

2015

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Recommended Citation

Witek, Darby (2015) "Overflowing Power in Self-Ownership: Finding Freedom in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 16, Article 4.

Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol16/iss1/4>

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Overflowing Power in Self-Ownership: Finding Freedom in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Toni Morrison uses tragic stories of young girls to display societal themes throughout her novels. Morrison's work in *A Mercy* follows the same trajectory, although Morrison uses girls of many different backgrounds to display her ideas. Morrison sets the time of her novel in late seventeenth century America, before slavery is constructed in the same racial binary many think of today: white masters and black slaves. Placing *A Mercy* in the early ages of American slavery allows an exploration of bondage defined by class rather than race, creating a larger space for agency to prosper—since station is not defined by skin color in this novel, there is more variation in what captivity is.

A Mercy centers around the small farm owned by Jacob Vaark, a white man who works as a trader and farmer in Virginia. His wife, Rebekka Vaark, is a white, devout Christian woman plagued by the recent loss of her two young children. Rebekka and Jacob marry after he pays for her passage from England to the New World, an arranged marriage of sorts that is intended to give each character a new start in their new society. The Vaark farm is populated with several servants of different backgrounds: Lina, a Native American girl bought by Jacob

Vaark; Florens, a young and literate slave girl born of an African slave and bought by Jacob from her previous Portuguese master as a certain kind of mercy, saving her from a master insinuated to be a sexual predator; Sorrow, an insane child and shipwreck survivor, whose servitude is accepted by Jacob rather than bought; and Williard and Scully, two white male indentured servants. Each character narrates the novel in turn, but the lack of clarification concerning which person is narrating each chapter gives a severe sense of disorientation for the reader. The plot of the novel is framed by Florens' literal and figurative journey home from a local blacksmith's house, complicated by frequent flashes both backwards and forwards by each alternating narrator.

The focus of American slavery before the binary in *A Mercy* decouples race and slavery, providing a space for nontraditional characters and their widely untold stories. Here, the reader is able to witness the possibility of different kinds of captivity, like in relationships that are too shallow for their fierce dependency or in the internalization of slavery in one's own mind. The relationships between the young women on the Vaark farm represent the fluidity of the non-binary slave system—they are able to forge friendships despite class or racial differences—but they are too weak to provide an actual escape from servanthood because they are created in, and are therefore subject to, the social class system. Some of the girls also suffer from internalizing their status as a slave; Florens specifically allows herself to believe she needs some kind of master to provide meaning for herself. These forms of self-induced captivity are survival techniques, operating as false means of protection against their harsh class

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College system. Sorrow and Florens are the only two characters within *A Mercy* to experience freedom from captivity, rising above the class system and liberating themselves mentally through self-ownership. Because it means going against social acceptance of the class system, this claim of self-ownership is often confused with insanity; but these characters have chosen a real survival technique, presenting insanity as the most successful escape from captivity in the novel. Although Sorrow's freedom is fleeting as she falls into being held captive in her dependency upon a relationship, Florens rejects her internalization of slavery and steals her own portion of freedom, allowing her self-ownership to overflow through her words and the liberating power she finds in literacy.

It may seem to some readers that mental freedom is a small victory when a person is still encumbered by direct captivity in their life, such as social, economic, and physical servitude. What I suggest is not that these factors are secondary, but rather that there is more than one mode of freedom; the empowerment in self-ownership could be the first step in establishing a more complete freedom. Frederick Douglass states in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* after he physically defeats his wicked overseer, Mr. Covey, that "I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day I had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (Douglass 89). Douglass joins other nineteenth century freed slaves in expressing one portion of their freedom through slave narratives; Florens also achieves monumental success in rejecting the internalization of her status as a slave and, instead, securing her own sense of ownership. Even her words are representative of her self-ownership—she

expresses herself with no intended audience, unlike the previously mentioned slave narratives, and instead finds her power in the existence of her words rather than the need to have them read by anyone at all. Florens' socio-economic freedom is not fully realized within the text of *A Mercy*, but her newfound independence through self-ownership gives the reader a secure hope that she will continue on her literate and independent path towards complete freedom.

