

AP English 12: English Literature and Composition

Song of Solomon literary analysis

reading due dates for in-class discussion:

- chapters 1-6 due on 11/29-30/10
- chapters 7-11 due on 12/3 & 6/09
- chapters 12-15 due on 12/9-10/09

protagonist & motif analysis assignment (due 12/13-14/10):

Song of Solomon is the story of Milkman's life, from his birth in chapter one to his subsequent journey and quest for identity. In your analysis of the novel, you will choose the most pivotal zeniths and nadirs that Milkman experiences in his life, especially those that force him to grow and change. As you focus on Milkman as the protagonist, discuss his advocates and antagonists (those forces that aid and hinder him on his quest) at each plot. Include supporting quotations in your analysis, and make sure to weave into your discussion the four major motifs that play a role in Milkman's life: flying, naming, singing, and loving.

Remember these crucial elements of the assignment:

- Choose no fewer than eight zeniths and nadirs.
- Discuss each zenith and nadir in a separate paragraph.
- Provide a headline-style title for each zenith and nadir.
- Examine the role that advocates and antagonists play in Milkman's growth.
- Support your interpretations and analysis with textual detail in the form of well-integrated and explained quotations.
- Include examples of major motifs.
- Maintain your focus on Milkman's role as protagonist, his quest for identity, and the transformation he experiences.

quotations for discussion

Identify the speakers and/or the person(s) to whom the quotation refers and contemplate the **context**. We will focus our discussion on the **significance** of the quotation in terms of *allusion, characterization, contrast, detail, diction, figurative language, foil, imagery, motif, setting, symbol, syntax, theme, and/or tone*. Make notes so that you can actively participate in discussion as you will be assessed on your contribution to high-level discussion, understanding of text, and textual evidence.

chapters 1-6

1. "Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out."
2. "Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother."
3. "The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days."

4. "Ruth was still frightened of her a little. Not just her short hair cut regularly like a man's, or her large sleepy eyes and busy lips, or the smooth smooth skin, hairless, scarless, and wrinkleless. For Ruth had actually seen it. The place on her stomach where a navel should have been and was not. Even if you weren't frightened of a woman who had no navel, you certainly had to take her very seriously."
5. "She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?"
6. ". . . because the fact is that I am a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him."

chapters 7-11

1. "You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. . . . Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?"
2. "Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone . . . His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance."
3. "But nothing was like the shame he felt as he watched and listened to _____. Not just her Aunt Jemima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it--for him."
4. "She banged her knuckles until they ached to get the attention of the living flesh behind the glass, and would have smashed her fist through the window just to touch him, feel his heat, the only thing that could protect her from a smothering death of dry roses."
5. "They loved it. Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it. But I'm the one left. Me and the dogs. And I will never clean it again. Never. Nothing. Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot."
6. "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down."

chapters 12-15

1. "Milkman was getting confused, but he was as excited as a child confronted with boxes and boxes of presents under the skirt of a Christmas tree. Somewhere in the pile was a gift for him."
2. ". . . he could not stop the worn old words from coming, louder and louder as though sheer volume would wake her. He woke only the birds, who shuddered off into the air. . . . Two of the birds circled around them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away."
3. "He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants."
4. "He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring--that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death."
5. "Perhaps that's what all human relationships boiled down to: Would you save my life? or would you take it?"