



Research Paper

## Wild and Wilderness: Unveiling Nature's Role in Toni Morrison's 'A Mercy'

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### Abstract

Toni Morrison's novel "A Mercy" explores a complex interplay of themes, with one of the central themes being the concept of "Wild and Wilderness," as embodied by the character of Florens. Moreover, the novel delves into the contrasting perspectives on wilderness held by both black and white characters. This paper aims to dissect and elucidate the multifaceted interpretations surrounding the theme of "Wild and Wilderness" within the novel.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Wild, Wilderness, Blacks, Racism

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In Toni Morrison's novel "A Mercy," the themes of 'wild' and 'wilderness' carry significant weight, inviting an eco-critical examination. The character of Florens serves as the conduit for these themes throughout the narrative. However, Morrison doesn't merely employ Florens as a vehicle for showcasing these concepts. Rather, she skillfully utilizes Florens' narrative to draw a contrast between two opposing interpretations of 'wildernesses held respectively by blacks and whites. In doing so, Morrison challenges the definitions of 'wild' and 'wilderness' imposed upon blacks and indigenous people by the white dominant culture. Additionally, Florens' voice within the novel symbolically represents these notions as masculine, drawing parallels between nature and women, thus placing them on the same plane of being 'wild.' Another noteworthy aspect is how, despite facing hardships, sadness, and abandonment, Florens' experiences contain a powerful undercurrent of self-assertion. Not only does she assert herself, but she also goes to the extent of claiming her identity as an American. She engages in a confrontation with the white male dominator who seeks to define 'wild' and 'wilderness' to suit his colonial agenda.

Florens, a young black slave girl, works on the sugar plantations of D'Ortega alongside her mother, Minha Mae, and her little brother. When Jacob Vaark visits D'Ortega, Minha Mae offers Florens as partial payment for D'Ortega's debt. Florens then starts working in Jacob's household, where he resides with his wife Rebekka, two girls named Lina and Sorrow, and two indentured servants, William and Scully. Initially, everything appears to be peaceful. However, the arrival of the Blacksmith, who comes to build a dream mansion for Jacob, changes the course of Florens' life. She becomes infatuated with the Blacksmith, sparking a romance between them. Lina, who is astute about the ways of the world, notices their connection from the outset. Lina's concern escalates when she learns that the Blacksmith is a free man, and she warns Florens about the potential consequences of their union. Lina admonishes her, saying, "You are one leaf on his tree", to which Florens defiantly retorts, "No, I am his tree". However, the presence of the Blacksmith, a free man symbolizing colonial designs, irrevocably alters Florens' life and ultimately leads to catastrophe (Zhou, 2019; Montgomery, 2011; الجافي, 2020; , Lu, 2021).

Jacob's death and Rebekka's illness mark pivotal events in the narrative. Rebekka believes that Florens is the right person to retrieve the Blacksmith, who previously healed Sorrow with his mystical abilities. Florens also seizes this opportunity, hoping to reunite with her beloved. Although initially apprehensive about embarking on a journey into an unknown land, she sets out to meet the Blacksmith. As a female and a slave, she faces inherent fears. To ensure her safety during the journey, Rebekka provides her with a letter outlining the purpose of her mission and confirming her status as a slave belonging to Jacob's family. This document establishes her as a documented slave, offering protection during her travels.

Throughout her journey, Florens encounters threats from the natural world, including a treacherous forest and challenging terrain. Despite these obstacles, her eagerness to reunite with the Blacksmith prevails. Notably, the fear of the wilderness accompanies her excitement. Her imagination had previously envisioned the trek through beech and white pine trees to meet the Blacksmith, prompting her to question him about whether

the wilderness would harm or aid her. Her journey is filled with joy and anticipation, yet also an underlying fear of the wilderness.

Significantly, Florens' encounters with the wilderness and her wild journey lead her to formulate her understanding of freedom, which she associates with her experiences in the natural world. As a former slave, Florens had never truly experienced the emotion of liberty. Her journey through the American landscape intertwines her concept of wilderness with freedom. She believes that the availability of choice equates to freedom, drawing parallels between freedom and nature. However, racial discourses influence and shape her perception of freedom. Florens hesitates to call this feeling freedom and instead terms it as 'looseness,' as any deviation from established rules and norms by a slave is often labelled as such. For Florens, 'looseness' becomes the closest synonym for the freedom she has known as a slave girl. Her fear of freedom persists due to her slave status, making her apprehensive even when confronted with its prospect. The dominant discourses of American history have so profoundly moulded and restricted the identity of slaves that they were unable to grasp the true essence of liberty. This oppressive influence is evident when Florens, despite experiencing genuine freedom, struggles to articulate the feeling accurately. Florens' journey allows her to perceive wilderness in all its wonders and terrors, ultimately transforming her understanding of freedom.