Outside the Binary: Seventeenth Century Slavery

By choosing an earlier time period that is much less studied than the nineteenth century and employing characters of backgrounds not typically seen in the racial binary of the nineteenth century, Morrison is able to create a family out of the most unusual circumstances, one that challenges traditional views of American slavery by introducing class as the determining factor of bondage rather than racism¹. This is the gap in which Morrison places *A Mercy*—by using women like Sorrow, a poor white girl, and Lina, a Native American, Morrison puts much of American slavery historical research into a new light by contrasting it with her use of early American slavery and characters outside of the binary. Morrison's choice to

1 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese pioneered the idea of white women and black women occupying two separate spheres that sometimes interact, but are fundamentally kept apart; for more information on the racial binary of the nineteenth century American slave system and how slaves and their masters interacted within it, reference her work *Within the Plantation Household* and the work of her husband, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College utilize the much more fluid seventeenth century system of slavery allows her to explore the possibility of many different types of captivity.

Lina and Sorrow are given space due to the social construct Morrison chose, a typically ignored space where their struggles against captivity can be aired outside of the shadow of the greater-known racial binary. Morrison “does not limit herself to black girlhood alone but goes on to focus on all of those ‘peripheral girls’: any girlhood impeded by peripherality deserves the attention of a writer alarmed at the colossal waste of potential through a deliberate disregard” (Roye 215). Sorrow, a poor white woman, and Lina, a Native American orphan, struggle against low class status alongside African American women like Florens, and their shared experience of captivity asks the reader to discard preconceived notions about slavery and instead focus on the possible realities of previously untold stories. Their stories represent the stories of so many “marginalized women who appear in history only incidentally, as a line in a ship’s log, a slaveholder’s inventory, or a letter home” (Logan 196). By bringing peripheral women together in a family-type setting, Morrison is able to show vastly different girls brought into the same space. The rigid black versus white structure of the binary fails Lina and Sorrow, whose servitude is based upon their social status rather than their race. Morrison’s emphasis on peripheral girls demands a form of American captivity that tells more of the story than the white slaveowner and the black slave, making room for these characters by finding their space before it has been erased.

Sorrow is the embodiment of Morrison’s dialogue with the binary; Sorrow is a poor white girl who has

seemingly no desire to become a slaveowner, which was held up as the feminine socioeconomic ideal, but who is also in bondage to the Vaarks (Fox-Genovese 47)². The daughter of a ship captain, Sorrow is the sole survivor of the raid and sinking of her father's ship—she has spent her entire life at sea and is disoriented by land, saying “before coming to the sawyer's house, Sorrow had never lived on land. Now the memories of the ship, the only home she knew, seemed as stolen as its cargo.... Even the trace of Captain was dim” (138). Unaware of the severity of the emotional devastation caused by the shipwreck, each society she enters into misunderstands Sorrow; she is alienated, raped, and made to be the Other throughout all of *A Mercy*. Despite being a young white woman, Sorrow is not only an outcast of the class her father certainly belonged to, but an outcast to the outcasts, the indentured servants and slaves that populate even the lowest class. Lina describes her as “stupid Sorrow” and a “daft girl who kept wandering off getting lost, who knew nothing and worked less, a strange melancholy girl” (51, 60). Sorrow occupies a gap in research typically accepted to be broad statements for all of American slavery: how could a white woman be an outcast in a societal system that only allowed for African Americans to be outcasts? The answer requires an understanding of early American captivity dependent upon a societal system that did not revolve around race, but rather bondage itself.

2 Fox-Genovese's previously mentioned work *Within the Plantation Household* primarily focuses on the culture of the “angel of the household” archetype (the petite, fragile, wealthy, and beautiful white slaveowner) and how it interacts with the culture of female African American slaves.

