

# Toni Morrison's Emotional Tropes in *A Mercy* as a Literary Representation of Historical Truth

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**Abstract** The etiology of the American Dream reaches back to the historical period of massive migration from the Old Continent to the New World. Wellbeing, freedom, and prosperity were the major constituents of the dream. Its fulfillment required identity redefinition. Conceptualizations of Euro-American superiority and African-American inferiority resulted there from. In Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, the author reconstructs the interior lives of subjects and objects affected by racial stratification within mainstream American society. In doing so, Morrison contemplates the possible emotions that more than likely accompanied Euro-American pursuance of patriarchal capitalism, which prefaced the mindset that engendered racialized slavery and, subsequently, systemically subjugated the majority of the black population.

**Key words** emotions; internal life; capitalism; white supremacy; racialized slavery

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## **Emotions and Their Historical Representation**

The discussion of any historical representation involves questions relating to objectivity and subjectivity. The conceptualization of historical reflection precludes

complete objectivity because certain historical periods are always introduced and discussed from a particular perspective that serves the interests and purposes of the historians and their audiences, whose views are shaped by the socio-political ideologies which permeated a particular time and place. Nevertheless, so-called documented history, or historiography, with its recorded dates, names, events, and statistics is considered to be objective because it is least likely to formulate or express individual viewpoints. At a certain point in the evolution of post-modernist theory, attempts were made to ascertain intersections between historiography and historical fiction. For instance, Hayden White states, “There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal [...] terms” (qtd. in Mazur 14). However, when it comes to content, some theorists hold that “novels are written and read according to a different set of conventions, historiography is controlled and the historian is not really allowed to speculate and provide what is missing, he has to adhere to documents and facts while the novelist is allowed to make them up” (Mazur 15). Again, such conceptualization of difference between documented history and its fictitious representation imply belief in the former’s higher level of objectivity. Advocates of objective history sometimes seek to avoid not only formulations or expressions of the writer’s individual view on history and but also any references to or attempts to express and evoke emotions. Not only is the presence of personal emotion in documented history seen as a violation of objectivity, but also fictitious literary historical representations that encompass limited emotional import are seen as more objective. In general, the question of objective literature has occupied the minds of literary theorists since modernism, whose representatives, to a large extent, focused on the proper context allowing for emotional expression in literature. The most influential concept in this regard was, and still is, T. S. Elliot’s “objective correlative” — “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (“Hamlet” and qtd. in Bertens 12). Therefore, according to Elliot, objective and proper art — for instance poetry, which is Elliot’s primary focus — excludes expression of an artist’s personal emotions. If an artistic piece is intended to convey or evoke emotion, certain linguistic tools should be utilized instead of mere reflection of the artists’ personal emotions.

### **Toni Morrison’s Approach to Literary Representations of Slavery**

In the American context, the modernist, therefore western, emphasis on emotionless historical representation and advocacy of non-autobiographical artistic emotional reconstruction fuse into a shared critical analytical approach towards slave

narratives. Toni Morrison cites a critic Paul Edward, who vouched for the historical and literary validity of the renown slave narrative by Olaudah Equiano, entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. This work, according to Edward, attained recognition in part because of the absence of emotional traits within it. He states, “As a rule [...] [Equiano] puts no emotional pressure on the reader other than that which the situation itself contains — his language does not strain after our sympathy, but expects it to be given naturally and at the proper time. This quiet avoidance of emotional display produces many of the best passages in the book” (qtd. in Morrison, *What Moves* 67). Morrison notes the emotionless representation of brutality in slave narratives. She reasons that the narratives’ authors sought to produce works “as objective as possible [...] not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names” (67). This approach is understandable when consideration is given to the fact that the most popular slave narratives were written during slavery, when literacy and articulateness among enslaved black people was viewed as threatening. The authors sought not to alienate white readers, a considerable part of whom were slaveholders. By cautiously avoiding emotionally intense descriptive narrations, the authors garnered more white appeal for their texts.

In order to supplement and bring to surface the repressed emotional content submerged in slave narratives, Toni Morrison seeks to reveal in her representations deeper dimensions of historical truth related to slavery by incorporating documented history and reconstructing the interior lives of people living in that particular historical period. Otherwise, the truth is not complete as Morrison writes, “memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” (*What Moves* 71). Employing her artistic imagination, Toni Morrison endeavors to envision the “‘picture’ and the feelings that accompany the picture” (*What Moves* 71).

