named Guitar Baines, and orders him to go to Admissions to notify security about Smith atop the hospital. Guitar points out she misspells "admissions." Eventually, Smith leaps from the top of the building.

The next day, Ruth Foster Dead gives birth in the hospital. Her son, Macon Dead III, is the first black child born in the hospital, an honor given to him because his grandfather was the first black doctor in the town. Other black women give birth on the hospital's front steps. At the age of four, Macon Dead III discovers humans cannot fly, which devastates him. He loses interest in everything. People who know him describe him as "peculiar."

Ruth and her children live in Dr. Foster's enormous home. There is no love from Ruth's husband, Macon Dead II (also called Macon Jr.), so Ruth finds pleasure in small things. She polishes a water spot on the dining room table, becoming almost obsessed with it. She also creates a strange connection with her son, Macon Dead III, by breastfeeding



him long past infancy. One day while she is nursing him as a child, Freddie, a janitor hired by Macon Jr. sees her. This earns Macon Dead III the nickname “Milkman,” which sticks with him throughout his life. Though Freddie is the town gossip, Macon Jr. never learns how his son got the nickname.

Macon Dead II is a slumlord obsessed with gaining wealth. His name began with his father, Macon Dead I, who got the name when a drunken Union soldier filled out paperwork incorrectly. Macon Jr. does not know his father's given name. Macon Jr. works out of an office that was once called “Sonny's Shop,” though no one knows now who Sonny was or what was sold in the shop. When Guitar Baines's grandmother comes into the office to ask Macon Jr. for an extension on her rent in order to have money to feed the children, he refuses without hesitation. He explains if he granted extensions to everyone who asked, he would not have all that he does.

Freddie comes into the office and tells Macon Jr. that one of his tenants, Henry Porter, has shut himself in his room, drunk and threatening to shoot himself. Rather than trying to save Porter, Macon Jr. takes his own gun to the building and demands Porter throw down the rent he owes to Macon Jr. When Porter passes out, Macon Jr. sends Freddie up to retrieve the money.

Macon Jr. enjoys reading his account books, and also spends his free time reflecting on family memories. He remembers the death of his mother, Sing, while she was in labor, and the appearance of his sister, Pilate, who climbed out of their mother's womb. Pilate was born without a navel. The reader learns that Pilate's name was chosen blindly from the Bible with no regard for its use in context. All members of the Dead family, except firstborn sons, are named this way.

When Macon Jr. was seventeen and Pilate was twelve, they parted ways. They were reunited a year before Milkman's birth. Macon Jr. does not allow Pilate in his home. He is ashamed of her unkempt appearance, as well as the fact that she is a smuggler of alcohol during prohibition. Despite Macon Jr.'s disdain for his sister, he is compelled to stop at her house on his way home on the day of Porter's suicide attempt. He hides and listens to Pilate, her daughter Rebecca (called Reba), and her granddaughter, Hagar, sing.

In Chapter 2, the Dead family goes for a ride in their new, green Packard to the Honore beach community. Macon Jr. has plans to build upscale summer homes for wealthy African-Americans in the area. Macon Jr. drives the car through Not Doctor Street, as well as through the rough part of the town. This area is known as the Blood Bank, and many of his tenants live in that area. Macon Jr. takes extremely good care of the Packard, which leads other blacks to refer to it as a “hearse.” When they look at the car, it is with a mix of envy and mockery.

During the car ride, Milkman throws a temper tantrum and demands to use the bathroom. Macon Jr. initially ignores his son and makes mean comments about Ruth, but eventually pulls over. Lena accompanies Milkman, who uses nearby trees. While urinating, Milkman hears Lena's footsteps behind him. When he turns around, he



urinates on her pale blue dress. The narrator explains Milkman tends to concentrate on things behind him because he does not have a future to look forward to.

When Milkman is twelve, he meets and befriends Guitar Baines, who is in high school. One day, Milkman follows Guitar to Pilate's house, despite it being forbidden by Macon Jr. When Milkman first sees Pilate, he is struck by her powerful appearance. Despite looking unkempt, she is not dirty, and her fingernails are very clean. Milkman asks Pilate if she is Macon Jr.'s sister, to which she replies there "ain't but three Deads alive."

Milkman and Guitar are invited into Pilate's home and she cooks them a soft-boiled egg. There is a moss-green sack hanging from the ceiling. Pilate tells Milkman she and Macon Jr. were raised in Montour County, Pennsylvania, on a farm. Their father, Macon Dead I, was shot while waiting for someone on the fence. After his death, Macon Jr. and Pilate wandered around the countryside, and saw their father's ghost once, sitting on a stump in the sunlight. This experience scared them.

Hagar arrives. She is the sixteen-year-old granddaughter of Pilate, and Milkman instantly falls in love with her, even before he sees her face. Pilate introduces Milkman as Hagar's brother rather than her cousin, explaining that a person has to act the same to both. Reba, Pilate's daughter, shows Milkman and Guitar a ring she won for being Sears Roebuck's half-millionth customer. She says she has a knack for winning things.

When Pilate and Reba ask Hagar if she has ever been hungry in her life, she says yes, and Pilate and Reba are upset by this. They tell her they will give her anything she ever wants. The three ladies sing about Sugarman, singing the same song Pilate sang on the day of Robert Smith's flight from Mercy Hospital.

Milkman leaves Pilate's home and returns to Not Doctor Street. He is captivated with Hagar, but must face his angry father. Macon Jr. demands to know about Milkman's trip to Pilate's house, but Milkman responds by asking about Macon Dead I's death. Macon Jr. recalls that something "wild ran through him" when his father died. Macon Jr. calms down and starts reminiscing about his childhood.

As Macon Jr. remembers his life on the farm in Montour County, he smiles in the same way Pilate did when recalling the farm, Lincoln's Heaven. The previous time Macon Jr. told stories about his childhood was when he was newly married to Ruth and starting out in his business. Macon Jr. tells Milkman how Macon Dead I got his unusual name. Milkman asks his father for Macon Dead I's real name, but Macon Jr. ignores the question. He instead says his own mother was a light-skinned woman. Macon Jr. restates that Milkman is forbidden from going to Pilate's house, and promises to introduce Milkman to the real estate business.

## Analysis

The first Chapter of Song of Solomon introduces the central characters, as well as some of the central themes of the story. This is particularly true in the idea of flight as a way to escape. The opening scene of the book addresses Robert Smith's flight from Mercy



Hospital to escape his life, which is followed closely by Milkman's disappointment at the discovery that humans cannot fly.

Smith's flight is an allusion to the flight of Icarus, which also fails. This reference draws a parallel between Morrison's story and an epic Greek myth. It also calls to mind traditional folk tales of African-Americans who flew back to Africa in order to escape slavery in America.

As the characters are introduced in the first Chapter, their personalities are revealed to give readers insight into their motivations and behavior. For example, Ruth's dress and behavior in the crowd at Mercy Hospital shows she is alienated from her community. Though she is among the upper class, she is not white and does not fit in with them. And though she is African-American, she is wealthier than other blacks and does not fit in with them, either.

This first scene also foreshadows the failings of other characters' attempts to find pleasure or relief from their circumstances. For example, Ruth's escape from the bad relationship with her husband is her relationship with Milkman. This fails when Freddie sees her breastfeeding him in childhood. The characters are trapped in their circumstances and unhappiness. Even Macon Jr. is trapped in his obsession for accumulating wealth. The only character that seems free is Pilate. She is not embarrassed to be poor; instead, she does not feel the need to accumulate material things. She also does not stand by quietly as an observer. When Robert Smith stands atop Mercy Hospital and the people around her simply watch him, she lifts her voice to sing.

The desire of the characters to escape and be free ties directly into American history. African-Americans are no longer slaves, but neither do they have all the freedoms of whites. And racism is an every day occurrence for the African-Americans in the story, even from other African-Americans. The first glimpse of this is seen in the white nurse's treatment of Guitar Baines. Macon Jr. is an African-American who looks down on other blacks, particularly those in poverty.

