

## What is the literary function of the motherhood motif in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*?

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**This research paper examines the literary function of the motherhood motif in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. The paper analyzes the presentation of the major characters in the novel and their relation to motherhood. *A Mercy* is a multi-layered, imagery-laden novel containing hidden themes and social commentary. Analyzation of the motherhood motif reveals the subtle societal comments Morrison makes in the novel. The complex motherhood motif fuels the characterization of two of the main characters in the novel, Jacob and Florens. In addition, its multi-perspective nature comments on the influence of stereotypes and discrimination in society.**

**The scope of the investigation includes the opinion of Toni Morrison critics and interviews with Morrison. Thus, my critical analysis can be synthesized with Morrison's own opinion of her own works as well as the opinion of literary critics.**

### INTRODUCTION

In *A Mercy*, published in 2008, Toni Morrison employs her popular verdant prose to illuminate a murky, opaque time in history: the 1680's. Morrison focuses on the ravages of slavery, both physical and emotional, that plagued the time. More specifically, she writes about the complications that arise from slavery: strained relationships between mother and daughter, the blurred lines of community ties, and the role of the individual in carving the path of other's lives. In exploring the somewhat arcane concept of slavery, Morrison unearths a promising hope for those faced with unspeakable horrors. The complexity with which Morrison crafts the novel ultimately offers a nuanced explanation of mercy that pulls the reader to the shores of meaning and existence while providing societal commentary. In effect, Morrison presents the reader with her own perspective of the world, which brings the reader to question crystallized dogmas. Although it is set in a time period centuries in the past, *A Mercy* presents an incisive look into present-day life. The motherhood motif in *A Mercy* works to fuel the characterization of major characters, drive conflict, accentuate motifs, and introduce major themes.

*A Mercy* chronicles the journey of an adventurer and Dutch trader, Jacob Vaark, who has moved to the New World in search of land and wealth. At its core, *A Mercy* spins the tale of an ostensibly abandoned daughter, Florens, and her life as one of Jacob's slaves. She joins Lina, a Native American who was once welcomed into the lives of the newcomers only to be relegated to a life of servitude, and Sorrow, a pitiful mongrel of a woman without identifiable heri-

tage. All three of these servants, as well as Jacob and his wife Rebekka, are outcasts. *A Mercy* delineates the plight of these pariahs and their struggles to cohere in such a divisive setting.

A shifting point of view marks the novel even though the narrative structure follows a generally linear path. A first person installment by Florens appears in between each third person chapter. A different character tells each third person chapter. Using this shifting, complex narrative structure, Morrison weaves a tale about the Vaark household and forges each of her characters into memorable forces that shape the meaning of the novel. She claims that she uses these "extraordinary people...to find what is applicable to the ordinary" (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 125). On the surface, Morrison creates an archaic world in which slaves and free members of the Vaark household attempt to coexist in an unstable, embryonic environment. To accomplish this, Morrison interposes rich sensory imagery, characterization, and conflict into the novel. In this way, *A Mercy* raises questions about the relationship between men and women, the position of the individual in society, and most importantly, what it means to be a mother. Morrison fractures the ubiquitous motherhood motif into multiple perspectives so as to catalyze the characterization of Jacob and Florens and to comment on the provincial outlook of society.

### INVESTIGATION

Morrison presents the motherhood motif as a multi-dimensional idea. The multiple perspectives given in the novel mold a fluid concept of mother-

hood, with each character adding something to the whole. In order to determine the literary function of the motherhood motif, it must be critically analyzed through each lens in which it appears.

Sorrow serves an important part in shaping the motherhood motif in that she is the only true mother in the novel besides Rebekka. In this way, Sorrow most closely aligns with the archetypal mother of literature: nurturing, caring, and willing to sacrifice for her child. Ironically, Morrison describes Sorrow with unfavorable imagery marked by misery. A sawyer had first found Sorrow “half dead on a riverbank” (Morrison, 2008, p. 38) and had given the “sullen, curly-headed” (Morrison, 2008, p. 38) girl to Jacob in exchange for nullifying a lumber purchase Jacob had made. The hardy, wise female servant Lina describes “stupid Sorrow” (Morrison, 2008, p. 51) as “vixen-eyed... with black teeth and a head of never groomed wooly hair” (Morrison, 2008, p. 59), portraying Sorrow as a wild, untrustworthy character. Her name Sorrow comes from her tendency to wander, her lack of knowledge and laziness, and her strange, melancholy personality (Morrison, 2008, p. 60). Lina claims “in the best of times [Sorrow] dragged misery by the tail” (Morrison, 2008, p. 65). Morrison thus uses atypical imagery when describing Sorrow, a true mother, in order to challenge society’s view of what it means to be a mother.

