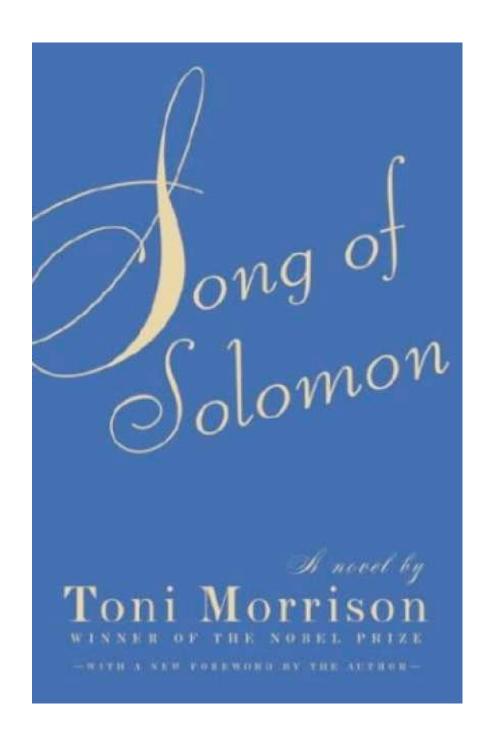
# IB ENGLISH HL 2 SUMMER ASSIGNMENT

CONTACT INFORMATION: MSKESTENBAUM@GMAIL.COM

Your summer assignment consists of multiple aspects. First, you must read, annotate, and complete the reading guide for Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. A detailed discussion and test is expected within the first days of class.

The second aspect of your summer work is the completion of a final outline as well as a preliminary draft of your Extended Essay. You must come prepared with these on the first day of class.

Don't be afraid to contact me if you have any questions over the break!



Student Handout

#### Introduction

Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, established her as a major American writer. The story of a Black man's search for his identity through a discovery of his family history, it became a bestseller and drew praise from readers and critics when it was published in 1977. The novel has been especially admired for the beauty of its language and its grounding of universal themes in the particularity of the African-American experience, as well as for its use of folklore.

Song of Solomon is based on an African-American folktale about slaves who can fly back to Africa when they choose. Morrison fictionalizes this folktale through the character of Solomon, the great-grandfather of the story's protagonist, Milkman Dead. Through his discovery of the story of Solomon and his ability to fly, Milkman learns to take pride in his ancestry and to value his connections to family and community.

*Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Award for fiction in 1977. It is now widely taught, and appeared again on best-seller lists when it was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for inclusion in her book club.

Beloved by readers for more than twenty years, it is still considered one of Morrison's best books.

#### Song of Solomon: Overview

#### The Life and Work of Toni Morrison

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

language, the structure, the sound, what people call slang, the metaphors, the similes, the paradoxes, the ironies...." (Morrison 29).

It is Morrison's ability to convey this language both in her narratives and the dialogues of her characters that gives her work its strong expressive powers. Morrison describes language as "the thing that black people love so much-the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them. Playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's; to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen (to black people) would be to lose that language" (LeClair 27).

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

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

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

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

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

At the time of its publication, Morrison's novel was her strongest statement to date on white society's oppression of African-Americans. However, critics agreed that although the novel "might easily be considered anti-white," that "the author's perceptions are human, rather than racist, and whites who read her will feel something-will live something-of what it means to be born black in America" (Miller 25).

#### Historical Context

#### Post-World War I America

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

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

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

# **Civil Rights Movement**

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

# Master List of Characters

**Robert Smith** – life insurance agent and member of the Seven Days organization. He attempts to fly in the first chapter.

**Dr. Foster-** father of Ruth Dead, and the only colored doctor in the city until her died in 1921. "Not Doctor Street" is named after him.

**Ruth Dead-** Milkman's mother, Macon's wife, and Dr. Foster's daughter; she is the first "colored" woman to give birth at Mercy Hospital. She is born in 1901. Her name in Hebrew means, "companion."

**First Corinthians (Corinthians)-** Milkman's older sister; she is 13 years older than her brother. She is the lover of Henry Porter. As is the tradition for Dead family women, her name is chosen randomly from the Bible at her birth. Her name refers to a book of the *New Testament*, the first epistle addressed by St. Paul to the Christians in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. Ironically, Corinth was known as a city of ill repute for its sexual promiscuity, while the character Corinthians is a virgin throughout much of *Song of Solomon*.

