A Mercy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio to working-class parents Ramah and George Wofford. Morrison's parents relocated to Ohio from the South in order to escape the racism that became increasingly violent in the South in the early 1900s. After graduating from Howard University with a bachelor's degree in English in 1953, Morrison earned a Masters of the Arts in English from Cornell University. Morrison then worked as an English professor at various universities, including Howard University, her alma mater. She published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. Since her first work, Morrison has published eleven novels, including Pulitzer prize-winning *Beloved*, along with multiple plays, works of children's literature, and non-fiction books. In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a work of historical fiction, Toni Morrison's novel references the historical climate and events of the time period and place in which it is set: 17th century America. In early colonial America, various types of human bondage, from chattel slavery to indentured servitude, were common and omnipresent. Morrison alludes to how, in the 17th century, American land ownership was constantly shifting, with European powers fighting against native tribes and each other for ownership. Through the character of Lina, Morrison describes the atrocities committed against the native peoples of North America under colonial rule. In order to frame the shifting racial climate of the late 17th century, Morrison alludes specifically to Bacon's Rebellion, a 1676 uprising of slaves and indentured servants against the rule of Virginia governor William Berkeley. The rebellion, lead by colonist Nathaniel Bacon, was ultimately suppressed. However, the collaboration between slaves (who were, for the most part, black) and indentured servants (primarily white Europeans) concerned rich Virginian landowners, because it showed the subversive power of a united lower class. Following Bacon's Rebellion, the Virginia government instated a series of laws referred to as the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, reducing the rights of black slaves and black people in general in the state of Virginia. Historians generally understand these laws and others passed following Bacon's Rebellion as an attempt by Virginian landowners and officials to encourage racism and sharpen racial divisions. They did this in order to prevent the unification of the lower class across racial lines that threatened white landowning power in 1676. *A Mercy* takes place during the critical period following Bacon's Rebellion, as racial boundaries began to harden.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

At the time of its publication, Morrison's publisher advertised *A Mercy* as a companion novel to Morrison's Pulitzer-winning novel *Beloved*. Both books center on motherhood and the impossible moral choices that people must make under the yoke of slavery and in societies founded on slave labor. Southern gothic writer William Faulkner and Modernist writer Virginia Woolf, about whom Morrison wrote her Master's thesis, have been major influences on Morrison's work in general.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Mercy
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, Contemporary African-American Literature
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** 17th century colonial America
- **Climax:** Multiple: the Blacksmith leaving Florens after she hurts the child in his house, the final revelation of Florens's mother's motivation for telling Jacob to take Florens with him
- **Antagonist:** D'Ortega, slavery
- **Point of View:** Multiple (first person narrative of Florens and Florens's mother, third person limited narratives from the perspectives of Jacob, Rebekka, Lina, Sorrow, and Willard and Scully)

EXTRA CREDIT

Name. Toni Morrison's pen name is significantly different than her birth name. Morrison adopted her last name from her ex-husband, Harold Morrison. Her nickname, "Toni," is the shortened version of her baptismal name, Anthony.

Nobel Prize. Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize win made her the first African-American to ever to earn the distinction. She was also the first American woman to win the award in 55 years.

PLOT SUMMARY

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is told through many perspectives and deals with time in a nonlinear way. As result, it is hard to pinpoint where exactly *A Mercy* begins. One beginning might be the day that Jacob Vaark, a farmer and trader from New

England, goes to Maryland to settle a debt with the plantation owner and slave trader D'Ortega.

D'Ortega offers Jacob any slave he wants as compensation for his debt, and although Jacob dislikes slavery, he proposes take a female slave, Florens's mother. Florens's mother, wanting to save her daughter Florens from the lifetime of sexual abuse and rape she herself has suffered at the hands of D'Ortega, begs Jacob to take her daughter instead. Jacob agrees and D'Ortega arranges to have Florens sent to New England. Florens, who does not understand her mother's motives for giving her up, feels abandoned. On his way out of the plantation, Jacob admires D'Ortega's magnificent house. On his journey back, Jacob decides to invest more in the sugar cane industry in order to make enough money to build a house like that of his own.

At the Vaark farm, Florens meets Jacob's wife Rebekka and their servants Lina and Sorrow. Rebekka came from Europe to marry Jacob after Jacob advertised in England that he was looking for a wife. Rebekka has recently lost her daughter, Patrician, in an accident with a horse. Prior to Patrician's death, Rebekka's baby boys all died in infancy.

Florens quickly realizes that Sorrow, who was found half drowned as an adolescent and then given to Jacob, is mentally unstable. Before Florens's arrival, Sorrow delivered a baby that Lina told her was stillborn, adding to her mental precariousness. Lina, a native woman whose entire village was wiped out by fire, takes Florens under her wing and acts as a surrogate mother to her.

Jacob begins to amass wealth thanks to his investments, and he decides to build a **house** like D'Ortega's. Laborers from all over come to help build it, including the indentured servants from the next farm over, Willard and Scully. Willard and Scully, having spent a lot of time at the Vaark farm, are close with the family. Jacob also commissions an iron fence, bringing in a blacksmith to make it for him.

Florens falls in love with the Blacksmith, who is a free African man, when she meets him. The two strike up a romantic relationship. Lina, who is herself traumatized by an abusive relationship in her past, warns Florens to be careful.

During the Blacksmith's tenure at the farm, Sorrow falls ill with smallpox and the Blacksmith miraculously heals her. When the Blacksmith finishes his work, he leaves the farm without saying goodbye to Florens, leaving her devastated.

Sorrow is pregnant and Jacob's house is nearly finished when he contracts smallpox. All the laborers leave, fearing contagion, and not even Willy and Scully are allowed near. Jacob's last wish is to be taken into his new house to die there, so Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow all carry him inside, where he passes away. At Jacob's funeral, Rebekka realizes she has pockmarks inside her mouth. The next day, she is bedridden with the disease.

Rebekka, remembering how the Blacksmith saved Sorrow when she became sick, sends Florens to go find him and bring him back with her. Lina stays behind to care for Rebekka while Florens sets out on her journey. After a wagon ride and a terrifying night in the woods, Florens comes to a village and seeks shelter in the cottage of a woman named Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane. The other villagers have accused Jane of being a demon. During Florens's stay they come to the house to examine her. While there, the villagers see Florens and accuse her of being a devil because of her dark skin. Florens flees with Jane's help before they can persecute her.

Finally, Florens arrives at the Blacksmith's house. She tells him about Rebekka, and the Blacksmith decides to set out at once. He tells Florens she must stay at his cabin so that she can take care of a little boy, Malaik, that he has adopted. Florens, who wants the Blacksmith's unrestricted attention and love, feels jealous and threatened by the boy. The Blacksmith rides off to heal Rebekka.

While The Blacksmith is away for several days, Florens becomes more and more paranoid about the boy's presence. She remembers what she thinks was her mother choosing her baby brother over her, and feels the same thing will happen now with Malaik. When Malaik will not stop crying, Florens grabs him by the arm hard and accidently breaks it. Just then, the Blacksmith returns and sees that Florens has hurt the child. Furious, he hits Florens and casts her out. Florens hits the Blacksmith in the face with a pair of tongs, bloodying him, before running away. She makes her way back through the woods to the Vaark farm barefoot.

Florens returns to find that Rebekka is healed. Much changes, however. The farm has grown wild during the time it was left unattended, so Rebekka hires Will and Scully for help. While Florens was away, Sorrow gave birth to her baby, and motherhood improves her mental health significantly. Rebekka becomes highly religious after her near death experience, and also becomes very mean. She is cruel to Lina, beats Sorrow, and intends to sell Florens. Florens, too, is changed. She is much more moody since the Blacksmith left her, and often thinks of how (as far as she knows) her mother abandoned her. Every night she sneaks into the house and carves words into the wood of one room, narrating her story in the hopes that someday the Blacksmith will read it. Florens never finds out the true reason behind her mother's actions: selfless motherly love.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Florens – Florens is a slave of the Vaarks' farm, a surrogate daughter to Lina, and the Blacksmith's lover. Desperate for affection and eager to please, Florens is a hardworking, naïve teenage girl. Florens grew up on D'Ortega's plantation in

Maryland. On the plantation, the local Reverend taught Florens and her family how to read and write. When Jacob comes to the plantation, Florens's mother begs for Jacob to take Florens away with him instead of herself. Florens thinks this is because Florens's mother cared more about her brother than about her (though this turns out not to be the case). Florens then moves to the Vaark farm where she meets Rebekka and their other servants. Lina adopts Florens as a surrogate child, sewing her soft skin **shoes** and telling her stories. When the Blacksmith comes into town to make a fence for Jacob, Florens falls madly in love with him. Florens and the Blacksmith strike up a romantic relationship that ends when the Blacksmith finishes his work and leaves. When Rebekka falls ill, Florens goes on a journey to find the Blacksmith to heal her, all the while hoping the Blacksmith will let her live with him. Florens finds the Blacksmith, who leaves her with the orphan he is caring for, Malaik, while he goes to heal Rebekka. Florens becomes jealous of Malaik and accidentally breaks the boy's arm. When the Blacksmith returns, he hits Florens for hurting Malaik. Florens, feeling abandoned, strikes the Blacksmith with a pair of tongs and runs away. Florens returns to the Vaark farm, where she spends every night carving her narrative in words into the wooden walls of one of the rooms of the house.

Florens's Mother – Florens's mother, who is unnamed throughout the book, is a slave on D'Ortega's Maryland plantation. She was born in Africa and then taken to Barbados as a slave to work on the sugar cane plantations. Florens's mother was later bought by D'Ortega and shipped up to Maryland. D'Ortega ordered Florens's mother to be gang raped when she arrived on the plantation, and he later sexually abused her himself. Florens's mother has two children, Florens and her brother, as a result of these rapes. When Jacob comes to the farm, Florens's mother, not wanting her daughter to suffer the same fate that she did, begs him to take her. Jacob does, and Florens's mother hopes that her daughter understands her sacrifice.

The Blacksmith – The Blacksmith is Florens's lover, Malaik's caretaker, and a contractor for Jacob. He is a free black man and a mysterious figure throughout *A Mercy*. The Blacksmith is the only main character in the novel (other than Florens's mother) without a name—he is only ever referred to as "the blacksmith." The Blacksmith comes to the Vaarks' farm to make an iron fence and gate for Jacob's new, fancy **house**. During his time at the farm, the Blacksmith heals Sorrow's life-threatening sickness. He also begins a sexual relationship with Florens during this time, but leaves without saying goodbye to her. When Florens finds him to tell him Rebekka is sick, and that she wants to stay with him, she finds that he is taking care of an orphaned boy name Malaik. When the Blacksmith returns, the Blacksmith finds that Florens has hurt the boy out of jealousy. He casts Florens out, but not before she hits him with his smithing tongs, bloodying his face.

Lina – Lina is a native woman owned by Jacob Vaark. Lina is loyal, superstitious, and hardworking. She is a friend of her mistress Rebekka Vaark and a surrogate mother to Florens. Lina began her life in a native village (of an unnamed tribe). During her adolescence, however, a plague of smallpox afflicted her village, killing nearly everyone. Following the epidemic, European soldiers burned the village and gave Lina to a village of Presbyterians. During her tenure with them, Lina had a romance with a European man that turned into a highly abusive relationship. The Presbyterians later sold Lina to Jacob Vaark. Despite her churchgoing with the Presbyterians, Lina practices native rituals and healing remedies. She is skeptical of European culture, systems, and people.

Sorrow – Sorrow is a young woman and an **orphan** who works on the Vaarks' farm. Several times during the book, characters imply that Sorrow is mixed race and heavily suggest that Sorrow suffers from some kind of mental illness or possession by evil spirits. Sorrow's exact origins are unknown to everyone else in the book. As an adolescent, a lumberjack found Sorrow half drowned on a beach and took her back to his wife. Sorrow would tell them nothing about her prior life, so the lumberjack's wife named her "Sorrow." The lumberjack sold Sorrow to Jacob after she proved unable to complete simple tasks. During her chapter, Sorrow reveals that, prior to being found on the beach, she was a Captain's daughter who had spent her whole life on a ship. When the ship was wrecked, Sorrow began hallucinating an imaginary friend, Twin. Sorrow became pregnant before arriving at the Vaarks farm. When Lina delivers her baby, she tells her it is stillborn and sets it in the river to be carried away. Sorrow is convinced the baby was alive and suffers greatly from the loss. The next time she becomes pregnant, presumably from her secret meetings with the deacon, Sorrow has a healthy baby. Following the birth of her child, Sorrow stops hallucinating and becomes more focused and capable. She renames herself "Complete."

