



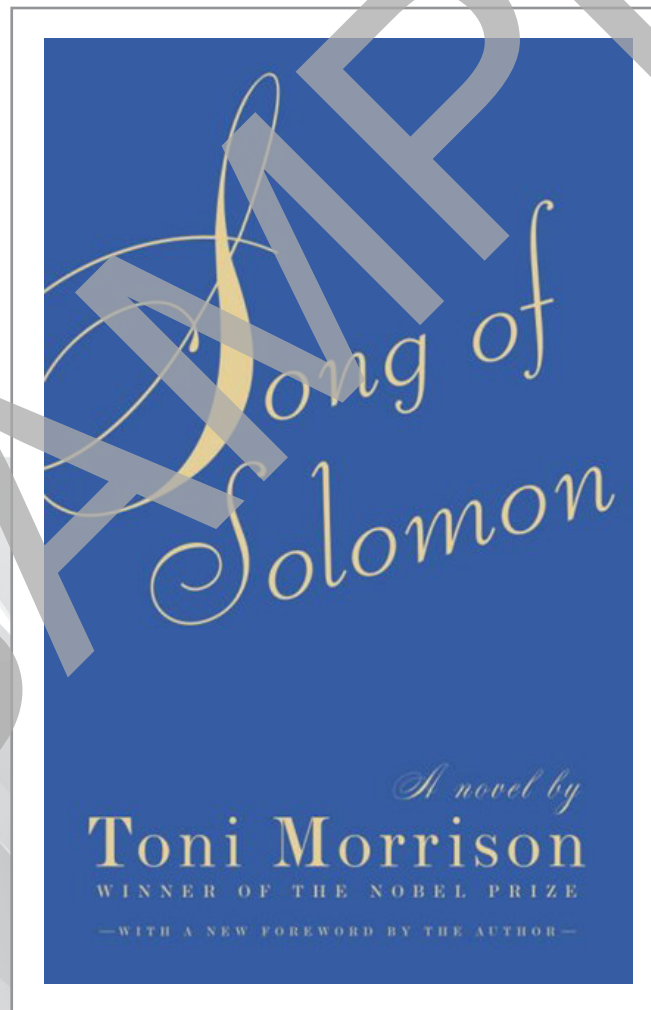
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# Song of Solomon

Toni Morrison



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

SAMPLE

# Song of Solomon

Toni Morrison

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

---

**ISBN 978-1-56137-937-8**

Copyright infringement is a violation of Federal Law.

© 2020 by Novel Units, Inc., St. Louis, MO. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any way or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written permission from Novel Units, Inc.

Reproduction of any part of this publication for an entire school or for a school system, by for-profit institutions and tutoring centers, or for commercial sale is strictly prohibited.

Novel Units is a registered trademark of Conn Education.

Printed in the United States of America.

To order, contact your  
local school supply store, or:

Toll-Free Fax: 877.716.7272

Phone: 888.650.4224

3901 Union Blvd., Suite 155

St. Louis, MO 63115

[sales@novelunits.com](mailto:sales@novelunits.com)

[novelunits.com](http://novelunits.com)

---

## Summary of *Song of Solomon*

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison details Milkman Dead's journey of discovery—a black man's quest for connection with his family's past. Milkman was born in 1931, the third child of unhappily married parents—Macon Dead (a businessman) and his wife Ruth (daughter of a prominent black doctor, now dead). As a young man, Milkman got involved with his cousin Hagar, daughter of his father's eccentric sister, Pilate. When he tried to end things with Hagar, she attempted repeatedly to kill him. Then he learned that his best friend, Guitar, had joined a secret society responsible for a series of revenge killings in which innocent whites were murdered to avenge the murders of blacks. Finally Milkman decided to leave town and told Guitar he was going to find the gold that, according to family history, his father had discovered in a cave as a child while hiding from his own father's killers. During his trip between Michigan and Virginia, Milkman was surprised to realize that his search for family had overshadowed his pursuit of the gold. And he was shocked to realize that he was being hunted—by Guitar.

### About the Author

Born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931 ("Chloe Anthony Wofford"), Toni Morrison was the second of four children. After receiving her B.A. in English from Howard University, she obtained her Master's from Cornell and went on to teach English at various universities (including Yale, Bard and Rutgers) and served for twenty years as senior editor at Random House (1965-1985). She married an architect from Jamaica in 1958 and was divorced in 1964. She has two children.