Bonds of Affection: A False Saving Grace

Throughout *A Mercy*, characters weave delicate relationships with each other to ease the incredible mental and emotional weight of being in captivity. Here, Morrison's setting plays another important function: the class structure of the seventeenth century is fluid not only in racial context but also in social context, allowing for bonds among women from one strata to the next. These relationships are made possible due to the lack of a racial binary, but instead of creating a unified force between the women, they impose another barrier to self-ownership. The intense friendships shared on the Vaark plantation generate one more sense of attachment between the women, allowing characters to project their definition of self onto their relationship dependent upon another being. I refer to these diversions of self-ownership as bonds of affection: although these ties feed an emotional need for stability, they form yet another type of bondage between two characters. Because these bonds are created within a greater system of servitude, they are weak and disintegrate as the realities of the class structure take precedence on their lives; by denying the full possibility of owning their personhood through allowing their existence to depend upon another person, the women who participate in bonds of affection experience a coping mechanism that gives a false sense of security.

Florens, Lina and Rebekka all bond with one another, but these relationships are set within the social class structure and eventually fall apart. Lina serves as best friend to Rebekka, her mistress, being "the only one

left whose understanding [Rebekka] trusted and whose judgement she valued” (85). Lina also forms a mother-like relationship with Florens, stating that Florens “could be, would be, her own” (72). Lina is fiercely protective of both relationships against Sorrow, always “making certain everyone else shared the distrust that sparkled in her own eyes” (147). For Lina, these forms of companionship are everything—they secure her position on the farm as one of relative ease and they provide fleeting comfort and friendship—although they will prove to have little impact on Lina’s socioeconomic reality. Florens, desperate for positive affirmation after what she perceives as a harsh rejection from her mother, “was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (72). Lina and Florens share glimpses of positivity despite their captivity, such as their “memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina’s stories.... Florens would sigh then, her head on Lina’s shoulder, and when sleep came the little girl’s smile lingered” (73). These attachments between the women are as shallow and permanent as a daydream, simply existing to disguise and distract from the lot each girl has been given. The friendships forged in slavery are important because they show the women forming companionships for their own comfort despite the class system that pervades their lives—but while they act as an essential emotional and mental survival technique for the women of *A Mercy*, these bonds of affection are not a solution or an escape from servitude itself.

In addition to her friendships with the women surrounding her in servitude, Florens creates another intense bond of affection with a black freedman who works for

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her master. Florens falls in love with the local blacksmith soon after her arrival at the Vaark farm, but it is a skewed and destructive love that nearly devours Florens whole. She quickly becomes dependent upon the blacksmith for her escape from captivity, saying “No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that” (81). But in finding her meaning in the relationship with the freedman, Florens loses sight of herself outside of his existence. She allows herself to need his presence, saying “with you, my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me” (161). Lina recognizes the imminent danger in Florens’ behavior, saying she is “crippled with worship of him” (74); Lina even “tried to enlighten [Florens], saying, ‘You are one leaf on his tree,’ Florens shook her head, closed her eyes and replied, ‘No. I am his tree’” (71). Florens loses herself in her relationship with the blacksmith, defining everything about herself in relation to her love for him. Her romance with the blacksmith will fail alongside the rest of the superficial unions amongst the women, forcing Florens to own herself and her own means of freedom rather than offering herself to false saviors.