**Magdalene** (Lena) – Milkman's oldest sister, she is 14 years older than her brother. Her name is arbitrarily chosen from the *Bible* and refers to the reformed prostitute who Jesus cures of evil spirits in the Book of lake (New Testament).

**Pilate Dead-** Milkman's aunt and spiritual mother; she is Macon Dead's sister and the mother of the illegitimate Reba and grandmother of Hagar. Her father arbitrarily chooses Pilate's name from the *Bible*. Because he can't read, her father chooses the name because it "looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees." Ironically in the *Bible* (New Testament: Book of Matthew), Pilate is the last name of a man, Roman official (the procurator of Judea) who authorized the execution of Jesus Christ.

**Freddy** – the Dead family's tenant, a janitor, and the originator of Milkman's nickname; he is often referred to as "gold-toothed."

**Mrs. Bains** – referred to as "the stout woman" in the first chapter. She is Guitar Bains' grandmother.

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

Guitar Bains – Milkman's best friend and member of the Seven Days.

Macon Dead III (Milkman)- protagonist of the novel; he is the only son of Macon and Ruth Dead. He is born in 1931.

**Macon Dead II or Jr.** – Milkman's father and Ruth's husband; he is born in 1891. He is a successful man of property.

**Circe**- the midwife who delivers Macon and is present when Pilate "births" herself. She conceals them after Macon Dead I is killed and supplies Milkman with his family history. Circe's name derives from Greek mythology. According to myth, she is a beautiful enchantress known for her magic arts and the daughter of Helios- the Sun God. In the Greek epic, Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe detains Odysseus for a year and turns his men into swine.

**Henry Porter** – Macon Dead's tenant and a member of the Seven Days. He is Corinthians' lover.

**Reba Dead (Rebecca or Rebekah)** – the illegitimate daughter of Pilate Dead, she is Milkman's aunt, and the mother of the illegitimate Hagar. Her name derives from the *Bible*: Rebecca or Rebekah is the wife of Isaac, a Hebrew patriarch. (*Book of Genesis*)

**Hagar Dead** – the illegitimate daughter of Reba, she is the granddaughter of Pilate Dead. Hagar is Milkman's cousin and lover. In the *Bible*, Hagar refers to the concubine of Abraham (the first patriarch and progenitor of the Hebrews). The biblical Hagar is Abraham's wife, Sarah's handmaiden; Hagar is he mother of Abraham's illegitimate son Ishmael and is cast aside by Abraham; her name means "forsaken." (*Book of Genesis*)

**Macon Dead I** – referred to early in the novel only as "Macon's father," he is the member of the family who was misnamed Dead and lost the original family name. His real name is Jake.

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

**Railroad Tommy-** one of he owners of the barbershop and a member of the Seven days.

**Hospital Tommy-** one of the owners of the barbershop and a member of the Seven Days.

**Anna Djvorak** – she is the Hungarian woman who credits Dr. Foster with saving her son's life in 1903.

Ruth Dead comes to her granddaughter's wedding.

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

**Empire State** – he is a Seven Days member who kills a white boy in a schoolyard after the historic figure Emmett Till is lynched.

Mary – the barmaid and part-time owner of a bar in the blood bank, where Milkman and Guitar often go to drink.

**Emmett Till** – a 14 year-old black boy killed in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman. The lynching of this historic figure lives on as a symbol of the racial injustice African-Americans encountered in the 1950s. The men at Tommy's Barbershop discuss Till's lynching, which is avenged by the Seven Days.

**Winnie Ruth Judd** – a convicted murderess. The blacks in the novel consider this white woman to be an example of "white madness."

**Seven Days** – an activist organization of seven black men who avenge innocent black deaths by randomly killing whites under similar circumstances.

**Uncle Billy** – Guitar's uncle, who comes to Michigan from Florida to raise Guitar after his father dies

**Moon-** aids Guitar in preventing Hagar from killing Milkman.

**Preacher** – head of the family that took the orphaned Pilate in after she decided to leave Pennsylvania to look for her extended family in Virginia.