Rebekka Vaark – Rebekka Vaark is Jacob's wife and Lina, Florens, and Sorrow's "mistress" (owner). Rebekka was born in England, where she lived with her devotedly religious but cold and unloving parents. In England, Rebekka began a training program to become a domestic servant, but dropped out because the head of the program was sexually harassing her. Rebekka's father sent her to marry Jacob in order to relieve him of the burden of paying for her upkeep. Rebekka arrives in America and marries Jacob. She manages the family farm while Jacob is away trading. She feels only somewhat religious and does not join the local church. Rebekka becomes pregnant several times, but only one of her children, Patrician, lives past infancy. When Patrician dies in an accident with a horse, Rebekka becomes withdrawn and sad. Rebekka and Jacob have a happy marriage, and she enjoys Jacob's presence while they build their third **house** together. After Jacob's death, Rebekka falls ill with small pox. She recovers, and following her illness,

Rebekka becomes devoutly religious.

Jacob Vaark – Jacob Vaark is a farmer and trader in New England, husband of Rebekka, father of Patrician, and master of Lina, Sorrow, and Florens. The son of a Dutchman and an Englishwoman, Jacob was **orphaned** as a child, growing up in a poorhouse until he eventually became a runner for a law firm and inherited land in New England from an unknown uncle. Jacob is a not-especially-devout Protestant and a not-especially-good farmer. Jacob arranges a marriage with Rebekka, who travels overseas to live with him. Despite not having known each other previously, Rebekka and Jacob fall in love and enjoy a happy marriage. Their martial bliss is tempered, though, by the deaths of all of their children. When his farm does not succeed, Jacob turns more and more to trading. Although he despises the slave trade, Jacob becomes increasingly involved in it. After a visit to the D'Ortega's plantation, where Jacob buys Florens and becomes jealous of the D'Ortegas' beautiful house, Jacob decides to invest in a sugar cane plantation in Barbados so he can make a fortune and build a huge **house**. Jacob does become rich from the investment and begins construction. However, Jacob falls ill with smallpox just before the house is finished. On his deathbed, his wife and servant bring him into the house and lay him on the floor, where he dies.

D'Ortega – D'Ortega is a Portuguese Catholic slave trader living in Maryland. Jacob goes to see him at the beginning of the book to discuss business. D'Ortega is indulgent and ostentatious—he owns an enormous plantation called "Jublio," many slaves, and a beautiful but gaudy house. D'Ortega rapes Florens's mother and generally mistreats his slaves, including the ones he ships in from Africa to trade. D'Ortega has gotten himself into debt through a series of bad business decisions, prompting him to give Florens to Jacob to settle his debt.

The Reverend Father – The Reverend Father is the Catholic priest who lives in D'Ortega's parish in Maryland. The Reverend Father takes Florens and her family under his wing: helping them, preaching the Catholic faith to them, and secretly teaching them to read. He delivers Florens to the Vaarks' farm on a boat before returning to Maryland.

Widow Ealing – Widow Ealing is Daughter Jane's mother. She meets and helps Florens when Florens is lost and on her way to find the Blacksmith, giving her food and shelter. Widow Ealing has red hair and light eyes. She and her daughter are part of a religious group that is threatening the family because they believe Jane is a demon. Widow Ealing petitions the other villagers and even cuts her daughter's legs to prove she is human. Widow Ealing further helps Florens by defending her when the other villagers, who have never seen a black person, think she is a devil.

Daughter Jane – Daughter Jane is Widow Ealing's daughter. Florens meets Daughter Jane while she shelters in their cottage for the night. Jane has a problem with her eyes, causing the other people in her village to think she is a demon. Widow Ealing cuts Jane's legs to prove that since she bleeds, she cannot be a demon, but the villagers are uncertain. When the villagers threaten to return later to persecute Florens, who they think is the devil, Jane takes Florens out into the woods, shows her the way to the Blacksmith's village, and gives her boiled duck eggs to take with her on her trip.

Willard – Willard is one of the indentured servants that belongs to the owner of a nearby cattle farm. Willard and his friend (and sometimes romantic partner) Scully often do work on the Vaark farm. Willard grew up working on a tobacco farm in Virginia before being sold up north. He was originally supposed to be indentured until he was 21, but a series of crimes and runaway attempts have extended his servitude far beyond that. Willard and Scully help Jacob build his new, enormous **house**. They then dig Jacob's grave when he dies. Willard and Scully also help Sorrow deliver her baby. After Jacob's death, Willard and Scully help Rebekka keep up the farm.

Scully – Scully is one of the indentured servants that belongs to the owner of a nearby cattle farm. Scully and his friend (and sometimes romantic partner) Willard often do work on the Vaark farm. Scully belonged to a group of clergymen until he was twelve, when one of the clergymen he was sleeping with blamed him for their sexual relationship. Scully was then sold up north. Scully plans on eventually obtaining his freedom and buying a horse. Scully and Willard help Jacob build his new, enormous **house**. They then dig Jacob's grave when he dies. Scully and Willard also help Sorrow deliver her baby. After Jacob's death, Scully and Willard help Rebekka keep up the farm.

Malaik – Malaik is an orphan that the Blacksmith is caring for when Florens shows up at his house to tell him about Rebekka's illness and beg to stay with him. Malaik is a young child, or perhaps a toddler, with dark skin. He carries around a cornhusk doll. Florens cares for Malaik while the blacksmith is gone, but resents Malaik because she feels that the blacksmith is going to choose Malaik over her. Florens accidentally breaks Malaik's arm while she is trying to get him to stop crying, prompting the blacksmith to cast her out when he returns.

MINOR CHARACTERS

D'Ortega's Wife – D'Ortega's wife is a Portuguese Catholic woman and the wife of D'Ortega, a slave owner. She wears overly fine clothes and is vain and shallow. Jacob finds her repulsive when he visits their plantation.

Patrician – Patrician is Rebekka and Jacob's daughter, and the only one of their children to live past infancy. Cherished by her parents, Patrician only lives to age five, when a horse kicks her in the head. Patrician's skull cracks as a result and she dies

several days later.

Florens's Brother – Florens's brother is a baby and a slave on the D'Ortega plantation when Florens is sold to Jacob. Florens feels that her mother chose her brother over her.

Twin – Twin is Sorrow's imaginary friend. Sorrow imagines Twin playing with her and talking to her. Twin looks exactly like Sorrow, and she first appeared to her after the traumatic shipwreck that only Sorrow survived. Twin disappears after Sorrow has her first healthy child.

Regina – Regina is the horse that Jacob rides from where his boat lands in Virginia to D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland.

Peter Downes – Peter Downes is a trader in the Caribbean sugar and rum industry. Jacob meets him on his way home from his business trip to Maryland. Peter Downes looks worse for wear, but he tells Jacob about the fantastic wealth to be made on the rum industry in Barbados.

Anne – Anne is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. Unlike the other women, who are thieves and prostitutes, Anne is a middle class woman who is being sent away to the colonies for disgracing her family.

Judith – Judith is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. She is a prostitute who chose to go to America rather than be sentenced to prison.

Lydia – Lydia is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. She is a prostitute who chose to go to America rather than be sentenced to prison.

Patty – Patty is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. She is the ten-year-old daughter of Lydia.

Elizabeth – Elizabeth is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. She is supposedly the daughter of a Company agent.

Dorothea – Dorothea is a passenger on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. A cutpurse, she was forced to choose between exile and prison, so she decided to go to America. Of all the women Rebekka meets on the ship, Rebekka feels closest with Dorothea.

Abigail – Abigail is one of the women on Rebekka's transatlantic ship. Abigail catches the Captain's eye, and she spends most of the voyage in his quarters.

Ney Brothers – The Ney Brothers drive the wagon that Florens uses to travel to the Blacksmith's house.

Figo – Figo is a slave boy on the D'Ortegas' plantation in Maryland. When Florens was a child, they used to play together.

Bess – Bess is Figo's mother and a slave woman on the D'Ortegas' plantation in Maryland. Like Florens's mother, Bess was gang raped when she arrived on the plantation.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HUMAN BONDAGE, WEALTH, AND HUMANITY

A Mercy takes place during a time in American history when labor was being exploited throughout the colonies through various forms of human bondage. Morrison's characters suffer under the variety of forms of bondage that were common in the late 17th century, from lifelong, hereditary chattel slavery (as in the case of first-generation slaves trafficked from Africa and their descendants) to indentured servitude, a system in which Europeans committed to a certain number of years of labor in return for the payment of their passage to America.

In both cases, slaves and indentured servants were considered to be the property of their master. The systems, however, differed greatly. For example, slaves were never compensated for their work, while indentured servants received money for their voyage to the colonies in return for their anticipated labor. Additionally, slave status was passed on to the children of slaves, while indentured servants were freed after the end of their work contract. (Though indentured servants still often had their contracts elongated arbitrarily, leaving them to provide their labor for indefinite periods.) Unlike indentured servants, and because of their race, slaves were also horrifically unprotected under law. As Jacob notes at one point in the book, the law even allowed black and native slaves to be shot by a white man for any and all reasons. While slavery clearly was a far more unjust and inhumane system than indentured servitude, both systems are forms of human bondage that violate modern moral codes and working laws.

Throughout her novel, Morrison suggests how both forms of bondage (chattel slavery and indentured servitude) break the spirits of the people suffering under them. Jacob clearly notices this oppressive, inhumane effect when he draws comparisons between his disgust with slavery and his observation of the look of surrender in the eyes of a beaten horse, clearly implying how the violence slaves face is torturous to the human spirit. Meanwhile, the indentured servant Scully offers an example of how bondage forces people to make choices that go against their own sense of righteousness. Morrison shows how Scully would like to help Lina, Florens, and Sorrow after Jacob's death, but he cannot do very much because he is afraid that if he does Rebekka will sell him, and so he will never have his freedom.

Among Morrison's 17th-century white, unbonded characters,

however, there is a plethora of different feelings about the prevalent presence of human bondage in the colonies. For example, D'Ortega, a Catholic slave trader with whom Jacob does business, has no moral qualms about the fact that he profits significantly from buying and selling other people. Jacob, meanwhile, is morally repulsed by the slave trade, finding it completely unsavory and insisting that "flesh is not his commodity," and calling it a "degraded" business. Jacob also clearly empathizes with slaves and comprehends their humanity. Upon seeing Florens, Jacob feels sympathy for her because of his own status as an **orphan** as a child, identifying with the young slave girl even though he is a free white man. But despite Jacob's aversion to slavery, he does accept Florens as payment for D'Ortega's debt without even entertaining the idea of freeing her. Moreover, after Jacob visits D'Ortega's house, he becomes more and more interested in acquiring wealth. Jacob manifests this obsession in his desire to build a mansion **house**. As Jacob tries to make the dream a reality, he invests more and more in the slave trade. So while Jacob is disgusted by slavery, he is content to profit from it financially, making him complicit in the entire inhumane system.

Through Jacob, Morrison seems to suggest the impossibility of building wealth in the colonial economy without becoming complicit in slavery. However, although the slave trade seems to be a boon for white traders like Jacob and D'Ortega, it also carries the possibility of backlash and ruin for them while destroying their moral fiber. Early in the novel, Jacob alludes to Bacon's Rebellion, a 1676 uprising in which slaves and indentured servants united to attempt to overthrow their wealthy white masters and gain control. Bacon's Rebellion terrified slave owners because it revealed the real danger they could face as a result of their cruelty and inhumanity. This uprising encouraged slave owners to further restrict the rights of black people and natives, and to encourage racism among poor white colonial residents in order to separate the two populations that together posed a real threat to the power and control of rich Europeans.

Moreover, in the book's final chapter Morrison suggests that, while slavery is fundamentally based on denying another human's humanity, slave owners are the ones whose humanity is ultimately threatened. During Florens's mother's narrative, Florens describes Jacob as human, unlike D'Ortega, suggesting that, through his cruelty, D'Ortega has become other-than-human. Morrison clearly shows that, although bondage produces wealth for slave owners and the owners of indentured servants, bondage is a horrific and thoroughly reprehensible system with terrible consequences for all involved.

THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND FEMALE COMMUNITY

Throughout *A Mercy*, Morrison describes and portrays the extremely common and disturbing violence that women face at the hands of men in 17th-century America. Over the course of the book, women characters suffer brutal beatings and sexual violence, which are in turn condoned by the male-dominated society.

Though Jacob does not beat Rebekka, Rebekka notes that wife beating is "common" in colonial America, but only legal before nine at night and "with cause and not anger." By drawing attention to how domestic violence is "restricted," Morrison damningly shows how 17th-century colonial society institutionalized, normalized, and legalized domestic violence against women. Moreover, the law includes no protections for unmarried women, as Rebekka notes when she describes Lina's past trauma. Lina suffered horrific violence when she was beaten and raped by a lover, leaving her traumatized and completely uninterested in sex.

And Lina is not the only character in the book to have suffered sexual violence— both Florens's mother and Sorrow have been victims of rape as well, and lack any protection from sexual violence because of their gender and race. Sorrow first becomes pregnant as a young adolescent, meaning that the sex she had as a child could not have been consensual. Moreover, when Sorrow watches Florens and the Blacksmith have sex, she is fascinated by its affection and intimacy because it is totally unlike her own experiences of sexual violence. As Sorrow watches the Blacksmith kiss Florens, she notes that no one she had sex with ever kissed her on the mouth, suggesting the violent nature of Sorrow's sexual experience.

