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Song of Solomon

by

Toni Morrison

1977



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The novel begins in 1931 and moves forward until 1963. It is set in a large city in Michigan and in the countryside around Danville, Pennsylvania and Shalimar, Virginia.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Macon "Milkman" Dead - the protagonist of the novel. He is a young African-American man who begins trying to escape from family ties and ends by embracing them.

Macon Dead - Milkman's father. He is a landlord of poor housing.

Pilate Dead - Macon's sister. She sells wine.

Guitar Baines - Milkman's best friend. He is one of seven men--called the Seven Days--who kill random European Americans in retaliation for murders of African Americans. In the end he tries to kill Milkman.

Minor Characters

Robert Smith - the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent who tries to fly from the top of Mercy hospital to the other side of Lake Superior. One of the Seven Days.

Ruth Foster Dead - Milkman's mother.

First Corinthians - Milkman's sister.x

Magdalena Dead - Milkman's sister, who is called Lena.

Freddie, the janitor - a man who works for the Deads. He is the one who.....

Many additional characters are discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Milkman Dead is the protagonist of the novel. He is a young man who is raised in the privilege of an African-American upper-class family as the only.....

Antagonist - The history of slavery and Reconstruction in the United States, a history that.....

Climax - Milkman steals what he thinks is his aunt Pilate's stash of gold. Because it.....

Outcome - Milkman finds some of the answers to his questions about his family's past, linking him.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

In 1931, an insurance sales person, Robert Smith, dresses up in a blue superman outfit and stands on the roof of Mercy hospital from which he plans to fly from across the Great Lakes. Below him, a crowd gathers to watch. Among them is Ruth Foster, her two daughters Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena. Ruth is pregnant. She is carrying a basket full of red velvet roses which she and her daughters have cut out. She drops them and everyone runs to pick them up before they're ruined. Pilate Dead, Ruth's sister-in-law sings a song: "Sugarman don't fly off and leave me." Robert Smith jumps and dies and Ruth goes into labor. She gives birth to the first African-American child born in Mercy hospital.

A few years later, Macon Dead, Ruth's husband, who is a landlord of poor houses, hears of one of his tenants, Porter, going crazy and holding a rifle out of his bedroom window calling for a woman to come up to him and have sex with him. He goes to the house and waits for Porter to pass out and then sends his man, Freddie,

upstairs to collect the rent. Macon goes home that night by way of Darling street where Pilate, his sister lives. He sneaks up to the window and enjoys hearing Pilate, her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter Hagar, singing together. His son is named Macon too, but he has been renamed Milkman after Freddie caught Ruth nursing him when he was long past infancy.

In 1936, the Dead family take their usual Sunday drive in the Packard. Milkman has to urinate, so Macon stops on the side of the road and sends Lena to take him up the hill to urinate. When they come back, Lena is angry because Milkman accidentally urinated on her dress. Years later, when Milkman is twelve years old, he and his best friend Guitar go to see Pilate, whose house has been off limits to Milkman by order of Macon who considers her a bad woman. Pilate tells Milkman the story of her father.....

THEMES

Main Theme - The main theme of *Song of Solomon* is the rootlessness of African Americans who live in northern cities. A search for family means a journey south. A search.....

MOOD

The mood of *Song of Solomon* is one of commemoration. It is a commemoration of the past, of ancestors, but that mood is interrupted in the present-day setting, in the protagonist's generation, by a mood of.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Toni Morrison was born with the name of Chloe Anthony Wofford. She was born and grew up in Lorain, Ohio, a town outside of Cleveland. She graduated from Howard University with a bachelor's degree in 1953 and then went on to graduate school at Cornell University, where she earned a master's degree in 1955. She taught at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas for two years and then in 1957 she returned to Howard University where she taught until 1964. While teaching at Howard, she married Harold Morrison and began to write fiction. She became an editor for Random House in 1964, eventually becoming senior.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Toni Morrison combines in her literary vision a seamless use of European-American literary history and a vivid incorporation of African-American folk history. Morrison calls her literary technique in *Song of Solomon* as "the imaginative combination of the real world, the very shrewd, practical, day-to-day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time encompassing some great supernatural event." In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison makes reference to one European fairy tale after another, Hansel and Gretel being one of the most memorable, as Milkman enters the dilapidated Butler mansion and sees Circe, the ancient woman who served as midwife to all the community of Danville from the time of slavery. Here, Morrison combines the ancient Greek myth of Circe, the goddess of Homer's *The Odyssey*, who detains Odysseus on.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Robert Smith, the North Carolina Mutual Life agent, stands on top of Mercy hospital dressed in powder blue suit getting ready to jump off and fly across Lake Superior to the other side. He has written a note and sent it around to all the people in the community, but most of them didn't get it. The only ones in front of Mercy hospital that morning are those who happened to be there anyway and those few who got his notice in time. Most people are busy with their usual morning things. The hospital is located on Not Doctor street, a name not recognized by the post office. In 1896, the first African-American doctor moved on that street and people began to call it Doctor street. After years of this informal name, the authorities decided to name the street Mains