Sorrow’s incompetence becomes even clearer in the chapter that she narrates. The reader learns of Twin, Sorrow’s “identical self” (Morrison, 2008, p. 137). Sorrow recollects that she met Twin after being “deep in an opium sleep” (Morrison, 2008, p. 138), which strongly suggests that Twin is a figment of Sorrow’s imagination. In fact, Sorrow asserts “Twin couldn’t be seen by anybody else” (Morrison, 2008, p. 137), further portraying Twin as an alter ego. Sorrow’s insistence on believing in the existence of this imaginary friend characterizes her as untrustworthy and mentally impaired.

Even so, Morrison utilizes Twin’s presence to tear down the stereotype surrounding imaginary friends. Twin’s presence guides Sorrow out of her life as a sexual servant on a ship to a life of hope. Morrison uses light imagery to suggest Twin’s role in leading Sorrow to good fortune. Sorrow describes her journey after the shipwreck by saying that “[she and Twin] swam not landward, but toward the horizon” (Morrison, p. 139). This seems like an unreasonable thing to do, but it resulted in “very good luck” (Morrison, 2008, p. 139). Further, Sorrow says that she “followed Sir’s

horse into a sun-drenched clearing” where she found the “relief” (Morrison, 2008, p. 143) and security of the Vaark household. In showing how Twin leads Sorrow to a better life using light imagery, Morrison shatters the conventional view of imaginary friends. In addition, Sorrow claims that it was Twin who noticed the foreboding the blacksmith brought to the Vaark household, an inkling that Lina supported. The arrival of the blacksmith “changed the weather of the place... Twin noticed it first... but her warnings were fruitless” (Morrison, 2008, p. 147). Also, Sorrow claims that “Twin made it possible” (Morrison, 2008, p. 149) to leave her life on the ocean. This further suggests the positive influence of imaginary friends.

Furthermore, Morrison introduces her layers of perspective through Twin. In Sorrow’s musings, it becomes apparent that Twin’s presence gives Sorrow a clearer head with which to analyze a situation from all angles. For instance, Sorrow struggles to elucidate the blacksmith’s true character: she does not know if he is truly “the danger that Lina [sees] in him” (Morrison, 2008, p. 147) or if Lina’s fear of him was “mere jealousy” (Morrison, 2008, p. 147); if he is “Sir’s perfect building partner or a curse on Florens” (Morrison, 2008, p. 148).

Sorrow’s status as a mother also reveals Morrison’s focus on the importance of having multiple perspectives. Morrison presents both positive and negative effects of giving birth in Sorrow’s story. For once, Sorrow is “[convinced] that she had done something important by herself” (Morrison, p. 157). The birth thus gives Sorrow independence and freedom from her former misery-driven self. Further, the “legitimacy of her new status as a mother” (Morrison, 2008, p. 157) gives her the confidence to start a conversation with Rebekka, which suggests that childbirth empowers women. Sorrow’s wandering stops after the birth of her child and she becomes organized, “[attending] routine duties” (Morrison, 2008, p. 158). Most important, Sorrow changes her name from Sorrow to Complete, suggesting that becoming a mother has completed her. Be that as it may, Morrison exposes the negative consequences of Sorrow’s birth. Although Sorrow feels like she accomplished something on her own, the father of her child is unknown and was most likely someone who raped her. Sorrow claims that “all her life she had been saved by men” (Morrison, 2008, p. 157) and this pattern continues with her childbirth. Furthermore, the birth separates the women of the Vaark household from

each other, cutting the tangled strings that had existed among them. Morrison illuminates this separation with animal imagery: each woman now “[spins] her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else” (Morrison, 2008, p. 158). The birth of Sorrow’s child decimates the loose, decadent connections that the women had shared, thus eliminating all hope for the revival of the Vaark household. This inclement forecast contrasts sharply with Sorrow’s emergence as an organized and motivated individual.

Most notably, the birth of the child ostensibly exterminates Twin, who leaves “untraced and unmissed by the only person who knew her” (Morrison, 2008, p. 158). Because Twin proved to be an invaluable guide to Sorrow, her disappearance seems like a tragic loss. Despite this, Morrison seems to suggest that Twin and Sorrow have become one, mixed so homogeneously that it is impossible to differentiate the two. The birth of the baby makes Sorrow literally and figuratively complete. Not only does she develop the attitude and work ethic she lacked before her birth, but she also sheds herself of the perceived insanity brought upon her by her relationship with Twin. Thus, Morrison takes the most meager, downtrodden character in the novel and uses her to illuminate the ultimate joys of motherhood.