Meanwhile, Morrison reveals at the end of the book that Florens's mother was raped at the orders of her master D'Ortega, and at the hands of D'Ortega himself. The violence that Florens's mother endures is so traumatizing that she would rather send her daughter away from her, never to see her again, than watch her suffer the same fate.

Violence against women is perhaps so rampant in the book because of the societal space women occupied in the colonies in the 17th century, when most women in America were considered to be the property of white men, either as slaves, indentured servants, or wives. Enslaved women, who were generally black or native, were particularly vulnerable to violence and assault. Florens's mother, for example, describes being raped by a group of men assigned by her master to "break her in"—a level of violence possible because of her low status as a black slave.

However, even white, unindentured women are depicted as property to be trafficked, though they do not suffer nearly the level of violence that the enslaved women of color do. Rebekka, for example, becomes Jacob's wife when her father sends her away in exchange for monetary compensation. The money is supposedly to cover Rebekka's voyage, but her father clearly sees this as an opportunity to transact his daughter for profit. Meanwhile, because women are considered to be the property

of men in 17th-century America, society marginalizes women who are untethered to men, like widows and single mothers.

Clearly, Morrison shows how all the women in the book are susceptible to violence and oppression because of their gender. Florens's mother sums up Morrison's portrait of female pain when she states "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below." In other words, womanhood in early colonial America is defined by trauma, oppression, and their inevitable and lasting aftereffects.

Though the violence that they suffer causes them immeasurable pain, the women in the book find comfort in the relationships they forge with other women who have undergone similar trauma. For example, on the boat from Europe, Rebekka connects with a group of women from different social classes (including prostitutes and disgraced middle class women). Together, the women talk about their lives in the context of men and their limitations as women, and discuss sex and how the commodification of women's bodies affects them. It is from the women that Rebekka learns about sex, showing how female communities can allow women to share knowledge and provide support. Despite their racial difference, Rebekka and Lina also enjoy a close friendship, giving a space for Lina to talk about her past trauma. Only Sorrow fails to form strong female relationships in the book, and Rebekka thinks this is because Sorrow was taught to seek male attention since she was not raised by women as a child. Morrison shows that while the trauma, violence, and oppression of womanhood burden the novel's female characters, the women respond to these heartbreaks by forming supportive relationships apart from the male world.

MOTHERHOOD, HEARTBREAK, AND SALVATION

A Mercy offers the reader several distinct images of motherhood in Rebekka, Sorrow, Lina, and Florens's mother. Each of these portraits of motherhood is very different, showing the distinct ways that social factors like race, social status, marital status and financial security can all affect motherhood. The women who serve as mothers represent a variety of types of motherhood and social and personal situations. As a result, they all experience motherhood very differently.

Rebekka, a white woman whose children are the product of a happy, legal marriage to a man she loves, might be expected to have a happy experience of motherhood. Rebekka is, after all, the most stable and privileged of all the mothers depicted in the book. And indeed, Rebekka absolutely adores her children while they are alive. However, Rebekka experiences immense heartbreak in her motherhood, as each of her children dies. Rebekka's boy children do not survive past infancy, while her daughter Patrician dies after being kicked in the head by a horse. Rebekka's grief shows the possibility of immense pain that motherhood makes women vulnerable to.

Motherhood is especially heartrending and torturous under slavery, where mothers often cannot protect their children from horrific violence, and where families are often separated. Although Lina is technically childless, she acts as a kind of surrogate mother to Florens. Lina enjoys a close, caring, and loving relationship with Florens, brushing her hair and taking care of her. Lina's relationship with Florens shows how motherhood does not necessarily have to be biological to be meaningful. However, Lina's motherhood is not official or legal, so it is not recognized by the other characters, or even officially between Lina and Florens themselves. At the end of the book, Rebekka intends to sell Florens away from Lina, showing how their bond may be broken by the harsh realities of the slave system.

Morrison offers the clearest example of how slavery can turn motherhood into anguish in Florens's biological mother, who is forced to beg for her daughter to be sold away from her in order to protect her from a life of horrific sexual violence. The situation is especially painful because Florens believes that her mother asked her to be sold not out of an immense, selfless act of love, but because she preferred to keep Florens's baby brother rather than Florens. When the true nature of Florens's mother decision is revealed at the end of the book, it is absolutely crushing. Florens's mother's nightmarish choice highlights how slave mothers were forced to make absolutely impossible, horrific decisions in order to protect their children.

Although Morrison clearly shows the potential heartbreak of motherhood, especially under slavery, she also shows how motherhood can be a kind of salvation. While many mothers in the book experience moments of intense joy through their children, Sorrow is the most obvious example of the positive transformative power of motherhood. Initially, Sorrow's pregnancies are viewed as problems by the people around her, who believe that because Sorrow is dependent and mentally ill, she will be incapable of mothering a child. In fact, it is unclear whether Sorrow's first pregnancy was stillborn, or whether Lina drowned the newborn because of her mistrust of Sorrow and her fear of what kind of a child she might have. However, when Sorrow has her healthy second child, motherhood greatly improves her mental health and makes her more responsible and grounded. Sorrow's postpartum transformation is such a redemption for her that she changes her own name after the baby's birth from "Sorrow" to "Complete," emphasizing how motherhood has made her feel whole at last. In sum, Morrison gives the reader an ambivalent but emotionally intense depiction of motherhood, in which motherhood is both and alternatively joyous and heartbreaking, a salvation and a sacrifice.

LAND, EXPLOITATION, AND THE AMERICAN PASTORAL

Throughout *A Mercy*, Morrison plays with the idea of the pastoral, or the use in literature of motifs and themes of idealized country and agricultural life. Pastorals recur throughout the English literary tradition, often to convey themes of innocence and romanticized views of hard labor.

Morrison connects her novel to the pastoral through her beautiful and striking descriptions of the early American landscape. Take, for example, Jacob's ride through the Virginian wilderness to Maryland to meet D'Ortega. Jacob describes the landscape of North America, taking in the "forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking." This is only one of many instances in which the American land is glorified and idealized in *A Mercy*.

Jacob and Rebekka, enchanted by the American landscape, dream of creating a livelihood by farming their small plot of land. Soon, however, Morrison troubles the idea of the romantic American Pastoral that Jacob and Rebekka dream of by connecting it to the slaughter of native people and to the slave trade. Just before expounding on the land's beauty, Jacob thinks of Bacon's Rebellion and the ongoing native genocide, connecting the land with the New World's thriving slave trade. Then, after his statement about the beauty of the landscape, Jacob goes on to discuss how the land is continually changing hands and being fought over, possessed by Europe kings and rich aristocrats. In doing so, Jacob highlights the European understanding of land as property to be bought and sold. By narrating Jacob's thoughts on slavery and the commodification of land in the space of minutes, the narrator seems to compare making land into property to commodifying people, suggesting that both are wrong.

Both theoretically and in practice, land and the agriculture business in the 17th century were deeply intertwined with slavery, as southern plantations relied heavily on slave labor to make their enormous profits. And not only is the American agricultural industry based on slavery, it is also later shown to be based on the deaths of native people as well. Later in the book, during Lina's narrative, Morrison shows that being a white European landowner is only possible through the deaths of native people, who originally lived on the land. Lina remembers colonialists burning her village after a smallpox outbreak (a disease brought to America by Europeans), leaving her with lifelong trauma. This suggests that land-owning by European colonists was essentially the result of pillage and theft.

Morrison effectively shows that the beautiful land of North America and the agriculture businesses flourishing there are far from the innocent pastoral ideal, and instead are plagued by cruelty, violence, and exploitation. As the book continues and it becomes clear that the pastoral dream is linked to violence, Jacob's pastoral dreams of a small farm die out. Jacob's crops fail because he does not know how to handle the weather in North America, and while Lina teaches him what she knows about local farming, he does not always listen to her advice. Ultimately, the farm does not succeed in making a profit, forcing Jacob to turn to trading. As a result, Jacob profits from the slave trade that he detests, first more indirectly through men like D'Ortega, and then more directly as he becomes increasingly interested in obtaining wealth for a **house**. Jacob's pastoral dream turns out to be untenable, one that concedes to the harsh realities of farm life and to the draw of wealth from the slave trade. The pastoral life that Jacob dreamed of is thus exposed as an American fiction, as, in an agricultural industry that is built on a system of forced labor, Jacob's small family farm cannot compete. Morrison uses Jacob to mock the image of the American pastoral, suggesting that any romantic image of American agricultural life is a façade distracting from the reality, which is one of mass production made possible through slave labor and land stolen from native people.

RELIGION, MORALITY, AND OTHERNESS

Throughout *A Mercy*, the white characters define the people living in North America in terms of their religion, separating them and stereotyping them by religious group. As characters draw their own social distinctions and outline the biases they associate with others, Morrison shows the North American landscape to be one peopled by a diverse array of religions. According to *A Mercy*, the religious makeup in the colonies is a rich mix of Protestant sects, Catholics, and native religions.

As characters encounter people who are different from them theologically, they often respond to this difference with skepticism and mistrust. For example, when Morrison's Protestant characters refer to "papists" (Catholics), they comment on their moral bankruptcy and disdain their extravagant lifestyles. Take, for example, Jacob's judgment of Catholic D'Ortega, who he observes in disgust, and whose moral depravity, bad taste, and excess Jacob associates with his Catholicism. The narrator suggests that Jacob's Protestant roots cause him to object to D'Ortega making money through the slave trade, although Jacob is implicated in the slave trade himself.

This animosity between religious groups is not limited to tension between Catholics and Protestants, however. Rebekka, a Protestant, dislikes the Anabaptists because they refused to baptize her daughter. In another instance, Rebekka refers to Quakers as "horrible," highlighting the intense antagonism in the relationships between religious sects.

Interestingly enough, however, non-white characters who observe the actions of the Europeans do not pay attention to the distinctions between their religions, instead focusing on the horrific violence that Europeans as a group have brought to the

continent. Lina uses the term "Europes" to discuss the culture, legal practices, and atrocities of white people, describing how they stole her land. Lina effectively erases the minute religious differences between Europeans that the European characters see as highly important amongst themselves, making them seem arbitrary and minor in comparison to horrific acts of violence from which all Europeans benefit to the detriment of native people.

And in fact, religion and religious beliefs are often used fairly explicitly to reinforce racism and the oppression of black and native people. For example, Rebekka notes that Anabaptists assert that it is impossible for natives and black people to go to heaven. Additionally, religion is used as a tool to erase native and African culture, like when white people force Lina to leave behind her native religion for their European one, or when Florens's mother adopts Catholicism. These forced conversions are especially ironic since in the novel Christianity proves to be ineffective in comparison to other non-Christian forms of worship and healing. It is the Blacksmith's alternative healing methods that save Rebekka, not Christian prayer.

As the Europeans fight over which brand of Christianity is best, their religions come across as completely divorced from actual morality, which is supposed to be one of the most important reasons and supports for religion. Morrison draws the reader's attention to the lack of true morality in European religion in several instances, including when she shows the treatment of Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane. Daughter Jane appears to be sick, and her community is persecuting her and her widowed mother because the girl is supposedly a "demon." This shows how religion as practiced by many in the colonies can be harsh and alienate members of communities (like widows and single mothers) who are already marginalized. Meanwhile, Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane show Florens true goodness when they take her in and feed her, displaying how they are more morally good than their fanatically religious neighbors.

Morrison also highlights how members of all the Christian religions present in early America seem to be complicit in slavery. Catholics like D'Ortega partake in the slave trade actively, finding no moral qualms with the practice. Although Protestants like Jacob seem to take issue with slavery from a moral perspective, their religion does not impede them from benefiting from it indirectly. Morrison draws attention to this irony through the symbolism on the **mansion** that Jacob builds, which features the Christian imagery of a snake on the metalwork of the house's gate. The snake alludes to the snake in the Garden of Eden, which represents sin. This suggests that Jacob's wealth and the house he built with it are symbols of sin, since they are the result of slave trade profits. In short, Morrison offers the reader a damning portrait of the Christian landscape of early America, one plagued by infighting but utterly devoid of true morality.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FLORENS'S SHOES

Throughout the book, various narrators pay attention to Florens's shoes. Florens gets her first pair of shoes, a pair of D'Ortega's wife's broken heels, in Maryland. Florens's mother tells her they are impractical because Florens needs to develop tough feet. When Florens arrives at the Vaarks' farm, Lina makes her a pair of soft skin boots. Then, when Rebekka sends Florens out to find the Blacksmith, she wears Jacob's boots. Florens's shoes, which change several times over the course of the novel, serve as a way to anchor the reader in the book, which plays with many different narrators and timelines. Moreover, in the final chapter of Florens's narrative, Florens walks shoeless through the forest, and notes that her feet are finally tough. Florens's lack of shoes at the plot's end symbolizes her coming of age and her new painful awareness of the dangers of life and love.