**Pickers** – Migrants Pilate lived and worked with for three years in New York State until they discovered she had no navel.

Father of Reba – Pilate's lover on an island of black families in Virginia.

Michael-Mary Graham- the hack-poetess who Corinthians keeps house for.

**Mr. Solomon** – name of imaginary husband invented by Pilate to explain to the police whose bones are in the green sack Milkman and Guitar steal from Pilate's house. Not to be confused with the Solomons from Shalimar, Virginia.

**Nero** – member of the Seven Days who Milkman sees in Porter's Oldsmobile when Milkman discovers Porter is a member of the Seven Days.

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

Esther Cooper- Reverend Cooper's wife.

**The Butlers-** the rich, white family Circe works for; they killed Macon Dead I (Jake) in order to take possession of his property.

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

Nephew – the only nephew of Reverend Cooper. He drives Milkman to visit Circe.

**Fred Garnett-** the driver of the Chevrolet who gives Milkman a ride in the direction of Danville after Milkman visits Circe.

**Mr. Solomon** – the owner of Solomon's General Store in Shalimar, Virginia. He is no relation to the immediate Solomon family.

**Children-** a group of youngsters who sing a song about Solomon in Shalimar, Virginia.

Saul – Shalimar resident who comes to blows with Milkman

Omar – Shalimar resident who comes to blows with Milkman.

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

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

**Calvin Breakstone** – Milkman's partner on the hunting trip. He tells Milkman about Ryan's Gulch.

**Small Boy** – a Shalimar resident who goes on the hunting trip.

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

**Vernell** – the woman who prepares breakfast after the hunting trip. She gives Milkman information about "Sing" and about Heddy Byrd.

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

**Susan Byrd-** Milkman's cousin. She tells him about his family history.

**Sweet-** She is Milkman's lover in Shalimar. It is the first Milkman has a loving relationship.

**Grace Long-** a local schoolteacher and a friend of Susan Byrd's. She flirts with Milkman and steals his watch.

Lilah- cousin of Susan Byrd who "passes" for white.

John- cousin of Susan Byrd who "passes" for white.

**Crowell Byrd-** only referred to; he is Susan Byrd's father.

Lily- the owner of Lilly's Beauty Parlor.

Marcelline- an employee of Lilly's Beauty Parlor.

**Shalimar-** another name for Solomon, Milkman's great-grandfather who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa and leaving his wife Ryna and 21 children behind. The name Solomon and the title of the novel are a biblical reference to a book of the *Bible* in the *Old Testament*, also referred to as *Canticles*. Solomon was the King of Israel in the tenth century.

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

#### **Themes**

#### **Coming of Age**

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

#### **Atonement and Forgiveness**

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

#### **Class Conflict**

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

#### Language and Meaning

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

# Motif

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

#### Narration

Though the main focus of *Song of Solomon* is Milkman's story, the narrator repeatedly turns to other stories to show how they intersect with Milkman' story. The narrative jumps back and forth in time to give the reader the necessary background for understanding the current situation being discussed. For example, in chapter nine the narrative shifts to the story of Corinthians and her affair, and Macon reacts punitively, forbidding Corinthians from leaving the house and evicting Porter and garnishing his wages. This provokes Lena to confront Milkman, which in turn spurs him to leave home.

Another aspect of the narration is the point of view of the narrator, who, as Catharine Rainwater noted in

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

# Bildungsroman

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

# **Reading Questions**

# Part I, through Chapter 4

1. When the doctors and the nurses at No Mercy hospital see the tragic death of Robert Smith, i causes their perception to change. They take on Ruth Foster and help her deliver the first 'colored' baby at their facility. Why did the doctors change their minds?