The forged companionships begin to fall apart as quickly as they materialized after Jacob Vaark’s death. As the bonds fail, the once easily ignored impacts of their enslavement become more prominent in the women’s minds. The death shifts the group of women into a more rigid recognition of class status; the possible peril is starkly noted by Lina:

Herself, Sorrow, a newborn, and maybe Florens—

three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile.... Lina had relished her place in this small, tight family, but now saw its folly. (68)

To be sure, the more fluid socioeconomic system these girls experience is no less harsh; the three servant girls face an entire life of uncertainty at the prospect of their masters' deaths, while Rebekka and Jacob could certainly depend upon their place in society to guarantee them a life of comfort. Sorrow narrates that "there had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though... they were falling away from each other" (158). Jacob's death no longer allows for bonds of affection among the women to disguise the perils of enslavement; Lina, Sorrow, and Florens will always be of lower status than Rebekka, and the fragile and shallow ties they create cannot battle the class structure for them. Lina states that "as long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all" (69), exhibiting how companionship is not strong enough to truly unite the women against the harsh class system and is, instead, a false saving grace. If any of the women want to escape their enslavement, they will have to find a way that is more powerful than the fabricated comfort of a bondage they

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Self-Ownership

The structure of class within society pervades everything, including the minds of those within it; in order for a character to achieve their personal freedom they must acquire ownership of their own minds. What I mean by this notion of self-ownership is a pervading sense of independence that emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically exhibits freedom from the servant class—not necessarily leaving the socioeconomic class status, but rather not being controlled by it. Achieving self-ownership is a task that only Sorrow and Florens attempt in *A Mercy*. Sorrow is an outcast from the beginning; “accepted, not bought, by Sir” (60), her presence seems merely to happen rather than have any sort of intention on the Vaark property. Sorrow makes the other women uncomfortable: “to Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh. Red hair, black teeth, recurring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed silver-gray eyes that raised Lina’s nape hair” (63). Unable to establish meaningful bonds with other people, Sorrow instead grows inseparable from her self-created persona named Twin. Sorrow refers to her time stranded amongst the ship wreckage, explaining that “After searching for survivors and food, fingering split molasses from the deck straight into her mouth, nights listening to cold wind and lapping sea, Twin joined her under the hammock and they have been together even since” (138). Just like Lina and

Florens, Sorrow is subconsciously forced into forming a bond to ease the harshness of her condition, even if the person she bonds with only exists in her mind. Clarifying further, Sorrow states:

She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name. It was easy to be confused.... Having two names was convenient since Twin couldn't be seen by anyone else. So if she were scrubbing clothes or herding geese and heard the name Captain used, she knew it was Twin. But if any voice called "Sorrow," she knew what to expect. (137)

Twin acts as a welcome distraction from the harsh reality of Sorrow's condition; just like all the other forged friendships, this relationship provides stability, tenderness, and familiarity where there may otherwise be none. Twin is "her safety, her entertainment, her guide" (141). Unlike Lina, Florens, or Rebekka, Sorrow's means of finding companionship is independent of another person, allowing for a trust that surpasses that of their bonds—Twin states "I'm here," said the girl with a face matching [Sorrow's] exactly. "I'm always here" (149). Sorrow creates Twin in a world that is not ruled by any kind of class structure—in fact, Sorrow and Twin are the only entities in the world at all.

Twin and Sorrow's shared universe translates to insanity when transposed into the class structure that envelops seventeenth century Virginia. It is unclear whether Sorrow does not understand or simply does not care about her place in society, but either way she is unconcerned with complying with any sort of societal rules upon reentering civilization. When she is first brought

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upon land, her rescuers attempt to ask simple questions of her and Sorrow states that “Twin whispered NO, so she shrugged her shoulders and found that a convenient gesture for the other information she could not or pretended not to remember” (140). This lack of compliance or recognition of her status is interpreted as insanity by those who depend upon the class structure to shape their lives. Sorrow is, instead, in a world deep inside her own head with Twin, creating for herself a shifted reality where her existence as a slave is a mere interruption; Sorrow states “Preferable, of course, was when Twin called from the mill door or whispered up close into her ear. Then she would quit any chore and follow her identical self” (137). Sorrow is alienated by everyone around her, saying that “With no one to talk to, she relied on Twin more and more. With her, Sorrow never wanted for friendship,” keeping “placid indifference to anyone, except Twin” (146-7). Sorrow is verifiably insane, dependent upon Twin to the extent that she depends upon her self-created second personality to provide happiness and command her actions—but it is through this insanity that Sorrow finds a way to escape her sentence of captivity. Insanity is Sorrow’s mode of survival, giving her a sense of freedom from the servitude she is submitted to, but denying any sense of independence or a true chance of escape from society’s demands. Sorrow does not exhibit any signs of independence until she becomes a mother, but her independence in motherhood will further entrap Sorrow in her role as a slave in society as she experiences a desperate need to ensure safety for her child.