avenue. They sent notices around town announcing the street was called Mains avenue and not Doctor street. People then began to call it Not Doctor street. People also tended to call the hospital No Mercy hospital because it admitted no African-American people.

On the day Mr. Smith jumped from the roof of Mercy hospital, the hospital admitted its first African-American expectant mother. A pregnant woman was there in the crowd that morning along with her two half-grown daughters who were carrying baskets of velvet red roses which they made for a department store. The girls dropped their basket and started running after the red roses to keep them from getting soiled in the snow. People helped them. A woman started singing "O Sugarman done fly away" when she saw Mr. Smith with his blue silk wings on the roof.

Officials from the hospital came out cautiously when they realized the gathering wasn't some sort of racial uplift demonstration. They started giving orders as soon as they got over the sight of Mr. Smith on the roof. One nurse tells an African-American woman to send one of the girls around back to notify security. She then points to the woman's grandson. The woman tells her the boy's name is Guitar. The nurse spells out the name of the building where the security guard is and tells the boy to run and get him. When she leaves, he tells his grandmother that the woman forgot an "s" in the spelling of the word. His grandmother tells him the nurse also forgot a "please."

The crowd gets nervous. Mr. Smith comes to their houses once a month to collect insurance payments. He's always polite and deferential and they always joke with him about his regularity in coming as soon as they have two dimes to rub together. They've always thought he was a good man, but being connected to death as a life insurance salesman has kept him separate from the community somewhat. The singing woman walks over to the pregnant woman and touches her arm, telling her she should be keeping herself warm. She adds that "a little bird" will be here by morning. The pregnant woman objects, saying she's not due yet, but the singing woman insists. The scene ends with Mr. Smith jumping.

The boy who was born that day in Mercy hospital discovered at the age of four that only birds and airplanes fly. From that moment, he lost all interest in himself. His imagination was left bereft. People called him peculiar or deep. Women come to visit his mother, Ruth Foster, and discuss him. He has trouble escaping them and walking upstairs. Then he has to get passed his sisters' door before they see him and say something in "casual malice." Lena and Corinthians, his sisters, are always upstairs cutting patterns for their red roses. The house is always quiet and prison-like, but that peace ends when Macon Dead, Ruth's husband, arrives home.

Macon keeps every member of his family "awkward with fear." He hates his wife intensely and he shows his disappointment in his daughters. Where they should be experiencing the exuberance of girlhood, they are awkward and subdued. Ruth begins each day "stunned into silliness" and ends each day animated by her husband's hatred. When Ruth's guests leave each afternoon, she begins dinner. She is a terrible cook, no matter how much she tries. As she prepares the table, she notices the large water mark left in its center. The water mark is like a lighthouse in her life. It reminds her that she is in life and not a dream and that she is alive somewhere inside.

The water mark came about years ago when Ruth's father was still alive. He liked to have fresh flowers on the table every day. It distinguished his family from the people they lived among. Ruth took great care in arranging flowers for the centerpiece. One day she saw in a magazine an arrangement made of driftwood, so she went to the waterside. To get there she had to pass through a poor neighborhood and get chilled by the cold. She brought the driftwood home and made an exquisite arrangement. That night at dinner, she had asked her husband what he thought of it. He said the chicken she had made was bloody and the potatoes lumpy. After that mean response to her artistry, she had let the arrangement disintegrate on the table and when she finally removed it, the water mark was left. The water mark seems like a plant in itself. It sometimes throbs like a fever

and sometimes it's subdued.

The water mark is one of Ruth's secret indulgences. The other has to do with her son. She takes him to a room that used to be her father's study. Now it is saturated with a "damp greenness" because the windows are filled with an evergreen. She puts her son on her lap and nurses him. While she does so, she tries to ignore that fact that his feet are dangling to the floor. Her son does it like it's a chore. Ruth feels like "his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold." She thinks of herself as the miller's daughter in Rumpelstiltskin. One day everything came to an end when Freddie the janitor came to bring his rent. He knocked on the door and then looked in the window calling. He saw Ruth nursing her son and began to laugh. Ruth dropped her son, signaling to him that what he had suspected all along was right; this daily routine with his mother was wrong and somehow shameful.