In *A Mercy*, Morrison incorporates vivid images in conjunction with powerful emotions in order to reconstruct the emergence of racialized slavery in America. By this incorporation, the novelist’s objective of supplementing existing slave narratives is realized. Morrison also ponders the circumstances prior to the emergence of vast, systemic slave plantations, while slave narratives recount enslaved life. In her account, Morrison expresses the emotional interior life of plantation inhabitants, ranging from avaricious Euro-American planters to confused and bewildered African-American slaves. She further considers these factors along with others that led to the formation of a racialized mindset, which fomented racial bifurcation within American society. The gaps in documented history concerning

the rise of racialized America, that Morrison seeks to fill in, refer to the apparently pre-racial 1676 Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, during which "an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured — had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class" (*A Mercy* 11) and the racial repercussions which followed that systematically disfranchised black people. "By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms of black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever" (11-12).

### **Interior Life during the Emergence of Slavery**

Morrison focuses upon the unbridled growth of Euro-American avariciousness and possessiveness as points of departure harbingering racialized slavery in America. The emotions accompanying the New World sojourns of three characters, a Portuguese slaveholder, Senhor D'Ortega, a Dutch planter, Jacob Vaark, and his English wife, Rebekka Vaark, together reflect the formulation of the ethos of Euro-American slavocracy.

Senhor D'Ortega embodies gross inhuman opportunism. He expresses very negative emotions at the loss of his human chattel. He exhibits no human compassion regarding the plight and sufferings of enslaved black people held in bondage aboard a slave ship. His is, however, emotionally concerned about the financial loss he will incur as a result of one third of the ship's human "cargo" dying of fever. Additionally, to his chagrin, he incurred a fine for throwing the dead bodies overboard too close to the bay. Another manifestation of this slaveholder's heartless possessiveness and commodification of black people is the manner in which he trades his slaves as if they were emotionless, soulless objects. Without hesitation, he offers his obligee, Jacob Vaark, an enslaved woman as reimbursement for a debt. When Vaark selects apparently D'Ortega's favorite female slave, the Portuguese slaveholder hopes to convince Vaark that another woman would be of greater value because she is a nursing slave at reproductive age that would breed more offspring thereby multiplying his free labor force. He emphasizes, "You don't seem to comprehend my offer [...] The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate" (28). Furthermore, D'Ortega has no regard for emotional bonds between slaves. The outcome of the transaction between Vaark and D'Ortega is the separation of a daughter, Florens, from her mother, which, historically speaking, was quite common. "Planters were frequently in debt. Their slaves would be sold, often with the children separated from their parents" (Nichols 10). On the whole,

D'Ortega's possessiveness that he fulfills through chattel slavery resurfaces in two recurring emotions, anger at property loss and total lack of compassion as he trades and exhibits human beings for material gain.

Morrison not only presents the avariciousness of an established planter, but also the evolving greed of Euro-American settlers. Through the sojourn of the character Jacob Vaark, Morrison reveals the emotional changes that the promising realm of the New World engenders. Initially, Vaark experiences a sense of uncertainty in the midst of unfamiliar territory. The different fog he confronts, "sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold" (10) is blurring, confusing, and even blinding. He can "see his boots sloshing but not his satchel nor his hands" (10). However, he grows in confidence as the vast territory with its promising ambience embraces him.

Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream. As mud became swamp grass, he turned left, stepping gingerly until he stumbled against wooden planks leading up beach toward the village. Other than his own breath and tread, the world was soundless. It was only after he reached the live oak trees that the fog wavered and split. He moved faster then, more in control but missing, too, the blinding gold he had come through. (10-11)

