Narrative conflicts and violence of reading in Toni Morrison's A mercy

Narrative Conflicts and Violence of Reading in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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In her ninth novel entitled *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explores the beginnings of America. Set in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the novel engages with such problematic issues as the institutionalization of slavery, forceful conversion to Christianity of the native peoples, the sale of European women for overseas marriages and other instances where different cultural, religious and economic epistemes enter into direct and oftentimes brutal conflict. To illustrate the consequences of this systematic and institutionalized violence, Morrison creates a character – Florens – a young slave girl who tells a story of her abandonment by her mother. By investing Florens with narratorial authority, Morrison makes her character manipulate the readers' trust only to upset it in the very last pages of the novel. This narratological *tour de force* not only mirrors the abdication of agency that Florens performs as a character, but also echoes the readers' transferral of agency onto the narrator, allowing Florens to govern her own reading of the story she tells. Ultimately, the structure of *A Mercy* and the use of the narrative technique expose the violence inherent in the act of reading by putting into tension the narrative structure and reading practice.

The plot of Toni Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* takes the reader back into the time of early colonial America. Set between the 1680s and the early 1690s, the novel explores the disturbing political and social landscape of early America as a site of ongoing European land squabbles, escalating institutionalization of slavery, eradication of native peoples and endless religious conflicts. Slowly simmering in a cauldron of disease, human greed and fear, America ceases to be a promised land of po-

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tential good beginnings and becomes the site of unbearable nightmares where dreams disintegrate rather than prosper and where irreconcilable individual and collective cultural differences constantly enter into deadly conflict. In order to exemplify the ongoing territorial, economic and religious disputes on this large national and international scale, Morrison also sets up the private microcosm of a farm owned by Jacob Vaark and the four women who help him run the estate. These five characters – of completely different origins and languages, cultural and social practices – are momentarily able to put aside their differences in order to work, as a collective, for their estate. This success, however, is only short-lived and tensions begin to surface rapidly after Jacob's death, underlining the total dependence of the women on Jacob and each other. What the text makes apparent in these tensions is the fact that the women, each with their own initial story of trauma, have completely abdicated their agency by transferring onto each other and Jacob the responsibility for their physical, emotional and psychic well-being. This will be the point of departure of this essay in which I will explore some of the textual strategies that Morrison uses to investigate the mechanism by which one hands over responsibility for oneself to another. I will argue that the characters' experiences of the world in these early stages of the makings of America – experiences which are heavily mediated by the characters' individual traumas arising from their brutal contact with colonial epistemes of conflicting European cultures – create a deep emotional lack which they see as being fulfilled only by an outside presence. Moreover, Morrison's text inscribes this argument as a problem of reading: the architecture of *A Mercy* and the telling of the narrative constantly call upon readers to adjust our existing reading strategies and judgments as to how the text constructs and deconstructs meaning during the reading process exposing problematic mechanisms in our culture of reading.

The theoretical framework in which this paper is rooted is situated within the narratological theory of the literary text that engages with the internal structure of a narrative and, most importantly, enlightens the relationship between the text, the narrator and the reader. Wolfgang Iser's research provides the operative mechanics behind this essay because Iser considers the practice of reading as a dynamic process which influences the experience of reading but also illuminates the experience of life outside the text. Particularly in his work *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, Iser addresses the issue of a phenomenological approach to a literary text grounded in the idea of the experience of the world which becomes crucial in understanding Morrison's construction of *A Mercy* and the ways in which intradiegetic communication creates extradiegetic effects on the reader. Furthermore, Monika Fludernik's work on the unreliable narrator and

its functions in the literary work encouraged a further investigation into the underlying forces behind the interactional principles between the reader and the narrator. However, whereas Fludernik purports a correlation between unreliability, readerly expectations and intentionality of the implied author, in *A Mercy* this relationship is disturbed by the introduction of a first-person narrator who holds a position of an author within the narrative – a position rendered more visible by the fact that the narrator is a young slave woman who, historically, is denied access to the practice of writing. Ultimately, unlike the previous research in the domain of narratology, this essay makes use of the psychoanalytic concept of *anaclisis* as a possible model to the type of relationship *A Mercy* creates between the reader and the first person narrator.[1]