Toni Morrison is the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize (for Literature, 1993). Her award citation describes her as an author "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality."

#### Books by Toni Morrison

**Six major novels:** *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977), *Tar Baby*, *Beloved* (won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988), and *Jazz*

**Essays:** "The Dancing Mind" (speech upon acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal), "Conversations with Toni Morrison," (The Nobel Lecture in Literature), and "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination"

For a complete listing of Morrison's books and articles on the web, go to:  
<http://www.yasuda-u.ac.jp/staff/ptervin/morrison/tm.biblio.html>.

---

## Introductory Activities

Choose one or more of the following activities to prepare students for the novel they are about to read:

1. **Anticipation Guide:** Students rate (from 1–6) and discuss their opinions of statements that tap themes they meet in the novel—both before and after reading. (1=agree strongly; 6=disagree strongly)

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

There is no excuse for spouse abuse.

A rose is a rose by any other name.

Most sons want to be like their fathers.

People fear anyone who's different.

It's important to know where you came from.

You can't buy happiness.

Before

After

2. **Pre-reading Discussion/Research**

**About Materialism:** What does it mean to be “materialistic”? Why are some people more materialistic than others? Do you think this is a bad thing? Is materialism at odds with spiritual growth? How important is money to you? What is “upward mobility”? What are the advantages of being “upwardly mobile”? What are the stresses that accompany upward mobility?

**About Caste and Class:** What is a “class system”? What is a “caste”? Would you say that we have a caste system in this country? How can a family move “up”? What happens when a family shifts its social status? What ties tend to be broken?

**About Gender and Ethnicity:** What do you know about women's roles in the 1920s? the 1930s? What were race relations like in the 1960s? What civil-rights abuses were prominent in the news? What legislation was being enacted?

**About Names:** What are some different ways people choose names? How was your name chosen? How important is a person's name? How important is your name to you? Why do we put so much emphasis on remembering people's names? Is your name central to your identity?

**About Shame:** What is shame? What are some sources of shame? Is shame ever a good thing? Have you ever been ashamed of someone else? Why? What did it drive you to do?

**About Tragedy:** What is a tragedy? What are some of the great tragedies of our time? Are all violent deaths tragic? Could most tragedies that happen have been averted?

3. **Literature Log:** Have students keep a response log as they read. These include journals in which students—
  - a) assume the persona of one of the characters (such as Milkman) and write in first person on one side of the paper about one episode in the assigned section of the story. A student partner—or the teacher—responds on the other side of the paper, as if talking to the character.

- b) jot down brief summaries and reactions to each section of the novel (in left- and right-hand columns)—beginning with a prediction about the novel based on a glance at the cover and a flip through the book.

Pages	Summary	Reactions
		These might begin: "I liked the part where Ruth ...," "This reminded me of this time I ...," "Pilate reminds me of another character ...," "If I were Guitar, I wouldn't ...," "I disagree with Milkman's father when he says ..."

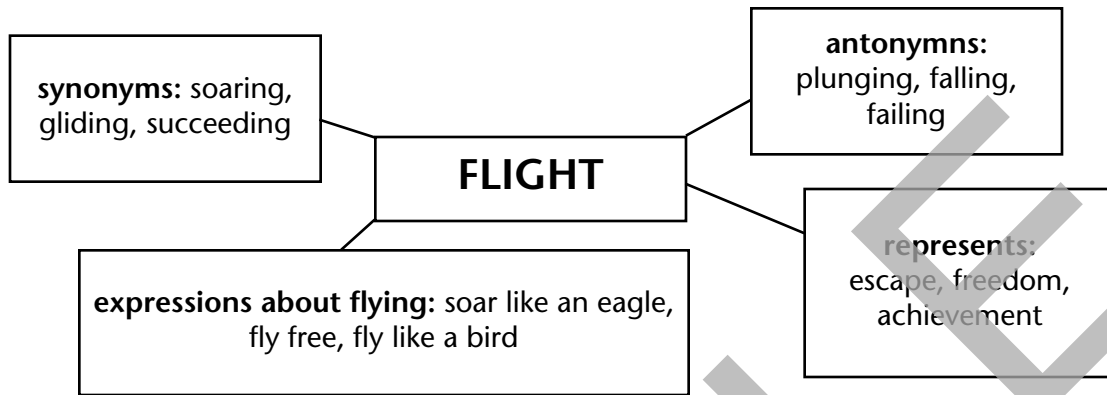
- c) write down one quotation from each section of the book that particularly strikes them—and respond to it. (What does it mean to the student? How does/doesn't it apply to his/her own life?)