Names are an important aspect of Song of Solomon, even from the first Chapter. Names have power, either positive or negative. Knowing where your name comes from or the meaning behind a family name can give someone strength, while a nickname or a real name that has been hidden or forgotten removes part of that person's identity. Morrison plays with this idea in the names of the characters. Macon Jr.'s father was given his name through an error. Milkman is called "Milkman" because of what Freddie saw in the window. Conversely, First Corinthians and Magdalene Dead are given names from the Bible. Characters' identities are often tied to their names, and as Milkman begins to question his own identity and his family's identity, names become important to his journey to discover who he is and where he comes from.

In Chapter 2, the similarities between Macon Jr. and Milkman become evident. Milkman's temper tantrum reveals he has a similar personality to his father, which is





nasty. This personality is a manifestation of the spiritual burden inherited from Macon Jr., which Macon Jr. first inherited from his father, Macon Dead I.

Another similarity between Macon Jr. and Milkman is obsession. Macon Jr. is obsessed with gaining wealth, an obsession which developed over time. Milkman becomes obsessed with his family's history in the same way, letting it be his single guiding factor and leading him to start his journey for answers. It could be this is part of the spiritual burden that has been passed from generation to generation.

When Milkman accidentally urinates on Lena, there is the implication he has no future to look forward to, which causes him to be overly concerned with the past. Though he is too young to have a past of his own, there is the past of his father and grandfather that haunts him, and has already begun to shape his personality. This concern for the past is what compels him to begin his journey.

Despite being a family member, Pilate is not at all like her brother or nephew. Where Macon Jr. is emotionally dead, Pilate is full of life. Her freedom and vitality is so strong she is even able to evoke emotion from Macon Jr. and cause him to reminisce about his childhood, even smiling about it. She gets the same response from Milkman. Until Milkman meets Pilate, he has no interest in any aspect of his life. When he meets her, he becomes interested in his family history. She awakens something in him, just as she awakens emotion in Macon Jr.

Chapter 2 shows the Dead family history is a puzzle. Milkman begins to hear about his grandfather, Macon Dead I, from both Pilate and Macon Jr. And while the stories they tell are the same, Macon Jr. leaves out the encounter with Macon Dead I's ghost. In addition, Macon Jr. refuses to tell Milkman his father's given name, which indicates there is an element of his past he is unwilling to face, and this is connected to his father's name in some way.

## Vocabulary

lumbered, cupola, cloche, placards, transfixed, peculiar, suffused, lilt, mooring, complicity, acquired, grosgrain, onyx, configuration, regal, unfettered, guileless



# Chapters 3-4

## Summary

In Chapter 3, Milkman is twelve and begins to work for Macon Jr. This gives him the chance to spend more time with Guitar, Pilate, and Hagar. Sometimes Guitar and Milkman go to the barbershop run by Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy to listen to the men talk about racial inequality. After one of these discussions, Guitar tells Milkman he is angry at white people, and his father's former white boss in particular, after his father was killed in a sawmill accident.

At age fourteen, one of Milkman's legs is shorter than the other. He tries to conceal it in the way he walks. In addition to swaggering to hide the problem with his leg, Milkman is constantly battling other people's perceptions that he is identical to his father. He tries to dispel this thought in how he behaves, such as smoking cigarettes and spending money freely. He also grows facial hair to distinguish himself from Macon Jr.

When Milkman is twenty-two, Macon Jr. hits Ruth during an argument at dinner. Milkman responds by hitting his father back and threatening to kill him if he ever hits her again. Milkman goes upstairs to his bedroom, and Macon Jr. follows him, claiming to have reasons to be angry at Ruth. Macon Jr. says Ruth's father, Dr. Foster, was a nasty man who referred to African-Americans as "cannibals," and claims even though Dr. Foster was impotent, he may have had a sexual relationship with Ruth. Finally, Macon Jr. says when Dr. Foster died, he saw Ruth lying next to her father's body, naked, with his fingers in her mouth.

Milkman is devastated by his father's claims, and goes to see Guitar. He remembers being breastfed by his mother long past infancy, which disturbs him. He also realizes his motivation for hitting his father was not love for his mother. As he walks, he realizes he is walking against the flow of foot traffic.

Milkman finds Guitar in the barbershop, talking about two recently murdered boys. One is Emmet Till, who was a black northerner killed in Mississippi, and the other is a white boy killed in their town. Guitar talks about the many injustices against African-Americans, and says they need to be corrected. Milkman and Guitar go to a bar, where Milkman tells him about hitting Macon Jr. Guitar says the "cards are stacked against" African-American men, which can lead to their hurting each other. Guitar tries to relate what happened to Milkman to Till's death, but Milkman does not want to hear about it. As Milkman is thinking about his life later, he realizes everything in his life bores him.

Chapter 4 explains as years pass, Milkman's love for Hagar blooms and wilts. When he is seventeen, she invites him into her room for the first time and makes love to him. Over the course of three years, Hagar strings Milkman along, but by the time Milkman stands up to Macon Jr., Hagar is totally devoted to Milkman. However, Milkman treats Hagar poorly, using her only because she is there for him. He does not consider her a



girlfriend or see a future with her because she is in a lower social class. He looks for a possible wife among the wealthy black women in Honore, but they are too boring for him. By the time Milkman is thirty-one, he is tired of Hagar, and writes her a letter ending their relationship. Hagar is driven mad by the letter and rushes out to find Milkman.

Over the years, Milkman and Guitar have grown apart. They remain friends, but Milkman senses that Guitar is hiding something from him. Conversely, Guitar criticizes Milkman for leading a life with no direction. During one conversation, Milkman tells Guitar about a dream he has in which his mother is planting flower bulbs in the backyard of their home. The flowers grow instantly, almost choking his mother. He says it was a dream, but knows it is a reality.

Milkman does not know Hagar is looking for him, and he spends some time talking to Freddie. Freddie tells him he believes in ghosts, and explains his mother went into labor with him after seeing the ghost of a white bull, and died soon after giving birth to him. He then explains he grew up in jail because Jacksonville, Florida did not have orphanages for black children. Freddie also suggests Guitar is involved in some bad things, including the murder of a white boy in their town.

## Analysis

Morrison addresses alienation in Chapters 3 and 4 by exposing Milkman's alienation from his family, friends, and community. Milkman purposely alienates himself from his father, doing whatever he can to prove he is different from him. As years pass, he becomes alienated from Hagar by choice, and he and Guitar drift apart.

He also alienates himself from his community because of his selfishness and arrogance. Others play into Milkman's selfishness, especially Hagar. Her devotion to Milkman means he can have the company of a woman whenever he wants. His mother loves him as well, and gives that love freely. He also lives a comfortable life while most other African-Americans are facing daily racism and battling poverty. Even when Milkman strikes his father to defend his mother, his action is selfish and not out of love for his mother. Because of his selfishness, Milkman feels no need to explore who he really is.

Milkman's alienation can also be seen in how he deals with news. He is an optimist, which can be seen when he is faced with the death of Emmet Till. Milkman dismisses the tragic event, claiming Emmet was crazy, and that what happened to him has no affect on Milkman.

The shell of arrogance Milkman brandishes begins to crack when he realizes his mother has a life outside of being his mother. Suddenly, he is not the center of the universe. This leads him to begin to fight against his own irrelevance and he realizes how alienated he truly is. The realization is his first step toward maturity, which is symbolized in Milkman walking against the flow of traffic down the street.



Chapter 3 also brings a distinct shift in the relationship between Milkman and Guitar, foreshadowing the growing tension between them that later develops into hatred. There is a great division between the friends due to the way each of them grew up, as well as how they view the world around them. Milkman lives a life of luxury, which protects him from the racism Guitar's life of poverty has pushed him into. Where Milkman's optimism causes him to look at the world through rose-colored lenses, Guitar views everything from the perspective of racial conflict.

In Chapter 4, the reader sees how Milkman responds to love in how he treats Hagar. When he was a child he did not reciprocate the love given to him by his family, and as an adult, he does not reciprocate the love given to him by Hagar. In fact, he goes so far as to reject her. This parallels the Biblical story of Hagar, Abraham's servant, who is abandoned after giving Abraham a son.

