Appendix

i. Summary of The Novel

Song of Solomon explores the quest for cultural identity. Based on the African-American folktale about enslaved Africans who escape slavery by flying back to Africa, it tells the story of Macon "Milkman" Dead, a young man alienated from himself and estranged from his family, his community, and his historical and cultural roots. Milkman is mentally enslaved and spiritually dead, but with the help of his eccentric aunt, Pilate, and his best friend, Guitar Bains, he embarks on a physical and spiritual journey that enables him to reconnect with his past and realize his self-worth.

The action of Song of Solomon spans thirty-some years. The narration comprises two distinct sections. Part I (Chapters 1-9) is set in an unnamed town in Michigan — presumably Detroit. It traces Milkman's life from birth to age thirty-two and focuses on his spiritually empty, aimless life as a young man caught between his father's materialistic lifestyle and Pilate's traditional values. These chapters are interspersed with various characters' flashbacks to their pasts. We learn that Milkman's father, Macon, and Macon's sister, Pilate, ran away from home after their father was murdered for protecting his land. However, after a disagreement between them, they each went their own way. Although both Macon and Pilate eventually end up in the same unnamed Michigan town, Macon refuses to speak to his sister, whom he feels is an embarrassment to his social position in the town. This section ends with Milkman's decision to leave Michigan in search of Pilate's illusory gold — Milkman's "inheritance" — which Macon is sure his sister hid in one of the many places she lived prior to coming to Michigan.
Part II (Chapters 10-15) begins with Milkman's arrival in Danville, Pennsylvania, where his paternal grandfather had built the near-mythological Lincoln's Heaven, a prosperous farm for which he was killed. Unable to find Pilate's gold in Danville and prompted by the mysterious stories surrounding his ancestors, Milkman traces his ancestry to the fictional town of Shalimar, Virginia, where he meets his father's "people" and discovers the true spiritual meaning of his inheritance. The novel's ambiguous ending centers on Milkman's "flight" across Solomon's Leap.

Song of Solomon is Morrison's third novel and one of her most commercially successful. Published in 1977, the novel — tentatively titled Milkman Dead — was condensed in Redbook. It was later chosen as a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which had not selected a novel written by a black author since Richard Wright's Native Son in 1940. The same month in which it was published by Knopf, Song of Solomon was sold to New American Library, a paperback publisher, for an estimated $115,000 and quickly became a bestseller. Well over half a million copies are now in print, and translation rights have been sold in more than ten countries. The novel won fiction awards from the National Book Critics' Circle and the American Academy and Institute of Letters. It also won the National Book Award for best novel and made the front page of the New York Times Book Review. Since Morrison is known primarily for her "womanist" writings that portray the challenges of growing up black and female in a white, male-dominated culture, the phenomenal success of Song of Solomon, which features a black male protagonist, is especially remarkable. ("Womanist," according to Alice Walker, who coined the term, is the African-American equivalent of "feminist." Consequently, while feminists focus on sexism and strive for women's liberation and economic equity, womanists focus on both sexism and
Morrison, asked why she chose a male protagonist for Song of Solomon, responded, "Because I thought he had more to learn than a woman would have." She also confessed to intentionally "trying to feel things that are of no interest to me but I think are of interest to men, like winning, like kicking somebody, like running toward a confrontation; that level of excitement when they are in danger." Drawing on a variety of stories, myths, and legends, the novel centers on two key stories: the Yoruba folktale of the flying Africans and Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, the twenty-second book of the Old Testament.

Song of Solomon is often classified as an impressionistic coming-of-age novel, or bildungsroman, that merges elements of fantasy and reality. According to Morrison, the novel is about a man who "learns to fly and all that that means. But it's also about the ways in which we discover, all of us, who and what we are. And how important and truly exciting that journey is." In part, Song is a wakeup call for young black males struggling to survive in white America. Given Morrison's insistence that a strong family and community are the means to black survival, we can surmise that the novel's abbreviated title — SOS — is no accident.

Although Morrison dedicated this novel to her father, we can also read it as a love song to young black men who, as Morrison illustrates through the character of Milkman, are doomed to spiritual death and self-alienation unless they read and understand their history.
Historically, Song of Solomon was published in the wake of the Black Arts/Black Power movements. Advocates of the Black Arts movement — including Larry Neal, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni — believed that the primary objective of all black artistic expression was to achieve social change and moral and political revolution. Consequently, if art fails to make a political statement, it is irrelevant. The movement's philosophy — which countered the "protest literature" movement of the 1940s and 1950s led by such writers as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright — is best summarized by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), who believes that art should be "fists and daggers and pistols to clean out the world for virtue and love."