Alternatively or in addition, students might simply jot personal responses onto sticky notes and attach them to relevant pages for later reference during class discussion.

4. **Character Ratings:** After students finish a section of the novel, have them chart their feelings/judgments about Milkman, Guitar, other characters, and the story in general using the following scales, or others you construct. Students should discuss their ratings, using evidence from the story.

Like	1—2—3—4—5—6	Dislike
Boy	1—2—3—4—5—6	Man
Happy	1—2—3—4—5—6	Sad
Active	1—2—3—4—5—6	Passive
Honest	1—2—3—4—5—6	Dishonest
Unselfish	1—2—3—4—5—6	Selfish
Obedient	1—2—3—4—5—6	Rebellious
Cowardly	1—2—3—4—5—6	Courageous
Guilty	1—2—3—4—5—6	Innocent
Immature	1—2—3—4—5—6	Mature
Spiritual	1—2—3—4—5—6	Materialistic

- 
5. **Brainstorming:** Have students generate associations with a theme or topic that is central to the story, such as flight, names, materialism vs. spirituality, self-discovery.



6. **Role Play:** Have small groups of students improvise skits about the following situations (like situations in the story):
- A self-centered guy sits down to write a “Dear Joan” letter to a woman he’s been seeing for years. He plans to send the letter with her Christmas present.
  - An upper-middle-class father tells his son why he wants the child to stay away from other, working-class members of the family.
  - One friend has joined a violent gang. The other argues with him about the idea that “revenge is sweet.”
7. **Geography:** As key locations in the story are mentioned, label these on a map of the U.S. (e.g., towns in Michigan, Virginia and Pennsylvania).
8. **Prediction:** Have students make predictions about the story, based on the cover. What is the “Song of Solomon”? (*Biblical love poem between a bride and groom*) What can you tell about the figure on the cover? How does the picture “feel”?
9. **Journal Writing:** Have students freewrite in their literature journals, using these sentence starters:
1. Chapters 1-2: A person’s name...
  2. Chapters 3-4: Seeing one parent abuse the other...
  3. Chapter 5: Being stalked by a former lover...
  4. Chapter 6: Hate crimes...
  5. Chapters 7-8: Stealing from a relative...
  6. Chapter 9: When a boyfriend and girlfriend are from different social backgrounds...
  7. Chapter 10: Finding out more about your “roots”...
  8. Chapters 11-12: When you’re a stranger in a small town...
  9. Chapters 13-14: A proper burial...
  10. Chapter 15: When a person looks death in the eye...

- 
10. **Debate:** Hold a classroom debate on one of the following questions. Those who argue “YES” get on one side of the classroom; those who argue “NO” get on the other; both sides try to convince the “UNDECIDEDS” in the middle.
- Your parents have the right to decide with whom you associate.
  - The capacity for racism lurks beneath the surface of anyone—even an Albert Schweitzer.
  - Even hate groups have the right to express themselves.
11. **Text “Combing”:** Tell students to watch as they read for references to **names** (and mark these with an N), **flight** (F), **shame** (S), and **violence/death** (V). These can be used as supportive evidence for discussion and/or writing about themes developed in the novel.



---

## Vocabulary Activities

(See the *Novel Units Student Packet* for several reproducible vocabulary activities.)

1. Have students keep a running list of words they meet in the book but do not know. Instruct them to write down what they think each word means, from its context. Then they should use a dictionary to look up the meanings of some of the words (five or so per chapter) and jot down the definitions—if different from their “educated guesses.”
2. Before students read a particular section of *Song of Solomon*, introduce them to the vocabulary words listed for that section in this guide. Pronounce the words and have students set up a chart like the one below. After reading the word in context, they should predict the definition and discuss the context clues they used to arrive at their guesses. Finally, they should jot down the dictionary definition that fits the way the word is used in the book.

Vocabulary Words	Meaning—My Guess	Definition

3. After reading, students list the 20 vocabulary words they feel it is most important to know when reading *Song of Solomon*. Have them write one sentence for each one, explaining what that word has to do with the story. (Why is the word important to an understanding of *Song of Solomon*?)