Ruth was mainly shocked in her disappointment because she knew that only one of her two secret pleasures was now over. Freddie came in the house laughing and telling Ruth he knew women in the south nursed their children a long time, but he had never seen it in the north and not anywhere for years. He looked at the boy with appreciation as if this action indicated the boy would grow up to be a "ladies' man." He called him Milkman and the name stuck because Freddie was the town gossip. He went around town telling everyone but Macon Dead about what he had seen. Ruth stayed inside for two months and didn't receive guests because she didn't want to know that they had all heard about it. Macon Dead heard his son being called Milkman and knew there was something wrong in it, but never knew the origin of the nickname. He already felt disgust for his son. He had tried for fifteen years to have a son and when he finally had one, he had had him under the most revolting circumstances.

When he had first married Ruth, they had loved sex. He loved to spend take his time undoing her elaborate and exquisite underwear. Now that he hasn't seen her naked in twenty years, he misses only her underwear. He used to believe that the sight of her mouth on the old man's fingers would stay with him forever, but it hasn't. He has to try to remember the details of that scene and even fabricate details. No one dared to tell him what the nickname of his son meant because he is unapproachable. Only one person--his sister Pilate--would have the nerve to tell him and he hates her more than he hates his wife. He hasn't seen his sister since his son was born and he doesn't want to see her now.

Macon holds onto the bunch of keys in his pocket. They reassure him in their "bunchy solidity." They are keys to all the houses, or shacks, that he owns. He has his business in a building with the name Sonny's Shop painted on the door. He walks toward this building now thinking of names. He imagines that somewhere in his family line there was probably a young man who got a name in the serious and loving way. "A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name." Macon's own parents had passed on to him the joke of a name given to his father by a drunken Union soldier. His own family had continued the tradition and now his son had been renamed Milkman Dead. His sister was named Pilate Dead. She had her name written on a scrap of paper, folded into a tiny square and contained in a box which she wears as an earring.

He remembers his father's choice of Pilate. His mother had died in childbirth. His father, who was illiterate, had opened the Bible and pointed to a name that seemed to him strong and handsome. Then he wrote it out carefully on a piece of paper and gave it to the midwife so she could tell him what the name was. She told him he couldn't name his child after the man who killed Jesus. He insisted the child would be called Pilate. He put the scrap of paper in the Bible where it stayed until Pilate turned twelve and put the paper in a box which she fashioned into an earring.

He was surprised when Ruth had had his son that Pilate took a great interest in the infant. She came over every day and sat next to his crib staring at him. Macon didn't like this because his sister looked so unkempt. He hadn't seen her since he was sixteen years old. Now she was acting like an in-law. He couldn't help but

remember his anger and her betrayal outside that cave so many years ago. Finally, one day he told her she should dress like a woman. He couldn't stand the idea of the white men at the bank knowing this bootlegger was his sister. Pilate listened to him and told him she had been worried about him as well. He went to the door and told her to go away. She had left and never came back.

When Macon gets to his office, he sees a woman and two young boys outside waiting for him. He invites her in and she asks him for an extension on her rent. She is already two months behind. Her grandchildren are living with her and her daughter Cency has left. Her relief check doesn't pay enough even for food, much less rent. Macon Dead tells her if she doesn't have the money to him by Saturday, he will evict her. When she goes outside, her grandson asks her what happened. She doesn't answer directly. She says "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see." When Mrs. Bains is gone, Macon Dead looks at his account books. He thinks of how he got in to see Ruth in the first place when he had only two houses. He thinks those two houses were the reason Mr. Foster let him see his daughter. He doesn't know that Mr. Foster was relieved to have Macon Dead seeing his daughter. He had begun to feel strange about his daughter's passionate devotion to him.