JACOB'S HOUSE

In *A Mercy*, Jacob's quest to acquire enough wealth to build an enormous, opulent house becomes an obsession around which the rest of the characters and the plot revolve. Jacob's desire for a large, impressive house begins after his trip to the D'Ortega's property in Maryland. While there, Jacob admires the D'Ortega's house and decides to build one of his own to leave as a legacy.

Though Jacob intended to build the house to represent his wealth and status, the house ultimately comes to symbolize his misfortune and moral depravity. Jacob funds his construction project through profits made on sugar plantations in Barbados, making the house a symbol of his profit from the slave trade. During the house's construction, several tragedies occur. A horse kicks Patrician, Jacob's only living child, in the head, killing her. Then, Jacob develops smallpox and dies. Rebekka contracts the same disease and survives, but is forever changed.

In a book with so much emphasis on superstition and religion, the reader may wonder whether the house is doomed because it is built with slave money. The gate of the house also features two iron wrought snakes, alluding to the story of Adam and Eve and connecting the house with the idea of greed and sin. Although the house is meant to be a symbol of power, the events surrounding its construction show the fragility of human life and the futility of wealth in matters of morality and mortality.

ORPHANS

Throughout *A Mercy*, Morrison brings up the concept of orphans, referring to many of her characters as such. As a child, Jacob was an orphan, making him especially sympathetic to other people who seem unmoored or lost. Lina and Sorrow are both orphans as well after their respective tragic youths. While Florens is not technically an orphan, she feels abandoned by her mother. When she appears at Widow Ealing's door, the woman identifies Florens as an orphan, and Florens does not object.

The preponderance of orphans in the book serves as a thematic counterweight to the discussion of motherhood throughout Morrison's novel. Moreover, the many orphans in *A Mercy* emphasize the possibly and necessity of alternative kinds of families. This necessity is the result of the systems of bondage that separate families, the high levels of death in the colonies, and the distance from parents in Europe or the Caribbean. Although orphanage is alienating and marginalizing for the characters who experience it, it also allows characters like Jacob, Lina, and Florens to form new relationships outside of traditional familial ones.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *A Mercy* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? ...Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up the door saddle to die.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), The Blacksmith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which Florens articulates in the first few pages of the novel, addresses the Blacksmith in second person as she sets up the conditions of her storytelling. Florens describes the questions she is asking and then goes on to discuss how she has trouble telling and interpreting her story because of the large number of "signs" she must read in order to do so.

Florens discusses how her narrative is intended for the Blacksmith, but it also could be seen as instructions to the reader, especially since the second person address implicates the reader as well. Florens's discussion helps the reader to situate themselves in the text. Morrison, through Florens, can be seen as indicating that to read her book will mean to interpret a myriad of symbols and signs and then reflecting back on them afterward. Florens makes it clear that there are too many signs to give a definitive reading of her story.

Similarly, Morrison's text as a whole cannot be resigned to one neat reading, as it is so full of ambiguous and sometimes contradictory symbols. Using Florens as a mouthpiece, Morrison refutes the idea of "mastering" a text, setting her postmodern style in contradiction to the simplification of identities that occurs among characters in the book who reduce and stereotype each other's stories.

A woman comes to me and says stand up. I do and she takes my cloak from my shoulders. Then my wooden shoes. She walks away. Reverend Father turns a pale red color when he returns and learns what happens...Finally he takes rags, strips of sailcloth lying about and wraps my feet. Now I am knowing that unlike with Senhor, priests are unlove here. A sailor spits into the sea when Reverend Father asks him for help. Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), The Reverend Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Florens narrates this quote as she and the Reverend set sail on a ferry for the Vaark farm. Florens has just been sold to Jacob and is heading to New England from Maryland, where Florens was raised Catholic, to start her new life.

In Catholic Maryland, priests are highly respected and loved. Florens loves the Reverend Father, who does everything he can to help Florens's mother and who secretly taught Florens and her family to read. However, on the ship to New England, Florens notices that, unlike in Maryland, no one treats the Reverend with reverence. On the contrary, a woman steals from Florens (her shoes, which often act as markers of her current living situation) despite his escort and a sailor spits at him, showing deep disrespect.

These interactions show how starkly different the attitude toward Catholicism is outside of Maryland at this point in American history. In most of the colonies, Protestantism was the dominant religion, and religious tolerance was scarce—as the woman and the sailor actively disrespect the Reverend. Not only does this quote show that religion is a source of contention in the colonies, but it also highlights how prejudices against people of other religions can mean being cruel to genuinely kind and good people. The Reverend is one of the few examples of highly religious people in the book who actively practice good morals in accordance with their faith.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for 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.

Related Characters: Jacob Vaark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

Jacob is traveling alone through Virginia to D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland. He thinks of the recent rebellion of slaves and indentured servants in Virginia (probably Bacon's Rebellion) that resulted in a series of laws discriminating against black and native slaves, but not white indentured servants. Jacob lists some of the laws in this quote.

As Jacob lists the laws now in place, it is clear how supremely oppressive they are not just in terms of political power, but also in terms of human psychology and spirit. The laws make manumission (freeing slaves) illegal, meaning that no slave would have any hope of gaining freedom. They also prevent "gathering" and "traveling," keeping slaves from forming communities or seeing family that has been sold elsewhere.

Jacob notes that these laws "separated and protected all whites from all others forever." Following the rebellion, these laws separate people not based on class, but based on race, keeping indentured servants and slaves, who both would have similar political interests, from joining together and gaining any kind of power. These laws are based on real Virginia slave laws, which did begin the history of legalized racist discrimination that continued throughout the modern era.

❝ Disaster had struck…D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a nautical mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco…for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses…they used pikes and nets…a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six. He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Related Characters: Jacob Vaark, D'Ortega

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, D'Ortega and Jacob are at D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland and D'Ortega is explaining to Jacob why he cannot pay him back the money he owes. D'Ortega, a Catholic slave trader who enjoys living lavishly, describes to Jacob the circumstances that led to his financial "ruin."

As D'Ortega discusses the accident, misfortunes, and poor business decisions that led to his bankruptcy, his detached way of describing the loss of his "cargo" seems normal until the reader realizes that the "cargo" he is talking about is human slaves. The narrator, who is imitating the conversation approximately as D'Ortega would speak it, describes him anchoring his ship off shore for a month to wait "to replenish what he had lost." In other words, he frames the death of hundreds of people due to ship fever (a form of typhoid that only occurs in horrendously unsanitary conditions) in terms of his own personal financial loss. Meanwhile, D'Ortega shows detached cruelty as he describes being fined and having to retrieve the bodies and then feed them to alligators afterward. The coldness of D'Ortega's description of the slave trade highlights rather than obscures the monstrousness of the slave driven economy.

❝ They both spoke of the gravity, the unique responsibility, this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization.

Related Characters: Jacob Vaark, D'Ortega's Wife, D'Ortega

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, D'Ortega, a Catholic slave trader, and his wife discuss what they see as the connection between their Catholic faith and D'Ortega's dealing in the slave trade as they have dinner with Jacob. Jacob has come to the D'Ortegas' planation to seek repayment on a loan that he gave to D'Ortega. D'Ortega, however, is in financial trouble after the slaves on one of his ships all died.

As D'Ortega and his wife speak about the connection between Catholicism and the slave trade, it quickly becomes clear that they have deluded themselves into thinking that not only can Catholicism excuse slave trading, but it can even be used as an excuse *for* slave trading. The D'Ortegas see D'Ortega's participation in the slave trade, an industry that made him rich, as connected to "God's work" and they imagine themselves to have suffered "on His behalf." As opposed to seeing themselves as exploitative, they believe that they are "caring for ill or recalcitrant labor" in a way that they see as saintly.

The D'Ortega's twisted, delusional view of their way of making money shows how religion, rather than being inherently good or inherently bad, can be manipulated to read as endorsing or condemning a number of behaviors. Religion, which is omnipresent throughout the novel, supposedly prescribes a moral doctrine. However, the D'Ortegas use it to justify their own evil actions. Morrison shows how religious doctrine can be appropriated and abused.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ They are certain their years of debt are over but the master says no. He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery, for more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving someone dear behind?...Daft, a man says. A woman across from me says, young.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 46-47

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens is on the Ney Brothers' wagon, traveling toward the Blacksmith to tell him that Rebekka has small pox and needs to be healed. There is a group of indentured servants in the wagon as well. As the indentured servants discuss why they are traveling North, they engage in a conversation with Florens about the reason they are all upset. The servants, who believed that they would be freed soon, were told by their master that they are not yet done with their debt.

It is unclear whether the master is telling the truth— as Morrison makes clear elsewhere in the novel, the masters of indentured servants often would lie to their servants about the terms of the contract, since indentured servants frequently could not read. Florens, who has grown up as a slave, does not understand why the servants are upset. She thinks "everyone has to work," failing to fully understand the emotional and physical toll that forced labor takes over the course of a lifetime (in large part because she herself has never known a life apart from forced labor). The indentured servants say, alternatively, that Florens is crazy or young, attributing her lack of understanding to mental instability or her naiveté. Morrison makes it clear in this quote, and throughout the novel in general, that repercussions of a life of bondage far surpass simply the visible, obvious consequences of unpaid wages. Rather, and as Florens will come to learn, bondage is not only a condition of labor, but a dehumanized state of mind.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft...That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation.

Related Characters: Lina

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55-56

Explanation and Analysis

Following the loss of her family in a smallpox epidemic, after which European soldiers burned her entire village to prevent the spread of the disease, Lina is taken to a

Presbyterian community to live. In the community, Lina tries to adopt the Presbyterians' customs in order to not be cast out.

As she attempts to follow the Presbyterians' ways, Lina is forced to acknowledge her status as a "heathen" because she follows the teachings of her native religion. The narrator describes the Presbyterians as "worthies," presumably mimicking the speech of the Presbyterians themselves. Although Lina describes the Presbyterians elsewhere as "kindly," they preach a doctrine that includes the belief that people who are not Presbyterian are unworthy and impure, dangerously devaluing human life that does not correspond to their idea of it.

Lina is forced to give up some of her habits to assimilate, including bathing naked in the river, since Christian Europeans do not bathe regularly. This is ironic, since, although the Presbyterians think that bathing is uncivilized, bathing frequently is now known to be a good hygiene practice. Lina also learns the European system of ownership, in which taking cherries from a tree is "theft." This also comes across as ironic. Despite this supposedly sacred system of ownership, European colonialists have no qualms about stealing land from native people like Lina. In short, although the Presbyterians profess to be more civilized than Lina, it is clear that their own teachings are backward and hypocritical. At the same time, this quote shows how religious conversion is used as an excuse to wipe out native culture.

> They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god…Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable…Lina was not so sure. Based on the way Sir and Mistress tried to run their farm, she knew there were exceptions to the sachem's revised prophecy.

Related Characters: Rebekka Vaark, Jacob Vaark, Lina

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63-64

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Lina describes the prophecy of the sachem (the head of her tribe) before he died. After first stating that he believed that the natives would defeat the Europeans, the head of the tribe changes his mind, saying that the Europeans will all continue to destroy the land forever.

As Lina relays the prophecy, it becomes clear that the native people see the Europeans' treatment of the American landscape as mass destruction. The Europeans "ship whole trees to faraway countries" and "ruin soil." The sachem clearly ties this lack of respect for the land to the European system of ownership, in which people "insisted on the purchase of its soil."

Moreover, the sachem sees this destruction as the result of the Europeans' lack of spiritual connection to the Earth (the Europeans are "cut loose from the earth's soul"). Lina's own religious inclination throughout the book suggests that her native people's religion involves worshiping and respecting the land that they live off of. In contrast, the Europeans "befoul sacred places" as they destroy the land, preferring to worship "a dull, unimaginative god." Morrison shows here that the natives, or at least the sachem, link the European destruction of the land with their religion.

Lina, however, does not believe this prophecy necessarily extends to Jacob and Rebekka. Unlike the other Europeans, Jacob and Rebekka seem to respect the land. Additionally, the sachem uses the term "orphan" to describe the reason the Europeans are unsatisfied. Jacob, literally an orphan, offers a counterexample to the greed the sachem describes— at least prior to his house building. Through Lina's view of Jacob and Rebekka, Morrison seems to suggest the possibility of another, better way that Europeans could live on American soil.

> The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, "This is perfect. This is mine." And the word swells, booming like thunder into the valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow…Mine. Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle's eggs quiver and one even cracks…Spotting the traveler, [the eagle] swoops down to claw away his laugh…the traveler…raises his stick and strikes her…screaming she falls and falls.

…"Where is she now?"
"Still falling…"
"And the eggs…do they live?"
"We have."

Related Characters: Lina, Florens (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Lina is telling Florens a story before they go to bed. She recounts for her the tale of an eagle that protects her nest. Then one day a man arrives and claims the land as his. The echoes of his proclamation cracks one of the eggs and when the eagle attacks the man, he strikes her with a stick and the eagle falls.