Sorrow’s greater sense of independence comes once she successfully delivers her child with the help of Wil-

liard and Scully, two white indentured servants. This independence, however, is not full enough; Sorrow has discovered motherhood and although she no longer depends upon Twin to escape from the physical realities of slavery, she will sacrifice any necessary part of her freedom to ensure stability for her newborn child. With a new driving purpose Sorrow no longer needs Twin, so Twin becomes “absent, strangely silent or hostile when Sorrow tried to discuss what to do, where to go” during her labor (156). After her daughter’s birth, Sorrow states:

Although all her life she had been saved by men... she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself. Twin’s absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself... Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her. Sorrow’s wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs, impervious to the complaints of others. She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete.” (157-158)

Sorrow becomes Complete, a woman who now does all that is expected of her without wandering and, most importantly, without Twin. While it is admirable that Sorrow is dedicated to being a mother and has a new feeling of independence, she is still tied in a bond of affection with her child—her sense of purpose and independence stems from the child, not from inside herself. Sorrow is a slave to motherhood, creating a new captivity in which

her very existence is defined by her ability to provide for her newborn child. Although she seems to be more sane and have a greater sense of true independence, her motherly love will now rule her life—Sorrow’s emotional attachment to her child will allow her to become enslaved to whomever can economically provide for her child. By losing Twin, and perhaps becoming more relatable to her peers and the system of class that controls them, Sorrow is more susceptible now than ever to the demands of her class status. Sorrow’s status as a mother will no longer allow her to attempt to escape her class status through her insanity, for she now must provide a sense of stability for her child. Although Morrison leaves *A Mercy* with an ambiguous end for Sorrow, it is understood that Sorrow will sacrifice her sense of freedom and fully submit herself to her status as a slave as long as it provides a stable environment for her child.

Florens also finds self-ownership and is able to access freedom, and she is the only character to do so without remaining emotionally tethered to another person. As discussed earlier, the desperate love that Florens experiences for the blacksmith is no more than a diversion from creating a sense of independence and self-ownership. To discover her own means of freedom, Florens must endure a painful but necessary break from the deceptive love that risks becoming another form of enslavement. Florens even conflates the freedman with freedom itself, stating “I don’t know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free.... It is though I am loose to do what I choose.... I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (82). In this moment, Florens has

lost sight of her greatest defense against captivity: her self-ownership.

The reckless way in which Florens tries to fling her ownership onto the blacksmith is an attempt to shift from one kind of bondage to the next, and it is in response to the fear and weakness Florens feels in the face of her status as a slave. Scarred by the emotional pain her bondage has induced, Florens' timidity and reluctance to take control of herself is sympathetic, but her frantic desire to shift her bondage from one form to the other must end for her to ever take control of the hurt that is inflicted upon her. Florens' attachment to her relationship with the blacksmith proves to be devastating when he renounces her after she has harmed a child:

[Florens] What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

[Blacksmith] No. You have become one.

[Florens] How?

[Blacksmith] Your head is empty and your body is wild.

[Florens] I am adoring you.

[Blacksmith] And a slave to that too.

[Florens] You alone own me.

[Blacksmith] Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child.

[Florens] No. Wait. You put me in misery.

[Blacksmith] You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.