Lina provides another perspective on the motherhood motif. Her perspective differs from those of the other characters in that Jacob did not rescue her; Jacob recalls “only Lina was purchased outright and deliberately” (Morrison, 2008, p. 40). Lina recounts her own tale, describing how her village was destroyed by war and fire. Her “joy of being rescued” (Morrison, 2008, p. 54) by the soldiers collapsed when their brutality became manifest; she was then “taken” (Morrison, 2008, p. 55) to live among Presbyterians instead of finding refuge. Like Sorrow, she was a slave to men. As a result, Lina had to “fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying” (Morrison, 2008, p. 56). Further, she “sorted and stored what she dared to recall” (p. 59) in order to “perfect... her self-invention” (Morrison, 2008, p. 59). An orphan herself, Lina had to become her own woman, vowing “never to betray or abandon anyone she [cherishes]” (Morrison, 2008, p. 57). Thus, Lina primed herself to be a mother to others by mothering herself.

More important, Lina takes Florens to be her daughter and thus makes herself a mother. Immediately after Florens’ arrival, Lina “falls in love with her” (Morrison, 2008, p. 70). Sorrow asserts that Flo-

rens “belonged to Lina” (Morrison, 2008, p. 146); they bathed together, slept together, and Lina made shoes for Florens. In addition, Lina is constantly wary of Sorrow, “making certain that everyone else shares the distrust that sparkled in [Lina’s] eyes” (Morrison, 2008, p. 147). Lina goes so far as to describe Florens as a “quiet, timid version of [her]self” (Morrison, 2008, p. 71) who could read, write, was trustworthy and “deeply grateful for every shred of affection” (Morrison, 2008, p. 72). Lina parallels herself to Florens and differentiates Florens from Sorrow in order to strengthen her status as Florens’ mother.

Even yet, irony plays a major role in Lina’s motherhood. When the blacksmith arrives at the Vaark household, Lina immediately recognizes the threat he poses to Florens’ innocence. She alone sees the “shattering a free black man would cause” (Morrison, 2008, p. 71) and vowed to “keep [Florens] away from the corruption” (Morrison, 2008, p. 70) at all costs. Lina becomes “determined to be the wall between Florens and the blacksmith” (Morrison, 2008, p. 70). Yet, Lina suffers from “mother hunger” (Morrison, 2008, p. 73) because no matter what she does, she will not be Florens’ true mother. Morrison employs nature imagery to highlight Florens’ inevitable change and the folly of her decision. When Lina tells her that “[she] is one leaf on [the blacksmith’s] tree”, Florens replies by saying that “she is his tree” (Morrison, 2008, p. 71). Enamored with the blacksmith and his ostensible love for her, Florens falls into a destructive trap: the blacksmith will never love Florens the way she loves him. Lina knows that Florens must be kept from the blacksmith at all costs, but ironically, he is the only one who can heal Rebekka and Florens is “the perfect one to find [him]” (Morrison, 2008, p. 74). Torn between her motherly concern for Rebekka and Florens, Lina sacrifices Florens by sending her to find the blacksmith. Although this is the only way to save Rebekka, it will most likely result in the loss of Florens’ independence as a woman.

Morrison illustrates Lina’s view on motherhood and thus justifies her sacrifice of Florens through the creation of a dominant nature image. Through the motif of talk, Lina shares the story of the eagle with Florens. In summary, an extremely wary eagle “[lays] her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them” (Morrison, 2008, p. 72). In other words, mothers attempt to care for their young out of the reach of evil. This fierce mother has a beak “like the scythe of a war god” and talons “sharpened on rock”

(Morrison, 2008, p. 72). This sharp imagery paints the picture of defensive mothers willing to do anything to protect their young. Despite these weapons, however, she cannot defend against one thing: “the evil thoughts of man” (Morrison, 2008, p. 72). The eagle attempts to attack man, but he strikes her with his stick and sends her falling into eternity. The mother eagle “is carried away by wind instead of wing” (Morrison, 2008, p. 73), suggesting that mothers will fall short of protecting their young by the very nature of their position. The image of the eagle foreshadows Lina’s inability to save Florens from the blacksmith. Instead, Florens will live a life without a mother figure, just as the abandoned chicks do in the story.

Florens provides yet another unique perspective to the novel in that her story is one of daughter instead of mother. Once again, Morrison employs a dominant image to accentuate Florens’ view on motherhood. This image contrasts directly with the eagle image in order to further illustrate and give credibility to differing perspectives. In addition, Florens’ first person chapters provide insightful commentary on the nature of being a daughter in this setting.