Word/Page	Prediction	Dictionary Definition

4. Have students generate “trains” of synonyms for target words.  
For example: entrails (p. 4)—guts—innards—  
Ask: Which of these synonyms are interchangeable? When might you use one but not another? What are some related—but not equivalent—words?

5. Have students work in cooperative groups to map particular words that fit the following framework:

What it looks like: \_\_\_\_\_  
 What it does: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Where it is: \_\_\_\_\_  
 What it is: \_\_\_\_\_

For example, several words students might map this way include:

*cupola* (4) *anaconda* (137) *stills* (146) *bootlegger* (150) *amanuensis* (187) *macadam* (220) *okra* (298) *bolero* (314) *water moccasins* (327) *tourniquets* (336)

6. Have students—especially those for whom English is a second language—do “synonymic webbing” of words with multiple meanings. For example:

<b>draw, p. 3</b>			
various meanings:	*attract	depict	stretch
synonyms:	interest lead on	design sketch	strain tighten
sample phrase:  *meaning as used in the novel	*He was drawn to her.	He could draw portraits.	She drew the string on her hood tighter.

Help students write several sentences containing “draw”—with its various meanings

7. Put the following words on slips of paper and have students each draw one from a box or bag. Each student is responsible for somehow demonstrating the meaning of his/her word (e.g., through a sketch, mime, dance, skit).

covering 26  
 furtiveness 121  
 gesticulating 177  
 nonchalantly 244

ambled 58  
 supplication 137  
 stationary 179  
 skulking 301

animation 83  
 bravado 139  
 wistful 194  
 languorous 317

incredulous 111  
 truculent 151  
 raucous 220

---

## Part I

### Chapters 1-2, pages 3-55

#### Summary

On February 18, 1931, Mr. Robert Smith—an African-American insurance agent—leaped to his death from the cupola of Mercy Hospital. One of the women in the crowd below went into labor, and the next day a black child was born at Mercy for the first time in the hospital's history. The lives of that child ("Milkman"), his family (the "Deads"), and Milkman's friend, Guitar (a small boy in the crowd), are threaded throughout the novel, which reaches back into the 1800s and ends in the 1960s.

Pregnant Ruth had her two little daughters—Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians—with her that day in the crowd. Later, unhappy in her marriage to stern Macon Dead, Ruth sought comfort by breastfeeding her boy far longer than "normal"—and so he was dubbed "Milkman." Macon did not know for certain where the nickname had come from, but he did know that naming had taken several strange turns in his family.

When his mother had died in childbirth, Macon's illiterate father had named Macon's baby sister "Pilate," after looking for a handsome group of letters in the Bible. When Pilate grew up to be a bootlegger, Macon was embarrassed by her eccentricity and her poverty and ordered her to stay away from his comfortable home. (His father-in-law had been a physician and he, himself, was a prosperous landlord.)

Macon was less than compassionate; when a tenant named Porter threatened suicide, Macon said he wanted his rent first. Macon took his unhappy wife and children out on Sunday rides in the Packard to show off the family's wealth. At 12, Milkman became friends with Guitar, who took him where his father had forbidden him to go—to the house Pilate shared with her simple-minded daughter, Reba, and Reba's spoiled daughter, Hagar. Pilate showed Milkman how to cook the perfect egg and told him about the death of his grandfather—shot off a fence by some white men in front of his children.

As he spent more time with the three women and his friend, Guitar, Milkman was completely happy for the first time in his life. Of course, Milkman's father was outraged when he learned about the visit and told him he had better things to do with his time than visit that "snake," Pilate. Milkman was told he would start work with his father immediately.

---

## Vocabulary

lumbered (3)	entrails (4)	quasi-official (4)	clarifying (4)
cupola (4)	hospital privileges (5)	dilemma (5)	cloche (5)
contralto (6)	racial-uplift (6)	placards (6)	preliminary (8)
reaper (8)	bereft (9)	caul (10)	gross (10)
suffused (10)	lilt (10)	rennet (11)	mooring (11)
balm (13)	guileless (13)	spontaneous (15)	odiousness (17)
lithe (17)	perverseness (18)	begat (18)	bootlegger (20)
tetter spots (22)	reverie (23)	bantamweight (23)	charade (24)
flunky (24)	cowering (26)	escapade (28)	paring (30)
flagrant (31)	regal (31)	belied (32)	feigning (37)
unkempt (38)	pervading (39)	narcotic (40)	haunches (44)
dissipated (49)	imposing (50)	reminisced (51)	