There are elements of Song of Solomon that are supernatural, such as Freddie's mother's encounter with the ghost of the white bull and the flowers that nearly choke Ruth. However, only Milkman refuses to publicly acknowledge them. When Freddie tells about the ghost of the white bull, Milkman smiles and shrugs it off, implying he does not believe in ghosts. When he tells Guitar about his mother and the flowers, he frames the story as a dream rather than something that actually happened. This may be because belief in the supernatural is seen as something low-class people believe in, and Milkman is afraid of how others will perceive him if he admits he believes in these things. However, this becomes yet another way Milkman alienates himself from those around him. Since the supernatural is a part of the story and the other characters accept it as reality, his disbelief separates him from others.

## Vocabulary

contrary, ambled, humidior, strut, polio, emulate, paunch, provocative, sanatorium, haphazard, frailty, atrocities, eccentricities, specificity, sulk, germinated, flailing, flippant



# Chapter 5

## Summary

In Chapter 5, Hagar becomes obsessed with Milkman, and is disinterested in anything else in her life. Though Reba and Pilate try to comfort her, she continues to be depressed over her abandonment. Milkman spends a great deal of time hiding from her at Guitar's home, while Hagar wanders the streets of the town and periodically tries to kill Milkman.

Guitar has become active in the political world, and is very paranoid. He triple-locks his doors at night and lectures Milkman about how African-Americans and other people are oppressed around the world. During one of the lectures, Milkman confronts him about his secret activities. Guitar does not answer him but only smiles. He leaves for a house where six old men are waiting for him.

Milkman is left alone while Guitar and Milkman both expect Hagar to try and kill him. As he lays in Guitar's bed, he remembers only a week earlier, he had discovered one of his mother's darkest secrets. He saw her leaving Not Doctor Street late at night on a bus. He secretly followed her to Fairfield Cemetery, where Dr. Foster was buried forty years earlier. Milkman waited outside the cemetery for several hours, and when Ruth emerged, he confronted her. As they rode the bus home, Ruth explained her relationship with her father, which challenged what Macon Jr. said about the father and daughter. Ruth told Milkman she loved her father because he cared about how she lived.

Ruth told Milkman it was Macon Jr. who caused Dr. Foster's death by throwing away his medication. When Dr. Foster died, the physical relationship between Ruth and Macon Jr. ended. Ruth was desperate for Macon Jr.'s attention, so she secretly gave him an aphrodisiac created by Pilate. Macon Jr. made love to Ruth for four days, and it was during that time Milkman was conceived.

Macon Jr. wanted Ruth to abort the baby, trying to force her into it. Pilate protected Ruth from an abortion by scaring Macon Jr. with a voodoo doll. Ruth acknowledged to Milkman she nursed him too long, but also admitted she prayed for him every night and day.

Milkman is brought out of his memories at the sound of Hagar's footsteps in the room. She has a butcher knife. Milkman closes his eyes and wills her to die. He asks an unseen power to choose between the two of them. Hagar strikes at Milkman, hitting his collarbone, but does not hurt him, and is unable to try again. Milkman sits up and makes a few mean comments to her, then turns away.

Ruth soon discovers Hagar's behavior toward Milkman, so she goes to see Pilate. Ruth sees Milkman as an extension of herself rather than a separate person, and is



determined to keep him safe. Ruth threatens Hagar from Pilate's porch, and the two women argue about their love for Milkman.

Pilate interrupts them and says it is silly for a woman to love a man so much, and tells Ruth a story from her childhood. Pilate worked as a migrant worker, but was driven away from each job because people were afraid of a woman with no navel. She settled on an island in Virginia for a few years, and found a good man who fathered Reba. She loved him but refused to marry him. After Reba gave birth to Hagar, Pilate moved her daughter and granddaughter to Macon Jr.'s town, bringing a sack from Lincoln's Heaven as one of her few possessions. Pilate claims the ghost of her father followed her, sometimes speaking to her and murmuring the word "sing." Pilate also tells Ruth she became a wine-maker and seller because of the independence it gave her. Pilate ends her story, which she'd deliberately kept long to distract Ruth from Hagar.

## Analysis

Chapter 5 is a Chapter of extremes. First, it delves into the political situation for African-Americans during this time. Milkman and Guitar represent the two responses to the initial actions of the civil rights movement. Guitar is politically active and radical, and the reader learns later he is an extremist as a member of the Seven Days vigilante group, which takes action against wronged African-Americans by killing innocent whites. The other side of that issue is represented in Milkman, who does not involve himself in the civil rights movement and turns a blind eye to the inequality and racism faced by blacks. These two extreme reactions to the issue of civil rights serve to widen the gap between Milkman and Guitar and increase the conflict between the two friends.

This Chapter also shows the contrast between two extreme types of women in the novel. Women like Hagar, who depend on men, are not seen favorably. Hagar defines her existence by her relationship with Milkman. When that relationship ends, her identity is defined in her obsession over him, and her alternating attempts to get him back and kill him. Ruth is similar to Hagar in this way. Her identity, which was first tied to her father, hinges on her relationship with her son. On the other end of the spectrum are women like Pilate who are strong, independent women. In fact, Pilate refuses to marry Reba's father, despite her love for him. These characters are viewed positively in the story because of their inner strength.

This Chapter also shows more of Pilate's freedom in contrast to other characters, who are bound by their circumstances. Even Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, is bound by her obsession with Milkman.

Pilate's lack of a navel is another link to the supernatural and to the myths and legends in literature. In Greek myth, for example, gods and goddesses were not born in traditional ways. Pilate's lack of a navel suggests she was born in a similar fashion to a Greek goddess. This further elevates her as a female ideal, a strong woman and role model within the story.



In Chapter 5, the reader is faced with conflicting stories in both Macon Jr. and Ruth's accounts of Ruth's relationship with Dr. Foster. Milkman must decide whether he believes his mother or his father, but the reader has the added advantage of Dr. Foster's opinion from Chapter 1, in which he is glad when Ruth marries Macon Jr. This conflicting story reveals further mystery surrounding his family history, and may serve to raise more questions about Milkman's identity.

## Vocabulary

phosphorous, agitation, implications, splayed, Technicolor, infanticide, malevolent, equilibrium



# Chapters 6-7

## Summary

In Chapter 6, Milkman once again confronts Guitar about his secretiveness. Guitar admits that he is in a secret society called the Seven Days. The group is made up of seven black men, each of whom is assigned a day of the week. The men kill random white people each time an African-American is murdered and the killer or killers are not punished. Guitar says that Robert Smith and Henry Porter were both members. The group tries to seek revenge in the way the original wrong was done. For example, if a black person was hanged, a white person is hanged in revenge. The white murders are done on the same day of the week as the original murder of the black victim. Guitar is the only young man in the group.

Guitar tries to justify the actions of the Seven Days group, using Hitler as an example by saying he only killed Jews because there were no blacks around for him to kill. He also says he is helping to keep the white and black populations balanced to ensure whites will not take over through genocide.

Milkman counters what Guitar says by explaining many whites have made sacrifices for blacks. He also asks why Guitar doesn't change his name as Malcom X did to show a refusal to accept his "slave name." Guitar answers his slave name does not bother him, but his slave status does. Milkman begs Guitar to see people as human beings rather than in terms of race, but Guitar is not moved. Finally, Milkman ends the conversation by telling Guitar his actions are crazy, and are a habit. He also suggests since Guitar is able to kill so casually, he might move to killing other African-Americans, including Milkman himself.

In Chapter 7, Milkman goes to speak to Macon Jr. He asks his father if he can spend a year away from home to travel and explore his own interests. As he talks to Macon Jr., he accidentally mentions the green sack hanging from Pilate's ceiling.

Macon Jr. interrupts Milkman and tells him about the days after Macon Dead I's murder. For two weeks, he and his sister hid in a house where Circe, the midwife, was a maid. While they were hiding, Pilate put a brown piece of paper with her name on it in a snuffbox. She attached a wire to the box and wore it as an earring.

After they left Circe, Macon Jr. and Pilate traveled the countryside, where they saw their father's ghost sitting on a stump, and then saw the ghost again at the mouth of a cave. They followed the ghost into the cave and spent the night there. The next morning, Macon Jr. discovered an old white man in the cave. Afraid that he was seeing another ghost, Macon Jr. killed the man. Under the man's tarp were gold nuggets, and Macon Jr. imagined a life of luxury ahead of him. But then Macon Jr. and Pilate saw their father standing before them. He disappeared and Pilate darted around the cave looking for him. Macon Jr. wanted to take the gold, but Pilate wanted him to leave it. They argued,





leading Macon Jr. to leave for three days. When he returned, the dead man was still there, but Pilate, the tarp, and the gold were gone. After hearing Milkman talk about the green sack hanging in Pilate's home, he is convinced it is the dead man's tarp, and that it contains the gold nuggets. He urges Milkman to get the tarp so they can share the gold.