As with most of Morrison's novels, the chronological plot of *A Mercy* is relatively simple in comparison to the structure of the narrative. The chronology tells a story of a man – Jacob Vaark – who, believing himself an orphan, unexpectedly inherits a farm from a distant relative to which he brings a wife whom he "buys" from England and three women as domestic and farm help whom he acquires during his numerous business travels. While Jacob is alive, the household cohabits peacefully, concentrating its efforts on building the large house Jacob insists on having and fighting the hardships of the farm and social life in early America. However, as soon as Jacob dies of pox, the sudden vulnerability with which the women are faced exposes various cracks in their relationships, which begin to expand and ultimately fissure the union of the household. How this simple plot is told is a much more complex matter because in *A Mercy* Morrison once again creates a narrative with multiple narrators, voices, and background stories, which echo her previous novels *Jazz* and *Beloved.* Unlike in her previous novels, however, Morrison also further experiments with narrative technique and strategies which problematize the traditional notions of narratorial reliability and reading practice where the readers' responsibility for making meaning heavily relies on the narrator's trustworthiness. Indeed, the telling of *A Mercy* becomes a venture into the problem of reading and the violence inherent in this act.

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[1] Although not directly engaged with in this particular essay, other determining works which concern the issue to narratological analysis are important to acknowledge. On the subject of the development of the narratological theory I will encourage the reader to refer to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* where he develops the model of the "spheres of action" and "functions" of the narrative, Tzvetan Todorov who in his seminal work *Grammaire du Décameron* coins the term "narratology," Gérard Genette's work on the narrative act in the collection *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method* and Roland Barthes' *S/Z* in which he proposes a matrix of codes that govern the "writerly" text.

A Mercy has two distinct major narrators: Florens – a young, literate slave woman – and an omniscient, third person narrator who relies heavily on the technique of focalization. Florens and the omniscient narrator tell their stories in parallel and they intertwine and overlap, supplementing each other, but remaining quite individual with respect to the voice and points of view. Whereas the omniscient third person narrator presents background and chronological histories of most characters except for Florens and her mother, Florens tells a more enigmatic, personal story in a difficult and broken form of expression heavily marked by grammatical reductions into the present tense and a disconnected story line. In her article entitled "Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" Jean Wyatt argues that the ungrammaticality of Florens's expression echoes her initial trauma of abandonment: "the stasis expressed by the unvarying present tense reflects the way time stopped in a single horrific moment . . ." (141). Although Wyatt's observation is pertinent with respect to some passages of the text, this is not necessarily the case throughout the novel. For example, the beginning of the novel presents a slightly different case; in the opening lines Florens articulates complex perfect tenses rooted in the anterior past:

> Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark – weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more – but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a cornhusk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die. Let me start with what I know for certain. (1-2)

This strange, rather poetic opening paragraph, composed of what seem to be relatively disconnected sentences in the style of interior monologue or stream of consciousness technique, is not understandable to the reader straight away. The lack of understanding is produced not so much by the incomplete sentences, but by their curious and seemingly unrelated phrasal juxtapositions and internal meanings, creating an im-

pression that whoever is speaking here is speaking in a secret undecipherable code. Only at the end of the novel does the reader begin to realize that these words are uttered in retrospect to the events. More precisely, the words are written down or scratched into the walls of a room with a nail by Florens.

The quotation above also begins to establish Florens as a narrator through her ability to read and, at the same time, anchors her reliability and trustworthiness. By offering the question ". . . can you read?" (1) Florens positions herself as a reader of signs and openly confesses that some signs are too complex to be deciphered and that she may not be as proficient in reading as she would like to be. This fact is also reinforced through the phrase ". . . yet I know I am missing much . . . " (2). This initial confession of her imperfection as a reader firmly roots Florens as trustworthy, objective and slightly critical of her own capacity for treating information. Indeed, as in *Jazz*, where Morrison presents us with a narrator who is able to recognize her interpretative mistakes and apologize for them to the reader, thus making us reconsider our harsh judgments of her mistakes, Florens's admission of her lack of proficiency ultimately makes her more human. By providing such confessions at the beginning of the novel, the text also echoes the experience of reading Florens's words – the reader is placed in the same situation as Florens because being thrust *in medias res* into her narrative, a narrative that displays fragmented and complex associations in the manner of a stream of consciousness, the reader is not proficient in deciphering the meaning in the signs on the page.

