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## Cherry Symbolism in Morrison's Novel

Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* tells the story of Macon "Milkman" Dead, a character completely alienated from his community, family and heritage. In the novel, readers follow his journey to the fictional town of Shalimar that he takes in order to fully understand the cultural heritage which has been left for him. He begins his travels as a person without a home or strong ties to family, but in the end, finds the place where he finally feels he belongs. The image of home in the book is often associated with the motif of cherries, which evokes nostalgia for different people in Milkman's immediate family throughout the book.

Morrison develops a theme of the importance of home and belonging by using cherries to symbolize the ancestry of the Dead family. First, Morrison uses cherry trees to represent a loss of home. After Macon and Pilate, then teen-aged, flee the site of their father's murder and stay the night at Circe's home Pilate is immediately reminded of cherry trees. Macon and Pilate run to Circe's home for refuge, but Pilate regrets what she will miss. "[Pilate] wanted her own cherries, from her own cherry tree, with stems and seeds; not some too-sweet mashed mush" (167). Morrison portrays the tragedy of twelve-year-old Pilate's sudden loss of a home by showing Pilate as critical of Circe's jam, which is said to not have "stems and seeds" and to be "too sweet". While Circe is considered a close confidant for the children, they do not accept her place as "home", which Pilate's unenthusiastic opinion of Circe's cherry jam shows.

While cherry trees represent a loss of home, cherry pies represent an attempt to re-establish familial connection. Macon tries to keep Pilate from Milkman while he could, "forbidding him to go near" (40) her and forces her to leave his son and his home and not to come back until she could "show some respect for herself" (20). This forced separation prevents them from forming a bond. Therefore, when Pilate invites Milkman into her home, she begins by extending a metaphorical olive branch. "Your father...he couldn't cook worth poot. Once I made a cherry pie for him, or tried to...Our papa was dead, you see. They blew him five feet up into the air" (40-41). By beginning her tale with a cherry pie, and further expressing her willingness to provide information on a story from her point of view, she attempts to reclaim her relationship with her brother's side of the family, one that knows less of the sordid history between Pilate and Macon. Her gamble works out in the long run, as by the end of the book, Macon helps Pilate bury the bones of her dead father and sings during her flight from life. She has finally reformed a link with her remaining family.

Later in the novel, Morrison uses artificial cherry flavoring to symbolize a lack of belonging. When Milkman's car breaks down in Shalimar and he goes into a bar to recover, he buys a "Cherry Smash" soda from the bartender. Unlike Milkman and Pilate, Milkman does not

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understand the cherries' symbolic value from the beginning, simply referring to it as a "red liquid" or "sweet soda water". His indifference towards the artificial taste of his drink starkly contrasts with an earlier episode in the novel, in which Pilate tearfully rejects Circe's cherry jam because it is artificial. While Milkman shows no particular emotion in regards to the flavor of his soda, Pilate "began to cry the day Circe brought her white toast and cherry jam for breakfast" (167). Pilate's rejection of artificial cherry flavoring reveals her own recognition of what a real home is, whereas Milkman's failure to react to the flavoring connects to his upbringing, which mirrors his disconnection to his family and community.

Toni Morrison uses cherries to symbolize nostalgia in her novel, *Song of Solomon*, in order to develop a theme of home and belonging. She introduces it as a means to initiate family ties in the midst of a dysfunctional sibling relationship and further uses it to establish the idea of home and Milkman's ensuing search for a home of his own. It is a small fruit with a large pit, making it difficult to eat - similar to how finding a home for oneself is hard to do. Furthermore, processed cherries don't have the seeds (such as the jam Circe gives Pilate and the cherry soda Milkman drinks) reflecting how an inauthentic home is easier to find, yet unfulfilling, but finding a real home and building family requires more work and dedication.

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