

Becoming Wilderness:  
A Look at Betrayal in *A Mercy*

*A Mercy*, Tony Morrison's 2008 bestseller, shares a common theme with most stories: love. The rewards and difficulties of all shades of love— Parental, romantic, friendly — are seen in the core relationships, from Jacob and Rebecca, Florens and the Blacksmith, Lena and Rebecca, Will and Scully, and more. However the love in these relationships, and *A Mercy* as a whole, is overshadowed by what Morrison calls “the opposite of love”, betrayal. Betrayal she says, “...Not hatred, but betrayal, the absence or collapse of trust” is the ultimate pain these characters feel. Each experience of it redefines these characters in a powerful way. In fact, the betrayals can be marked as the key events in the intertwined history of these people's lives. The betrayals drive drastic change, and are the primary mechanism in the novel. To understand how significant these betrayals are, we will look at their place in the novel in three ways. First, we will find it useful to analyze betrayals as the key events driving the lives of the characters, that is each betrayal marks a distinct period of time in these lives. Next we will look at the complex nature of *A Mercy*'s betrayals – none of these are as simple as good an evil. Finally, we will look at how these betrayals, and the changes they cause, become a device to highlight class and social themes in the story.

Betrayals drive the action in *A Mercy*. These moments, so painful for these people, are the primary catalyst for change in their worlds. Specifically, each betrayal redefines core parts of their character; change is seen their personalities, their relationships, and most often both.

For example, the novel begins and ends with the perceived betrayal of Florens by her mother. This decision, the real reasons hidden from Florence, create the unique blend of humility, shame, and romance that doom Florens to fall for the Blacksmith as she does. She is constantly haunted by memories of this rejection. One of the most palpable examples is seen in the sinking feeling she experiences when first meeting the Blacksmith's orphan boy, Maliak. “And there is another reason, you say. You turn your head. My eyes follow where you look. This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her

hand that is only for her little boy... Now I am seeing a little boy come in holding a corn-husk doll....” She immediately relates the impending abandonment to the familiar hurt she’s never been able to let go. Ultimately, after she internalizes and accepts this betrayal by the Blacksmith, and as she completes her confession, she again laments this first betrayal, the determinant of her life. “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me.” What we see is that Florens life, internal and external, is the result of two major betrayals. The first sent her to where she would live, work, and ultimately meet the Blacksmith. It also created for her the feeling of being “thrown away”, and with it the insatiable desire for unconditional romance— her fatal flaw is her dependency. The second betrayal is the opposite of the first. Her fantasy of a life with the blacksmith is ruined, and it leaves her unsure of her physical future. However, it completes her emotionally. She takes the blacksmiths criticism to heart, and finally comes to peace with who she is. “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.” Ultimately, Florens life can be seen in three periods, partitioned by these defeats.

Betrayals guide the lives of those around Florens as well. This is particularly clear in the drastic change we see in Rebekkah after Jacob’s death. The betrayal’s Rebekkah experiences are less direct than those Florens faces. First, she is plagued by the repeated tragedy of her infants’ deaths. This betrayal, by life and fate, primes her loneliness. After Jacob unexpectedly dies of smallpox, yet another cruelty played on her, she turns to the narrow religious beliefs of her community. She assumes their beliefs and social constructs, driving her to redefine her relationship with Lena, Sorrow, and Florens from one of love to one of cruelty. The betrayals against Rebekkah, though not as attributable as those of Florens, completely change her personality and life just as much. Other betrayals arise as a result of this too. Particularly, Rebekkah betrays Lena’s loyalty. When the two first met, they were friends and equals in many ways, struggling to redefine their lives after being displaced (Rebekkah from her country and life, and Lena from an abusive relationship) . Their relationship was built over shared hardships and loss, so much so that Lena unequivocally stays loyal to the Vaark’s, even after Rebekkah

abuses them. This betrayal, between Rebekkah and her servants, changes the dynamics of their relationship and darkens the future for all these women. We could similarly analyze the hardships and betrayals of Sorrow, Jacob, Will and Scully, and the blacksmith and find the same trend. The theme of betrayals as transformative moments can be seen in all of *A Mercy's* major characters.

The lifeblood of *A Mercy* is the stories of betrayal. However, the strength of the message isn't just in the pain of these moments, it's in their *complexity*. Nothing we see in *A Mercy* is black and white, a case of good versus evil. Rather, as Morrison describes it, every character believes in what he or she is doing.