Lina's story seems to be a fairly straightforward allegory of the European colonization of North America, in which the eagle represents the gods or forefathers of the native people, and the traveler represents the Europeans. This allegory attributes the disturbance of the land to the European system of land ownership, as the traveler claims the land as "mine." The eggs, which stand for the current native population, have, according to Lina, survived. The use of the past perfect tense in her response that "we have" survived suggests that the native people are still in jeopardy, though, and their long-term survival cannot be guaranteed.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ I don't know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory…I walk sometimes to search you… I hear something behind me and turn to see a stag… Standing there…I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. 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.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), The Blacksmith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens explores the meaning of the word free, noting that she is not sure of the implications of the word and describing one time when she thought she might have experienced freedom. When Florens indicates that she does not "know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free," she reveals her own naiveté (as well as her tragic life, which has never been free) and the fact that she is only beginning to comprehend her state of bondage and what it means for her life.

Florens explores her memory, recalling seeing a stag while she stood next to a wall of flowers. As Florens "[wonders] what else the world may show me," she indicates her feeling of possibility and excitement. Florens then describes feeling that she is "loose to do what [she chooses]," identifying freedom with willpower and the ability to choose. Notably, this choice is accompanied by fear for Florens, who says she does not like freedom and only wants to be with the Blacksmith.

Florens's ambivalence towards freedom (she finds it exciting but terrifying), suggests that freedom is a complicated state that combines choice with risk, and that may be less secure than being "unfree." Florens, seeking security, prefers the Blacksmith's intimacy, which, although she defines it as "unfree," makes her feel safe. Morrison shows here the complexity of the idea of freedom and connects freedom for women with detachment from romantic relationships with men.

❝ Sir steps out. Mistress stands up and rushes to him. Her naked skin is aslide with wintergreen. Lina and I looked at each other. What is she fearing, I ask. Nothing, says Lina. Why then does she run to Sir? Because she can, Lina answers. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us.

Related Characters: Lina, Florens (speaker), Rebekka Vaark, Jacob Vaark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens describes Rebekka's reaction after a moose appeared during her yearly bath. Although the moose posed no danger, Rebekka ran to Jacob for protection.

This quote contrasts with the one above it, in which Florens describes her felling of freedom when faced with a stag. Florens defines her feeling of freedom as exciting, but also it terrifies her. In a mirror scenario, Rebekka finds herself confronted with a moose. Rather than feeling awe like Florens does with the stag, Rebekka runs back into Jacob arms, seeking out security in them.

When Lina says that Rebekka only runs to Jacob "because she can," and then goes on to state that "the world shapes us," she implies that Rebekka has been conditioned to seek out Jacob's protection even when she does not need it and could be fine on her own. Essentially, Lina implies that Rebekka's dependency on Jacob, which Florens sees as a

lack of freedom, is something that she has learned to seek out. Through this scene, Morrison suggests that Rebekka's relationship with Jacob makes her less free, and romantic relationships in general erode women's freedom by making them dependent.

At the same time, however, there seems to be something wistful in Lina's comment about Rebekka and Jacob. As we learn later, Lina has never had a healthy or supportive romantic relationship, and so has never had someone she could "run to" whether she needed them or not.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Wretched as was the space they crouched in, it was nevertheless blank where a past did not haunt nor a future beckon. Women of and for men, in those few moments they were neither…For them, unable to see the sky, time became simply the running sea, unmarked, eternal and of no matter.

Related Characters: Judith, Patty, Abigail, Lydia, Dorothea, Rebekka Vaark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Rebekka is on a ship from England to America with a group of women in steerage. Although they all come from different backgrounds, Rebekka becomes friends with the women. A crewmember has just closed the hatch above them, plunging them into darkness.

As Rebekka enjoys the darkness on the ship because "a past did not haunt nor a future beckon," the reader gets a sense of Rebekka's unhappiness in her past (which was filled with sexual harassment and deeply religious but hateful parents) and her anxiety about her future in the colonies with Jacob, a man she has never met. As a woman, Rebekka clearly has lacked control over her life, and the darkness in the enclosed space calms her worries about where she will end up.

Rebekka identifies the other women on the ship as "women of and for men," highlighting the lack of agency that many women suffered from under the male-dominated system in 17th-century Europe and its colonies. By describing them as "of and for men," Rebekka suggests that the women's identities were formed by men, and cannot exist without men. However, Rebekka suggests that in the female community they have created on the ship, these women are able to escape from the restraints of male-dominated society and live outside of their male-centric identities.

❝ Wife beating was common, she knew, but the restrictions— not after nine at night, with cause and not anger— were for wives and only wives.

Related Characters: Rebekka Vaark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Rebekka contemplates the possibility that Lina has been physically abused and thinks of her own loving and unabusive relationship with Jacob. She then notes the official legal status of "wife beating." Rebekka describes how domestic abuse is officially legalized, but also how it is restricted to certain hours of the day and only allowed with a reason and without anger.

As she describes these specifications, the modern reader will likely be horrified by the way these laws make it clear that the colonial government sanctions and officially condones domestic abuse. Rebekka also notes that these restrictions do not protect women living with men outside of marriage, showing how women who are not married (as slaves were not allowed to be) are more vulnerable to physical abuse. Though the system of marriage keeps women tethered to men, it is also incentivized as a way for women to gain legal protection. In this quote, Morrison makes it clear that many women at the time suffer from daily violence in their own homes.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ They frown at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), The Blacksmith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens describes being examined by the townspeople at Widow Ealing's house. The townspeople, who have come to persecute Jane for being a demon, see Florens and believe that because she has black skin, she is a devil.

As Florens describes being examined by them, she highlights how it makes her feel dehumanized. The townspeople's examination is incredibly invasive. They even examine look between Florens's legs to examine her genitals. Although Florens notes that the townspeople do not look at her with hate, their refusal to recognize Florens's humanity disturbs her.

Later in the text, Florens describes this incident as the one that makes her "wither," causing her, according to the Blacksmith's definition, to become truly a slave. Morrison uses this incident to highlight how slavery and race are both systems that cause black slaves like Florens to constantly have their physical bodies interrogated and invaded, as well as emphasizing the fact that their bodies do not legally belong to them. Morrison shows how this kind of examination, frequently conducted at slave markets, is dehumanizing and inhumane.

❝ Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), Daughter Jane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Florens narrates this quote after the townspeople have left Widow Ealing's house and Widow Ealing has gone out. Jane boils eggs for Florens and then takes her to the woods and shows her the way to the Blacksmith's village, saving Florens from whatever the townspeople might have done to her.

When Florens asks Jane, whom the townspeople have accused of being a demon, if she in fact is one, Jane responds yes. It is unclear whether Jane means this as a joke or not. Regardless, the response carries interesting implications for the meaning of religious righteousness. Jane has shown herself to be more generous, kind, and morally sound than the townspeople, despite all their intense religious devotion. On the contrary, the townspeople's persecution of a Widow and her invalid daughter (Jane seems to suffer from some kind of visual impairment, as well as another sickness) indicates their willingness to cast out and persecute vulnerable members of their own community. So although Jane says she is a demon, her kindness towards Florens makes it clear that she is in the moral right. By extension, this challenges the entire set of moral principles of the fanatical Protestantism that the townspeople exemplify.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ 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…was not the silent submission…that Sorrow knew…It was a dancing…It all ended when the blacksmith grabbed Florens' hair, yanked her head back to put his mouth on hers…It amazed her to see that. In all of the goings she knew, no one had ever kissed her mouth. Ever.

Related Characters: The Blacksmith, Florens, Sorrow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Sorrow describes watching the Blacksmith and Florens have sex without them knowing. As Sorrow watches, she is fascinated by how different Florens's sex with the Blacksmith is from any sex that Sorrow has ever had (or even seen). Sorrow describes it as "a dancing," and notes that rather than being a "silent submission" like her own sex, Florens actively participates and seems to enjoy sex with the Blacksmith.

Sorrow's descriptions of the sex that she has had as "silent submission" suggests that Sorrow did not actively enjoy it, nor even perhaps consent to it. The men who Sorrow has had sex with (the sons of the lumberjack that saved her and the deacon of the nearby church) were apparently unconcerned with her pleasure or even her desire to have sex with them. Unlike the rape or unenthusiastic sex that Sorrow has experienced, Florens's sex with the Blacksmith looks like it is actually enjoyable. Sorrow is especially surprised when the Blacksmith kisses Florens on the mouth. Sorrow notes that that has never happened to her before, tragically highlighting the lack of affection in her own life.

Morrison's depiction of Sorrow's fascination with Florens and the Blacksmith having sex suggests the violence and lack of agency Sorrow has had during sex, putting Sorrow among many of the other women characters as a victim of negative or violent sexual experiences.

Although all her life she had been saved by men— Captain, the sawyers' sons, Sir and now Will and Scully— she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself.

Related Characters: Scully, Willard, Jacob Vaark, Sorrow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Sorrow describes how she feels as she lies on the riverbank after giving birth to her second child, and the only child she's had that survived. Will and Scully have just helped Sorrow deliver the child and then gone back to their raft on the river.

Sorrow's satisfaction with her child and her success in childbirth is extremely apparent from this quote. As Sorrow describes, she has consistently leaned on men for help throughout her life, often in exchange for sexual favors. Sorrow exemplifies Rebekka's definition of a women "of and for men," as she has thus far fashioned herself into someone who is sexually desirable because, as a marginalized, mixed-race slave woman, Sorrow has few other means for attaining power. Sorrow's new motherhood, however, allows her to feel self-sufficient and confident as she congratulates herself for doing "something important" by herself. Morrison uses Sorrow's reaction to motherhood to show how motherhood can be a form of salvation and redemption.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing…I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it? Soon Daughter Jane is kneeling next to me…Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it. Where I ask, where is my face…When I wake a minha mãe is standing by your cot and this time her baby boy is Malaik. He is holding her hand.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), The Blacksmith, Malaik, Daughter Jane

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens describes a dream. She is sleeping in the Blacksmith's house and taking care of Malaik while the Blacksmith goes to heal Rebekka. Florens fears that the Blacksmith will leave her in order to prioritize Malaik.

Florens's dream, in which Florens looks into a lake and cannot see her own reflection, seems to indicate Florens's lack of a concrete sense of self. She cannot see her face in the water, suggesting the absence of a real identity, perhaps due to Florens's desire to please and her codependency. This anxiety is clearly linked to Florens's abandonment by her mother, as Florens imagines her mother ("a minha mãe," which means "my mother" in Portuguese) holding Malaik's hand when she wakes up. Florens is worried that, like her mother seemingly let her go to keep her younger brother, the Blacksmith will give her up for Malaik.

When Daughter Jane, who saved Florens from the townspeople, appears, she tells Florens she will find "it." Though it is unclear what "it" is (probably her reflection), Florens's general state of anxiety about the Blacksmith leaving her suggests that "it" may also be a sense of purpose and selfhood outside of her romantic relationship with the Blacksmith and her trauma as a result of her mother's abandonment. In Daughter Jane, Morrison shows that Florens has found a kind of female community or role model.

I want you to go…because you are a slave…
What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.
No. You have become one.
How?
Your head is empty and your body is wild.
I am adoring you.
And a slave to that too.
You alone own me.
Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child…You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.
You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice.

Related Characters: Florens, The Blacksmith (speaker), Jacob Vaark, Malaik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this dialogue, the Blacksmith has returned to the house to find that Florens has broken Malaik's arm. Furious, he slaps Florens and tells her to leave because she is a slave.

The comment clearly confuses Florens, who sees slavery as a legal status rather than a mental one. She tells the Blacksmith she is only a slave because Jacob bought her. The Blacksmith, however, insists that Florens has become a slave because she has allowed herself to become "nothing but wilderness."

The idea that slavery makes someone "nothing but wilderness" connects slavery to the failed American pastoral. Just as farm life in the colonies is in reality mass production on plantations based on slave labor, the American landscape, rather than being an idyllic paradise, is a dangerous wilderness.

Morrison is never clear about whether she fully endorses the Blacksmith's evaluation that slavery is partly a state of mind. It is likewise unclear whether the Blacksmith is blaming Florens's mental slavery for ending their relationship when he never intending to keep seeing her anyway.

However, Morrison clearly suggests that, if slavery is a state of mind, it is one that is also nearly impossible not to succumb to given the horrific conditions of slavery. Enslaved people's total lack of agency is traumatizing. Moreover, the Blacksmith's insistence that Florens has no mind is clearly untrue, as Florens offers the reader a rich and complex narrative. The insistence that Florens has no mind also dangerously reinforces how slaves are treated as laboring bodies rather than humans with emotions and logic.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Thus her change from "have me always" to "don't touch me ever" seemed to him as predictable as it was marked.

Related Characters: Florens, Scully

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Scully describes Florens's changed attitude after returning from the Blacksmith's house following the Blacksmith's rejection. Scully notes that while Florens used to be innocent and naïve, she has become guarded and wary.

