

The Other Narrative

The United States of America is a melting pot, with multiple cultures and stories getting thrown in and being lost as they mix together into one white mass. Certain aspects, or narratives, that fit within the confines of this “whiteness,” are allowed to be visible, but those that do not are forced under the torrent of voices, as part of the “other” narrative, the one that gets buried and mixed in with the main narrative, the white mass of the melting pot, being silenced, destroyed, and watered down. There are those that refuse to let their stories be just a part of the other narrative, the stuff that is mixed in with, but does not fully match with the white mass in the pot. One of those who refuse to let their narrative be drowned in the pot is Toni Morrison, who examines a narrative that is truly its own other element, in her novel *A Mercy*.

In *A Mercy* Toni Morrison explores the idea of America as a cultural melting pot as a form of suppression. The American narrative pushes together millions of stories, silencing them by drowning them out amongst the rest. The stories that refuse to be hegemonous with the mainstream narrative are cast aside and discarded as no more than some other narrative. Morrison deconstructs this form of narrative suppression by suggesting that by being discarded these narratives are made louder and more powerful. *A Mercy* challenges the suppressive power of the American narrative through its main protagonist, Florens, who is stripped of her agency through being disconnected from her past and identity by letting others decide it for her, removing her from the main plot on the Vaark farm and pushing her into increasingly smaller roles and locations, until she is discarded and alone allowing her story and identity to flourish

The plot of *A Mercy* attempts to suppress Florens by folding her into the American narrative from the moment she is born, making her only past the D’Ortega plantation, separating her from her mother’s culture and connecting her most important trait to white people. Florens,

her mother, and her brother are taught to read by the Reverend father of the D'Ortega plantation. Florens recounts the lessons by stating, "once every seven days we learn to read and write," (Morrison 6). Florens' ability to read and write is taught to her by a white man. This ability to read and write, is arguably her most important trait because it creates the framing device in which her side of the story is told, but this is trait is only hers because a white man gave it to her. It was not any white man that gave her the ability to read and write, it was the Reverend Father, a Christian white man, the focus of the dominant version of the American narrative. From the time she was a child, who Florens is gets decided by those that exist within the main ingredient of the melting pot, watering Florens down. Florens is not aware of her own mother's culture, never mentioning it. Readers do not find out where her mother is from, and the only hit given is withheld until the final section of the book. In that section Florens' mother, referred to as a *minha mae*, explains that she was taken from her home and, "...put into the house that floats on the sea... ..Barbados, I heard them say. After times and times of puzzle about why I could not die as others did... .. So to Barbados..." (Morrison 193). Floren's mother never reveals where she is from, only that she came to America from Barbados, adding layers of separation between herself and her home. The full story of her journey is never told either, only that she suffered on the ship, indicated by a *minha mae* being "puzzled" as to why she wasn't dead, suggesting that the only thing that matters to the narrative is that she is in America. More layers of separation are added between the culture and the person, when Florens is born, as her only connection to the home her mother once had, is her mother. In being added to America and it's narrative, a *minha mae*'s past and culture, and the possible heritage Florens could have had, is erased made irrelevant by the fact they are in America. It is what is in America that decides who Florens, as only a white man could teach her to read and write. Those that are in charge of the systems of a nation, those that

control its narrative, also control who Florens is and what about herself is known. Jacob Vaark's entrance further solidifies this when he decides Florens is an orphan.

Jacob Vaark begins the plot's process of othering Florens by taking her fit into his American narrative by making her an orphan. According to Toni Morrison in her collection of essays, *The Origin of Others*, the process of other strangers is the process of creating a story about them that makes them fit with us and makes our own image better, discarding who the strangers truly are, (Morrison 34-40). Jacob Vaark does this to Florens when he accepts her from D'Ortega, taking her because he, "...[felt] a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays," (Morrison 38). Florens is a slave, who has her own mother, her identity at this point in the novel is a *minha mae's* daughter, but Jacob Vaark justifies his acquisition of her as adoption, by calling Florens an orphan. Labeling a slave as an orphan erases Jacob's role as a slave owner, in this instance, and turns him into a father figure. In being turned into an Orphan, Florens loses her only connection to the past, her mother. Florens's own narrative is swallowed by Jacob's and her identity is changed, from daughter to orphan, to fit it. According to Lina, in her section, everyone on the Vaark farm, "...[was] orphans, each and all," (Morrison 69). Florens is changed to fit in on the Vaark farm, despite getting no choice in the matter. Not only does she fit in on the farm, she now fits in with Vaark's version of the American narrative. Jacob Vaark himself was an orphan, but "but he refused to be sentimental about his own orphan status..." (Morrison 36). Vaark refusing to be sentimental of his status as an orphan, likely means he does not want the label on himself, but is willing to put it on Florence because she presents him, as Morrison phrases it, with an opportunity, "...to be generous of protection and protecting," (Morrison 34). By making her an orphan, Vaark others Florens with the label and perpetuates the story that he is

a kind person. In being brought into Vaark's farm of Orphans, Florens's voice is muddled by others.

In including other perspectives, the Vaark farm is turned into the American melting pot, and Florens' identity and agency is lost amongst the voices of others. *A Mercy* begins in a first person perspective with Florens telling the reader, "do not be afraid," (Morrison 1). This first person narration puts Florens in charge of telling the story, giving her the most agency. In the next section, with Jacob Vaark, the narration begins with, "the man stepped over the surf..." (Morrison 10). The shift from first person to third person immediately takes control of the narrative away from Florens. The shift in focus from Florens to Vaark, also takes away her status as the central character. Vaark is not the only character to have his perspective pushed on top of Florens', the characters of Lina, Sorrow, Willard, Scully, and Rebekka all have their own sections, with their own narratives. The amount of perspectives the book switches between, and the existence of a third person narrator, causes Florens to lose her agency, as the other characters decide her identity for her.

