

Study Guide for *Song of Solomon*

Advanced Placement English 11: American Literature

Mr. Chuck Jones (cjones@saes.org)

St. Andrew's Episcopal School

May 2009

Welcome to AP English 11 and to the summer reading choice, Toni Morrison's wonderful novel *Song of Solomon*. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoy teaching it. While it may seem a little strange at first—one of the characters attempts to fly from the roof of Mercy Hospital in the first chapter!—if you will let it work its magic on you, then you will find it very rewarding. The tasks I outline below are not designed merely to give you more work to do during your hard-earned summer; they are really intended to deepen your understanding of the story and Morrison's craft in shaping it.

As you probably know by now, the work in AP English 11 will be demanding. It is designed to be a college-level course—in fact, it must be this challenging to earn and keep our AP accreditation from the College Board—and thus it will stretch your abilities as a reader and a writer. All I ask is that you give every assignment your best effort, and not for the grade (and your college transcript) but for the growth you will experience and the satisfaction you will feel from doing your finest. You will find that curiosity is your good friend in this course, so I urge you to nurture it in any and all forms it manifests itself. I can lead you to the threshold of the AP exam, but only you will be there to test what you have learned this year.

Another recommendation is to start your own vocabulary list as you read this novel—and then continue to build it throughout the year. We English teachers have borne the responsibility of helping you develop a more mature vocabulary so that you can express the increasingly sophisticated ideas that your brain is trying to share with the world. Now it is time for you to become responsible for that task, too. (And here again, curiosity comes into play.) Research shows that effective development in vocabulary comes when people are actively involved in absorbing and then using new words on their own initiative. We can make you learn new words for the next quiz, but only you can incorporate them into your working word bank by using them in your speaking and writing. You will be amazed at how much more articulate you will sound and how much more satisfied you will be with your new maturity of thought.

The following questions and tasks are meant for you before you start the novel so that you have a sense of some things to pay attention to, in addition to the plot and the characters. You should read primarily for the reason every reader picks up a book: to enjoy the story and to let it move you emotionally and teach you something about being human. To help you find key passages so that you can contribute to our discussions, however, I recommend that you mark and notate important events and passages.

→ **Before reading the book:**

1. Please be sure to have the edition of the book indicated in the summer reading list (ISBN # 140003342X or 978-1400033423). If not, you will have a hard time finding passages in class.
2. How much do you know about your family's origins (race/ethnicity/nationality/immigration experiences/movements across the country and up or down the social class structure)? How do you know what you think you know about your forebears and ancestors, i.e. how did you learn it? The main character of the novel goes across the country and, in effect, back in time to discover where he came from. Interview your parents about your family's history and its relationship to your identity. Be prepared to share your findings in class.
3. Begin a list of characters' names. The names suggest more than just the identities of their owners. After each name, write down what you know about, or associate with, that name. Then go back as you read and add new information that you pick up. This list will help you in class discussions.
4. Set up your vocabulary list.

The following questions or tasks are meant to help you, after you read the novel, to discover the story beneath the story and make sense of the richness that may not appear at first. **Please write your responses and bring them in to share in class discussions in September.** This is your first assignment for the year, so please be clear and thorough. Except where indicated, 3-5 sentences can be enough to answer the question.

→ **After reading the novel:**

1. Before you do any of analysis of the novel, write a personal response—completely from your point of view and based only on your tastes and values. Imagine that we (you, me, some classmates) were at the Starbucks in Cabin John Mall, and I asked you, “So, what did you think of the book?” Write what you would have told me over coffee—as honestly as you can—in about 300-400 words.
2. The novel is named after a book of the bible, the one immediately after Ecclesiastes, and it reads like an extended love poem to a Beloved. Read the Song of Solomon, and then propose your own theory about Morrison's reasons for titling her novel after this book of the bible.
3. Speaking of the bible, this story is full of biblical allusions. First, list all the ones you DO know, including what the allusion refers to; then do some research to find the ones you missed. (Don't cheat on this one—it's not a test, so much as a gauge of your knowledge of the bible.)
4. Another character is named First Corinthians. If you haven't already done so (see #3

above about characters' names), read I Corinthians, chapter 13, in the new testament of the bible. Then explain the connection between the character and this book of the bible.

5. This novel is actually a combination of several different genres of fictional narration. Which ones can you identify? How do they show up here? After you have explained your current knowledge, see what you can find about these different genres.

6. The novel is a quest story (similar to others like the Odyssey, Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and others), but in this case, Milkman Dead III travels back through time. Ostensibly he is looking for a literal pot of gold, but in reality he is discovering his own past. Create a graphic or visual representation of his journey back to his roots, including what important information he learns at each important juncture. There are lots of different ways to portray his journey in a visual fashion, so you can use your creativity here. This is NOT a major art project, however, so keep it simple and manageable.

7. The novel uses a technique called “magical realism.” Look the term up (strong suggestion: bookmark this link to the Wikipedia glossary of literary terms, because it will be very handy to have at home: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_literary_terms.) As a reader, how does this technique affect your reading of the story? What does it add or detract? Have you seen other examples of magical realism in other books (or movies)?

8. Who has been the most compelling character for you? Please explain and give examples of the character's actions, thoughts, traits, etc. that impressed you the most.

9. As soon as you close the book for the last time, write a response to the ending. Of the many different ways Morrison could have ended the story and resolved the various plot lines and conflicts, how well does this ending work for you? What are its strengths and weaknesses? (There are no right answers for this question.)

10. View these two You Tube video clips of Toni Morrison; (a) www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Zgu2hrs2k and (b) www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5D5PLI7kvc&feature=related. While neither one is directly about *Song of Solomon*, they both reveal important aspects of Morrison's life and work, the connection between her life and work, and the importance of history in her work. Explain these connections as you see them revealed in *Song of Solomon*.

→ When we meet to discuss the novel in September:

Bring in your written responses to these questions and tasks. I will collect them at our first class meeting. An important principle in our work together is your willingness to be an autodidact. (Add this to your vocabulary list.) Your initiative and curiosity will lead you to true knowledge—the meaning you make for yourself from this great American literature, versus what a teacher hands you as “inherited” or conventional wisdom. I hope you enjoy taking more control of, and responsibility for, your learning; it leads to a marvelous sense of accomplishment. I also hope you bring in your own questions, ideas, and discussion topics for our consideration.

Another important principle is that we work cooperatively as a team, not competitively as individual strivers; you will work together often as you explore topics or make presentations. This second principle requires that we treat each other with respect and honor different points of view. Together we will accomplish more than we could alone.

→ **A Postscript...**

Please feel free to email me during the summer, so that we can start our own conversation about the book. [Email is best: cjones@saes.org.] I really want to know what you love (and hate) about *Song of Solomon*; what you don't understand; what stories this reminds you of; what you'd like us to do with the book when we gather in September; what it makes you think of.... You get the point. It might feel odd to email a teacher you haven't met yet, but what better way to get to know each other than over a book? I am really serious about wanting to hear from you.

Please be sure to check the online book order for this course. You may be daunted by the sheer number of titles, but I want to reassure you that we will actually read them all and that you will find yourself a much better reader by next June—and well prepared for the AP exam. If you have any questions about the book order, please email me.

I hope you enjoy the rest of your summer and come back to school relaxed and ready for a great year together! I am excited about meeting you and working with you next year.

Mr. Jones