Scully describes Florens's transformation as a move from "have me always" to "don't touch me ever," highlighting the fact that Florens's newly closed off attitude is about bodily protection and sexual unavailability. The idea that the change is predictable suggests that the transformation from hopeful about romantic life to wary of men is a common experience among women. In turn, this implies that many women experience the heartbreak, betrayal, and violence that Florens experienced with the Blacksmith. Morrison's portrayal of womanhood is one fraught with trauma and sadness.

❝ They once thought 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. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess.

Related Characters: Sorrow, Willard, Lina, Rebekka Vaark, Jacob Vaark, Florens, Scully

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Scully describes how the farm felt like a family prior to Jacob's death and Rebekka's illness.

As he describes how the Vaarks and their servants "carved companionship out of isolation," Scully alludes to the fact that so many of the members of the household were orphans or motherless. Scully's analysis of the alternative family that the Vaark household formed suggests that it is possible to form strong relationships outside of the confines of blood relationships. However, as Scully describes how the family was ultimately "false," it seems that, in fact, the household's bondedness and shared love was not enough to maintain their familial network.

When Scully states "their futures were separate," it is notable that Scully's certainly will be— he is planning to free himself once he makes enough money working for Rebekka.

This sense of having separate futures, therefore, may come from the varying states of bondage of the members of the household: free Rebekka, who will likely remarry to keep her farm, the enslaved servants who Rebekka is threatening to sell off, and Will and Scully, who, as indentured servants, may eventually gain their freedom. Scully's comment highlights how, because of the various states of bondage of many members of the household, their family can be physically separated and essentially fall apart.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet…I cannot stop…wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane…She risks. Risks all to save the slave you throw out.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), Daughter Jane, The Blacksmith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187-188

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens, addressing the absent Blacksmith after their violent final encounter, offers her evaluation of the Blacksmith's philosophy of slavery as a mental condition rather than a physical or legal one. Florens reiterates the Blacksmith's idea that a slave could plausibly be freer than a free man, and that it is an internal "withering" that makes someone a slave.

Florens admits that she did experience a "withering" when she was examined by the townspeople in the Widow Ealing's closet. The examination, which was a dehumanizing violation Florens's body and privacy, profoundly damaged Florens's mental state. Florens, however, taking up the Blacksmith's metaphor of lions, suggests that the Blacksmith's view of slavery implies that his own condition is the only important thing, and that he does not have regard for other people's fates. On the other hand, Florens extols Daughter Jane, who risks punishment to help Florens rather than fearing and rejecting Florens's slave state like the Blacksmith does. Morrison suggests through Florens that, although the Blacksmith may be correct about the mental trauma of slavery, he has a moral obligation to support Florens rather than reject her.

❝ I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress.

Related Characters: Florens (speaker), Florens's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens's last narration of the book, Florens states that she is still sad, and will remain sad, about what she perceives as her mother's abandonment when she was a child. Florens senses that they both have things they would like to tell each other.

When Florens says that her mother can take pleasure in the fact that Florens's feet are now as "hard as cypress," her comment suggests that Florens's shoes, a consistent symbol throughout the book, are a metaphor for her innocence and sexual openness. Having finally cast them off, Florens has become an adult woman, who is wary of men and fully aware of the implications of her slave state. This quote also reiterates the trauma of Florens's separation from her mother, affirming the important of mother-daughter relationships.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below.

Related Characters: Florens's Mother (speaker), D'Ortega, Florens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens's mother describes her view of womanhood just after describing her brutal gang rape at the orders of D'Ortega. Florens's mother states that "to be

female in this place"— in other words, female identity itself under D'Ortega's rule— is "to be an open wound that cannot heal." Florens's mother describes this womanhood as an infected gash, stating "even if scars form, the festering is ever below." In other words, Florens's mother implies that the trauma that defines female identity, especially as a slave, can never be fully healed, leaving women perpetually revisiting their pain. Florens's mother's descriptions of womanhood as physical pain highlight the physical nature of many of these traumas, which are often sexual assaults or domestic violence. Florens's vision of womanhood is undeniably bleak, and it is this that she is trying to spare Florens from in whatever small way she can.

> It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.

Related Characters: Florens's Mother (speaker), Jacob Vaark, Florens

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195-196

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Florens's mother describes Jacob's decision to take Florens away with him instead of herself. Florens's mother has just revealed that, despite what Florens has thought, her request that Jacob take Florens was a selfless act of love and an attempt to save Florens from D'Ortega, a sadistic sexual predator.

Florens's mother describes Jacob's choice as *not* a "miracle bestowed by God." In doing so, she banishes religion from the equation. Rather, she describes it as a "mercy," and states that it was an entirely human interaction. Florens's mother places the machinations of the slave system, and the slave system itself, firmly in the hands of people. As a result, she highlights how, although the forces of the slave economy may seem larger than human life, it is made up of individual human choices, and individuals are implicated in those choices.

In Florens's mother's final advice to Florens, she tells Florens that to be "given dominion over another is a hard thing," effectively sympathizing with people like Jacob, who are only semi-willing slave owners. She then condemns willing and forceful slave owning, saying "to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing." Finally, Florens's mother states that "to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing," suggesting that, above all, Florens must maintain her self-possession and identity, and never give her entire self over to anyone, whether a lover or a master.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A Mercy opens with an unknown first person narrator, who later turns out to be Florens, addressing an unknown and not-present second person audience (who later turns out to be the Blacksmith). Florens tells the Blacksmith not to be afraid, because what she is going to recount cannot hurt him. She says that the Blacksmith can think of her story as a confession, but one full of curious, dream-like, and uncanny events and details.

Florens's instruction about what her narrative is going to be (dream-like, a confession), shows her sense of narrative control. At the same time, that her story is unconfined by traditional reality highlights Morrison's commitment to postmodernism, and to the freedom of subjectivity and ambivalence that it affords.

Florens brings up the questions "who is responsible?" and "can you read?" She seems to mean not just reading text, but also reading symbols. Florens tells the Blacksmith that not all signs are so easy to read, and many take more time to understand. Florens describes trying to read all the signs, but feeling like she is missing much.

When Florens asks the Blacksmith if he can read symbols, Morrison draws the reader's attention to the fact that good reading is not a simple task. The emphasis on reading also highlights the link between slavery and suppressing literacy.

Florens states that she will start recounting her narrative from the part that she knows is certain, beginning with **shoes.** Florens describes how, as a child, she did not like being barefoot, and would beg to wear other people's shoes. This upset Florens's mother. Florens's mother did not want Florens to wear the broken high heels Florens found being thrown away at her mistress's house, thinking that high heels were for "bad women." But finally she consented.

When Florens juxtaposes her narrative uncertainty with her shoes, Morrison clues the reader into how the shoes function throughout the novel— to anchor the reader in a novel that constantly changes time and narrative perspective. At the same time, Florens's shoes, especially her high heels, later come to indicate her budding sexuality and womanhood.

Florens says that Lina tells her that this is why her feet are so delicate and weak. Lina asks what she will do with the "hands of a slave" and the "feet of a Portuguese lady." Florens explains that when she set out to find the Blacksmith, Florens's current mistress Rebekka and Lina gave her "Sir's" (Jacob's, Florens's master) **boots**.

When Lina talks about Florens having the "hands of a slave" and the "feet of a Portuguese lady," she emphasizes, albeit through a joke, how the effects of slavery and class stratification are inscribed into the body.

Lina and Rebekka stuff the **boots** with cornhusks and hay so they fit Florens better and tell her to hide a letter in her stocking. Although Florens can read, she does not read the letter, and neither do Lina or Sorrow, who are illiterate. Florens, however, knows it is a letter to give to anyone who may stop her on her errand.

Florens's boots, different than the high heels she wore as a child, show that her narrative moves fluidly through several timelines. Moreover, because literacy is such a marker of class and freedom, Lina and Sorrow's illiteracy mark their slave status.

Florens is "hungry" for the Blacksmith and afraid that she will get lost. She describes her errand as frightening, but also a "temptation." Florens has longed to go find the Blacksmith since he disappeared.

Florens's journey is described in words ("temptation," for example) that align it with sexuality, clearly showing how Florens's love for the Blacksmith pervades her mission.

Florens thinks of the bears in the forest. Lina warns Florens of enormous birds in the wilderness, and of natives who are not like Lina. Florens thinks of how the neighbors call Lina a "praying savage" because she goes to church but, unlike them, bathes every day. According to Florens, Lina wears a blue beaded necklace under her clothes and secretly dances during the new moon.

The neighbor's comment that Lina is a "praying savage" shows how religious faith is closely linked with cultural practice. It is also highly ironic to a modern reader, since bathing daily is expected in modern life, and less frequent bathing could be considered "savage" instead.

More than the animals in the woods, Florens fears getting lost at night. But now that Florens has been ordered to seek the Blacksmith, she thinks she will succeed. She imagines being intimate with the Blacksmith. The possibility of a future with the Blacksmith both excites and scares Florens, since she must leave her home to go find him.

Florens's sense of danger and excitement at the idea of finding the Blacksmith is part of a larger trend in the book, where men are simultaneously a source of pleasure to women and a source of fear.

According to Lina, who estimates from the state of Florens's teeth, Florens was seven or eight when she arrived at the Vaarks' farm. Based on how many seasons have passed, Florens is now sixteen. Florens has been baptized, and her Reverend at the plantation in Maryland taught her to read and write every week in secret along with her mother and her younger brother. Teaching slaves to read and write is illegal and punishable by fine or prison, but the Reverend did so anyway.

The Reverend's choice to educate Florens and her family, despite the potential legal repercussions for him, shows one of the few times in the book when a religious figure genuinely exemplifies moral righteousness in the face of the slave system. Moreover, the fact that reading and writing are illegal for slaves suggests their potentially subversive possibilities.

Florens, though, has forgotten most of what she learned from the Reverend. Florens likes to talk and enjoys conversation with Lina, Sorrow, and the Blacksmith. When she first arrived at the Vaark farm, Florens did not talk, because everyone on the Vaark farm spoke a different language from her family. Lina explained to Florens that her mother and brother were still in Maryland.

Florens's language barrier with the Vaark family when she first arrives at their farm shows how diverse early America was, not only in terms of religion and race, but also in terms of language and culture.

Florens prefers sleeping with Lina in her broken sleigh to sleeping with her mother and brother on the floor. In the winter, she and Lina bundle up in fur for bed. In the summer they sleep in hammocks. Florens catalogues where each member of the household sleeps.

Florens always sleeps with Lina, showing their close relationship from the start. Florens and Lina's connection is not only friendly; it is intimate and maternal, as shown by the fact that they always sleep in the same place.

Florens asks if the Blacksmith remembers how Will and Scully would not take orders from him until Jacob forced them to, since Will and Scully's master owed him money. Florens recounts how Lina thinks that Jacob "has a clever way of getting without giving," which Florens agrees with.

Lina's comment that Jacob "has a clever way of getting without giving" could be taken as an evaluation not only of Jacob's business sense, but also of the exploitative nature of the slave-labor-based economic system as a whole.

Florens remembers her mother holding her baby brother and talking with Florens's former master D'Ortega, who Florens calls "Senhor." D'Ortega did not have enough money to repay Jacob, and Jacob said that, to mitigate D'Ortega's debt, he would take Florens's mother. Florens remembers her mother begging Jacob to take Florens instead. Jacob agreed.

Florens recounts her understanding of the moment when her mother begged Jacob to take Florens instead of her. Florens's account makes it seem like Florens's mother wanted to get rid of Florens. The memory is of a kind of dehumanizing transaction.

The Reverend took Florens to a ferry to deliver her to Jacob's farm. During the boat ride, a woman stole Florens's cloak and wooden **shoes**. When the Reverend returned, he was angry and embarrassed. When a sailor spit at the Reverend's feet after he asked for help, Florens saw that, in the part of the continent where the Vaark farm is, priests are not well loved. To Florens, though, the priest was nothing but kind.

The Reverend's experience on the ship outside of Maryland showcases the intense hostility between different religious groups. Clearly, the sailor and the woman on the boat have no respect for the priest or his religious authority, since they believe in a different doctrine. Religion in 17th century America is a divisive force.

When Florens first arrived at the farm, the freezing temperatures in the winter made her believe she was in hell. Lina wrapped Florens in warm clothes. Rebekka looked away from her. Sorrow waved a hand in front of her face at nothing.

Florens's belief that she is in hell because of the cold temperatures in New England shows how deeply Florens's worldview is affected by her religion.

Lina told Florens that Sorrow is pregnant and the father is unknown. Lina believed the child is Jacob's. Rebekka said nothing. Florens worried at her new home and said she was afraid of "mothers nursing greedy babies," thinking back on her mother begging Jacob to take only Florens. Florens remembers her mother saying "something important" to her, but also that, at the time, she was "holding the little boy's hand."