## Analysis

In Chapter 6, the story explains Guitar's secret activities, which addresses another of the story's themes: obsession. Many characters have obsessions in the story. Macon Jr.'s obsession is the accumulation of wealth, Ruth and Hagar are both obsessed with Milkman, though Ruth to a lesser degree, and Guitar is obsessed with righting the wrongs he sees occurring against African-Americans at the hands of whites. These obsessions fuel the characters' actions and inactions.

Chapter 6 also reveals Guitar to be a parallel character to Macon Jr. Just as the death of Macon Jr.'s father traumatized him and led him to his obsession of wealth and becoming emotionally dead, the death of Guitar's father led him to his obsession with justice for African-Americans and becoming a heartless killer.

The political aspect of the story is expanded during Milkman and Guitar's conversation about the Seven Days group and Guitar's motivations for his involvement in it. Guitar is an extremist, and his apparent justification is outdated in the climate of 1960s America. The fact that he is the only young member of the group reflects this. In addition, Guitar's obsessive behavior causes him to blur the line between murdering out of love for blacks and murdering out of hate for whites.

The theme of names returns in the conversation between Milkman and Guitar, as well. Milkman asks Guitar about his "slave name," and Guitar says he's more bothered by his slave status. Milkman, on the other hand, is more concerned about his slave name (Macon Dead III) than his slave status. This discussion of names and their importance further links names and identities. Slave names are given by oppressors, meaning a slave's identity is given to him or her. Taking a name for oneself represents taking one's own identity back.

The story of the night in the cave is told from the narrator's point of view rather than from a character's perspective. This may cause the reader to question the narrator's motives. It is not known if the story told by the narrator is the full account, or if there is something that would be added by Macon Jr. or Pilate that would change the reader's perspective. This adds the narrator into the puzzle of the Dead family history, rather than including only the members of the Dead family.

## Vocabulary

depravity, pervaded, snuffbox, ryegrass, tarpaulin



## Chapters 8-9

### Summary

Guitar is in bed trying to figure out how to kill four white girls in a church bombing as retaliation for the four black girls killed in a church bombing in Birmingham. However, he does not have the money to purchase explosives, so he is at a dead end. Milkman arrives and tells Guitar about the gold supposedly in the green tarp at Pilate's house. They try to figure out how to get the tarp out of Pilate's house, and fantasize about what the money could bring for them.

During the conversation, a white peacock jumps from a building and walks around the street in front of them. The men try to catch it, but then get distracted by discussing the gold. For a moment, Guitar thinks about using the money to help his grandmother and siblings, but then remembers he needs it to complete his Seven Days mission. Milkman wants to use the gold to free himself from his father. The next night, Guitar and Milkman sneak into Pilate's house and cut down the tarp. On the way out, Guitar thinks he sees the figure of a man standing behind Milkman. Reba is awake and, as they leave, she wonders what thieves would want with the green sack.

In Chapter 9, the reader learns First Corinthians is secretly working as a maid for Michael-Mary Graham, who is the state poet laureate. Although she graduated from Bryn Mawr and studied in France, no man is interested in her from within her social class because she is too used to the middle-class life. Her parents think she is working as Graham's secretary, but she has taken the job as a maid to get out of her father's house and have a sense of independence.

First Corinthians is courted by an elderly black man on her bus rides home. The reader later learns this man is Henry Porter. He works as a yardman and is a tenant of Macon Jr.'s. Henry and First Corinthians begin to date secretly. Eventually he confronts her and asks if she is ashamed of him, and she says she is not. She realizes she is in love with him and that he might leave her forever because she is not a "doll-baby." She admits she has not been fair to him, and they go to his home to make love.

When she returns to Not Doctor Street, First Corinthians overhears an argument between Milkman and Macon Jr. During the argument, it is revealed while Guitar and Milkman were driving with the tarp after taking it from Pilate's house, they were pulled over by a police officer who searched the vehicle and took them to the police station. The tarp contained rocks and a human skeleton, but no gold. Macon Jr. and Pilate both arrived at the police station to bail the boys out. Pilate tells a story about the bones belonging to her dead husband, Mr. Solomon, and the cops believe her. They give the tarp back to her and let Milkman and Guitar go. On the ride home from the police station, Pilate does not say she did not take the gold, but says she returned to the cave three years after she and Macon Jr. left each other to get the bones of the dead white man on the orders of her father, Macon Dead I.



Macon Jr. yells at his son, asking why he took Guitar with him, calling him derogatory names. Milkman does not respond to his father's provocations, but is instead upset he was pulled over by the police without a good cause. He calls his father crazy. Macon Jr. suggests if Pilate did not take the gold, then it is still in the cave, and someone should get it.

Milkman sleeps until noon. As he stares at himself in the mirror, he feels ashamed at having taken the tarp. He realizes Guitar has killed before and is capable of doing it again. As he looks at his reflection, he notices his undersized leg seems to have returned to normal.

When Milkman goes outside, he sees an Oldsmobile packed with Guitar and six other friends. Porter is with them, and Milkman realizes Porter is the man First Corinthians has been secretly dating. Milkman tells Macon Jr., who breaks up the relationship, evicts Porter, and forces First Corinthians to quit her job with Michael-Mary Graham.

A few days later, Lena confronts Milkman about causing the end of First Corinthians' only relationship. She says he is just like Macon Jr., living off the labor of the women in the family. She reminds him of the time he urinated on her, and says he has been urinating on people his entire life, in one way or another. She sends Milkman out of her room after telling him she will no longer make artificial roses.

## Analysis

The white peacock that appears to Milkman and Guitar is a symbol of the wrongdoing they are planning. Throughout the novel, white creatures are symbols of harm or wrongdoing to come, such as the peacock and the white bull that appeared to Freddie's mother. The peacock is also a symbol of wealth, just as when Macon Jr. saw the gold like an open peacock's tail and became obsessed with wealth. Morrison's choice of white creatures further illustrates the oppression of blacks by whites.

When Milkman is pulled over without justification after he and Guitar take the tarp from Pilate's home, his idealistic worldview is shattered. It shows him that, regardless of his supposed social class, he is seen as any other black man in the eyes of the law, as well as in the eyes of other whites. Milkman's experience in the police station is the first step in reconnecting him with the African-American community. Then, when he tells Macon Jr. about First Corinthians' relationship with Porter, it is out of genuine concern for her, rather than because of Porter's social status. This is the first real step on his journey toward maturity and discovering his true identity.

## Vocabulary

cordial, gesticulating, asceticism, amanuensis, tempered, mitigated, peignoir, subsequent, wistful, mediocrity, wane, scoured, astonished, tremor, garnished,



# Chapter 10

## Summary

In Chapter 10, Milkman tells Guitar he has to go to Montour County, Pennsylvania, to look for the gold they thought was in the green tarp in Pilate's house. He says he is going alone, but adds he will split whatever he finds with Guitar, who suspects Milkman will cheat him. Guitar reminds Milkman he needs the money to complete his Seven Days mission, and to support Porter, who was evicted by Macon Jr. The conversation between the men ends badly.

Milkman flies to Pittsburgh, which he relishes, and then takes a bus to Danville, which is the town nearest Lincoln's Heaven. In Danville he meets Reverend Cooper, an old friend of his father's, who tells Milkman he knows his "people." Milkman enjoys the stories Reverend Cooper tells him about his father's childhood, and he realizes Macon Jr. had a close relationship with Macon Dead I, and he loved his father. Reverend Cooper also tells Milkman the Butler family is responsible for Macon Dead I's murder.

Milkman stops at the Butler mansion on his way to Lincoln's Heaven. He meets Circe, a midwife who attended Macon Jr.'s birth, who works for the family, and she initially mistakes Milkman for Macon Jr. She is disappointed when she discovers Milkman is a different Macon Dead than she thought.

