

*Song of Solomon*

*Topic #5 LAP*

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The names given to the characters in a book are in many cases the poetic insight to their role and their traits. In this manner, a character's name can sometimes tell the reader more about them than any specific sentence in the book. This is very much the case with Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The characters in the book have names that directly correlate with their role and individual traits. This is the case with the characters Pilate Dead and Guitar Baines. These names have polarized symbolism that highlight negative connotations on the surface, but shine through victimization when dissected thoroughly. There are also dynamic characters in this book that actively attempt to defy the labels that shackle them. The main character continuously attempts to shake off his identity that burns through him with the graphic nickname of Milkman. His actual name, Macon Dead III is the allegorical device that foreshadows Milkman's journey to resurrecting his identity. Perhaps the most important character in the whole book, Solomon also has deep analysis behind why his name was chosen. Solomon's name reflects back on the idea of "fight or flight" and also has prophetic Biblical meaning behind it. All of these names are visuals into the plot of the book, highlighting each character's internal and external conflicts.

Morrison created brilliant roles for the supporting characters in *Song of Solomon*. The best example of this would be Pilate, who easily is the most misunderstood character in the book. Her illiterate father could not have picked a worse manner to choose his daughter's name. "Not like no river boat pilot. Like a Christ killing Pilate. You can't get much worse for that as a name. That's where my finger went down at."(Morrison 19) Confused after his wife died from labor, Macon Dead had decided to give Pilate a name straight from the Bible. Thus, she has had to live with the unbelievable irony of receiving a seemingly evil name that came from holy text. The

Biblical allusion of Pilate reveals multiple layers to the entire story. The Pilate that “killed” Christ actually simply washed his hands of the situation due to immense pressure from the Roman empire. This is greatly symbolic of Pilate’s misunderstood nature in respect to the novel. Early on, Milkman knew Pilate as “the queer aunt whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine”(Morrison 37). Rather than embracing the name she was given, Pilate embodies a different meaning of her name. If Milkman was able to fly, then it was only under the supervision of “Pilot” that Milkman was able to take off. Pilate is the guiding force for Milkman’s physical journey in re-discovering himself. “She took the bones alright. But that’s not all she took. She took the Gold. To Virginia. Milkman followed in her tracks.”(Morrison 237) Pilate was the driving force in sending Milkman down to Virginia. This sentence in the book blends the idea of Milkman physically tracking the gold he was pursuing, as well as tracing his “bones” back to his original ancestors. With Pilate’s guidance, the treasure of Milkman’s ancestry was far greater than any gold he could have found.

If Pilate was the contributing factor in guiding Milkman to flight, Guitar Baines is the leading antagonist in manipulating Milkman and hindering his growth. Hence the name, Guitar exploits Milkman through his longstanding friendship with him, proving to be the main factor stemming Milkman’s journey to self-discovery. He consistently opposes Milkman on issues of race and morality, primarily manifesting this opposition in the form of joining the Seven Days. This cult-like organization embraces a volatile “eye for an eye” mentality regarding race. “I help keep the numbers the same”(Morrison 155). The fellowship he has with this group exemplifies his last name “Baines” as Guitar can very much be seen as the bane of Milkman’s existence. On

numerous occasions near the end of the book, he physically attempts to take Milkman's life. "Your name is Macon, but you ain't dead yet"(Morrison 297). Though Guitar is clearly the antagonist, he also had dealt with significant hardship that shaped these twisted beliefs. Contrary to Milkman, Guitar grew up in a lower class environment that was pervasive with racism. The Seven Days ironically manipulated Guitar by providing a group that feigned protection and love that shielded him from the racism. "When those concentration camp Jews hunt down Nazis is it about hating Nazis or loving dead Jews?"(Morrison 159) He has been duped by radical extremists who turned his politically responsible mindset into one of bloodlust and violence.

These external factors just add to the power of Milkman's re-discovery of his identity. Rather than separating himself from his own skin, Milkman goes on a literal journey in self-realization of his ancestry. "Like a man peeping around a corner he is not supposed to be, trying to make his mind whether to go forward or to turn back." (Morrison 70) His name Milkman refers to the "bones" of a family, considering it was he who realized the beauty of his forefathers. He gave structure and life to the Dead family after four two generations of straying from magnificence. This meaning of the name contrasts deeply with the physical manner in which he received his nickname."He came reluctantly, as to a chore, and tried to pull the thin faintly sweet milk from her flesh without hurting her with his teeth."(Morrison 13) Milkman was breastfed by his mother at a very late age. Such a nickname was given to him in order to highlight Milkman's dependency to his mom. In any case, this name comes off as quite ironic because Milkman shows complete dismissiveness for the female characters present throughout the novel. "Milkman looked at his sisters. He had never been able to distinguish them (or their

roles) from his mother.” (Morrison 68) This name also implies the severe sexual deprivation of his mother. For years, the relationship between Ruth Foster Dead and Macon Dead II has been completely barren. This relationship between Macon Dead and Ruth Foster Dead seem to only be fitting of a family with the last names “dead”. Every generation after theirs wouldn’t have had any meaning, if it wasn’t for Milkman discovering Solomon.

Solomon himself also has deep analysis behind why he received his name. His name is clearly Biblical, but it also corresponds with the Quranic name Suleiman (سليمان) which means “man of peace”. In this context, Suleiman was one of the great prophets in Islam that was bestowed with blessings that no other prophet had received. He was enabled the blessing to control wind, as well as communicate with birds and angels. Solomon is very similar to this context of Suleiman. In the book, Solomon was known to fly away from the hardships he faced as a slave. “He just took off; got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders!”(Morrison 328) Similarly, Suleiman was able to control the direction of the wind for up to a month. Also, in the face of adversity Solomon’s choice to fly away rather than to stay and fight embodies him as a “man of peace”. This story, however small was the spark that set forth all the actions that took place in the book. That’s why Solomon is easily the most important character in the book.

Every single character in this book plays a pivotal role in the plot of the story. Morrison creates a wonderful blend of obstacles and abettors to add to the power of Milkman’s self discovery. Each name that was chosen for the characters were hand-picked for they all reveal depth behind their corresponding character. Milkman had uncovered his family’s past, down to

the very bones of his generation. His journey to flight would not have been possible without the guiding light of “Pilot”. Even though Guitar did everything in his power to manipulate Milkman, the end result was just that much more powerful when he could not stop Milkman from discovering Solomon. Amazing how such a volatile and tumultuous story had begun from “a man of peace”. This is why even though these names are the cover to the insightful books each character contains, analyzing these covers can help the reader attain a greater understanding of the information inside.