Florens's agency is lost in the perspectives of the other characters as they all push their own version of Florens onto her. Jacob Vaark is not the only one to push Florens into a role without giving her choice. Vaark was the one to get her to the farm, pulling her into the plot that surrounds it, the death of Jacob. There are several narratives going on at the Vaark farm all at once, pushing out their own ideas of Florens. Lina turns Florens into her daughter in her narrative. In Lina's narrative, when Florens first appears on the Vaark farm, "Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow," (Morrison 70). Lina falling in love with Florens "as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow" implies a motherly instinct. Lina saw a child that was cold, and fell in love with her because she wanted to protect

her from the snow, to provide her with warmth. In projecting these instances onto Florens, “Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew,” (Morrison 70). In taking her in, Lina fulfills the hole in her heart caused by the loss of her home. Once again, Florens made the other piece of the puzzle for someone else, Lina adds Florens to her narrative, so she can feel a sense of home again. Sorrow’s narrative does not make Florens fill a role, but it shows Lina had agency over Florens. When she is brought up in Lina’s narrative, Sorrow is made out to be a problem child. Lina calls Sorrow, “hard company... needing constant attention,” (Morrison 64). Someone that is “hard company” is not easy to be around, and if that same person “needs” constant attention, they would be a nightmare to be with. In Sorrow’s perspective Lina is revealed to be quite rude, with Sorrow recognizing, “the distrust that sparkled in [Lina’s] eyes. Sorrow remembered how they narrowed, gleamed... Sorrow behaved thereafter as she always had- with placid indifference,” (Morrison 147). Being able to see an emotion of any kind in someone else’s eyes is a sign of being able to read people, which requires emotional intelligence. With the implication that Sorrow has gone through this often, behaving indifferently as she always does, Sorrow comes off as not needing constant attention. In these lines, Sorrow’s narrator is discussing Florens and Lina, and she has just taken Florens away from Sorrow, controlling who she can be friends. The multiple perspectives create a rounded view of all the characters, except for Florens. Her perspective does not contradict anything the other character’s establish for her, drowning her identity in the narratives of others. Despite this, Florens continues to be the only character narrating her own story, and for that the plot separates her from the Vaark farm.

Florens is constantly being separated from the main plot on the Vaark farm and pushed into increasingly smaller roles and places. Florens spends most of the book away from the Vaark

farm, while the rest of the cast remains on it. While Florens is journeying to the blacksmith, Rebekka is sick. Florens was sent to get the blacksmith in the hopes he'd cure Rebekka, but once he gets to the farm he does nothing. When the blacksmith arrives to heal Rebekka she asks, "Am I dying?" and he responds, "No. The sickness is dead. Not you," (Morrison 152). This exchange comes after a whole novel's worth of Florens travelling to the blacksmith and missing out on Rebekka being sick and the changes her, Lina, and Sorrow go through. When the Blacksmith finally arrives, Rebekka has begun to get better on her own, meaning Florens' whole journey, her own narrative, was pointless, erasing her influence on the plot. However, throughout the book, something does happen to Florens, she gets passed around from person to person, each time her role changing into something more specific as the spaces she finds herself in get smaller. The novel starts on a plantation, but when Vaark acquires Florens, he takes her to his farm, which would be smaller than a plantation. When Lina claims Florens as her daughter, which is more specific than an orphan because she belongs to someone, Florens stays on the farm because she began as a daughter. When Florens gives herself to the blacksmith, at first it does not seem like he puts her in a specific role, content with having sex with her, as noted by Sorrow who, "...saw the smithy and Florens coiled around each other," (Morrison 150). The act of sex can be seen as giving oneself to a partner, and Florens gives herself to the Blacksmith, eventually ending up in his cabin, an area smaller than a farm. In the cabin Florens harms a boy named Malik and the blacksmith discards her, explaining it is because "[she] is a slave," (Morrison 166). When Florens argues with him, the blacksmith tells her to, "own [herself] and leave [him] be," (Morrison 166). Florens is away from the farm and the people she knows, and she has been discarded by the blacksmith, as a slave, the role she starts in and was born into. At the end of this section, something escapes from Florens as its, "...claws scratch and scratch until [a] hammer is

in [her] hand,” (Morrison 167). Claws that “scratch and scratch” imply something from within trying to break out of Florens, but this entity inside her only tries to get out when she is the least free, when she is relabeled a slave, her identity fully stripped down because slaves do not have one. Something in her is set free, only when readers are reminded Florens has no freedom. When she is pushed into her smallest role, Florens is pushed into the smallest area, a single room in the third Vaark house. When Florens is in this room, she begins to scratch words into its wall, revealing her narrative has been written down this entire time. Florens is now pushed into a space where she is on her own, fully marginalized, yet what she writes, those “careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom top, top to bottom all across the room,” (Morrison 188). The words going “round and round” fill up the entire room, and they talk to themselves, because they are the only thing in that room. In being pushed into a solitary space, Florens was given the space in which her story can be written down permanently, the only character to write her story down. Everything in the novel led her to being reminded that she was a slave, which led her to this room, everything that tried to other and silence her gave her a voice, made her the other narrative.

Toni Morrison uses *A Mercy* to examine a narrative that is meant to meltdown alternative stories as a form of silencing and explores how Florens is stripped of her agency as the protagonist, through the narratives of others deciding her identity for her before being removed from the farm, making her story stand out and become louder. In writing this novel Morrison examines how the tools of suppression can also allow marginalized voices to get louder. Through Florens falling back into her role as a slave, she was given the stage needed to be heard.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. Vintage Books, 2008.

Morrison, Toni, *The Origin of Others*. Harvard University Press, 2017.