Circe tells Milkman Macon Dead I's real name was Jake, his wife's name was Sing, and they arrived in Pennsylvania in a wagon, coming from a place in Virginia called Charlemagne. She says the Butler family earned their wealth by robbing and killing independent farmers like Macon Dead I. She also tells him a month after his burial, Macon Dead I's body floated out of its grave during a rain and hunters put it in the same cave in which Pilate and Macon Jr. stayed.

Milkman claims he wants to find and bury his grandfather's bones to get directions to Hunter's Cave from Circe. He offers to help her leave the Butlers' home, but she is determined to stay and make sure it rots to the ground out of hatred for her masters. When Milkman arrives at the cave, all he finds are some boards and a tin cup.

Milkman goes back to the highway and hitches a ride to the Danville bus station with a man named Fred Garnett. Milkman is offended when Garnett refuses Milkman's offer to pay for the ride. While helping a man at the bus station, he decides Pilate must have taken the gold with her to Virginia, and he is going to follow her footsteps.

## Analysis

Milkman's journey starts out of greed and self-interest, much like his life. However, just as he is being slowly transformed, the journey has transformed into a quest for his own identity and understanding. A sign of the transformation Milkman is undergoing is the



fact he helps another person in the bus station. He uses his search for the gold as an excuse to learn about his family history.

Though Milkman has refused to acknowledge the supernatural in his life, the magical and real seem to be blending, as is apparent in his encounter with Circe. He is unsure whether or not she is real because of her ethereal appearance, as well as her ability to transform the stench of rot into a pleasant aroma. Though he does decide she is real, the consideration she might not be further shows Milkman's transformation from all he was prior to his journey.

Part II of *Song of Solomon* parallels Homer's *Odyssey*, which Morrison brings to the reader's attention at times, such as through the character of Circe, who helped Odysseus find his way home. In Morrison's story, Circe gives Milkman information about his family that will lead him to his ancestral home.

## Vocabulary

chastened, assuaged, irrevocable, parsonage, sniveling, portico, appraising, celluloid, muslin, macadam, stile



# Chapter 11

## Summary

Milkman buys a car and drives to Shalimar, Virginia. His car breaks down next to Solomon's General Store. He walks past two women who remind him of Pilate and goes into the store. The owner of the store, Mr. Solomon, tells Milkman an unnamed friend of his drove by earlier, leaving a message: "your day is here."

Milkman realizes the friend is Guitar, and wonders why the message is the one given to victims of the Seven Days group. He sits outside, looking around, and sees a group of children standing in a circle. A boy is in the middle with his arms outstretched, turning like an airplane. The others sang a rhyme: "Jay the only son of Solomon / Come booba yalle, come booba tambee / Whirl about and touch the sun / Come booba yalle, come booba tambee..." (ch. 11, pg. 264). The game intensified as the children sang nonsense verses until the last line "Twenty-one children and the last one Jay!" (ch. 11, pg. 264) and the boy crashed to the ground.

Milkman realizes he never played like when he was a child because his class separated him from the other children. He wore a velvet suit to school, which led to him being teased and bullied by blacks and whites until his mother finally gave in and got him corduroy pants, which helped, but he was still alienated by other children until Guitar befriended him. Milkman decides when Guitar shows up, he will simply explain everything to him and try to help Guitar. He sees a black rooster strut by, noting its blood-red comb looks like a "wicked brow."

Milkman goes back into Solomon's Store and talks to Mr. Solomon about a place to stay and a way to fix his car, or whether he will need to buy a new one. He senses the men in the store, including Mr. Solomon who was chatty with him before he went outside, are hostile toward him. They are because of his behavior. The men see Milkman as an upper-class black who has no manners or respect. He seems to spend money carelessly and does not even give the respect of telling them his name, or asking them their names. Though he has dark skin like theirs, the men believe he has the heart of a white man.

The men start antagonizing Milkman, which leads to a fight between him and a man named Saul. Saul has a knife and Milkman uses a broken bottle. The fight is broken up when two women come into the store, and Saul is dragged away by other men. No one tries to help Milkman. When he goes outside he kicks a white hen, and is so angry he would have killed everyone if he'd had a weapon.

One of the men on the porch invites Milkman to go hunting with him at sunset, telling him to meet him at a gas station nearby, to which Milkman agrees. He then goes into his car, using a towel to bandage an injury on his head, and thinks about all the times someone has tried to kill him. Macon Jr. tried to kill him before he was born, Hagar tried



to kill him regularly, and he says he walked into the store to ask someone to fix his car and a man pulled a knife on him.

Milkman sleeps and dreams he sees Guitar looking down on him. When he wakes up he buys two cans of pineapple and a box of crackers from Mr. Solomon. He eats on the porch of the store and when he is finished, gives one of his cans to children who ask for it. Then he heads to King Walker's to go hunting with Omar. As he walks, he realizes he is living life and taking risks on his own. At the gas station which Milkman suspects went broke long before, he meets Omar, and the hunting party is complete with King Walker, Luther Solomon, Calvin Breakstone, and Small Boy.

The men dress Milkman in military fatigues and give him a Winchester rifle. They go to Ryna's Gulch, and while the group plans the hunt, Milkman sees a car speed by. Milkman learns the gulch got its name from a woman who is crying there, which can be heard in the wind. The hunters divide into pairs, and Milkman is matched with Calvin. The two men stalk a bobcat for several hours. Milkman stops to rest, and Calvin continues alone. While Milkman is alone in the dark, he takes an honest look at himself. He realizes how he has behaved and treated others due to his social status, and now that he is separated from his family and their money, he sees what he can do on his own.

Milkman's thoughts are interrupted when Guitar comes up behind him and begins choking him with a wire, repeating the Seven Days' phrase, "Your day has come." Milkman's life flashes before him, but it represented in one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love. Milkman relaxes. He thinks he is going to die, but suddenly feels invigorated and manages to scare Guitar off by firing the rifle, just as the other men return with the bobcat as their prize. The men do not know Guitar was there, and they tease him about accidentally firing his rifle. He is not bothered by what they say. Instead, he finally walks the earth with confidence, as if he belongs on it. He does not limp.

When the hunting party gets back to the gas station, they tease Milkman, but it is not meant to be mean or insulting. The men cut open the bobcat and Milkman is offered the heart. A peacock flies by and lands on the hood of a blue Buick.

The next morning, over breakfast, Milkman explains why he is in Shalimar. He learns his grandmother, Sing, was the Indian daughter of a woman named Heddy. Susan Byrd, who is another descendant of Heddy's lives in the area, and Milkman decides to visit her. Before visiting Susan, though, Milkman spends the night with Sweet, a local prostitute. She bathes him and makes love to him. In return, Milkman bathes her, makes her bed, and cleans her tub while she makes him gumbo. She rubs a salve on his neck and washes his clothes. He gives her fifty dollars and leaves, telling her he'll see her that night.



## Analysis

More of Milkman's transformation becomes clear in Chapter 11. Since Milkman is no longer at home and under the protective umbrella of his father's name and wealth, he is doing things he would not otherwise do, such as deciding to go hunting with Omar. In the past, he only took risks with Guitar, knowing his friend would protect him. Now he is relying on himself to stay safe.

Because Milkman is in an area where he does not know anyone, he is able to see himself the way others do, and quickly takes stock of his life. He realizes how he has treated others. This realization is an important part of Milkman's transformation into maturity, which is underscored with Milkman's clothes. First, his beige suit is damaged in a fight, and then he is dressed in military fatigues on the hunt. This change from fancy, immature clothing into the clothes of a soldier is a visual manifestation of the emotional change Milkman is experiencing.

This transformation goes further when Milkman is alone in the woods. When Guitar chokes Milkman, he comes very close to death. This is another physical manifestation of his inner change. This experience is an emotional and spiritual death and rebirth, just as Milkman comes back from the brink of death when he scares Guitar away. This rebirth comes quickly after Milkman makes the claim that he is already dead, a play on his last name. His old self dies in the woods, and he is finally free to make a new life for himself. Milkman's new life is seen in his behavior after the hunt. Though the men he hunted with are virtually strangers, he is a part of their community. They tease him as they would each other, and give him the heart of the bobcat. The heart is the power of the animal, and by accepting it, Milkman is accepting the new power within himself.