His bolstered confidence fuses with hope and happiness as he luckily obtains "one hundred and twenty acres of a dormant patroonship" (13) that he had inherited from his uncle before coming to America. The intoxication with the freshness of the New World evokes further hopefulness for more property. "Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him [...] Now here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life" (13). Two breakthroughs whet Vaark's greed. One is the luxurious mansion on D'Ortega's Jubilo plantation, which greatly impresses him, and the fertile land that surrounds it. The house is made of honey-colored stone and servants welcome visitors. There is also the "comfortable smell of tobacco leaves" (16) roundabout. Initially, Vaark's emotions are mixed. He resents the arrogance and vanity displayed by the Portuguese planter, but at the same time he is taken by "the estate honestly" (24). Upon one of his subsequent visits, he aspires to equally acquire such wealth. He ruminates, "So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property?" (31). The second breakthrough occurs during the conversation with an experienced

adventurer, Peter Downs, whom Vaark meets on his way from D'Ortega's plantation. Downs informs Vaark about the profitability of rum production, which requires much less effort and risk than other production endeavors, which involve strenuous fertilization, harvesting, and processing. Eventually, an epigraphic narrative statement recapitulates Jacob Vaark's overall route towards affluent planter: "When Jacob, a small-scale trader for the Company with a side line in fur and lumber, found himself an heir of sorts, he relished the thought of becoming a landowning, independent farmer [...] He did what was necessary: secured a wife, someone to help her, planted, built, fathered .... He had simply added the trading life" (39).

Toni Morrison also reimagines the emotional life of an ascending Anglo-American plantation mistress through the character Rebekka Vaark, who underwent fear and humiliation in the Old World as a result of patriarchal oppression and religiosity. Had she stayed in England, she would have been destined to be a "servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest" (91). Patriarchal oppression is even evidenced by the circumstances under which she treks to the New World. Her parents, regarding her as hopeless and resentful, sell her to a wealthy unknown man, who simply seeks an obedient and resourceful wife. As she approaches the beckoning fresh, vast, and intact land, Rebekka feels assured and released from the oppression she had experienced in England. For a while, she enjoys serving her husband and seeing to everyday chores. Unfortunately, in the long run, her hopes fade after her husband and children die prematurely. After her loss, she is further beset by smallpox, but she ruggedly endures. In the process, Rebekka's sense of self-confidence rises to the point that she assumes the posture of a dominant widowed plantation mistress. Religiously, she finds solace and self-affirmation in apologetic Christianity, which leads her to humiliate non-Christian, non-white slaves — a black woman named Florens and a Native American woman named Lina. Florens observes Rebekka's growing negative emotions, "Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone. Each time she returns from the meetinghouse her eyes are nowhere and have no inside [...] She makes us all [...] sleep either in the cowshed or the storeroom where bricks rope tools all manner of building waste are. Outside sleeping is for savages she says" (186). Racially, Rebekka privileges only white male serfs, with whom she begins to feel a certain racial solidarity. She remunerates them for services rendered; and paternalistically sees to their future prospects. Respectively, non-white female slaves were totally under her subjection. Morrison revisits the rise of the American

dream and the images and feelings that accompanied it. She writes, "In the New World there was the vision of a limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction, and turmoil left behind" (*Playing* 34).

In *A Mercy*, the Euro-American characters' hope for advancement and liberation from loss, isolation, poverty, and humiliation is infected by increasing avariciousness and white supremacy. Their acquisitiveness leads to territorial usurpation for expansive plantations and the merciless degradation of human beings to chattel in pursuit of wealth.

### **Internal Lives of the Enslaved**

Toni Morrison not only engages in reimagining the emotions of emerging Euro-American slaveholders, but concomitantly also delves into the internal lives of the oppressed. The most poignant and touching emotions are expressed by the enslaved in response to oppression and social degradation.

During slavery, the threat of forced family separation by sale was always menacingly present. Such sales were intensely emotional. Forceful separation of family members by slavers was extremely painful. Toni Morrison reconstructs an emotionally complex circumstance whereby a black enslaved mother chooses to give one of her children, a daughter, to another slave master. The girl grows up away from her mother on Jacob Vaark's plantation, and has conflicting emotions about her mother's decision until her true motive is revealed. The black mother, Minha Mae, out of love for her daughter, pleaded with Jacob Vaark to take her daughter, Florens, instead of her son because she knew what would have befallen the girl if she had remained on the plantation with her mother. Like herself, her daughter would have been raped, an act the whites on her plantation regarded as mating. For the enslaved woman, this is equivalent of bestial breeding to multiply a labor force. She relates the brutal nature of her own sexual assault: "first the mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother" (194). The fusion of motherly love and traumatic memory evoke fear and resolve to save her child from a similar fate. The woman considers sending her daughter away to be the lesser tragedy.

