



Song of Solomon

by Toni Morrison

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Discussion Questions

1. The importance of names is a prevalent theme in the novel. Pilate carries the origin of hers in an earring she fashioned out of a snuff box. Her brother, Macon, "yearns for some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name." What do you think is the significance of some of the names in this novel: Milkman, Pilate, Guitar, Macon Dead, Circe, Sweet, even Not Doctor Street? Which characters have more than one name, and why?

2. The novel opens with a busy and memorable scene: Perched on the roof of the hospital, the black community's insurance collector prepares to soar to his death wearing blue wings he has made himself. On the hospital steps below him a pregnant woman collapses, her basket of velvet rose petals tumbles, and sends its contents flying through the wintry air. Also on the ground, a strangely clad black woman sings an equally strange and mournful song. What do you make of this scene? Which images resonate, and continue to resonate throughout the novel? How, in this scene, does Morrison set forth the tone of the novel and its many themes?

3. Although Morrison never gives us the exact location of Milkman's hometown, she tells us that it is up north, near Lake Superior. In his search for the buried gold, Milkman travels as far south as Virginia, where he feels like a stranger amidst the black men he meets. In this example and others, how does Morrison set up comparisons between a Northern black community with the Southern black way of life? Do you sense that she values one over the other?

4. Ghosts are a common presence in Morrison's fiction. What role do they play here, whether in the apparitions both Pilate and Ruth have of their perspective fathers, or in Circe's ghostly existence in the old mansion where she worked as a maid? Are ghosts real or imagined? Why are some characters haunted by ghosts, while others are comforted by their appearance?

5. Macon Dead, Jr., seems haunted, even threatened, by his sister, Pilate's, very existence. He willingly admits that he used to love her, but now he calls her "a snake." Still, he is drawn to her house and to its music where, "near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight." Why are his emotions so passionate and so mixed? What does Pilate represent to Macon's way of life?

6. What do you think of Morrison's portrayal of romantic relationships in the novel? The only successful, satisfying relationships she portrays exist between Milkman and Sweet, who have no commitments to each other, and between the first Macon Dead and his wife, Sing, who died in childbirth. Do you think Morrison is making a comment about "traditional" versus "non-traditional" unions? How important are marriage, sex, and love between men and women?

7. Guitar is Milkman's first and, for a long time, only friend. He serves as Milkman's mentor, introducing him to many of life's pleasures, especially those to be found within the walls of Pilate's home. As they grow older, the two men seem to grow apart. And, though Guitar continues to offer Milkman guidance, his advice is rarely taken. How do these two lives diverge and why? Can Milkman still benefit from Guitar's wisdom? Or do the roles become reversed?

8. What does Guitar mean when he says "everybody wants the life of a black man"? Do you think he is justified in joining the Seven Days? Why does he want Milkman's gold so desperately? And why does he end up trying to kill Milkman?

9. What is the significance of flying in the novel? How does Morrison equate the act of flying with death and with freedom? The last sentence of the novel reads: "He leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." Does Milkman die in this final scene? Why does Morrison leave it ambiguous?



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10. Milkman's journey south is an odyssey worthy of Homer: he is challenged physically and spiritually, faces death, and emerges a changed and happier man. Discuss this odyssey in terms of its symbolism and what Milkman learns about himself and his past. Why are these lessons so important? How does this journey help tie together the stories of Pilate, her brother, and her father?