Milkman's transformation is also seen in his treatment of Sweet. He gives to her the way she gives to him, which is very different from the way he treated Hagar. Though only one night with Sweet is seen in Chapter 11, it is clear it is a positive relationship, and that he has learned from his past mistakes.

## Vocabulary

wicked, legitimate, evading, mingling, baying, melancholy, ferocity, corrugated, hominy





## Chapters 12-13

### Summary

Chapter 12 opens at four o'clock the next day with Milkman arriving at Susan's home. Milkman notes Susan is about his mother's age. Susan invites Milkman in and introduces him to Grace Long, who seems taken with Milkman.

Milkman learns Susan's deceased father, who was named Crowell, had a sister named Sing, but Susan explains this sister never married. She left Virginia in a wagon headed for Massachusetts. Milkman is disappointed to have reached a dead end and leaves Susan's home. He forgets his watch. However, he does take a box of cookies with him that contains Grace Long's address.

As Milkman leaves Susan's house, he feels out of sorts. He says though he does not feel close to the people he is meeting, he does feel some sort of connection with them. This is different from the way he felt in Michigan, the only home he ever knew. There, he did not feel connected to anything or anyone. Although, he notes the way he feels in Shalimar is similar to the way he once felt at Pilate's house in Michigan. Milkman admits to himself it is important to him to find his people, his family history. Ever since Danville, he found his interest in the mystery of the Dead family increasing.

Milkman encounters Guitar on his way to Sweet's home. Guitar accuses Milkman of stealing the gold from the cave and sending it to Virginia. Milkman denies it, but Guitar does not believe him. Guitar says he saw Milkman helping an older man load a crate onto a platform in Danville. Since Guitar had never seen Milkman perform an act of kindness like that, he is suspicious. Guitar was unable to complete his mission for Seven Days, and vows to do whatever he can to kill him. Milkman asks why Guitar left a warning at Solomon's Store, and Guitar says it is the least he could do for a friend.

Milkman spends another night with Sweet, then goes back to Shalimar. Everything that has happened makes Milkman miss Pilate. He also sees the flaws and positive aspects of his parents more objectively, understanding what they experienced in their lives scarred them. Finally, Milkman takes responsibility for the way he treated Hagar, admitting to himself he enjoyed her desire for him because it made him feel more like a man.

Milkman hears local children singing the song about Jay again, and memorizes the words. The song tells the story of a man named Solomon who flew across the sky to his home, leaving his wife, Ryna, to cry for him. Solomon's son, Jay, was left to be raised by a woman named Heddy "in a red man's house." Milkman realizes the story is about his family, and the Jay in the song is his grandfather, Macon Dead I, whose given name was Jake. He realizes Susan did not tell him everything she knew, and he resolves to return and find out more.



Chapter 13 opens with an image of Hagar in Guitar's room, finally able to put down the knife she had been holding. Guitar discovers her in a catatonic state and carries her to his car and drives her home. As he drives, he tries to comfort her and tells her she should not be so devastated by Milkman. Pilate and Reba also try to console her, with no success.

Hagar finally comes out of her catatonic state, suddenly believing it is her physical appearance that made Milkman leave her, and if she improves it, he will take her back and grow to love her. Reba pawns the diamond ring she won from Sears for \$200 to take Hagar shopping. Hagar runs from store to store, frantic to make herself over. On the way home, the things she buys are damaged by rain, but as soon as she gets home, she runs upstairs to get dressed in her new things, not even stopping to dry herself. When she shows her new appearance to Pilate and Reba, she is a mess. She realizes how she looks when she sees how Pilate and Reba look at her. She cries, and suddenly gets a fever, which kills her.

Pilate and Ruth had no money for a decent funeral because of the money they spent for Hagar to go shopping. Ruth goes into her husband's office and stares at him until he reluctantly gives her the money she wants for Hagar's funeral. The funeral is a quiet one, and partway through it, Pilate and Reba sing the duet "Mercy." After Pilate sings a lullaby to Hagar, she goes to the mourners in the pews and tells them Hagar is "my baby girl," quietly. Then, with sudden power, Pilate shouts "And she was loved!" (chap. 13, pg. 319)

## Analysis

Milkman's increasing connection with his family history comes in the form of stories being told to him. It began in his Michigan hometown when Pilate and Macon Jr. told him stories of their childhood, and continued as he traveled to learn more. The oral tradition of sharing stories and family history is important in African-American culture. When blacks were slaves, they were kept from learning to read and write to keep them dependent on their white masters. Slaves shared stories and history by passing the stories from generation to generation in oral storytelling. By learning his own family history in this way, Milkman is further connecting to his ancestry in the way they would have connected to him.

As Milkman lets go of his past life, his material possessions leave him as a symbol of his letting go. His life in Michigan was consumed by wealth and material possessions. He is releasing that life, his immediate past, and also losing the material possessions he acquired because of that life. He first loses his car when it breaks down, then his suit when he fights Saul and then goes hunting. Finally, he loses his watch when he visits Susan Byrd. He even says aloud, "I'm losing everything" (chap. 12, pg. 298), which is his recognition he is losing the boy he once was in favor of the man he is becoming.

When Milkman learns the song about Solomon from the children, he is able to put more pieces of the Dead family puzzle together. The song addresses the theme of women



being abandoned by men found throughout the story. In the song, Solomon abandons Ryna, leaving her devastated. This is the same thing Milkman did to Hagar, leaving her driven mad. This abandonment can also be seen in the relationship between Ruth and Dr. Foster.

Despite the sadness that weighs down the reader at the end of Chapter 13, Morrison shows the strength and compassion of the women in the Dead family through Pilate and Ruth surrounding Hagar's death and funeral. When Hagar dies, Ruth stands up to her husband in order to ensure she can have a proper funeral. At the funeral, Pilate goes to each mourner to ensure he or she knows Hagar was her "baby girl," and she was loved by Pilate and Reba. Ruth, Pilate and Reba do what they can to bring Hagar the peace in death she did not have in life.

## Vocabulary

smattering, cobalt, okra, consummation, homage, gulch, engulfing, ecstasy, sluicing, bereaved



# Chapters 14-15

## Summary

In Chapter 14, Milkman returns to Susan's home, who gives him the answers he needs to fill the gaps in his family history. She tells him Sing went North on a wagon with Jake, who belonged to a tribe of flying African children, who were the descendants of Solomon. Solomon and Ryna were slaves on a cotton plantation. Together they had twenty-one sons, and Jake was the youngest. When Solomon flew back to Africa from Virginia, he tried to take Jake with him, but dropped him. Jake fell into Heddy's yard. After Ryna was driven insane by her abandonment, Heddy raised Jake as one of her own. Eventually, Heddy had another son named Crow Bird (later called Crowell Bird), who was Susan Byrd's father. Meanwhile, Jake and Heddy's daughter Singing Bird (later called Sing) secretly ran away together.

As Chapter 15 starts, Milkman is frantic to get back Shalimar. He is energized from finding out his family history and discovering Susan is his cousin. He goes immediately to Sweet's house and tells her he wants to swim in the ocean, so they go to a local swimming hole.

Finally, Milkman is ready to return to Michigan. He sells his car and takes the bus home, reflecting on all he has learned and thinking about his broken friendship with Guitar. As soon as he returns he runs to Pilate's house to tell her what he found out, unaware of Hagar's death. Pilate hits him on the head with a wine bottle and knocks him out.

When he comes to, he is confused about where he is and why. His journey has taught him things are usually not what they appear to be. At first, he is not sure why Pilate hit him, but realizes Hagar has died. It does not matter to him how because he is the one who hurt her.

Milkman realizes what Macon Dead I's words to Pilate meant, and he calls to her so he can explain. When Macon Dead I said "You don't fly off and leave a body," he was referring to the way his father dropped him when he flew back to Africa. And when Pilate thought her father was telling her to sing, he was actually calling for his wife, Pilate's mother, who was named Sing. Milkman explains the bones she carries are actually the bones of her father, and he wants to be buried at Solomon's Leap.

Hagar takes a box from a dark part of the cellar that contains Hagar's hair, which she intends to bury, as well. Milkman takes it from her and goes to his father's home with almost none of the things he took with him out of Michigan.