The character Florens expresses her own emotions to racialized oppression. Her birth on one plantation and being transported to another makes her feel at times like a motherless child. Moreover, Florens is perplexed that others associate her with demonic forces. As formerly stated, her mistress Rebekka adheres to an

apologetic Christianity that deems non-believers to be soulless heathens. On the way to Blacksmith, the craftsman and healer, for whom diseased Rebekka has sent Florens, the black girl accidentally comes across the house of Widow Ealing where she is openly regarded as an incarnation of evil. A mysterious religious grouping compare Florens, a female, to a devilish figure called the Black Man. Florens is confounded that her blackness represents an ill omen for them. "One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black [...] Afric and much more, says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion" (131). The Christian sect examines her physical makeup in order to determine the extent of her devilishness. Florens is shamed by their treatment of her,

Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. (135)

When she states that the penetrating eyes do not recognize her individual self, she reveals awareness of her humanity that the religious grouping denies. The shame Florens experiences under their examination is precursor to the shame most enslaved black people would later feel, when they underwent nude inspection on auction blocks. bell hooks informs that "'Naked on auction blocks in a world so different from their familiar understandings, joined with other darker-skinned folks who did not necessarily speak the same language, enslaved black people were vulnerable to shaming" (37).

Florens is also bewildered by the Puritan's conceptualization of a sinister, demonic figure called the Black Man. At this point, Toni Morrison projects black intellectual response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* wherein is found the most recognized classic literary reference to the menacing "Black Man." Notes to Hawthorne's novel refer to this concept as "A common euphemism for the Christian devil, whom the Puritans associated with the forested wilderness that surrounded their settlements and with the Native Americans who dwelled within it" (250). In Morrison's novel, the black female character Florens finds her demonization fueled by reference to the Black Man to be particularly confusing



because her experience of the black man had been that of the loving and beautiful Blacksmith, who was in no way demonic.

Florens' affection for the blacksmith represents another aspect of black enslaved interior life. The difference between Florens' and Blacksmith's social status makes their intimate relationship complex. She is a slave, he is a free man employed by her master. Feeling abandoned by her mother, suffering isolation on the new plantation, and years of reclusion, Florens develops affection for Blacksmith, which, in turn, evolves into passionate love. Florens' love gradually becomes more and more possessive in form. The extremity of her feeling is given added impetus by the overall yearnings of an enslaved person. First, as a demeaned and rejected object of commercial transaction, Florens seeks recognition. Therefore, she misleadingly persuades herself that she is central to Blacksmith's life, contending, "I am his tree" (71). Secondly, she discovers the significance of ancestral connectedness in that blacksmith's craftsmanship is a continuing generational practice. She ponders the spiritual dimension of Blacksmith's closeness to his forefathers: "And you know the ancestors approve when two owls appear at the very instant you say their names so you understand they are showing themselves to bless you. See, you say, see how they swivel their heads. They approve you also, you tell me" (80). Florence is uplifted when he goes on to plead that his ancestors recognize her.

Blacksmith's firing of her passionate love for him engenders greater discernment that indeed black is beautiful. Florens testifies,

You probably don't know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moonrise. I rest there. My hand, my eyes, my mouth. The first time I see it you are shaping fire with bellows. The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there. I run away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move. Your arm goes up to strike iron. You drop to one knee. You bend. You stop to pour water first on the iron then down your throat. Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you. My mouth is open, my legs go softly and the heart is stretching to break. (43-44)

Although this new sense of uncontrolled passion is overwhelming and inexplicable to her, Florens becomes fully alive. She longs for Blacksmith's invigorating

presence: "I think if you wake and see me seeing you I will die. I run away not knowing then you are seeing me seeing you. And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live" (44). Further on in the novel, Florens compares the empowering love ignited within her by the black man, who becomes a "worship" (74) object, with the desecration of black male beauty by white Christian. Morrison presents this as an indication that a love relationship between an enslaved black woman and a free black man could provide mutual affirmation of the beauty and humanity of both.