"The characters have such good intentions and they're not really at fault, except for the environment in which they live, the social environment, the times, what's available to them. Their efforts to survive collapse in some instances because what they're thinking — what they intend to happen— is misunderstood or made wrong by other people, or the circumstances of their lives. These are not wicked people who betray for greed or personal fortune, they simply want a calm —a better— life, and when things go awry part of it is their misunderstanding and mistrust of other people or their own flaws."

This idea is epitomized by Florens and her mother. What Florens experiences is a sense of abandonment, a rejection of her as a person of value and someone to love. The experience haunts and defines her. What her mother felt was a desperate attempt to save her daughter, still too innocent to understand the sexually abusive environment around her. Lena's mother knew she had no other way to protect her daughter than to let her go, a painful sacrifice but one she knew was necessary. Florens memory of it, and her inability to remember what her mom told her about it, makes the ordeal particularly painful for the reader, so simultaneously aware of the love and sacrifice borne by the mother as well as Florens' misunderstanding and pain.

We see the complexity again in the blacksmith's rejection of Florens.

"Why are you killing me I ask you.

I want you to go.

Let me explain.

No. Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave...You have become one...Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too."

The reader is primed to see Florens side, that of a wildly romantic and repressed girl desperate to have her love reciprocated. However, the blacksmith isn't shallow in his denial. Instead, as Florens notices, he has already dedicated himself to raising the orphan child, and his love and concern are first for Maliak. Furthermore, the blacksmith resents Florens as representing the very concept of slavery. He conflates her desperate need for love with the institution that's been imposed on her. Though we aren't necessarily sympathetic to his choice, the amalgamation of his dedication to Maliak, his aversion to the increasing ranks of bondman, and his antipathy for the dependence he sees in Florens, make his mind understandable.

The complicated nature of betrayal is seen in Rebekkah's sudden change as well. Her sudden unrelenting abuse of her servants, and the deeper betrayal of years of relationships, are clearly not the right choices. However, Rebekkah's cruelty isn't from a place of evil but from a place of pain. After the deaths of all her children and husband, she turns to the narrow religious beliefs of the church near her in order to survive. She does this because the center of her old life, her husband and the family that never was, is now a paradigm that's impossible to achieve. She finds a new way to continue her life through her religion. The betrayal then, is an unfortunate side effect of Rebekkah readapting her life to fit the definitions of slave and master, heaven bound and hell bound, that are at the heart of her new beliefs. Despite her growing and utter disregard for those closest to her, Rebekkah is a tragedy, not a villain. Her

betrayal, much like the others, is another example of good intentions and a bad environment causing more pain.

So far betrayal has given us a way to understand the world Morrison has created; we understand why and how the characters are forced to change by what happens to them. Betrayal though, can offer us even more in this novel. Themes that underlie the story —such as racism, slavery, power, and love— are made apparent by the betrayals. Rebekkah's betrayal of the servants, particularly her close friend Lena, provide a portrait of the master-slave dynamic at this point in history. We can see the love and loyalty years of being together have created, but we see at least equally the corrupting nature of power and how it leads to abuse. The master-servant relationship, and how it relates to race, is explored in the entire lives of the black characters like Florens. The similarities and contrasts between their lives and those of the indentured servants, Will and Scully, touch on part of the history Morrison is interested in. That is, the concept of slavery, together and separate from race, and how it came to be linked in the U.S. Additionally, we see the pain a parent feels in this world through betrayals. Besides Florens and her mother, we see Rebekkah and her reaction as a failed mother. We see Lena adopt a motherly relationship with Florens, though this same motherly character drowns Sorrow's first born. Sorrow in particular reforms her life and goals around motherhood. Other facets of love are explored as well, such as the difference between romance and relationships. Florens first betrayal comes about as a result of the sexual abuse prevalent in dynamics with such unbalanced power. Her experience with the blacksmith is the exact opposite, however, and their sexual relationship is seen by her as a validation of her as a person. In contrast, Sorrow doesn't or hasn't experienced love or romance in the same way. Physical relationships carry less weight for her, though she becomes at least as obsessed with the love of a parent as Florens does with that of a lover. Jacob and Rebekkah provide another interesting example as well. They were initially matched in a relationship out of mutual convenience and expectation, something common for the time. However, it grew quickly into an earnest romance, unfortunately marred by their continued tragedies. Overall, betrayal as a theme highlights many facets of Morrison's work.

*A Mercy* is a complex story with complex characters. As the novel progresses many of the characters and relationships are driven to change through the mechanism of betrayals. Whether these treacheries occur on personal relationships or ideals, the effects are strong and lasting for Morrison's characters. In this way, we can segment the path of the narrative and its people by emotional events, the betrayals, rather than just physical events and the march of time. In short, perhaps

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