Song of Solomon

Chapters 13–15 — Discussion Lesson Guide

Discussion questions, transcribed from the classroom notes of Joe Scotese

About This Guide

These are the questions I use to lead the final discussion of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, from Hagar's death in Chapter 13 through the novel's last page. Page numbers refer to the Vintage paperback. Answers I'm fishing for appear in italics in parentheses; my reminders and connections to earlier chapters appear as teaching notes. The starred question is the key question of the lesson.

Opening Moves & Logistics

Tell students to bring their books for the movie parts.

Before starting Chapter 13, I tell students this is the chapter that makes me cry — the way *All Quiet on the Western Front* does with Paul and his mother.

Chapter 13

Guitar Finds Hagar

p. 305 Irony of Guitar rescuing her? What kind of eyes? *(Hagar — hollow eyes)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *On p. 307 we learn he once wanted to kill his lover's boyfriend.*

pp. 306–307 What do we learn about Guitar from these pages? *(Objectifies women; once someone he loved)*

p. 306 What did she need? *(structure)* Explain.

> ***Teaching note:*** *Connect this directly to the p. 307 question below — Guitar gives the answer.*

p. 307 Again, he says you can't OWN a man — but he says SHE is mine when talking about Black women? What does Reba try to do but can't?

> ***Teaching note:*** *She is NOT like Pilate and Reba.*

p. 307 Guitar is RIGHT about something — what did Hagar need? *(A normal life — structure; she's not like them)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *Makeup — the peacock.*

p. 308 What gets her up? *("The compact")* Why? What does she see? Why does she care? What does she think MM wants? *(White girl)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *"No wonder, no wonder" — double meaning: Hagar is empty; she has no "wonder" left in her.*

Hagar's Shopping Spree

p. 310 Where do they get the money to buy her stuff? *(Pawned diamond)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *Pawned — do students understand what that is?*

pp. 310–311 What does she buy? Do you think any of the image problems Hagar has exist in your age group?

p. 311 The perfume — meant to solve the "no wonder." What is the smell (natural) of wonder in the book? *(Ginger)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *Sea foam — the Little Mermaid dies trying to become what the prince wanted. And MM said it was HER, waiting for Prince Charming on his horse.*

p. 313 What happens at the hairdresser? What happens on her way home — to all of her stuff? How is it the same as what happens to MM, and how is it different? *(She holds on to it — even though it is gone)*

p. 314 Her tears as SALT WATER — why so angry? *(Salt earlier; roots)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *Same time as the salt water in Milkman's throat (in the cave). Also: she reaches the sea.*

The Funeral

p. 315 What does Pilate say about MM hating her hair?

p. 316 Where (who) do they get the money for the FUNERAL? *(Macon)*

pp. 316–317 What does Pilate ask for three times? *(Mercy)* Connection?

p. 319 "Suddenly like an elephant" — the elephant that makes stuff known (the elephant in the room) *(History of Love)*. And she was loved.

p. 319 The green glass and wire breaking on the floor *(Red rose petals at the hospital)*. Imagery.

Chapter 14

Back at Susan Byrd's

p. 320 How does her house look? *("Seedy")* What type of cookies is Ms. Byrd making AGAIN? *(Gingerbread)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *"Seedy" — the seed, because this will be the seed of Milkman's roots.*

pp. 320–323 What does he learn from Ms. Byrd about Jake–Solomon? Have students tell the story. What did Jake do? *(Leave)* How did his wife react? *(Ryna's Gulch)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *"You don't hear about women like that" — link to Hagar.*

p. 325 What does he decide to do about the watch? *(Leave it)*

Chapter 15

Shalimar: Swimming with Sweet

> ***Teaching note:*** *p. 325 — bathos: "This is a dull place."*

p. 326 What does he want to do when he sees Sweet? Why? *(Swim — fly)*

> ***Teaching note:*** *He loses the car (flying). On p. 327 he climbs a tree to dive.*

> ***Teaching note:*** *(2021) Welcomes swimming with a water moccasin — Pilate is compared to a snake by Macon.*

pp. 326–329 How does he feel at this point about "Solomon fly home"?

Teaching note: *Going swimmin' — the river.*

p. 328 Who did Solomon leave behind?

Names and Pilate's Basement

p. 329 Pilate and her rocks — why does she take them?

pp. 329–330 What does he think about going back? Names — what is their importance? What should we do with them?

Teaching note: *Blues singers — blues songs — Sugarman.*

p. 331 How does his encounter with Pilate go? How did he think she'd react? Why a green bottle to break over his head? *(Wine bottle at the funeral; red wine — rose petals again)* What does she leave with him in the basement? *(Hair)* Why? *(His inheritance)*

The Realizations

p. 331 Guitar — what does MM realize? *(Little girls deserved better)*

p. 332 "Nothing could be taken for granted." Anything is possible.

p. 332 ★ What GIANT realization does he make about Solomon? *(Not a good thing — he left the family behind him)* Like he left whom? *(Hagar, etc.)* And Guitar — like him?

p. 333 What does he realize about Pilate's dad's ghost's message?

p. 334 What does he return to Not Doctor Street with? Why? *(His inheritance — Hagar's hair)*

The Ending

p. 334 "Peace circled Pilate." *(Ready to die)* Tie back to her earlier comment.

p. 335 Does everyone change in a FAIRYTALE way? *(No — Pride and Prejudice)*

Teaching note: *Pilate won't go on an airplane.*

p. 335 What will they do with the bones? What do they put on the grave?

Teaching note: *One last time, the ginger smell — when the green bag opens.*

pp. 335–338 Explain and discuss the end. Who are the two birds? What are Pilate's last words? What does MM do? If Pilate doesn't have a navel…

Teaching note: *The bird takes the earring. "Are you hurt?" — "It was the dumbest thing he ever said." The banner — "the banner I made after the LA riots."*

Teaching note: *Time permitting, read "People Who Could Fly" and have students comment.*

Recurring Threads to Keep Alive

Flight. Solomon's flight home, Milkman's urge to swim and fly with Sweet, the tree he climbs to dive, and Pilate, who flies without ever leaving the ground. Keep asking who gets left behind when someone flies.

Leaving and being left. Jake–Solomon leaves Ryna; Milkman left Hagar. The giant realization on p. 332 turns Milkman's own story against him — and asks whether Guitar is the same.

Green. The green glass and wire, the green bottle broken over Milkman's head, and the green bag of bones — keep the Gatsby green in view.

Ginger. Susan Byrd's gingerbread, the natural "smell of wonder" Hagar's perfume can't buy, and the ginger smell one last time at the grave.

Salt water and wine. Hagar's tears, the salt water in Milkman's throat, the wine bottle at the funeral, and red wine with rose petals again.

Names and inheritance. The names Milkman lists on pp. 329–330, the song that carries Solomon's name, and the box of Hagar's hair he carries home as his inheritance.