Macon is interrupted in his thoughts by Freddie's knock. Freddie tells him Porter has gone crazy and has his shotgun out. Macon gets a pistol out of his desk drawer and says he will go to Porter and get his rent, which is due the next day, before Porter spends it all. They get to the house and Porter is being taunted by a group of women. He's been yelling out the window that he wants someone to have sex with. Macon interrupts them with an order for Porter to put his rifle down and send his rent money down. Porter points his rifle at Macon and Macon tells him he will shoot his testicles off if Porter tries to shoot him. Porter tries to turn the shotgun on himself, but he's too drunk and the gun is too long. Next, Porter pulls down his pants and urinates over the heads of the women outside. Then he begins to sob that he loves all of them and is suffering from having so much love. He asks God to give him hate instead of love. He compares himself to Mr. Smith, saying Mr. Smith also couldn't carry all the love he had. Porter finally falls asleep. Macon sends Freddie upstairs for his rent money and then walks away.

When Macon is walking home, he suddenly starts to feel lonely. He decides to take a different route home, one on Darling Street, where his sister Pilate lives with her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. Pilate had been like his own child for twelve years. When she had been born without a navel, he hadn't thought anything of it. It wasn't until he was seventeen years old that he found out she was probably the only one in the world with such a stomach. He gets to their house and hears them singing. Pilate refuses to pay electricity, so they use kerosene lamps. Macon sneaks up and looks in the window. They look so peaceful and harmonious that he wants to stand there for a long time. He notices his sister's lips. They're always moving because she always has something in her mouth like pine needles or pieces of rubber bands.

Notes

The first scene of chapter one contains most of the main characters of the novel: Ruth Macon and her two daughters, First Corinthians and Lena, Pilate Dead, and Guitar Bains, who will grow up to be friends with the soon-to-be-born Macon "Milkman" Dead. The death of the insurance salesperson, Robert Smith, is as yet, only the occasion that brings these people together, but later, the reader will discover a connection between Robert Smith, Porter, and Guitar Bains, a connection that will push the plot of the novel to its conclusion.

The dominant mood of the first chapter is somber. It describes the tragic regarded as the every day, as if it were nothing to be remarked upon. All the characters live lives of isolated desperation. Ruth Foster Dead, for example, anchors her life with the water stain that marks her dining room table. Macon Dead anchors his identity with the number of houses he rents out to people too poor to pay the rent steadily. Minor characters echo this isolation of individuals. People like Porter, the man who calls out for a woman to have sex with, and wishes he felt hatred instead of love, live in the midst of community and get no succor from it. The only people who seem to live in happy community are pictured at the opening and the ending of this chapter. Pilate Dead,

Macon Dead's sister, her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar, sit in a kitchen lighted by kerosene and sing together.

Names are an important motif in African-American literature. Because Africans were taken from their homeland and brought to the American continent, they lost their lineage and were given the haphazard names of chattel slaves. They were often given only first names and, if they needed to, they would take the last name of their slave holders. Morrison shows that this slave time heritage remains in the present day. The original Macon Dead gets his name from the mistake of a drunken Union soldier who thinks he's filling in the name of his county. The female members of the family are as haphazardly named by use of a method of blindly choosing a name from the Bible. Pilate got her name when her illiterate father pointed to a word that looked strong and brave. Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena got theirs also from the Bible. The dislocation of.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Macon "Milkman" Dead - Milkman is one of the new generation of African Americans, his being the first generation to enter some realms of previously all European-American privilege. He is born in Mercy hospital, an all-white hospital which the people of the neighborhood have dubbed no Mercy hospital for its policy of admitting no African-American patients. Milkman's relation to his material sustenance is so far removed that he never even thinks of money as something for which he needs to strive. He is two generations removed from slavery and has no concept of the continuation of discrimination against.....

Macon Dead - At twelve he loses his mother and becomes the only mother his baby sister knows and at sixteen he sees his father shot in the back by people who want to take his father's land. As an.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Morrison plots *Song of Solomon* chronologically from the birth of the protagonist Milkman Dead until the time he is in his early thirties. She intertwines this chronological plot with a series of flashbacks into the past of his ancestors. These glimpses into the past are presented in the stories his.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

In her novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison writes of the rootlessness of African Americans who live in northern cities. Many of the people living in northern cities trace their families to ancestors who lived in the south under slavery and Reconstruction. Morrison's northern characters are deeply influenced by their past in the south. They carry the wounds of the past and these wounds are passed down to the next generation, young women and men who grow up disconnected from their ancestors but nevertheless shaped by their heritage. Milkman Dead is of this generation. He grows up in the privilege gained by.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

- 1) Examine the issue of naming in the novel. How does it connect to African American history and how does Morrison deal with that history?
- 2) Analyze the characters of the older generation of African-American women in the novel, especially Ruth Foster and Pilate, but also taking into account Mrs. Baines. What function do they serve in establishing the novel's themes?.....

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