## Discussion Questions

1. What do you see and hear as you imagine the opening of the story—pages 1-9? (*A man in blue wings is about to jump from a cupola; wind blows the velvet rose petals a pregnant woman has dropped.*) What was the atmosphere like? (*festive, at first; then serious*) Why did the crowd gather? When? (*They gathered on the afternoon of February 18, 1931, to watch the man “fly.”*)
2. What are your impressions of Mr. Smith? (*insurance agent, quiet, known to all*) Why do you think he killed himself?
3. What do you think of Macon Dead, senior? What words and phrases would you use to describe him?

(materialistic, hard,  
angry)



Macon

4. What sort of marriage did Ruth and Macon Dead have? (*loveless*) Why do you think they got married? Why do you suppose they stayed together? What did the incident with Porter show you about Macon? (*his pitilessness and materialism*) Why do you think the author included the description of family outings in the Packard? (*They show his concern with status.*) How do you think Macon was regarded in the black community? (*Others resented his tightfistedness, the way he flaunted his wealth.*)
5. Milkman is a central character in the story. How does he figure in the opening scene? (*He was the first black child born at Mercy, after Smith's leap.*) What do you learn about how he got his name? (*from the inordinate length of time he was breastfed by his mother*) Who else knew the source of his nickname? (*almost everyone but Macon*) Why didn't his father know? (*People were afraid to tell him—or didn't care to.*)
6. How did "Not Doctor" Street get its name? (*Black residents called the street Doctor Street at first because Ruth's father lived there; legislators insisted it be called Mains Avenue, not Doctor Street; residents called it Not Doctor Street.*) How is this similar to the origin of Guitar's name? (*He was named after what he was NOT able to have—a guitar he saw in a window.*)

- 
7. How did Macon's sister Pilate get her name? (*Her illiterate father picked it out of the Bible.*) What was in her earring? (*her name*) How did Macon feel about her—and her earring? (*ashamed, disgusted*) What do you think the reference to "his anger and her betrayal" (p. 20) might be about?
  8. Why do you think Milkman suddenly felt threatened and defensive in Pilate's company (p. 38)? (*She was proud of the family name and he wanted to claim it, too.*) Why do you think Milkman enjoyed being with Pilate and the other women so much (pp. 36-49)? (*There was a sense of relaxed family togetherness that was absent in his own home.*) Do you think he regretted that forbidden visit when he got home?
  9. Macon blamed the fact that his father's name was "messed up" on his father's illiteracy (p. 53). What happened? (*A drunken Yankee made a clerical error; Macon's father couldn't read.*) Why didn't Milkman's father change the "Dead" name, if it bothered him so much? Do you think the elder Macon should have kept the new name—or insisted on his original one? Have you ever heard other stories about people's names being changed by clerical errors?
  10. **Prediction:** What will be Milkman's job—and how will he like working for his father?

## Supplementary Activities

### Literary Analysis: Allusion

Explain that an **allusion** is a reference to a person, place, event, or artistic work—often from literature, history, scripture, or mythology—that the author expects the reader to recognize. Point out the allusion on page 13 to the fairy tale, "Rumpelstiltskin." Have a volunteer refresh everyone's memories about the story. (*Rumpelstiltskin is a little man who shows the miller's daughter how to spin straw into gold—in return for her promise that she will give him her first newborn. She gets out of her promise by guessing his name.*)

Ask how Ruth is like the miller's daughter. (*While breastfeeding her son, Ruth feels almost as if she has a special power—like the miller's daughter's ability to spin gold from straw.*) Discuss with students what Toni Morrison may have meant to suggest by this comparison. (*For instance—Ruth, like the miller's daughter, found that a secret, thrilling, illicit gift came "at a high price." The miller's daughter was almost forced to give up her child. When Ruth's secret was discovered, she felt compelled to give up these times with her son.*)

### Writing Ideas

1. Write a short short story showing what led up to Robert Smith's suicide.
2. Tell how you received your name. (Try to have a talk first with those who named you.)
3. Reread the section about the Dead family's car rides in the Packard (pp. 31-35). Describe one of your family's car rides in a way that shows something about your "family dynamics."

### Research

1. Who was Lindbergh (p. 3)?
2. What was the Freedmen's Bureau (p. 53)?