Florens clearly has experienced being given away by her mother as an immense trauma. This is so scarring for Florens that even imagining Sorrow with a child evokes the scene of Florens's mother giving her up while holding on to her baby brother. Florens clearly sees her mother's choice as the expression of a preference for her brother.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 opens with a third-person narrator describing a man (it is not yet clear who this is, but it turns out later to be Jacob) wading through the ocean from a boat to the shore. When he arrives on the beach, he turns and waves at the crew of the sloop that has dropped him off, but he can no longer see the boat in the fog. The fog is thick and golden with the sun behind it.

The opening of Jacob's chapter draws attention to the American landscape, emphasizing its beauty and its wildness. Morrison sets the stage for her critique of romanticized views of rural American life with Jacob's initial love for the striking and untamed American wilderness.

Jacob walks from the beach through the forest to a village nestled between two plantations nearby. There Jacob secures a horse named Regina. He signs his name on the papers: "Jacob Vaark." Jacob rides along the beach to an old Lenape trail, where he slows because the path is dangerous.

The fact that Jacob takes an old Lenape trail shows how, although the Lenape are in the process of being displaced and oppressed, white Europeans continue to benefit from their land.

Jacob thinks of how, a quarter century before, a mix of slaves and indentured servants from all the races rebelled against the wealthy white landowners in the area. The rebellion failed, and the fallout from the conflict resulted in the slaughter of natives and a slew of new laws restricting rights. These include laws forbidding black people from assembling, traveling, and bearing arms, allowing white people to kill black people without any recourse, and compensating owners for a slave's death. As the narrator notes, this "separated and protected all whites from all others forever." Jacob disagrees with the new laws, which he sees as cruel and unjust.

The rebellion that Jacob refers to is a clear reference to Bacon's Rebellion, a 1676 revolt by indentured servants and black slaves against the Virginian government. Bacon's Rebellion resulted in significant backlash against black slaves, resulting in harsher restrictions for slaves—restrictions that were intended to separate poor whites from black slaves and so divide their joint political power. These new laws set the stage for the legal racial segregation that continued for hundreds of years afterward.

Jacob thinks that it is "1682 and Virginia was still a mess." Because of the land skirmishes Jacob must be careful traveling alone, despite the privilege of his white skin. Jacob, who is carrying money and only one knife, is a target. Wanting to get out of Virginia and into Maryland, he urges his horse to go faster. Jacob only stops to get off his horse twice, once to free a baby raccoon caught in a trap. Jacob and the horse both sweat in the October heat. He thinks that he might as well be in Barbados, where he almost moved. His idea of moving to the island did not come to fruition, however, because an uncle died and left him over a hundred acres of farmland in the North.

Jacob's thought that it is "1682 and Virginia was still a mess" should strike the reader as ironic, since Jacob clearly thinks that 1682 is, or should be, a modern era, but is being held back. This irony draws attention the reader's sense of their own reality as modern. In doing so, Morrison draws a parallel between the racial and labor injustices of 1682 and the reader's contemporary world. Morrison also uses this section to orient the reader to Jacob's class and racial advantages.


Although the weather is hot and humid, and his travels are long, Jacob enjoys his journey, admiring the beautiful forests, the breathtaking shorelines, the abundance of wild food. Jacob did not come to North America to get rich, but rather because of his desire for adventure. Jacob thinks of himself as a self-made man. Having started as an **orphaned** child, Jacob is now an independent landowner. Jacob relishes the challenges of life in the New World.

Once again, Morrison draws attention to Jacob's love for and romanticization of the American landscape. Morrison also reveals Jacob's childhood as an orphan— a common trait among many of her characters and one that allows them to make alternative kinds of families not based in blood relations.

Jacob looks around the landscape, thinking how the land has frequently changed hands, from native to Swedish to Dutch control. There is hardly any point in knowing to whom the land belongs, since it changes hands so often. Instead, Jacob thinks of the land in terms of the native tribes it belonged to originally. After navigating his way through the native villages and finding his way based on the familiar geography, Jacob arrives at last in Maryland.

As Jacob thinks about how often ownership of the American soil has changed hands, the constant change makes ownership nearly irrelevant for people like Jacob. Jacob also acknowledges that the land originally belonged to the native peoples, emphasizing the fact that the current ownership is the result of theft.

Unlike the rest of the colonies, Maryland belongs entirely to the king. While the other colonies only do business with the country that owns them, Maryland is open to all foreign markets, making it a center for trade. Notably, Maryland is also Catholic. Jacob finds Maryland's Catholicism, and the excess and luxury that he associates with it, to be totally appalling. Still, Jacob continues to do business in Maryland, where the slave and tobacco trade affords for massive profits.

Jacob's bias against Catholics is not just because of their religious views, but because of the culture of excess that he associates with them. Jacob's view of the Catholics shows how religion in 17th century America is not confined to church doctrine, but rather pervades social and economic life.

Jacob is in Maryland because he has been invited to dinner at the house of D'Ortega, a plantation owner with whom he has done some business. The invitation is unexpected, as Jacob has previously interacted only with the owner's clerk. Jacob thinks that the personal invitation must mean that something is wrong.

Jacob's perception that something must be wrong if D'Ortega invited him to dinner shows how early America was extremely stratified based on class. Although Jacob is a landowner, he still has never met D'Ortega.

As Jacob arrives at the plantation, which is named "Jublio," he is impressed by its grandeur. Jacob takes in the smell of tobacco and the slave quarters in the back of the house. On the house's veranda, a boy greets Jacob and, after he dismounts, takes his horse to the stable. Jacob walks up the house's front steps and then descends again to get another look at the impressive structure. He admires the house's many windows and the fact that it is made of stone.

The name of D'Ortega's plantation, "Jublio," is highly ironic because "jublio" means "rejoicing" in Portuguese. Far from being a happy place, Jublio is the site of immense suffering for the slaves that live there. When Jacob sees D'Ortega's house for the first time, it plants the seeds for Jacob's impending obsession with building a mansion of his own.

Jacob goes back up the steps and a servant (presumably a slave) opens the front door. Jacob explains that he is there to see D'Ortega. The servant takes Jacob's hat and leads him into the parlor, where D'Ortega is waiting for him.

When a slave interrupts Jacob's revelry at the house's grandeur and beauty, Morrison shows how wealth in early 17th-century America is inextricable from systems of human bondage.

Jacob greets D'Ortega and admires his fine clothes. Jacob drinks a beer and makes small talk. D'Ortega quickly cuts to the chase, informing Jacob that his finances are in dire straits—a third of the "cargo" on his slave ship has died of fever, and he was then fined for throwing the bodies in the bay. D'Ortega decided to keep his ship in the harbor and wait for a new shipment of slaves from Lisbon to replenish the slaves who died before sailing on to Barbados. The ship, however, sunk, drowning everyone on board except the crew and four slaves. D'Ortega asks Jacob for more credit and more time to repay the money that Jacob lent to him.

The way that D'Ortega discusses his "cargo"— the people he is selling as slaves— shows the extent of his inhumanity. D'Ortega never acknowledges the horror of the deaths onboard. He clearly does not view the slaves as people, but rather as the means to a profit. D'Ortega's description of his "business troubles" is chilling and shows how D'Ortega, a devout Catholic, is divorced from any sense of true morality.

During dinner, Jacob feels awkward, comparing his own humble outfit to D'Ortega's fine clothes, and worrying about his table manners. The meal begins with a prayer. Jacob tries to focus on the food, but everything is overcooked and the wine is watered down. At dinner, D'Ortega's sons are quiet, but D'Ortega's wife talks incessantly, making meaningless conversation. The D'Ortegas tell Jacob that their work as slave traders is God's work, because the Angolan slaves they are "caring" for are often ill or deviant. D'Ortega explains to Jacob that Angola is a Portuguese colony, praising its beauty and Portugal's.

The D'Ortegas' assertion that they are doing God's work by enslaving Angolans and shipping them overseas to die or work in miserable, cruel conditions shows how religion is used as a justification for horribly immoral and reprehensible choices rather than as a compass for moral righteousness. D'Ortega's praise of Angola's beauty also disturbingly mirrors Jacob's love for the American landscape— both are colonies whose people and land are being exploited for profit.

Jacob learns that D'Ortega, a fortuneless third son, went to Angola in the first place to work in the slave trade before moving to America and amassing his wealth there. The D'Ortegas have six children, which makes Jacob, who is now childless, very jealous. Jacob's children have all died, leaving him without any heir. Jacob's jealousy makes him search for flaws in the D'Ortegas' marriage, observing meanly that their mutual vanity makes them well suited for each other.

Jacob and Rebekka's childlessness is a source of major anxiety for both Jacob and Rebekka, and one of the reasons why the Vaark farm becomes an alternative family based not on blood relations, but shared time together. Jacob's lack of an heir also contributes to his later obsession with building an enormous house to leave as his legacy.

Jacob thinks that D'Ortega's opulent lifestyle shows how he has gotten himself into debt. He thinks that D'Ortega's wife is overdressed and that the fact that they are burning candles in the middle of the day is wasteful. Jacob sees the couple exchanging devious looks and wonders what they are communicating. Jacob no longer feels embarrassed about being disheveled from traveling because the D'Ortegas 'style is so grotesquely over-the-top.

Jacob's sense that D'Ortega's lifestyle is too over-the-top and that his wife is vain and overdressed corresponds to his Protestant sense of simplicity. Although Jacob is not religious, Morrison makes it clear that he retains a cultural orientation towards Protestantism, showing again how religious affiliation is deeply culturally rooted.

Jacob thinks about his own wife, Rebekka, comparing her humbleness favorably to D'Ortega's wife. Jacob remembers seeing Rebekka for the first time as she disembarked from the ship that carried her across the Atlantic. Jacob had been expecting a much less beautiful woman, and seeing Rebekka for the first time was a pleasant surprise. Jacob thinks Rebekka is the ideal mate: hardworking, beautiful, and cheerful. However, after the deaths of her children, Rebekka has become much more melancholy. Still, she always does her duties on the couple's farm reliably and without complaint. Anyway, Jacob thinks, Rebekka is still young, and will be able to have more children.

Jacob and Rebekka's relationship is one of the only positive examples of romance between men and women that Morrison gives the reader in the book. Their marriage is, at the least, free of the violence that characterizes so many of the sexual relationships throughout the novel. It is plagued by heartbreak though, since all of their children have died.

Dessert comes, and then D'Ortega offers to take Jacob on a tour of the estate. As they walk, Jacob admires the various plaster buildings of the plantation. He notes that, although D'Ortega has described the financial disasters that have befallen him, he still has not told Jacob how he plans to repay him. After the estate tour, it becomes clear that all D'Ortega has left to offer is slaves.

Jacob's admiration for the plantation foreshadows his later obsession with building one that is similar. When Jacob realizes that D'Ortega will offer slaves to repay him, Morrison shows how Jacob becomes implicated in slavery without intending to partake in it directly.

Jacob refuses D'Ortega's offer of slaves, but D'Ortega insists that if Jacob will not use the slaves on his own farm, he can always sell them. Jacob does not like the idea of this, because he objects morally to trading directly in slaves. Still, he allows D'Ortega to line up his slaves in front of him, so D'Ortega can tell Jacob about their respective talents. Jacob takes in the glazed looks in the slaves' eyes.

Although Jacob finds the idea of owning slaves immoral and cannot stomach the idea, his objections seem somewhat hollow. Jacob has already been doing business with D'Ortega while knowing full well that he is slave trader, so he has already been benefiting indirectly from slavery.

Jacob suddenly feels sick. He is unsure whether it is from the smell of tobacco or the food he has just eaten. Jacob tells D'Ortega he will not accept slaves as payment, since he does not want to go through the trouble of transporting and managing them. After all, Jacob is used to funding men who deal in the slave trade, not partaking in the trade directly himself. D'Ortega offers to arrange everything for Jacob.

Jacob's feeling of sickness, although he attributes it to the food, is more likely because he is facing his own culpability in the slave-driven economy. As Jacob tries to make excuses for why he can't take the slaves as payment, Morrison shows how tenaciously Jacob tries to maintain his separation from slavery.

Jacob begins to grow angry. He knows that if he does not take D'Ortega's offer, he may never see the money D'Ortega owes him, because the local courts will favor D'Ortega. Jacob feels that D'Ortega knows this, and is disgusted by what he perceives as D'Ortega's aristocratic complacency. Jacob thinks that D'Ortega has probably never done any hard labor himself, saying there was "something beyond Catholic in him, something sordid and overripe." He thinks he would never socialize with Catholics outside of business.

As Jacob becomes more and more irritated, he returns to his aversion to D'Ortega's Catholicism. This once again shows how religion is a source of tension and prejudice between Europeans in colonial America. Jacob's return to D'Ortega's Catholicism also seems to be a way of making himself feel different and better than D'Ortega, despite the fact that now they both own slaves.