Nevertheless, at the same time, Morrison considers the enslaved woman's devastatingly powerful over possessive love, whose emotions and reasoning have been warped by slavery. Her possessiveness transforms into morbid jealousy; resulting in her lost of a chance to share her life with a "free" black man. When he returns after curing Rebekka Vaark, he is outraged at the injury Florens allegedly had inflicted upon Malaik, the boy he had adopted. Without seeking explanation for Malaik's condition — "still and limp on the floor with that trickle of red from his mouth" (165) — he accuses Florens of irresponsibility. His partiality is most striking and disappointing to her. She muses, "No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first. You take him to lie down with the doll and return to me your broken face, eyes without glee, rope pumps in your neck. I am lost. No word of sorrow for knocking me off my feet. No tender fingers to touch where you hurt me. I cower. I hold down the feathers lifting" (165). Blacksmith reproaches her for exhibiting, through submissiveness and possessiveness, a slave mentality. He orders her to return to her mistress. Actually, Blacksmith was aware of Florens' inability to make independent, constructive, reasonable decisions and behave like a truly free person. Such freedom of choice was a real challenge to Florens, whose understanding of freedom was other. Morrison incorporates a poetic image that evidences the confusion and uncertainty Florence underwent when she had to choose on her own. On the way back to the plantation, trying to choose either flowers or a stag, she felt discomfort, looseness, and fear: "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. When I choose and say good morning, the stag bounds away" (82). Unfortunately, she is not the self-loving, resourceful, autonomous woman that Blacksmith seeks. Florens' emotions manifest a paralyzing slave mentality, which blocks her from fully understanding freedom. Her overall emotional condition can be treated as the allegory relative to the attitudes many manumitted black slaves held after the Emancipation Proclamation. Although they formally obtained freedom, they were befuddled by it and often even their most

basic needs were difficult to meet. As a result, many ex-slaves found themselves lonely, hungry, homeless, and helpless in a virtual wilderness. “Freedom” evoked conflicting emotions.

Morrison also portrays the feelings of white servants on the plantation. Historically, some of the first slave plantations were somewhat pre-racial in that the masters owned slaves and serfs of varied races and descent. Later, slavery would become a racial affair. In *A Mercy*, the white serfs’ feelings towards black people manifest the mindset that set the foundation for systemic racial slavery. Even though they are seemingly at the same level on the social ladder, they project a sense of white supremacy relative to blacks. White serfs’ interior feelings about black people have significant bearing here.

One of the ways by which white serfs demean black people is through a bestial notion of black love. A white serf, Sorrow, sees Florens and Blacksmith’s relationship as uncontrollable lust.

The blacksmith and Florens were rocking and, unlike female farm animals in heat, she was not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male. What Sorrow saw yonder in the grass under a hickory tree was not the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew. This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing. Florens rolled and twisted from her back to his. He hoisted her up against the hickory; she bent her head into his shoulder. A dancing. Horizontal one minute, another minute vertical. Sorrow watched until it was over; until, stumbling like tired old people, they dressed themselves. It all ended when the blacksmith grabbed Florens’ hair, yanked her head back to put his mouth on hers. Then they went off in different directions. (151)

Such discourse discloses a widely held stereotypical perspective among whites about black sexuality, a sexually seen as excessive and perverse. Sorrow’s voyeuristic gazing at the black couple’s intimacy reveals a kind of morbid curiosity, not to mention violation of privacy. Moreover, her morbidity is facilitated by envy and her traumatic past. She yearns for a passionate relationship that she fantasizes all black people enjoy. Earlier sex abuse had robbed her of that joy. In sorrow, she regrets that “no one had ever kissed her mouth. Ever” (151), the way Blacksmith kissed Florens.

Not only does a white woman but also white male serfs, Willard and Scully,

consider Florens and Blacksmith's passion astonishing. Willard expresses his wonderment, stating, "In all my born days [...] I never saw anything like it. He takes her when and where he wants and she hunts him like a she-wolf if he's not in her eye. If he's off at his bloomery for a day or two, she sulks till he comes back hauling the blooms of ore" (177). He also makes fun of the black man's sexual prowess. "Chuckling to himself, Willard understood why the girl, Florens, was struck silly by the man" (177). The white males' attitudes towards the black woman are equally licentious. Scully lusts after Florens, "if he 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" (178-179). Both, white women and a Native American woman, think that black women are sexually wanton. The white male character Scully's feelings regarding Florens reflect the fetishization of the black woman's body, which was a mindset that conjured up the stereotypical notion of black female sexual promiscuity, which, in turn, fostered prejudicial gender racial politics, opening the door to "racial and sexual oppression and class discrimination" (Hine 35) of black women reflected by the sexual assault upon Florens' mother.