Jacob articulates the story of Florens’ rescue early in the novel. When Jacob visits the wealthy D’Ortega at his mansion, Jacob becomes confronted with the injustice of his low social standing. D’Ortega requires Jacob to take one of his slaves as part of their barter even though “flesh is not [Jacob’s] commodity” (Morrison, 2008, p. 25). Jacob asks to have a slave-woman he sees but D’Ortega tells him she is too valuable. Just then, a little girl, Florens, steps out from behind the woman whose “legs rose like two bramble sticks from [her] bashed and broken shoes” (Morrison, 2008, p. 30). Morrison’s use of alliteration emphasizes the poor, decrepit nature of the girl, which evokes pity from Jacob. Further, the nature imagery accentuates Florens’ lowly position in society, which her mother’s readiness to give her away confirms.

In addition, Florens comments on the image of her exchange of hands in order to reveal her thoughts on motherhood. Morrison employs animal imagery to crystallize Florens’ feelings toward her mother’s giving her away. Florens characterizes her mother’s act as one of abandonment. She parallels her own abandonment to “a weak calf abandon[ed] by the herd” and a “turtle without shell” (Morrison, 2008, p. 135). The use of animal imagery suggests that Florens sees herself as less than a human being. Her view that her mother

abandoned her supports this thought; Florens struggles to understand why her mother would do such a thing. Aware of her “outside darkness” (Morrison, 2008, p. 135), Florens wonders if her “feathered and toothy inside darkness” (Morrison, 2008, p. 135) scared her mother into abandoning her. Florens develops this belief of a monster inside her, which further suggests that she sees herself as less than a human being. She also is unable to reconcile the fact that her mother chose to give her away instead of her baby brother. Her awareness of this fact foments hostility toward her mother in addition to lowering her self-opinion even further.

The image of Florens’ abandonment not only reveals Florens’ view on motherhood, but it also fuels the characterization of Jacob. The juxtaposition of the animal imagery that describes Florens’ abandonment with Jacob’s kind-hearted thoughts illuminates his character. Jacob, an orphan himself, concludes that there is no help for “waifs and whelps other than the generosity of stranger[s]” (Morrison, 2008, p. 37). He thinks that “even if [orphaned kids] matter less than a milch cow to a parent... they [are] less doomed under adult control” (Morrison, 2008, p. 37). Jacob’s awareness of his ability to help orphaned kids leads him to perform the ultimate act of mercy: taking in Florens. Through Florens’ and Jacob’s perspectives, Morrison frames Florens’ mother’s act as one of abandonment. Consequently, Jacob’s willingness to rescue Florens compares to a miracle. In fact, Florens’ mother muses that “[the rescue] was not a miracle bestowed by God; it was a mercy offered by a human” (Morrison, 2008, p. 195). Jacob’s ability to “see [Florens] as a human child, not pieces of eight” (Morrison, 2008, p. 195) allowed him to perform such a tremendous act of kindness and elevates him to the status of a deity.

To add a final perspective to the mercurial motherhood motif, Morrison ends the novel with a first person chapter from Florens’ mother. Morrison presents the reader with yet another perspective on what it means to be a mother in the setting of the novel. Florens’ mother comments on what it means to be a female in society and how that relates to motherhood.

Florens’ mother appeals to reason and experience to formulate her argument. Morrison implements literary devices such as repetition and animal imagery in order to catalyze the lamentation. Throughout the chapter, Florens’ mother, who remains nameless, asserts that “there was no protection” (Morrison, 2008, p. 191) for Florens; she was inevitably going to be sold

away. She cites Florens' nature as a black girl and her ability to read and write as reasons for this eventuality. Morrison encapsulates the injustice of Florens' status through repetition. Florens' mother recants the story of her slavery, repeating the word "we" over and over so as to accentuate the singular identity black women have in society. Critic Reyes-Connor agrees, saying "Morrison's fiction dismisses the issue of correctness in language, focusing instead on the communal bonding" (Reyes-Connor, 2000, p. 12) it creates. Thus, Morrison includes the repetition of "we" in order to emphasize the bond of black slave women in such a society.