This link between the reader and Florens is further strengthened by the use of the second person "you." Without any introduction to the narrative, the reader has no knowledge of the addressee and is put in the position of supplementing the gaps in meaning. Without further information about the identity of this second person pronoun at the beginning of *A Mercy*, it is tempting to imagine that Florens addresses the reader because among the incomprehensibly assembled phrases, the "you" does stand out in its interpellative properties. This is also a technique that was used by Morrison in her previous novel *Jazz* where, at the very end of the novel, in the closing paragraph, the narrator launches into a monologue where she declares her love to a "you" and forces the reader to ponder the meaning of the attribution of this addressee. Whereas the narrator of *Jazz* uses this interpellative technique at the very close of the novel and thus never provides the elucidation of the pronoun, throughout the telling of *A Mercy* and particularly at the novel's end, the addressee does become apparent: Florens addresses her lover, the blacksmith. In the meantime, however, the "you," reinforced by Florens's seemingly objective criticism of her reading skills, serves to

create a link of trust and proximity with the reader, a sense where reliance on Florens as a narrator is established but which will later be suddenly severed, leaving the reader to ponder the mechanism by which he/she has constructed the meaning of Florens's story.

While Florens has her reader's attention and trust, she begins to tell a complex story where, as Wyatt points out, the grammatical structures begin to morph into the timeless present but also to move between different levels of meaning. The second paragraph of Florens's story reads:

> The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, a minha mãe, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top. As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, which life requires. Lina is correct. Florens, she says, it's 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady? So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking – no matter the itch of the sealing wax. I am lettered but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to any who stop me. (2)

Fluctuating between the anterior past and more recent past of her story Florens also seems to jump in the content of her telling. Starting with the shoes that occupy the primary position in her story, she suddenly reveals her enslaved condition, and also the fact that despite being a slave, she is lettered. It is interesting that the shoes are foregrounded to the detriment of Florens's thoughts on her indentured condition, suggesting a certain thwarted perspective the young Florens has of slavery. In her article, Wyatt argues that this fact is related to Florens's general inability to read at a deeper level: the initial shock of separation from her mother does not allow Florens access to meta-interpretative levels and she "stop[s] at the visual surface of things" and people (141). Ultimately, Wyatt states that "Florens seems to lack what cognitive scientists call Theory of Mind, the ability to attribute thoughts and feelings to others. That lack is characteristic of autism" (142). Indeed, Florens's readings do, at times, prove to be quite juvenile and Wyatt provides a number of interesting examples, always locating them in a larger context of slavery and the traumatic effect this practice has on the psyche and identity formation. However, Florens's readings are often corroborated by the third person anonymous and fully omniscient narrator as in the case of

the shoes, which, throughout the novel, begin to transform from an object into a trope for the abandonment that Florens constantly experiences.

In the second section of the novel, where the omniscient third person extradiegetic narrator presents us with Jacob's story, the shoes resurface again. This time, however, the story is told from Jacob's and, therefore, a grown man's perspective, and it positions the shoes at the heart of a gruesome transaction which takes place between Ortega and Jacob. The Portuguese planter, unable to pay the debt he owes Jacob, proposes to requite his dues by giving Jacob slaves. Although opposed to the exchange at first, saying that "flesh was not his commodity" (20), Jacob finally agrees to take payment in human bodies out of loss of patience with Ortega, but also because of a curious detail provided to us by the narrator. Although, initially, Jacob's choice seems to settle on an older woman, Ortega refuses to concede saying that she's the cook and too valuable to let go. At this point, the following scene is described by the narrator:

> Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh. A loud, chest-heaving laugh at the comedy, the hopeless irritation, of the visit. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking her urgency.
>
> "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter."
>
> Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business. (24)

Here, the content of the passage echoes Florens's previous words – the combination of Jacob's discomfort with the situation, the sight of Florens's legs rising from the shoes and the look of terror in the mother's eyes. As in Florens's introduction, the shoes appear first and signal some comical relief from the tense situation with Ortega, but at the same time they hold Florens in Jacob's field of attention. Even when he hears the mother utter the words that mark her rejection and abandonment of her daughter, Jacob does not look at her directly, but "away from the child's feet": a phrase which marks the trajectory of his gaze for the reader, thus confirming again the importance of the presence of the shoes on Florens's feet. Furthermore, as in Florens's second paragraph, the shoes in Jacob's description are juxtaposed with the act of

rejection and act here as an introduction to the event of the sale about to take place.

The dissonance that is created in this juxtaposition of shoes and the abandonment Florens experiences confers the aura of a fetish onto the shoes. Indeed, throughout the novel, the shoes resurface numerous times in Florens's life: on her journey to Jacob's farm, in Lena's expression of affection towards Florens which comes in the form of rabbit-skin shoes, in her fear of the disappearance of shoes when she arrives at the blacksmith's cottage. Indeed, the shoes in *A Mercy* seem to take on more importance than that accorded to a very scarce object.[2] The importance of the shoes for Florens is most powerful when, feeling rejected by the blacksmith, Florens says, "I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow" (156). The convergence of the loss of shoes and the rejection by her lover triggers a pattern of traumatic repetition in Florens – for her the rejection by the blacksmith repeats the event she had lived at an earlier stage of her life when her mother prompted her transfer to Jacob.

