

Of Orphans and Mercy: A review of *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison

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Toni Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy*, published in 2008, is a welcome return to the powerful cadences of her best work after her disappointing last novel, *Love*. It is set in the 1690s, in the slave era, at a time when it was perilous to be without the "protection" of a man, independent women were still suspected of being witches and paternalistic relations between men and women were still the norm. In this novel, Morrison brings together representatives of all the major racial categories in the New World—African, Native American, Anglo and mulatto.

The narrative structure continues the use of multiple narrators seen in some of Morrison's other work. The twelve chapters alternate between the first-person narrative of Florens, the black girl "rejected" by her mother and one of the other denizens of the farm owned by the Englishman Jacob Vaark, born of a Dutch father to "a girl of no consequence". Hence six chapters are narrated in the first person by Florens and the other six presented in third person by the other characters, with the final word going to Florens' mother, the enslaved African. The narrative is framed by the act of apparent rejection committed by Florens' mother who offers her seven-year-old girl child to the trader Jacob Vaark while opting to keep her baby boy. It opens with Florens' flawed interpretation of that betrayal and ends with the mother's explanation of it. The rejection is a wound which stunts the psyche of the young Florens, leading her to "give dominion of [her]self to another", an act described by her mother at the

end as "a wicked thing".

Jacob Vaark, "a ratty orphan become landowner", the owner of the farm on which Morrison's cast of characters is assembled, has a weak spot for orphans of all kinds. One of his first acts of kindness includes freeing a trapped young raccoon which "limps off...to the mother forced to abandon it". Death in childbirth caused Vaark's own mother to abandon him to the institutional life of an orphanage. His Dutch father took no interest in him but he is rescued from poverty by the bequest of an uncle who leaves him 120 acres of farmland in Maryland, Virginia. To assist him on the farm, Vaark enlists the help of female "orphans", citing a preference for female labour. Two of his workers, Willard and Scully, are indentured servants but being homosexuals, they do not fully occupy the status of "male".

Like Vaark himself, all the characters are orphans, parentless and, at least initially, dispossessed. As Lina observes when her mistress is ill, "They were orphans, each and all." Messalina (Lina), Vaark's first assistant on the farm, is a young Native American woman who has survived the decimation of her tribe by a virulent strain of pox. Taken in by "kind" Presbyterians after her family's death, Lina is grateful but she soon realises their kindness does not extend to full acceptance. After being sold to Vaark, she manages his household competently though she remains puzzled by the "Europes". When, frustrated by the deaths of his four children, Vaark

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builds a large house, a “profane monument to himself” then falls ill, she is not surprised: “killing trees in that number without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune”. Though Lina’s memories of her native culture are limited, she retains a reverence for nature, especially trees and is a natural healer. In the face of rejection by the European community, she turns to nature: “She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain.” She has a special respect for fire, remembering the “cleansing” and “scandalous...beauty” of the fire that purged the diseased bodies of her dead clan members.

Native Americans see the “Europes” as orphans. After his initial assessment of them as essentially harmless, the native sachem (king) sums them up as having been “cut loose from the earth’s soul”, orphans who “like all orphans...were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples.” Yet this assessment is too pat and all-inclusive for Lina who realizes that individual “Europes” like Vaark cannot be so easily dismissed.

Rebekka, the wife Vaark gets from an advertisement, may also be seen as an orphan. Once she arrives in her new home, she never sees her family again and is totally at the mercy of her husband. Vaark is well pleased as she “saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings” and was “cheerful as a bluebird”, at least until she had buried four children, one after the other. Love grows between them causing them to retreat from the community, believing in their pride that “they needed only themselves”. From Lina’s perspective, “Sir and mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives” but she saw that “their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan.” As owners of other human lives, their withdrawal from communal life threatens not only themselves but all those dependent on them. Ironically, when Rebekka recovers from the illness that kills Jacob, she retreats into the life of the church but with a meaner, more selfish spirit which causes her to

inflict hurt on those who, in the absence of a bloodline, could have been recast as her family.