Morrison captures the irony of Florens and her mother's situation with animal imagery. Although Florens' mother "watched [Florens] like a hawk", "there was [still] no protection" for her (Morrison, 2008, p. 192). This parallels the eagle story in which the ferocious mother eagle could not protect her young from men. In this case, even the "magic [of] learning" (Morrison, 2008, p. 192) would provide no protection for her daughter. A perspicacious woman, Florens' mother seized the first opportunity she had to free Florens from the place she was in, a place where "unreason rule[d]" (Morrison, 2008, p. 192). Although her mother cannot provide protection, she can find "a difference" (Morrison, 2008, p. 195). The difference to which she refers is Jacob's difference from other men: his mercy. Thus, the "abandonment" of Florens was not abandonment at all; rather, Florens' mother saw an opportunity for Florens to have a better life and seized it. Consequently, her mother believes that being a mother obliges one to give her child the best opportunity possible in life. She could not totally free Florens from slavery due to the nature of her status and ethnicity, but she could offer her a better life in which Florens could avoid "[giving] dominion of [herself] to another" (Morrison, 2008, p. 196). Slavery, then, is not simply a form of physical bondage but an emotional and mental form of bondage as well. Although a mother cannot keep her child from physical bondage, she must strive to keep her child free of any other chains.

Many perspectives create the complex idea of motherhood. Morrison fractures the idea into different perspectives for a number of reasons. First of all, the fluid nature of motherhood juxtaposed with the rigid definition of manliness accentuates Jacob's solidarity from stereotype. Critic Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu claims that Morrison recognizes "masculinity as a social invention" (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 202) and feels that the

proper conception of masculinity "rejects violence as a necessary ingredient" (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 202). From the beginning, Morrison describes Jacob as different from the typical man: he views discrimination laws as "lawless laws encouraging cruelty" (Morrison, 2008, p. 12); during a long journey in precarious wilderness, he dismounts "to free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon" (Morrison, 2008, p. 12); he passes through the village of natives "mindful of their fields of maize and politely asking permission to enter the village" (Morrison, 2008, p. 14). Unlike the sinister gentry whom he despises, Jacob is a naturally compassionate and respectful man. The fluid definition of a mother contrasts sharply with the singular definition of a man, thus highlighting Jacob's character in relation to the stereotypical man.

Second, the fluidity of the motherhood idea parallels Florens' growth and journey in the novel. In the beginning, Morrison uses symbolism, the motif of shoes, and animal imagery to describe Florens' state. When Florens journeys to find the blacksmith, she comments that she dreams of moments "when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle" (Morrison, 2008, p. 1), an image which suggests that the dog, Florens, is merely a hazy, ethereal being. In fact, this is how the blacksmith views her: a mere girl enslaved to her emotions and thus less than human. Florens continues to muse about the "boneless bears", which symbolize her and her love-driven enslavement to the blacksmith. Her "smell belies [her] beauty" (Morrison, 2008, p. 5); the blacksmith is drawn to her physically but not emotionally. The motif of shoes also characterizes Florens. As a child, Florens always begged for shoes even though her mother denounced her "prettify ways" (Morrison, 2008, p. 4). Even so, her mother relents and lets her wear shoes. According to Lina, Florens' feet "are useless and will always be too tender for life" (Morrison, 2008, p. 4). In Lina's opinion, Florens is not emotionally ready to face the horrors of the world. The motif of shoes, then, represents the tough love a mother must give her daughter. Because Florens' mother relents to her demands and gives her shoes, Florens does not receive the tough love she needs and consequently will not hear the words of advice her mother offers at the end of the novel. Therefore, Lina foreshadows Florens' emotional enslavement to the blacksmith.

By the end of the novel, however, Florens is no longer boneless. She laments "it is hard without Sir's boots" but that "her way is clear after losing [the

blacksmith]” (Morrison, 2008, p. 184). Her clear path contrasts sharply with the “pathless night” (Morrison, 2008, p. 9) she wandered on in the first chapter, which indicates the growth she experiences from losing the blacksmith. Florens states that perhaps it was necessary that she “fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow” (Morrison, 2008, p. 188). She grows from the dangerous animal that she was to ash, the remnants of a beast. Because her “soles are hard as cypress” (Morrison, 2008, p. 189), she will finally be able to avoid emotional enslavement. Ironically, she finally does hear her mother’s final advice, but only after experiencing it firsthand.

## CONCLUSION

By implementing many perspectives, Morrison challenges societal stereotypes. By forcing the reader to consider all angles when judging someone, as in the case of Sorrow, she opens the reader’s eyes to the bounty of perspectives in the world. The purpose of the motherhood motif, then, is to challenge the reader to question his or her own assumptions, stereotypes, and the implications of looking at the world through a parochial lens. Morrison argues that the world should be viewed with a catholic lens that accepts the differences of others. Taylor Guthrie supports this claim, saying that Morrison supports “eccentricity, freedom, [and] less conformity in individual acts” (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p.125). However, the unraveling of the motherhood motif reveals new questions about the nature of love. Is love as fluid of a concept as motherhood? Or is love being the mother one has to be in order to provide protection, or difference, in a child’s life?

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