[Florens, narrating] You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice. On my knees I reach for you. Crawl to you. You step

back saying get away from me. I have shock. Are you meaning I am nothing to you? (166-7)

The blacksmith directly confronts self-ownership—Florens is not a slave until she allows herself to be. While losing the blacksmith is devastating, it awakens Florens to her independence, stating “my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am” (185). Florens now understands “that it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild” (187); the same kind of pain that previously drove Florens to give away her independence is now what propels her into her freedom.

Florens, in a moment of complete despair, states that “now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold” (167). She is refusing to allow her life to be determined by others any more, refusing to be held captive by her status or her feelings toward the blacksmith or anything else. She denies the blacksmith’s claim that she is, in fact, a slave and experiences a drastic shift due to his rejection; she is no longer a servant when she comes back from the blacksmith’s place. She, instead, exhibits enormous power—Scully states:

Strangest was Florens. The docile creature [he and Williard] knew had turned feral. When they saw her stomping down the road two days after the smithy had visited Mistress’ sickbed and gone, they were slow to recognize her as a living person.... If [Scully] had been interested in rape, Florens would have been his prey. It was easy to spot that combination

of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others. Clearly, from the look of her now, that was no longer true. The instant [Scully] saw her marching down the road—whether ghost or soldier—he knew she had become untouchable. (171, 179)

Florens' shift is so monumental that she transforms from being no more than a servant to being unrapeable. But this concept of being unrapeable is not limited to how Scully views Florens, but rather the physically visible shift in her view of herself. In her rejection of the victimized status society wishes to force upon her through her captivity, she has become such a stronger woman that she is no longer seen as a target by people who could choose whether or not to harm her. Kristina Bross argues in her article "Florens in Salem" that Florens' status as unrapeable is useful but worth little: "Untouchability in Morrison's novel, while it offers an immediate protection, is not tenable. In the end the self-imposed isolation that untouchability demands breaks apart the fragile society that the women on Jacob Vaark's farm had created together" (Bross 188). This understanding of Florens' demeanor assumes that her independence is fleeting rather than transformational, and attributes the entire falling apart of the Vaark farm to Florens' absence. This view, however, puts too much emphasis on the weak bonds of affection, and too little faith in Florens' shifted character. The failure of the women on the Vaark farm to hold together their miniature society is not due to Florens' newfound self-ownership, but rather due to the other characters' inability to take up ownership of their own minds as well. Florens' self-ownership frees her from the penetration of

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societal class ideas into her mind, and shields her from being a victim of anyone ever again.

Literacy and Freedom

The power Florens finds in her self-ownership is laced with the natural fear that accompanies possible insanity. Florens takes ownership of her mind, and it is unnerving at first; she knows the shallows and depths of her thoughts, but does not shy away from them in an effort to comfort. The novel begins with “Don’t be afraid” (3), a simple and disorienting beginning followed by a startlingly honest insight by Florens:

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 corn-husk 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. (3)

Florens is direct and aggressive with her storytelling. She does not pretend to be reassuring because she knows her words will not be; plain, dark, and constantly shifting, the reader is invited into Florens’ mind only by accepting that they will take up the atmosphere of her mind in doing so. What may first appear as fearful lunacy is transformed into rightfully fearful power as the reader delves into the novel and understands more about Florens. It is costly for Florens to achieve self-ownership of her mind, a cost that is reflected in the way in which Florens expects her boldness to scare others because she will not conform.

But Florens plays upon this fact too, daring her readers to immerse themselves in her story and intimidating them in the same breath; Florens is no longer the timid girl she once was, and she finds power in the same place where some may try to discredit her sanity.