Milkman's return to his home was not what he expected, though he is relieved when he sees his mother's "crooked smile." Lena does not forgive him, but she is civil to him since First Corinthians moved to a house in Southside with Porter. The relationship



between his parents has not changed. Milkman tells his father what he learned, and Macon Jr. decides he should take a trip to Danville to see people who remember him.

When Milkman and Pilate arrive back in Shalimar, the people are glad to see him, and Pilate fits in well with their personalities. They stay with Omar's family, and on their second evening in the town, Milkman and Pilate walk to Solomon's Leap. When Pilate opens the sack she carries, they hear a sigh and smell ginger. Pilate lays the bones in the small grave, which Milkman covers and packs down.

Pilate yanks her earring out and puts it on the grave. When she stands, she falls and then Milkman hears a shot. Guitar has shot her. He kneels and cradles her, asking her if she is hurt, trying to find a wound he can stop from bleeding. Pilate tells Milkman to watch Reba for her. She says, "I wish I'd a' knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a' knowed more, I would a' loved more" (chap. 15, pg. 336). Pilate asks him to sing, and he sings his own version of Sugarman to her, which asks her not to leave him. Pilate dies in his arms as he continues to sing, loudly. He wakes the birds who take off and fly around him in the air. One bird dives into the grave and scoops up the snuffbox, carrying it away. Milkman realizes the reason he loved her so much is that she was able to fly without leaving the ground.

Milkman knows when he stands, Guitar will not miss. Milkman shouts to Guitar, waving his arm to show Guitar where he is. He can see Guitar's head and shoulders in the darkness. Without taking a breath or even bending his knees, Milkman leaps from where he is and toward Guitar. It does not matter which of them will die when they collide because Milkman now knows "what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (chap. 15, pg. 337).

## Analysis

When Milkman is able to put together the final pieces of the puzzle, his transformation is complete, and he is able to break the curse of the Dead men. He is able to return to his home as a new man, sharing what he has learned with the rest of his family. He is eager for them to have the same excitement and passion he does.

When Pilate dies, there is the suggestion she lives on in the birds that circle overhead. This is emphasized when one of the birds dives to take the snuffbox away. In Pilate's death, Milkman learns flight does not have to be physical. He realizes his love for Pilate was because she could fly without leaving the ground, and when he finally truly understands flight, he is able to fly toward Guitar and ride the air.

The final message of the story is that those who truly know themselves and have a strong sense of identity will live on after death. Pilate lives on in the birds, and Milkman will live on in story just as Solomon did after his own flight back to Africa.

## Vocabulary

tallow, iridescent, bidding, rickety, stole, interment, tourniquets, lodestar



# Characters

## Milkman Dead

Milkman is the protagonist of the story. His father is Macon Dead II, also called Macon Jr., who is an emotionally dead landlord. His mother, Ruth Foster Dead, is the daughter of a doctor. Because Milkman's father was the town's first black doctor, Milkman was the first black child born in Mercy Hospital. Milkman was given his unusual nickname when Freddie, the town gossip, sees Ruth nursing Milkman when he was a child. Macon Jr. does not know where the nickname originated. Milkman has one undersized leg, which contributes to his feelings of alienation from his family and community. Though his family loves him, he does not return their love. Milkman is referred to as "odd" as a child, and after he is grown, even walks against the flow of traffic, which emphasizes he is different. Milkman's character plays with the idea of nature vs. nurture. His selfishness is developed in part because of the affect on his family of generations of slavery. However, Milkman does undergo a major transformation when he goes to Shalimar and learns of his family history.

## Pilate Dead

Pilate could also be considered another protagonist of *Song of Solomon*. Though her thoughts and feelings are not explored by the narrator, her presence is felt throughout the story. Pilate is Macon Jr.'s sister, which makes her Milkman's aunt. After witnessing the murder of her father as he tried to defend the family farm, she and Macon Jr. grew estranged from each other. However, as Macon Jr. became bitter by his life experience, Pilate became loving and selfless. Pilate is an initial link to Milkman's past through her songs about Sugarman's flight, which refer to her grandfather, Solomon. When Pilate dies, her regret is she could not love more people. Pilate acts as a foil to Milkman. The two are similar because of their survival of racism, their estrangement from Macon Jr., and their ties to their family history. In addition, when Milkman learns about his family on his journey, he becomes more like Pilate through his emotional transformation.

## Ruth Foster Dead

Ruth is Milkman's mother and Macon Jr.'s wife. She is the daughter of the first black doctor in town, which allowed her to give birth to Milkman in Mercy Hospital rather than on the front steps. She is a quiet woman, who endures the oppression she faces at the hands of her husband. She was raised by her father until she was sixteen, when she and Macon Jr. married. Ruth clings to her routine and her sense of normalcy, even nursing Milkman into childhood, which earned him his nickname. The relationship she has with Milkman is the only good thing in her life, and it becomes an obsession for her.



## **Macon Jr.**

Macon Jr., also called Macon Dead II, is Milkman's father and Ruth Foster Dead's husband. He is Pilate's brother. After witnessing the murder of his father, Macon Jr. became bitter and emotionally dead. He is obsessed with gaining wealth, which has led him to be a slumlord. The only time he shows emotions is when he thinks about his childhood. His stories are what prompt Milkman to look into the Dead family history.

## **First Corinthians Dead**

First Corinthians is Milkman and Magdalene's sister. She was educated at Bryn Mawr, as well as in France. She works for Michael-Mary Graham for a time as a maid, though her parents think she is his secretary. She has a love affair with a yardman, Henry Porter, which crosses class boundaries. She tries to unify people, which mirrors her namesake, a book in the New Testament of the Bible.

## **Magdalene Dead**

Also known as Lena, Magdalene Dead is Milkman and First Corinthians' sister. She gives the outward appearance of submissiveness, but has moments of inner strength, such as when she criticizes Milkman's selfishness.

## **Reba**

Reba, who is also known as Rebecca, is Pilate's daughter and Hagar's mother. She is attracted to abusive men, but the men who abuse her are punished for it.

## **Hagar**

Hagar is Reba's daughter and Pilate's granddaughter. She is Milkman's lover. She remains devoted to Milkman despite many rejections. Her character parallels her namesake, a Biblical servant who was used and abandoned. When Milkman rejects her, she becomes obsessed with him, and tries to kill him several times.

## **Macon Dead I**

Macon Dead I is Milkman's grandfather, and the father of Macon Jr. and Pilate. He is also known as Jake. He was given the name Macon Dead when a drunken Union soldier filled out his papers incorrectly. He was abandoned as a baby when his father, Solomon, flew back to Africa. He was raised by an Indian woman named Heddy, and married her daughter, Sing. He was killed defending his land when Macon Jr. and Pilate were younger, and his ghost appeared to them in the days following his death. His bones are in a green tarp hung from the roof of Pilate's shack.





## Dr. Foster

Dr. Foster is the first black doctor in the story's town. He is Ruth Foster Dead's father, and the grandfather of Milkman, First Corinthians, and Lena. He is arrogant and racist against African-Americans, referring to them as "cannibals." One of the chief concerns he has at the births of his granddaughters is how light-skinned they are.

## Solomon

Solomon is Milkman's great-grandfather, as well as Macon Jr. and Pilate's grandfather and Macon Dead I's father. The legend about Solomon is to escape slavery, he flew back to Africa, abandoning his wife and twenty-one children. He tried to take his son, Jake (Macon Dead I), with him, but dropped him. Solomon's Leap is a mountain named after Solomon and his legendary journey.

## Ryna

Ryna is Milkman's great-grandmother and the wife of Solomon. When her husband flew back to Africa and abandoned her and their children, she became insane, which causes Macon Dead I to be raised by Heddy, an Indian woman.

## Guitar Bains

Guitar is Milkman's best friend. His father was killed in an accident at a factory, leading Guitar to grow up in poverty. He hates white people, and sees them as the cause of the evil he sees in the world. He is a member of Seven Days. When Milkman leaves Michigan, Guitar follows him and tries to kill him because he thinks Milkman cheated him out of his share of the gold Milkman promised him.