The phrase "I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow" (156) also reveals a gap between the complexity of Florens's experience and the literalness of the level on which she reads this experience, making the reader wonder whether Florens's mother really abandons her daughter because of a pair of shoes. Indeed, by juxtaposing the shoes and the heart, a place of belonging and her future, Florens expresses her profound misunderstanding of the situation which is unraveling before her. Furthermore, being raised on the tobacco plantation, Florens is an integral part of a system dictated by slavery where

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[2] Here one may recall the description made by Frederick Douglass in his autobiographical account *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* where he presents his readers the description of the slaves' clothes:

> The yearly allowance of clothing was not more ample than the supply of food. It consisted of two tow-linen shirts, one pair of trowsers of the same coarse material, for summer, and a woolen pair of trowsers and a woolen jacket for winter, with one pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes of the coarsest description. Children under ten years old had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trowsers. They had two coarse tow-linen shirts per year, and when these were worn out they went naked till the next allowance day – and this was the condition of the little girls as well as of the boys. As to beds, they had none. One coarse blanket was given them, and this only to the men and women. The children stuck themselves in holes and corners about the quarters, often in the corners of huge chimneys, with their feet in the ashes to keep them warm. (*Online*)

Indeed, Douglass's description makes apparent the importance of footwear especially for children.

people and objects are mutually replaceable. The novel thoroughly problematizes this fact in the depiction of the horrific transaction between Ortega and Jacob where, unable to deliver goods or money, Ortega offers his slaves as payment of his debt. Florens also internalizes this blurring of boundaries between people and objects and reenacts it with respect to shoes which become invested with the emotional energy and affect that normally would be reserved for the child's mother. In short, Florens is unable to read the situation in all its complexity not because of her intellectual capacity, but because the slavery system demands this of her.

Indeed, as a young girl, Florens is simply unable to withdraw herself from a system which names people as objects and to render meaningful the complexity and the emotional dissonance of the event of separation from her mother that she experiences. However, another force that comes into play here is Florens's instinct for survival: in order to survive, she must conform to the system that demands she cease to differentiate between people and objects. Here, it becomes interesting to read the relationship Florens has with shoes through the Freudian notion of *propping* which is later absorbed into the concept of the *anaclitic* by the translators of his works. As Jean Laplanche explains in his essay "The Order of Life and the Genesis of Human Sexuality":

> . . .the term *anaclitic* was introduced by the translators in a text later than the *Three Essays*, the essay "On Narcissism" (1914), in which Freud contrasts two types of "object choice," two ways in which the human subject selects his love object in his own image, and an "anaclitic" object choice (*Anlehnungstypus*, in the German) in which . . . one's sexuality is based on the object of the function of self-preservation. Thus the term *propping* has been understood in this tradition as a leaning on the *object*, and ultimately a *leaning on the mother*. . . . The phenomenon Freud describes is a leaning *of the drive*, the fact that emergent sexuality attaches itself to and is propped upon another process which is both similar and profoundly divergent: the sexual drive is propped upon a nonsexual, vital function or, as Freud formulates it in terms which defy all additional commentary, upon a "bodily function essential to life." (emphasis in the original; 119)

Considering the definition provided by Laplanche and the system of signification Florens integrates, it is possible to think of Florens not only as acting out an "anaclitic object choice" (opposed to the "narcissistic object-choice"), but also to read the "object" as having multiple replaceable denominators – as a person but also as a literal object. Such a mechanism of defense seems to work for Florens as long as the shoes are available to her; their presence soothes Florens and replaces the lost mother. However, once Florens loses both her shoes and the black-

smith, the anaclitic object is no longer available and this loss throws Florens into the anxiety of repetition of the original abandonment by her mother. This precipitates a rejection of the object, a rejection that the text presents as a moment of destruction.

When the experience of rejection is repeated at a later stage in her life with the blacksmith, the difficulty of reconciling the simultaneity of the feelings of love and rejection overwhelms her and she lashes out at her lover with teeth, fists and tongs with the intention of destroying the object of her desire. Through this act of extreme physical violence Florens severs herself from her anaclitic object embodied by the blacksmith and she is able to partially fabricate a self that stands independent of the smithy and, consequently, partially recover her abdicated agency.[3] Her telling ends with the following words:

> See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.
>
> . . . Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress. (159)

In this desperate act of self-making, the harshness of Florens' words – especially the "No ruth my love. None" – appear contradictory with respect to the title of the novel *A Mercy*. Speaking of herself via negation, she completely distances herself from any possibility of feeling compassion, pity, distress for the others and, therefore, the text suggests that she loses a part of her humanity while attempting to shield herself with numbness against the pain of rejection. Although the last paragraph seems to recover some of this numbness, as the last section of the novel will shortly reveal, Florens is completely wrong about her mother's motivations for giving her daughter away.