White envy leads to belittlement of black people through discriminatory and insulting sexual references. White supremacist envy also has an imprint on the formation of mindsets that lead to racial social stratification. In *A Mercy*, the white male serfs cannot abide the privileges a free black man receives. Before Blacksmith arrives to do some work for Jacob Vaark, the white male indentured servants, Willard and Scully, develop a family-like relationship with their master.

For years the neighboring farm population made up the closest either man would know of family. A goodhearted couple (parents), and three female servants (sisters, say) and them helpful sons. Each member dependent on them, none cruel, all kind. Especially the master who, unlike their more-or-less absent owner, never cursed or threatened them. He even gave them gifts of rum during Christmastide and once he and Willard shared a tipple straight from the bottle. (169)

Upon observing the conclusion of a business partnership between their master and a free black man, the white serfs seek to assert superiority over the black man. Willard encouraged Scully not to cooperate with Blacksmith and "refused any request the black man made. Refused to chop chestnut, haul charcoal or work bellows and 'forgot' to shield green lumber from rain" (176). Although systemic

racial slavery has not commenced, the tow white serfs sense of white supremacy is presented as a continuation of old Europe, which the Native American female slave, Lina, acknowledges by the poignant statement, “Both were Europes, after all” (67). Also the fact that Willy refuses to call Blacksmith “mister,” as he does to him, evidences white supremacist thinking. To do otherwise, he would affirm an inferior status relative to Blacksmith. Willard’s and Scully’s dream to reach the level of slave master surfaces after Rebekka Vaark begins to remunerate them after her husband’s demise. Scully, for instance, meticulously calculates the income that would buy his freedom. Not wanting “to spend his life just searching for something to eat and love” (181), he temporarily assumes the posture of an obedient servant to Rebekka to save as much money as possible. Willard and Scully represent the lower class whites who felt superior to blacks, even if a black person has higher social status.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, in *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison offers in-depth insight into the interior lives of people who were either subject or objects in the formation and pursuit of the American Dream. She reconstructs the feelings and attitudes that gave rise to white patriarchal capitalism, and its roots in racialized slavery. Although history references black slaveholders, they were very few in number; “the peculiar institution” was dominated and supported by whites. Moreover, as Morrison brings up in her novel, certain racially specific laws were implemented, which granted privilege to white males. Black people became a referent from which whites calculated their own status. Morrison states in an interview that, “Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group — and that was [black people]” (Taylor-Guthrie 255). In *A Mercy*, the characters who aspire to be recognized as citizens at least one level above black people are Euro-American immigrants, most overtly, the religiously apologetic Rebekka Vaark, Widow Ealing, and her religious sect, the English indentured servants Willard and Scully, and the Portuguese planter, D’Ortega. Additionally, Morrison highlights the transformation of hope into avariciousness and the merciless, capitalist abuse of people and land that followed. It may be fittingly stated that the novelist elaborates on the import of the final paragraph of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which reads

the old island [...] that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way

for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (115)

In her work, Morrison imagines the emotions that accompany the sojourns of Dutch immigrant, Jacob Vaark, towards planter status, who in the process develops self-confidence, hope, and, finally, descends into avariciousness whetted by the promising, vast, intact landscape. The Portuguese slaveholder and white indentured servants are analogously acquisitive. The realization of their dreams comes through, to a large extent, through the commodification and subjugation of other human beings, mostly black slaves, whose inferiority is religiously, ontologically, and socially rationalized. The melancholic feelings, precursor to the blues, that black people express upon facing their newly defined identity and function are shame, confusion, and pain, as exemplified by the characters Florens and her mother.

Therefore, Morrison elucidates the emotional dynamics between white subjects and black objects and their individual feelings at the genesis of racial and social bifurcation of mainstream American society that subsequently evolved into systemic racialized slavery. In doing so, the novelist realizes her objective to complement the discourse of slave narratives. Not only does she express the repressed emotionally intense environment of slavery, but Morrison also reconstructs the feelings and approaches that fostered the racialized mindset, which was the harbinger of chattel slavery.

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