Although the Black Arts movement drew a strong following, some black artists objected to its violent imagery and its rejection of traditional forms of black art, such as the blues and dialect poetry. Although Song of Solomon is a tribute to the movement — Morrison agrees that "the best art is political" — it also challenges some of the movement's basic tenets, including the role of black women in the largely black male-oriented movement, and reaffirms the place of black vernacular and the blues as an integral part of African-American art and culture. Through numerous conversations between Milkman and Guitar, Morrison explores some of the underlying principles of the Black Arts movement; through the friends' problematic relationships with women, she questions the validity and viability of the movement as the "spiritual sister" of the Black Power movement.

Song of Solomon demonstrates Morrison's commitment to black life and culture and examines the role of African Americans in relation to white mainstream society and the legacy of slavery on the history and experience of blacks in America. "I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably Black," Morrison has said, "not because its
characters were or because I was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art." Although her work explores many of the major themes in African-American literature — for example, alienation versus identification, the search for roots/the journey home, and freedom and liberation — she repeatedly returns to what has become the overriding theme in her novels: the search for love and identity.

ii. Biography and Literary Works of The Author

Chloe Anthony Wofford, later known as Toni Morrison, was born in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931. She was the daughter of a shipyard welder and a religious woman who sang in the church choir. Morrison had a sister, Lois, and two younger brothers, George and Raymond. Her parents had moved to Ohio from the South, hoping to raise their children in an environment friendlier to blacks. Despite the move to the North, the Wofford household was steeped in the oral traditions of Southern African American communities.

The songs and stories of Chloe Wofford's childhood undoubtedly influenced her later work; indeed, Toni Morrison's oeuvre draws heavily upon the oral art forms of African Americans. Although Toni Morrison's writing is not autobiographical, she fondly alludes to her past, stating "I am from the Midwest so I have a special affection for it. My beginnings are always there.... No matter what I write, I begin there.... It's the matrix for me.... Ohio also offers an escape from stereotyped black settings. It is neither plantation nor ghetto."
Toni Morrison's writing was also greatly influenced by her family. Her grandparents had relocated from to Ohio during the national movement of blacks out of the South known as the Great Migration. After leaving their farm in Alabama, Morrison’s mother’s parents (Aredelia and John Solomon Willis) moved to Kentucky, and then to Ohio. They placed extreme value in the education of their children and themselves. John Willis taught himself to read and his stories became inspiration for Morrison's Song of Solomon (1977).

Morrison was an extremely gifted student, learning to read at an early age and doing well at her studies at an integrated school. Morrison, who attended Hawthorne Elementary School, was the only African American in her 1st grade classroom. She was also the only student who began school with the ability to read. Because she was so skilled, Morrison was often asked to help other students learn to read. She frequently worked with the children of new immigrants to America.

Morrison's parents' desire to protect their child from the racist environment of the South succeeded in many respects: racial prejudice was less of a problem in Lorain, Ohio than it would have been in the South, and Chloe Wofford played with a racially diverse group of friends when she was young. Inevitably, however, she began to experience racial discrimination, as she and her peers grew older. She graduated with honors in 1949 and went to Howard University in Washington D.C. At Howard, she majored in English and minored in classics, and was actively involved in theater arts through the Howard University Players. She graduated from Howard in 1953 with a B.A. in English and a new name: ‘Toni Wofford’ (Toni being a shortened version of her middle name). She went on to receive her M.A. in English from Cornell in 1955.
After a teaching stint at Texas Southern University, Toni returned to Howard University and met Harold Morrison. They married, and before their divorce in 1964, Toni and Harold Morrison had two sons. It was also during this time that she wrote the short story that would become the basis for her first novel, The Bluest Eye.

In 1964, Morrison took a job in Syracuse, New York as an associate editor at Random House. She worked as an editor, raised her sons as a single mom, and continued to write fiction. In 1967, she received a promotion to senior editor and a much-desired transfer to New York City. The Bluest Eye was published in 1970. The story of a young girl who loses her mind, the novel was well received by critics but failed commercially. Between 1971 and 1972, Morrison worked as a Professor of English for the State University of New York at Purchase while holding her job at Random House and working on Sula, a novel about a defiant woman and relations between black females. Sula was published in 1973.

The years 1976 and 1977 saw Morrison working as a visiting lecturer at Yale and working on her next novel, Song of Solomon. This next novel dealt more fully with black male characters. As with Sula, Morrison wrote the novel while holding a teaching position, continuing her work as an editor for Random House, and raising her two sons. Song of Solomon was published in 1977 and enjoyed both commercial and critical success. In 1981, Morrison published Tar Baby, a novel focusing on a stormy relationship between a man and a woman. In 1983, she left Random House. The next year she took a position at the State University of New York in Albany.

Beloved, the book that many consider Morrison's masterpiece, was published in 1987. Mythic in scope, Beloved tells the story of an emancipated slave woman named Sethe who is