The final section of the novel is told by Florens's mother – an unnamed slave woman brought from Angola to Maryland via Barbados. Although her telling is short, it is intensely packed with information, emotional tensions and grief. As the mother explains her decision to give her daughter away to Jacob, she justifies her act by the fact that she wanted to protect her daughter from Ortega's sexual assault. Speaking directly about her own "breaking in," Florens's mother says the following:

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[3] The text of the novel embodies the concreteness of her gesture when, at the very end of the novel, we realize that Florens' words are actually written down – or rather scratched into the floor and the walls of the room of the new house on the Vaark estate with a nail.

> . . . There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. . .
>
> But you wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye. After the tall man dined and joined Senhor on a walk through the quarters . . . I heard their voices and gathered you and your brother to stand in their eyes.
>
> One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes.
>
> It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.
>
> Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe. (161-65)

Here, the mother's words completely overturn Florens's presentation of her personal story – the shoes are not the cause of her initial decision to give her daughter away. In an attempt to protect her daughter from the unavoidable sexual assaults due to her position as a slave on the plantation the mother sees Jacob as an opportunity for her daughter to have a different life from her own. It is here that we understand to what extent Florens misreads her mother's gesture and the importance of the words that her mother says. This misreading leads Florens to enact precisely the opposite of what the mother had wished for her daughter. Her fear of abandonment and hunger for recognition make Florens give herself over completely to another man, thus committing the "wicked" deed that her mother warns her against and setting herself up for yet another act of abandonment, forcing Florence to steel herself against pain, but also against any possible positive interactions with others.

It is here that Florens's initial questions "Who is responsible?" and "Can you read?" begin to acquire their polysemous aura. Very pertinent in the context of her own story, the first question can be read as an attempt to find someone accountable from Florens's trauma. However, this question also has a larger historical scope because, ultimately, slavery is responsible for her inadequate responses and she stands as an innocent victim of human greed. Moreover, along with the second question "Can you read?" both are pertinent with respect to the narratological structure of the text: as readers of the novel, we have conferred re-

sponsibility for understanding the story onto a young girl and an omniscient narrator without questioning the motives and the mechanics which have led Florens's mother to commit her act. Via this question, the reader is also confronted with the mechanism of narratorial anaclisis – the dependency on and the transference of responsibility onto the narrator because, throughout the novel, we believe Florens who says that her mother wanted to protect her infant son rather than an unworthy daughter who wanted shoes. By traversing the intra- and extra-textual levels of the narrative via this simple question of responsibility, the novel indeed questions our own readerly responsibility and our capacity to offer mercy as a gesture towards the mother and Florens. Thus, the question "Can you read?" is not exclusively directed at the smithy, but expresses concern with respect to the conflicts within and the violence inherent to the act of reading as well.

By constructing this narratologically intricate story set in early America, Morrison creates a narrative which reveals the complexity of the mechanism of trauma propagated by colonial epistemes. Taking possession of a human being as an object leads to the abdication of personal agency which becomes extremely difficult to reclaim. In attempting to reclaim her agency and a self, Florens steels herself against the surrounding world, Jacob's wife turns to religion, Sorrow renames herself "Complete" only after she has a child and completely loses herself in the baby. Jacob, resolved to build the big fancy house which neither he nor his family need, but who is persuaded that a man is measured by what he leaves behind, dies of pox in the process of construction, leaving an empty shell of masonry which Florens fills with her writing like empty pages. Following the initial shock of her husband's death, Rebekka turns to Christian fundamentalism and chases the other women from her house, forcing them to sleep outside regardless of the weather and forbidding Lina her native practices. Indeed, all the characters display some type of anaclitic behavior which leads to deep conflict and where the other becomes a cause of their well-being or lack of it. These are the foundations of America that Morrison depicts in her novel where acts of mercy become quickly forgotten in favour of greed, religious fanaticism, and the hope that mercy will come from the outside and not from within. Indeed, the text that Morrison creates does not only display this problematic as a theme, but inscribes conflict within the very structure of her narrative where conflict becomes embodied within the language and the structure of the telling, making the reader acutely aware to what extent reading is a cultural and conflicting practice.

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