

# Song of solomon and gold's metaphor



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Song of Solomon, by Toni Morrison, explores how each character searches for something, and the novel examines the ways in which they cope when they cannot find it. In the novel, many of the characters are trapped by their materialistic desires. The need to fulfill those desires erodes their souls, making them bitter. For some of these characters, their wants and needs are in the form of gold. Song of Solomon examines the human condition of being physically, spiritually, and financially trapped through the classic symbol of desire, gold.

The protagonist, Milkman, is trapped physically and mentally. He feels as though his life has no meaning, and that if he could leave his situation on Not Doctor Street, he could be happy. From the time he was little, Milkman wanted freedom and escape from his life, or to “fly away.” He becomes sad and isolated from his friends and later, isolated from his family. He feels as though his future is defined by the events of his past and is constantly troubled by other people’s problems. He believes that he has done nothing to deserve the burden of the knowledge that people have given him and is too far inside himself to appreciate the love that his family members provide him. His desire to escape his life is shown when Morrison says “He wanted the money – desperately, he believed – but other than making tracks out of the city, far away from Not Doctor Street, Sonny’s Shop, and Mary’s Place, and Hagar, he could not visualize a life that much different from the one he had. New People. New Places. Command. That was all he wanted in his life” (179, 180). Milkman finally finds an opportunity to escape his life through his aunt Pilate’s gold.

For Milkman, the gold represents what he has always desired, freedom and flight. This is shown when Morrison describes Milkman and Guitar's first encounter with what they thought was gold: "They both saw it [the sack of gold] at the same time. It hung heavy, hung green like the green of Easter eggs left too long in the dye. And like Easter, it promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart's lone desire" (185). The idea of fulfilling this craving and achieving happiness makes Milkman selfish and cruel, causing him to betray his loving aunt by robbing her. When he discovers that Pilate does not have the gold, he goes on a journey to find it where he finds himself along the way. After gaining a sense of identity, the journey becomes more about freeing himself mentally than finding the gold and escaping physically. He has an epiphany where he is overcome with happiness and realizes that he no longer desires escape from his family's problems or his life, and in the same way, gives up on finding the gold. This is described by Morrison's quote, "[H]e felt a sudden rush of affection for them all... Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted... Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain, share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness" (278). At the end of the novel, Milkman never finds the gold, but gains a new identity when he realizes that the freedom gold can bring him is not worth the betrayal required to gain it. Milkman's experience supports gold's symbolism for worldly desires because his want for gold disappears just as his search for happiness ends. When he gives up what weighs him down, he finally is able to fly. However, other characters are not as fortunate as Milkman is in abandoning the worldly desires that trap them.

Guitar, Milkman's best friend growing up, is strapped financially. He lives in poverty in the South Side of the city and wants so badly to escape and to live a more affluent life. He compares himself to wealthy white people who murder innocent African-Americans, and cannot understand how his situation is fair. He says "[E]verybody wants the life of a black man... Fair is one more thing I've given up" (Morrison 222, 224). These internal and external conflicts eat away at him, and he sees no other way to cope than to become a murderer. Like Milkman, he sees gold as an opportunity to free himself through the wealth it can bring him. This is shown when Morrison writes "... he [Milkman] wondered if Guitar simply could not resist the lure of something he had never had-money" (180). He speaks to Milkman about all the things gold can buy him, not knowing that the gold will lead him to attack his best friend. His perspective is ironic because once, while giving Milkman advice, he says "[A]ll that jewelry weighs it [the peacock] down... Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). His viewpoint shows that, like the peacock's tail, materialistic desires weigh down your soul, and you must give them up in order to be free. This contradicts his obsession with wealth, which ultimately weighs him down to the point of committing murder and betrayal. When Milkman gives up on finding the gold, Guitar continues. In the end, Guitar remains trapped by his greed and obsession with bettering his life financially through the gold, which comes to a head when he kills Pilate.

Macon Dead, Milkman's father, is a slave to his desire for property and power, making him spiritually trapped. A humble farm boy turned-wealthy realtor, he is bitter about his past. After witnessing his father's murder as a

boy, he runs away where he finds gold, beginning his desire for wealth and power that last for the rest of his life. “ Gold... Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock, and as he stood there trying to distinguish each delicious color, he saw the dusty boots of his father standing just on the other side of the shallow pit... Pilate darted around the cave calling him, looking for him, while Macon piled the sacks of gold into the tarpaulin” (170, 171), describes his transformation from a humble farm boy to a money-hungry man trapped by his craving for property and prosperity. As the quote describes, Macon is indifferent to the ghost of his father whom he claimed to care so much about. While he believes that wealth will be the solution to all of his problems, it actually isolates him from his family and the people who love him. The traumatic event of his father's murder changed him, as Morrison describes what she writes “[T]he numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt” (50, 51). This, combined with his desire for money, rejection by his wife's father, and later, witnessing his wife kiss her father's dead fingers, turns Macon into a cold, heartless, and broken man. He is trapped by his sadness, anger, and hunger for power, making him spiritually disconnected from love, his family, and immaterial things in life. When the possibility of obtaining gold resurfaces, he is naturally drawn in and gets behind the scheme of robbing his own sister, Pilate. The prosperity that gold could bring him is just another form of psychological imprisonment for Macon, pushing him farther from his sister and from love. His want for gold is stronger than his want for love, family, and loyalty, showing gold's symbolism for desire.

In Song of Solomon, the main characters are trapped by their materialistic desires, which are symbolized by gold. Milkman, Guitar, and Macon, each see gold as a way to fulfil aspects of their lives that are missing. Gold's symbolism for worldly desires is consistent with the fact that Pilate had no interest in the gold when she in Macon found it. Instead, she took her father's bones with her, showing that she cares more about spiritual value than she does about materialistic value. This reinforces gold's symbolism for acquisitive desires because Pilate does not chase the gold; the three men each have different materialistic desires, so they do pursue the gold. The wealth that comes from the gold is a temptation for the men because it seems like a solution each of their problems and an end to their longings. However, their attempts to retrieve the gold push them closer into deception and farther away from their loved ones, until Guitar becomes a murderer and Macon becomes cold and dead (hence his last name). In the end, Milkman is the only one of the three that abandons his need for "gold" and realizes the true value of the people in his life and of himself.