2. What do the relationships between Milkman and Ruth, and Milkman and Macon have to say about their feelings for each other? What do these relationships seem to say about each person's ideas of a relationship and of a family? Is the relationship between Ruth and Milkman a healthy one? Why or why not?
3. Define the meaning of temptation. Why does Milkman listen to Guitar? Does this seem to b a good idea? Was Milkman tempted or did he perhaps want an excuse to go to see his aunt?
4. Why is Milkman so obedient to his father in regard to not seeing Pilate? How did Milkman feel about this woman and did he see any similarities between her and his father?

hey are connected t say about Milkn	the novel, Milkman is given a wealth of information about his family and how d, or not. Are there any advantages to Milkman's new knowledge? What doe nan that people keep answering his questions and trying to tell him about the es it say about Macon that he wants to keep Milkman from learning?
ather's point of v Milkman decides	rows older, he takes a very different direction in his life that is far from his iew. He decides to have the fun his father never had. Why do you think to have fun and not be like his father? What does this say about Milkman's his father? What does this say about Milkman as a person?
7. Milkman's rea	lization that his relationship with Hagar is not fulfilling is striking and

8. The rationalization that black people have reasons for killing others and white people do not seems to be a form of denial in terms of murder being wrong. Discuss the rationalization that all blacks have a good reason for killing. Do whites feel the same way? Are both sides saying the same thing? Why aren't people realizing they think alike? Why does color change the perception of each side's position?
Part I, Through Chapter 8
9. Milkman knows that Hagar is coming to kill him, but instead of hiding, he decides to face his fate. Why do you think Milkman decided to resign himself to fate?

	d Milkman a different story than is the actual truth for Ruth and her father's ou think it was right for Macon to lie about the situation between Ruth and h	ıer
How does the unveiling of the lie affect Milkman's relationship to his mother? To his father?  Does it affect it at all? Why do you think Ruth lied about her relationship with her father?		
		_
		_
	crecy in The Seven Days is a big one for obvious reasons. Define the idea of to the Seven Days and to other organizations. What does it mean?	I 
		_
		_
	as the idea of The Seven days to Milkman as though it were a completely an. Is revenge really the motive of The Seven Days? Why or why not?	
	<del></del>	
		_

13. The gold becomes a significant part of the progress of the novel. But the idea of gold may also be a symbolic one. Why do you think that gold was chosen as the treasure in this story? What does this say about the characters? What might gold be standing for symbolically in the story? What does this say about people who long for the gold? What does this say about the possible outcomes of desiring this gold? How has gold affected those in the story?
14. Define the word greed. Is Milkman as greedy a person as his father seems to be? Why or why not? Is Pilate a greedy person up to this point in the novel? Why or why not?

15. The white peacock in this section is a symbol for the pursuit of pride and money – a noteworthy idea in this novel. What does the pursuit of money seem to say about Guitar? Al Milkman? Are these two characters after the same thinking when they steal the gold?	out
16. Seeing things becomes a bit of a theme in this novel- with Milkman seeing the image of a man behind Guitar, a man who is presumably Milkman's grandfather. Is the apparition actual in the room with Guitar and Milkman or in Milkman's conscience? What does the apparition Milkman sees mean to him? Why is his grandfather the one that is seen? Why not someone	lly

# Through Part II, Chapter 12

17. First Corinthians is an interesting character. She is educated, smart, and certainly a woman who knows what she wants. Yet, she takes a job as a maid. Did First Corinthians have a choice in the job she chose? Why or why not? Why didn't she try for something more challenging?

Would Ruth be ashamed of First Corinthians' job? Why or why not? First Corinthians thins she is too intelligent to find love. What does this say about her? Why do you think she feels this way? Is she accurate in the way she feels? Is her family's snobbery really the cause of her bad luck in love?
18. Pilate ends up saving Guitar and Milkman from jail by lying about the green sack and what it contained. Yet, Guitar is upset with her because the bag did not contain the gold he expected. Why is Guitar so made at Pilate, even though she saves them from jail? Is Guitar happy to be in jail? What motivated Milkman and Guitar to steal the green sack? What did these motivations lead each character to do?

9. Guitar's explanation of the fact that everyone wants to own black men, but that he also think lack men belong to him is a bit hypocritical. Define hypocrisy. What does it mean? Is Guitar a ypocrite or do you think Guitar realizes the conflict in his statement? Why might these two tatements seem perfectly logical to him? What does he mean by black men belonging to him? Does Guitar see himself as owning just as the white man owned the slaves? Is that really the goat f his life? To turn the tables?
0. The struggle to the cave is symbolic in many ways. First of all, it's symbolic of the way mare earches for money. The many obstacles on the way are difficult, and they seem to only lead to isappointment. But on the way back, the journey is simple. What do you think is the perfect mount of wealth? Why do you think people are always striving for wealth? What does wealth rovide? What does wealth allow?