In Toni Morrison's novel, the contrasting encounters with wilderness are starkly depicted through the experiences of two characters, Jacob and Florens. Jacob, a white character, is captivated by the beauty of the wilderness and seeks to claim and exploit it for his purposes. In contrast, Florens, an enslaved black girl, faces a much more challenging and less idyllic relationship with the wilderness. Her journey is fraught with numerous obstacles and hardships, and, ultimately, she becomes equated with the very wilderness she traverses. What's particularly noteworthy is that the damage inflicted upon her identity primarily emanates from her interactions with the human world rather than the non-human natural environment. During Florens' journey, she takes refuge in the home of Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane. However, her encounter with a group of white villagers who visit the Ealing household leads to a deeply dehumanizing and traumatic experience. These villagers, driven by racial bias, exhibit hostile and repulsive behaviour toward Florens, which is both shocking and deeply unsettling. Their emotional confrontation with Florens upon first seeing her vividly captures the racial tensions and prejudices of the era.

Florens describes how the visitors stare at her as if she were a strange and terrifying creature. The women express fear and invoke God for help, while a young girl even bursts into tears upon seeing her. This immediate rejection and fear Florens encounters from the villagers make it apparent that, despite being a human being, she is perceived as fundamentally different due to her blackness. Rather than accepting her status as a documented slave, the villagers demand that she undresses for inspection. They subject her to an invasive examination, during which they liken her to swine and scrutinize her bodily features in a degrading manner. This humiliating experience leaves Florens deeply scarred, and she is marked as 'wild' by the villagers.

This racial exploitation reaches its zenith as the villagers view her with hostility and contempt. The memory of this encounter haunts Florens for a long time, as it represents the first instance in which her position in the world is equated with that of animals labelled as 'wild' in the human hierarchy. Her dehumanization and the stripping away of her human identity by the villagers deeply affect her psyche. She realizes that the villagers refuse to categorize her as a human being, exemplified when she observes, "I think they have a shock that I can talk." This realization shatters her sense of identity and leaves her oscillating between her human and non-human status, with the dominant class imposing a distorted image of darkness and wildness upon her.

The dehumanizing narrative of wildness and wilderness that Florens encounters strips away even her most basic notions of freedom, undermining the sense of identity she had developed during the first part of her journey through communion with nature and wilderness. The superficial darkness of her black skin becomes a darkness that denies her the very right to be called human, instead associating her with the concept of wildness. This transformation reflects her mother's early assertion, "I am dangerous, she says, and wild." Moreover, the novel underscores how this perception of wildness is often linked to female sexuality, with female bodies considered wild and subject to control and domination. Even Blacksmith underscores this notion when he tells Florens, "Your head is empty and your body is wild," highlighting the oppressive stereotypes imposed on her due to her enslaved status and gender. Florens' wildness and the perception of her body as a site of untamed sensuality are recurring themes in the novel, explored both through her self-perception and the observations of other characters. Her affinity for wearing Mistress's shoes is seen as a symbol of her embracing her sensuality and femininity, which is often regarded as wild and uncontrollable in a patriarchal society. Her romantic involvement with Blacksmith is another manifestation of her sexual desire, which some characters, like Lina, label as "appetite."

The novel portrays a woman's body as a locus of wilderness, carrying inherent wildness that others seek to explore, claim, and dominate. Florens becomes like a "she-wolf" on a journey to pursue her lover, defying societal norms and expectations regarding women's behaviour and sexuality. However, her encounter with the Blacksmith ultimately labels her actions as wild. When Blacksmith witnesses Florens' altercation with Malaik, a

child in his care, he harshly characterizes her lack of control as an act of wildness. This moment marks a significant turning point in Florens' life as she is equated with the wild, much like nature itself. Blacksmith's choice of vocabulary and perspective reflects the patriarchal mindset prevalent in the novel, where women, especially black women, are viewed through a lens of domination and control. He justifies his anger by attributing her actions to her status as a slave and her perceived lack of mental restraint, equating her to a wild creature. Toni Morrison, through Florens' experiences, critiques the constructed nature of the label "wild" when imposed on black women by both men and non-whites. She highlights that this label is not inherent but socially constructed, stripping individuals like Florens of their humanity. Her encounters with the Quaker community and Blacksmith deny her a sense of self and identity, ultimately causing her to declare, "I am lost." Florens' character is a testament to her resilience and refusal to accept these imposed definitions. She confronts these injustices and asserts her wildness as a source of strength. She challenges Blacksmith, embracing her wild streak and declaring herself as wilderness, ready to face him head-on, saying, "You say I am wilderness. I am." In the end, Florens emerges victorious, reclaiming her wildness as a powerful asset. She embraces her withered interior, which she acquired through suffering and hardship, as a symbol of her resilience. She mocks the superficial definitions of freedom and wildness imposed upon her by society. Florens asserts that enslaved individuals like her, despite their perceived weakness, are the true lions in the struggle for freedom. She redefines herself as Florens, free and enduring, determined to write her own story and confront the white-dominated world. Florens' character embodies the transformation from victim to survivor, rejecting societal labels and stereotypes to assert her identity and resilience in the face of adversity. Her words, as she writes her own story, become a powerful tool to challenge and dismantle the oppressive norms of the society she inhabits.

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