## Freddie

Freddie is a janitor who was hired by Macon Jr., and is the town gossip. He gave Milkman his nickname when he saw Ruth nursing Milkman when he was a child, long after he should have been weaned.

## Circe

Circe is an old midwife who helped deliver Macon Jr. and Pilate. She helps Milkman reconnect with his family history by giving him important information about Macon Dead I. Her name is a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*, and her character parallels her namesake. In Homer's epic poem, Circe helps Odysseus find his way home to Ithaca.



## Sing

Also known as Singing Bird, Sing is Macon Dead I's wife and Milkman's grandmother. Sing is the daughter of Heddy, who raised Macon Dead I. She is an Indian woman whose name commands Macon Dead I, Pilate, and Milkman to connect the missing links of their family using Solomon's song.

## Heddy

An Indian woman who raised Macon Dead I after he and his mother were abandoned by Solomon. She is the mother of Sing.

## Michael-Mary Graham

Michael-Mary Graham is the Michigan poet laureate who writes sentimental poetry. He hires First Corinthians as a maid. He is a liberal, but like other white liberals, he claims to support universal human rights but refuses to treat African-Americans as equals.

## Henry Porter

A member of the Seven Days vigilante group, Henry Porter is the lover of First Corinthians Dead. He was also a tenant of Macon Jr., but was evicted when Macon Jr. discovered his relationship with First Corinthians. After that, Guitar took him in.

## Robert Smith

Robert Smith is an insurance agent and member of the Seven Days vigilante group. At the start of the story, he attempts to fly with blue silk wings from the roof of Mercy Hospital. He is unsuccessful, and falls to his death.

## Sweet

Sweet is a prostitute who has a brief affair with Milkman. She is his first positive relationship with a woman.



# Objects/Places

## Seven Days Vigilante Group

The Seven Days group is a vigilante group of African-Americans who seek revenge for wrongs done to African-Americans by murdering innocent whites. There are seven members, each assigned a different day of the week. The men kill whites on the same day of the week a black person is murdered, and in the same manner. Henry Porter, Robert Smith, and Guitar Baines are members.

## Mercy Hospital

Mercy Hospital is where Milkman was born. He was the first African-American child to be born in the hospital, which is attributed to the fact that Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster Dead, is the daughter of Dr. Foster, who was the first black doctor in the town. Robert Smith attempts to fly by jumping off the roof of Mercy Hospital.

## Montour County

Montour County is the area in Pennsylvania where Milkman's grandfather, Macon Dead I, lived. Milkman travels to Shalimar and meets Circe, who tells him about his family's history and prompts him to keep searching for answers about his family's past.

## Shalimar

Shalimar is the town in Virginia that was the home of Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon. This is the town where Solomon started his flight back to Africa. Though it is not Milkman's hometown, he feels more at home here than he ever did in Michigan, and has a real connection with the people in the town.

## Solomon's Leap

Solomon's Leap is a mountain named for Milkman's great-grandfather, who escaped slavery by supposedly leaping from the mountain and flying back to Africa.

## Not Doctor Street

The main street in the unnamed Michigan town, Not Doctor Street is officially called Mains Avenue. Originally it was called Doctor Street by residents because it was home to the first black doctor. The post office issued a notice that the street was "Mains Avenue not Doctor Street," which led the street to be called "Not Doctor Street."



# Themes

## Alienation

Alienation is seen in many characters, but most notably in Milkman in the first half of the novel. He alienates himself from his family, friends, and community due to his behavior and social class. Ruth is alienated from her community because she is the daughter of Dr. Foster as well as Macon Jr.'s wife. Her social class separates her from the rest of the women in her community. Overall, alienation is seen in the race clash throughout the story. There is a great deal of tension between African-Americans and whites during the time of the story. Blacks are alienated from whites because they are black, and blacks who try to act "white" are alienated from other blacks because of their behavior.

## Flight as Escape

Flight is a central theme to Morrison's story. It begins with Robert Smith's flight from the top of Mercy Hospital in an attempt to escape his life. Solomon, who is Milkman's great-grandfather, escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. Pilate escapes her situation through emotional and spiritual flight, and it is suggested her spirit escapes her body in the flight of the birds. Finally, Milkman's final escape from his past life is represented in his flight toward Guitar at the end of the novel. Flight represents freedom, and while each of the characters have something they need to escape, not all of them are able to fly in order to find freedom.

## Abandoned Women

The women in *Song of Solomon* are on two extremes: liberated and independent or wholly dependent on men. Those who are dependent on men are used and abandoned by them, which causes emotional damage. Ruth is abandoned by her father, Dr. Foster, when he dies and clings to her relationship with Milkman. Hagar is abandoned by Milkman, which drives her insane and leads directly to her death. Ryna is abandoned by Solomon when he flies back to Africa, which causes her to wail in the gulch.

## Obsession

Many of the main characters have some sort of obsession, some more obvious than others. Macon Jr. is obsessed with acquiring wealth. Hagar is obsessed with Milkman. Guitar is obsessed with getting revenge on white people for the treatment of blacks. Ruth is also obsessed with Milkman, though in a more subtle way than Hagar's obsession. Once Milkman begins his journey, he becomes obsessed with discovering his family history in order to create his identity.

## Names

Names have the power to create a character's identity. Just as giving the firstborn sons in the Dead family the name “Macon” connects each son's identity to the Macons before him, giving the other children random names from the Bible (such as Magdalene or First Corinthians) gives those characters a connection with the Bible. These connections shape the identities of these characters from birth.

# Style

## Point of View

Song of Solomon is told in limited-omniscient point of view. In it, the narrator uses a third-person voice, but at times concentrates on individual characters' points of view through the first-person point of view of that character, as well as third-person point of view of that character. The narrator does not comment on the characters' feelings and actions, and it is up to the reader to decide whether or not the narrator and characters are reliable in their storytelling.

## Setting

The story takes place between 1931 and 1963, with occasional flashbacks to earlier years. The geographical settings of the novel are an unnamed town in Michigan, Montour County in Pennsylvania, and Shalimar in Virginia. Milkman's emotional journey is reflected in the changing physical setting of the story. As he travels to a new town, he changes and matures.

## Language and Meaning

The language of Song of Solomon is straightforward, and the dialogue is written in the dialects of the characters. This allows the reader to relate to the characters in the story since the story is written in a conversational tone. This also underscores the emphasis on the oral tradition of African-American culture and history. The story could be interpreted as the narrator telling it to the reader just as Milkman learns his family history through oral traditions.

## Structure

The novel is divided into fifteen chapters with logical scene breaks between the chapters. The overall structure of the novel follows the archetype of the monomyth, also called the hero myth. The three stages of the monomyth are departure, initiation, and return, with smaller stages falling under these three. This is a very appropriate structure for the story since Morrison draws on Greek myth and other epic tales within the story, which were shared in oral tradition, which is important to Morrison's story. This structure makes Milkman's journey more magical.



## Quotes

The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o' clock. (Chapter 1)

O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home.... (Chapter 1)

Other than the bright and roving eyes of Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians, the Packard had no real lived life at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse. (Chapter 2)

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. (Chapter 3)

Why couldn't anybody in his whole family just be normal? (Chapter 5)

My name's Macon; I'm already dead. (Chapter 11)

When he went home that evening, he walked into the house on Not Doctor Street with almost none of the things he'd taken with him. But he returned with a box of Hagar's hair. (Chapter 15)

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. (Chapter 15)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Why does Morrison refer to so many folk stories and myths in *Song of Solomon*? What significance do they have to the structure of the novel? What significance do they have to Milkman's journey?

## Topic 2

How does Morrison portray women in the novel? How does she portray their relationships with men? Why are women portrayed this way?

## Topic 3

Explain how Milkman's emotional and spiritual transformation is manifested in his physical life. How does Morrison show his internal change on the outside?

## Topic 4

Discuss Macon Jr. and Pilate's reactions to the trauma they suffered together as children. Why does each react so differently? How do each of them react to what Milkman tells them about the Dead family history?

## Topic 5

What role does race play in the novel? What role does class play in the novel? How do these issues relate to the political issues of the United States during the time frame of *Song of Solomon*?

## Topic 6

Why does Morrison choose to not tell the readers how Milkman's flight ends when he leaps at Guitar? What does this say about Milkman? What does this say about Morrison?