21. By fighting with the men in the General Store, Milkman creates an uneasy peace. What do violence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not? Did he have another choice?  22. Milkman's obvious discomfort in the world of nature causes him to have troubles keeping up with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the world? Is being a man rigidly defined one way or another? Is Milkman a true man?	
violence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not? Did he have another choice?  Did he have another choice?  22. Milkman's obvious discomfort in the world of nature causes him to have troubles keeping up with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the	
violence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not? Did he have another choice?  ———————————————————————————————————	
violence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not? Did he have another choice?  ———————————————————————————————————	
violence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not? Did he have another choice?  ———————————————————————————————————	
with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the	iolence and peace look like? Is Milkman correct in taking the action he did? Why or why not?
with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the	
with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the	
with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the	
	with the other hunters. But in order to prove his manliness, he has to go. Is Milkman a good example of the modern man? Why or why not? What are some ways we define men in the

23. Guitar shows a touch of compassion in this section as he reveals to Milkman that he warned Milkman of his impending death because he still thinks of Milkman as a friend. Define the idea of compassion. Do you think Guitar was showing compassion to Milkman? If not, what do you

Part II Throu	gh Chapter 15
uri 11, 1 mrou	gn Chapter 13
he children is nore than she or why not? W	ience of Milkman hearing the songs of his grandfather and great grandfather from a lovely part of this dark novel. In hearing stories, Milkman realizes Susan knows revealed she did. Do you think the song is really about Milkman's family? Why what makes Milkman believe this? How are stories important to our different Do you think the children understood the meaning of the story?
he case. Wha other examples	hapter seems to indicate potential bad luck for the characters and that's certainly t are the various instances of bad luck for Pilate, Reba, and Hagar? What are some s of bad luck that happens to other characters in the book? How does luck affect es?

16. The realization that she cannot do anything to help anyone is a shock to he is a character who always tried to do things to aid others, but with negatives. This realization turns her world on its side. What does Pilate believe to help others? What are the benefits for her? What are the benefits for other ways Pilate tries to help others? What does this do for those characters? Wiffects of her help? What are some positive effects? Is she cannot help anyonean to the story?	ive results in many about her willingness ers? What are some hat are some ill
27. Once Grace is gone, Susan is much more willing to talk to Milkman abovelieve Susan's story about Grace? Why or why not? Do you think Milkman everything that Susan is saying since she's already lied to him once? Could easons for Susan not sharing the information with Milkman at first?	n can believe

28. The idea of being related to a flying man has to be exciting for Milkman. The story Susan rells shows Milkman that he comes from a long line of men with marginal abilities, unlike that which he has found in his life. What is the possible symbolism for the flying man? What is this man flying from? What does it mean when a man can fly? How might this affect those who know of a man's ability to fly? How might this story affect Milkman?
ells shows Milkman that he comes from a long line of men with marginal abilities, unlike that which he has found in his life. What is the possible symbolism for the flying man? What is this nan flying from? What does it mean when a man can fly? How might this affect those who
ells shows Milkman that he comes from a long line of men with marginal abilities, unlike that which he has found in his life. What is the possible symbolism for the flying man? What is this nan flying from? What does it mean when a man can fly? How might this affect those who
9. Pilate attacks Milkman upon his return, hitting him over the head with a wine bottle and haining him up in the cellar. When he awakes, Milkman realizes that Pilate has put a braid of lagar's hair into a shoebox in order to make him feel guilty about her death. Do you think Milkman should feel guilty about Hagar? Why do you think it was important for Pilate to attempt make Milkman feel guilty? What would this do for her and her loss?

30. At then end of the novel, Milkman decides he has learned how to fly. The image of him soaring into the chasm is one that remains with the reader, though it's not clear whether he actually flew. What happened to Milkman? Did Milkman actually fly? Why or why not? Why did Milkman decide to fly in the first place? What did this achieve for him? What else could he have done? What was he trying to prove? What does the action of flying symbolize for Milkman? Was this jump the easy way out for Milkman, who was about to be killed by Guitar? Why or why not? Did Guitar learn anything from this leap of faith that Milkman took? Did it change Guitar? What did Milkman mean by "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it"? What does he mean by surrender?