She crafts her story in the walls of the house that was Jacob Vaark's obsession before his death, knowing that perhaps the words will never be read and finds power despite that. The unfinished construction of Jacob Vaark's tremendous second house looms as a representative of his stake in the social realm: his house signifies all the social and economic power he has while also embodying the lack of power his slaves possess. Florens' words inside this house are a physical representation of her self-ownership; she expels all that is class and servitude from her body, and her freedom of thought due to this expulsion overflows from her mind to the walls of the man who once bought her as an offering to his depressed wife. She has "become wilderness but [is] also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (189). She lasts because she is in full control of herself; no pity, no distinction between classes, no forgiveness because she has nothing to be forgiven for. Florens knows her place in society and refuses to accept it, and is therefore not subject to it. She writes her story on the walls regardless of whether or not there be an audience—she writes it because it is an overflow of her freedom through self-ownership, and for that reason alone. Nearing the end of her story, Florens explains:

My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you.... If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide

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open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow.... Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress' need I know she loves fire more. (188-9)

Some may perceive Florens' desperate storytelling as a far-fetched wish to reconnect to the blacksmith, whom she addresses in the beginning of the excerpt, but this quickly shifts as she continues on. It is not her audience that she needs to reach, but rather her story that she must get out; while her intended audience shifts rapidly, her need to release the words within her stays constant. Still more readers may wonder what the point of writing without an audience could be, but this understanding denies the fundamental power in self-expression. Perhaps the blacksmith will eventually read her message, or perhaps her words will die with the house, or perhaps Florens will set the entire house on fire in complete rebellion of the man who thought he could purchase her. It is not clear what will happen to Florens' words, but it does not need to be for they have symbolically already served a greater purpose for her self-ownership. Her words have freed her.

Florens' impulse to write down her own story has been shared by many others who endured the American system of bondage, which can be seen in the classic slave narratives of the nineteenth century. In correspondence to the established binary of the nineteenth century, the later slave narratives have a direct and intentional audience: white Americans who could be convinced to join

the abolitionist movement. This emphasis on the audience created a meticulous design for slave narratives, forcing the authors to continually focus on devices that would gain their white readers' trust. Florens, as previously discussed, is not bound by the binary and is able to write for herself rather than for another; Morrison gives Florens the freedom of self-expression as narrator and liberates her by removing the pressure of writing for an audience. Morrison has weaved exceptional characteristics borrowed from slave narratives into Florens' being, but allows for them to devolve into a more feral form in response to Florens' young body and the early slave system she rebels against. This wild form of slave narrative by Florens centers upon the raw power and freedom in reading and writing, and rejects the pointed address to a white audience that is fundamental in nineteenth century slave narratives.

The power of literacy permeates both nineteenth-century slave narratives and *A Mercy*, exhibited in the heavy emphasis in each text of the importance of becoming literate. Florens' wise mother pleads that "I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way.... What I know is that there is magic in learning" (191). Although it is already dangerous for a slave to learn how to read and write—the priest who teaches Florens and her family states that "it was what God wanted no matter if they fined him, imprisoned him or hunted him down with gunfire for it as they did other priests who taught we to read" (191)—Florens' mother risks it all in recognition that literacy and freedom have an intricate relationship. It is clear that slaveowners knew of the dangers in literate slaves, and their fear of losing

power to literacy would only magnify slavery becomes more and more important socially and economically in America; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that “the command of written English virtually separated the African from the Afro-American, the slave from the ex-slave, titled property from fledgling human being” (Gates, 4). Florens’ writing gives shape to her person, especially in such stark contrast to the slave she has allowed herself to be for others; her ability to express herself roots her wildness into a fervent freedom, and it gives the reader the opportunity to understand her self-liberation. Florens’ powerful literacy is what breathes life into her freedom.

The relationship between literacy and freedom appears in Frederick Douglass’ previously mentioned *Narrative*, his first autobiographical and abolitionist work. Although the *Narrative* is published a century and a half after Florens’ time frame, both Douglass and Florens experience freedom and self-expression through the exercise of writing. David Blight says of Douglass’ work:

... his ability to speak and write not only allowed him to tell his story but gave meaning to his life. By his own account it was literacy that opened Douglass’ mind to the possibility of freedom.... He learned that words could mean power and persuasion and alone could provide a sustenance to life, give it purpose, and give off hope. (Blight, 89)