Sorrow, the “mongrelized” girl rescued by a family of sawyers from the riverbank, and then acquired by Vaark, is reminiscent of Pecola, the schizophrenic protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*. She too has created an alter ego, Twin, to assuage the loneliness of rejection by all the other humans with whom she comes in contact. Sorrow “dragged misery like a tail” getting attention only from men for whom she is “always an easy harvest.” None of them love her; when she comes across Florens and her lover, Sorrow is amazed that a man would kiss a woman after having sex with her. She herself has never experienced such tenderness though her sexual experience is extensive.

Florens, Vaark’s final acquisition, is orphaned in the sense of having been rejected by her mother, as she thinks. Though Lina loves the girl as her own, Florens never gets over this early rejection. She finds love with the blacksmith, the free black man who assists in building Vaark’s mansion but this love is seen, not as ennobling, but as debilitating. Florens is “crippled with worship of him.” Her love for the blacksmith is seen as purely physical, “a bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience. The young body speaking in its only language its sole reason for life on earth.” In attempting to warn the girl she loves as a daughter, Lina tells her, “You are one leaf on his tree” but Florens is sure of her position. She retorts, “No. I am his tree.” Lina, as it turns out, is right. Florens suffers a second rejection in favour of a boy child, another orphan whom the blacksmith chooses over her. Her response is violent; this second rejection hardens her so that from the girl with sensitive feet who always insisted on wearing shoes, no matter how poorly they fit, she becomes a tough woman whose soles are “as hard as cypress.” In an act of defiance and possibly madness, she inscribes her story on the floor and walls of a room in Sir’s vacant mansion, an area off-limits to the dispossessed. She tries to reach her mother through this act of communication as her mother tries to reach her in dreams. Sadly, both acts of attempted communication fail.

The novel also explores the nature of parenting. The mother of Florens asks Jacob Vaark to take her child because she believes he would treat her as a child, not as a sexual possession. The mother sends her daughter away not from a failure of love but to save her from “the lips of an old married couple” who at that time were Vaark’s debtors. Lina, who is childless, loves the girl as her own child and tries to protect her from harm. Jacob’s wife, Rebekka, is undone and grows bitter because of a failure to produce heirs for the husband she loves and the church’s refusal to offer Christian burial to her dead children. She is unable to love any child who is not of her own bloodline and rejects the love she could have given to Sorrow or Florens, who were fairly young girls when they came into her household.

The world of this novel is an inclusive one, with relationships between women and girls dominant, but it also touches on relationships between men and between men and boys. It seems to be saying that whether male or female, African American, Native American, European American or “mongrelized”, the characters are all orphans—human beings full of hurt and needful of love and acceptance. The roles of men and women

overlap—Willard and Scully (who “did not object to lying with Willard when sleep was not the point”), are as practical and helpful as any midwife when Sorrow needs help birthing her baby girl. The blacksmith with whom Florens is in love, is a healer like Lina. He also has an adopted orphan boy, Malaik, whom he loves with as fierce a love as that Rebekka feels for her young daughter, Patrician. So if the novel is about the nature of mothering it is also, though to a lesser extent, about fathering,

The story Lina tells Florens is a story of orphan-making. It is the story of an eagle destroyed by a traveler and his dream of possession so that her eggs are left to “hatch alone.” Morrison’s story is multi-faceted and complex. On the one hand, Jacob’s purchase of the child Florens at the request of her mother is not an act of God but “a mercy. Offered by a human.” The irony is that even acts of mercy may turn out not to be a mercy at all, but may bring suffering. Possession of any kind seems to be wrong. Even religion offers no succour to the living. Religion in this novel is a mean thing that sucks the life out of people. The undelivered message Florens’ mother has for her at the end of the novel is a condemnation of all forms of “dominion” and an assertion of self-determination. Ultimately, the characters of this novel are all “orphans” who have to find their own way.

References

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