Both Douglass and Florens find both their power and freedom in words; set apart by their literacy, words have defined them both in their lives and in their process of understanding themselves. The creative process of explaining themselves is not the direct cause of their freedom, but rather a natural overflow from their increased

sense of power due to their newly found self-ownership. Perhaps the major difference between the two is that Douglass' portrayal of himself and the events that led him to his freedom are carefully crafted in his autobiography, while Florens' words move haphazardly and lack the intention of persuasion that so heavily guides Douglass. This divergence between the two narration styles largely stems from Florens' lack of intention with her words—her lack of intent and intended audience is a large deviating factor from the slave narrative genre she so smoothly fits into.

Florens deviates from typical slave narratives by pointedly not writing in the highly intentional style most slave narratives follow; while authors of most slave narratives tactfully adjusted their writing to appeal to their white audience, Florens writes with a wild abandon in regards to pleasing a reader. This deviation does not diminish the power of Florens' story; rather, her words are strengthened by the honesty and intimacy in which they are shared. Instead of focusing on the narrator as crucial to the plot, nineteenth century narratives centered around their audience: William Andrews states in *To Tell A Free Story* that "the most reliable slave narrative would be the one that seemed purely mimetic, in which the self is on the periphery instead of at the center of attention, looking outside not within, transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts" (Andrews, 6). But Florens' narrative could never be a transcription of facts; she confides that "In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away” (185). Florens’ words are urgent and blunt, sharing a sense of honesty and intimacy that later narratives will lack for the sake of appeasing their audience. But Florens has no audience; she writes to her mother and to the blacksmith, but she reaches an ambivalence towards the identity of her reader by the end of her narration. For later freed writers, it mattered very much who read their words; their audience is the main focus of their work, always addressed and catered to by the author. Florens, however, cares not who reads her words, or even if they are read. She has instilled the power of literacy and writing within herself; she will carry it with her as she makes her way in her new world, and the pieces left in her wake are simply a secondary representation of this power. It matters not if they are read at all, only that they exist.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that self-ownership of the mind is necessary to gain freedom from societal class structures. The bonds of affection that exist within the family-type unit on the Vaark plantation are too weak; as Scully states “they once thought that they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false” (183). These companionships, or bonds of affection, cannot overcome servitude because they are made shallow due to class structure. When a class system can permeate all of that within the society it is based in, the only thing strong enough to combat the system is independent self-ownership. The novel ends with a

comment by Florens' mother stating "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" (196). More important than Florens' status as a slave is whether or not she internalizes her position of a slave, allowing herself to truly become one. Florens overcomes the wickedness of giving into the victimization she is prescribed by society; she discovers within herself such a radical form of independence and self-ownership that she even achieves a metaphorical status of being unrapeable.

Florens says of the blacksmith in the midst of her writing, "You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk" (188). Both Florens and Morrison challenge the reader to reach past what is given to them and demand more, to learn from those who have found their freedom and, in turn, teach others the power of reading. It is too simple to thrive according to the standards of society, to read the world—the readers must instead read the words that force themselves out, even if they are scrawled across the floor, even if they cause discomfort just to see. "Can you read?" (3) is posed by Florens over and over throughout the novel, consistently asking her reader a seemingly contradictory question—for if the reader could not read, how would they respond to her words? But this inquiry asks more: the ability to piece together Florens' story, scrawled in bits and pieces both in Morrison's narrative technique and on the walls of Vaark's house; the ability to understand more than simply what is told, to read the secrets that are hinted at but never overtly shown; the power to listen to Florens' story and take ownership of it as well. These words are a mark of Florens'

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College stolen power, and Morrison asks more of her readers than to simply enjoy her story of triumph. The reader must wrestle through narrator shifts and disorienting language, piece together parts of the story that are out of order or perhaps left untold, and take on the full weight of active reading in order to understand Florens. Her words, as an extension of Florens herself, are wild, unforgiving, everlasting, and, most importantly, free.

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