As they approach the cookhouse, Jacob sees a woman standing in the doorway, holding a baby and hiding a girl behind her skirts. Jacob points to her and tells D'Ortega that he will take her. D'Ortega is clearly startled. He tells Jacob it is impossible, because the woman is the family's main cook. Jacob, suspecting that D'Ortega has some other investment in the woman, pushes D'Ortega, saying he promised Jacob any slave he wanted. D'Ortega tells Jacob to look at the other female slaves he owns, and Jacob threatens to sue, though knowing full well that a lawsuit would be decided in D'Ortega's favor.

Jacob's suspicion that D'Ortega has a particular interest in Florens's mother suggests the prevalence of slave masters using their female slaves for sex. Moreover, it emphasizes D'Ortega's moral bankruptcy— although he is a devout Catholic, he is also a slave owner and is unfaithful to his wife. Jacob's interest in Florens's mother seems to be at least partially because he wants to save her from D'Ortega.

Jacob then changes tactics, telling D'Ortega he will have to look for another lender. D'Ortega panics, knowing that his credit is so bad that no one else will lend money to him. D'Ortega tries again to convince Jacob that slaves are a good replacement for money to repay his debts. Jacob reminds him that he is not a slave trader and adds in an insult about Catholics.

Jacob maintains his separation from the slave trade, despite the fact that he is about to take one of D'Ortega's slaves as compensation. Again he links slave trading with Catholicism, suggesting that both are morally bankrupt and showing religion to be divisive.

D'Ortega's hand moves toward his scabbard, and Jacob wonders if he will attack him, kill him, and then claim self-defense to rid himself of his debt. The two men lock eyes. Jacob turns his back on D'Ortega to convey his scorn for his cowardly behavior, and walks over to the cookhouse door where the woman is standing.

Jacob's brief suspicion that D'Ortega will kill him to free himself of his debt once again shows that D'Ortega is totally devoid of morals. Moreover, it reaffirms the fact that 17th-century America is a wild, unstable place.

The little girl behind the woman's skirts steps out into Jacob's view. She is wearing a pair of **shoes** that are too big for her, and the sight of them makes Jacob laugh. The woman looks at Jacob desperately and begs him to take her daughter instead of herself. Jacob looks up at her, sees the terror in her eyes, and thinks that slavery is "the most wretched business."

Although Jacob sympathizes with Florens's mother, Jacob's account of this critical moment in Florens's life shows how removed he is from her horror. Although he feels bad for Florens's mother, the moment, which defines Florens's life, means little to Jacob.

D'Ortega jumps at the opportunity to give Jacob the girl instead of her mother. Although Jacob refuses, he begins to think that Rebekka might enjoy the girl's presence around the farm. The girl is about the age of their recently deceased daughter, Patrician, who died after being kicked in the head by a horse. D'Ortega offers to send the girl to Jacob's farm on a sloop, in the company of a local priest. Ultimately Jacob agrees to take the girl, and they draw up papers legalizing the trade.

Jacob's decision to take Florens instead of her mother is based in his empathy for both Florens and her mother. Additionally, Jacob thinks that Florens could serve as a substitute to Rebekka for their recently deceased daughter, a hope that evokes the recurring theme of motherhood.

Jacob leaves the plantation, eager to get away from D'Ortega. As he waves a final goodbye, he once again admires the fine house. Having confronted the gentry for the first time, Jacob realizes that he too could have a house that luxurious. Jacob thinks about the fact that D'Ortega's lifestyle is only made possible through slavery, and disdains his means of making a living. Jacob is determined to make his own fortune without becoming directly involved in the slave trade and deviating from his sense of what is right.

Having decided to take Florens, Jacob's thoughts quickly turn back to D'Ortega's house. This shows again how insignificant this decision is for Jacob, although it permanently changes Florens's life. Jacob desires wealth like D'Ortega's, and although he is convinced he does not have to partake in the slave trade to obtain it, he is already a part of that system.

Jacob pushes his horse to go faster so he can get to a tavern to sleep before nightfall, looking forward to a drink and a warm bed. When he arrives in town, he gives his horse to a man to be stabled and walks toward the tavern. On his way, he sees a man violently beating a horse to its knees. Before Jacob can say anything, a group of sailors pull the man away. Jacob is furious, "not only because of pain inflicted on the horse, but because of the mute, unprotesting surrender" in its eyes.

In this scene, the horse that Jacob watches being beaten to its knees serves as a parallel to the slaves that Jacob watches on the plantation. He feels sorry for the looks of defeat in both their eyes. Through this moment, Morrison shows Jacob's empathy for slaves. However, Jacob's pity for the slaves seems to stem not out of his sense of their humanity, but his general objections to cruelty.

At the tavern Jacob listens to a fiddler and piper play music, and sings along. Two women (presumably prostitutes) enter the tavern, and Jacob avoids them, having tired of brothels "years ago."

Jacob's lack of interest in the prostitutes who approach him shows his apparent commitment to his wife Rebekka.

Jacob eavesdrops on the people around him as they discuss the price of sugar and rum, which is much higher than that of tobacco. He joins the men at their table and listens to one who seems particularly knowledgeable, Peter Downes. He talks about Barbados. Jacob asks how they manage all the slaves, and Downes tells Jacob that they ship in more all the time, and new slaves are constantly being born. Jacob tells Downes that he has heard that whole estates are sometimes destroyed when disease sweeps through the slave population, and asks what they will do when the labor supply dwindles. Downes responds that it will not dwindle, since the slave trade is still thriving.

As Jacob discusses the rum trade with Peter, it becomes clear that, although Jacob ostensibly objects to slavery, he is drawn to the wealth it entails. Jacob's questions center on the financial viability and risk of investing in slave plantations, rather than on the moral problems they cause. Again, Jacob reveals his aversion to slavery to be somewhat shallow—he maintains his dislike of it, but entertains business interests that deal in the slave trade.

Jacob responds that he thinks the slave trade is a "degraded business," and Downes tells him that sugar cane just grows on its own, with very little labor necessary and no crop failure. He emphasizes the fast fortune a person can make in the sugar and rum industry. Jacob laughs, thinking that Downes, who looks worse for wear, has clearly not benefited from that supposedly easy profit. But despite this thought, Jacob decides to look into getting involved in the rum industry.

When Jacob states that the slave trade is a "degraded business," Peter does not seem to even register it as a critique. This suggests how little the amorality of the slave trade is genuinely considered in 17th-century America. When Peter repeatedly tells Jacob about the high profits possible in the Caribbean rum industry, Jacob easily overcomes his objections.

Jacob eats dinner and reserves a bed. Jacob thinks about his day, deciding that D'Ortega will probably never repay him the money he is due. However, he thinks that if the king in England changes back to a Protestant king, he may have a shot at suing D'Ortega and winning.

When Jacob thinks that if the king in England changes to a Protestant king he could potentially win a lawsuit against Catholic D'Ortega, he reveals how religion pervades even the legal system in the colonies.

Jacob's thoughts return to the child he has acquired from D'Ortega. He hopes Rebekka will like her. Jacob knows that he decided to take the child because of his own tough childhood. Jacob was an **orphan**, and so he knows the difficulty of being a child without an adult for protection. Jacob's mother died in childbirth, and his father, a Dutchman, left him with only his last name. Jacob lived in a poorhouse before becoming a runner for a law firm, a job that led him to climb the social ladder. Because of his upbringing, Jacob harbors a soft spot for marginalized children.

When Morrison brings up Jacob's orphanage, and the fact that he empathizes with Florens because of it, she brings up a commonality between many characters in the book. Jacob's orphanage and the orphanage of so many characters reflects the general disconnection between the colonies and their "mother" countries, abstractly evoking the theme of motherhood.

Because of this sympathy, ten years ago Jacob took on a girl called Sorrow that a lumberjack found nearly drowned on a riverbank. At the time, Jacob needed the extra help anyway, since Rebekka was pregnant. Jacob's land, once part of a Dutch settlement, stands alone in a community of religious Separatists. Jacob's land inheritance was a welcome surprise, since he liked the idea of farming.

While Jacob's sympathy for orphans is what led him to take on Sorrow, Jacob functionally owns Sorrow as a slave. Although Morrison portrays Jacob in a way that is sympathetic, she is also critiquing the inherent hypocrisy of "benevolent" slave holding.

On top of his farm life, Jacob began trading, but his preference is for farming. Because his trading brings him far away from the farm for long periods, Jacob bought female slaves to help Rebekka. Jacob thinks of his acquisition of the slave girl, like the acquisition of Sorrow, as "rescues." Only the third slave he owns, Lina, was, in Jacob's view, an "outright and deliberate" purchase.

Morrison continues to show Jacob's hypocrisy as she explains his lifestyle. Although Jacob professes to prefer farming and dislike slavery, his work as a trader means that he must buy slaves to do the farm work for him. Again Morrison shows Jacob rationalizing his slaveholding to try and keep his conscience clear.

Jacob walks as far as possible away from town to the beach. He looks out at the water and then places his hands in the ocean, washing them clean. He then walks back to the inn, setting out a new plan for himself. He thinks that, since farming has not worked especially well for him, he will invest in a sugar plantation in Barbados. After all, Jacob thinks, it will be different than D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland, being so far removed. Jacob goes to bed in the inn, sleeping well and dreaming of a huge **house**.

Jacob's imagination that he can invest in a sugar plantation in Barbados without being morally implicated in slave holding shows how Northern colonists and later American citizens continually rationalized their role in the slave trade and set themselves apart as morally superior while still benefiting financially from an economy based on slave labor.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 returns to Florens's perspective. She begins by describing how long it has been since the Blacksmith has gone—two seasons, plus part of a winter. In the winter, a disease shows up, similar to one that Sorrow had previously. This time, the disease strikes Jacob. He becomes moody and develops blisters, vomiting at night. He begins to grow weak. Jacob chose his servants in the first place because they had all already had measles, meaning they would not catch it and give it to Jacob, so no one can understand why Jacob is getting sick now.

In this chapter, Morrison returns the perspective to Florens's first person narrative. Although every other chapter focuses on a character other than Florens, Morrison's choice to give Florens a first person narrative voice throughout centers her story and her experience of slavery. Florens continues to frame her narrative as an address to the Blacksmith.

Jacob feels he is being cheated out of the beautiful, big new **house** he is building. Florens goes on to say that the house is spectacular to look at, even though it is not yet finished. She looks through the fence the Blacksmith made to see it. At the top of the iron gate, there are two figures of snakes.

In Florens's narrative the reader sees that, as Jacob indicated he would in his chapter, Jacob has built a house with his profits from the slave trade in Barbados. The fence gains significance later in the novel as a symbol of sin.

Jacob wants Rebekka to take him to the new **house**, in spite of the fact that there is no furniture there and that it's raining. The women of the Vaark household carry Jacob on a blanket into the house while he is asleep. He never wakes up again.

Jacob's dying wish, to die in the enormous new house he built, is fulfilled. This is bitter because Jacob dies before his dream is realized, and the emptiness of the house in the face of death shows the hollowness of this "legacy" he is leaving behind.

Two male servants who occasionally work for the Vaarks, Will and Scully, dig Jacob's grave, even though their master, a neighbor of the Vaarks, has warned them to stay away. None of the churchgoing people come either, afraid of contracting the pox that killed Jacob. The women bury Jacob. During the burial, Rebekka notices two pockmarks in her own mouth. She finds even more the next day. Now Rebekka wants the Blacksmith to come back to save her life.

When Florens notes that Will and Scully came to dig Jacob's grave against their orders, she hints at their loving relationship with the Vaark family, which is later fully explored. As Florens describes Jacob's burial and Rebekka's contraction of small pox, it becomes slightly clearer that Florens has been sent to find the Blacksmith and bring him to heal Rebekka.

Florens thinks again of her intimacy with the Blacksmith, describing what it's like to touch him. She discusses the first time she saw his back, when he was doing metalwork. She thought about watching water run down his back and wanting to lick it off. The thought embarrassed her at the time, and she ran into the cowshed to distract herself. Florens imagines watching his body as he worked metal, and her own body's reaction at the sight of it.

Florens clearly harbors intense feelings of love and lust for the Blacksmith, and her descriptions of touching him make it clear that they have had a sexual relationship. Florens's loving attention to and worship of the Blacksmith's body is radical in a novel where bodies, especially black bodies, are exploited for profit.

Florens describes one time she took a candle at night to watch the Blacksmith sleep. She watched him for too long and the candle burned her hand. She promptly ran away, but made eye contact with the now-awake Blacksmith as she fled.

Once again, as Florens describes her early relationship with the Blacksmith, her utter infatuation and obsession with him becomes clear.

Next, Florens comes back to Lina and herself waiting in the village together for the Ney brothers' wagon to pick Florens up, so she can begin her journey to go find the Blacksmith. As a boy drives past, he raises his hat to Florens. She is pleased. Florens grows hungry, so she eats the bread and cod that he brought with her. Lina seems to be in a bad mood.

Florens's pleasure at the attention from one of the boys who drives past her shows how Florens, having not yet had her heart broken (or experienced sexual violence, as have most of the other female characters), is still excited by the attention of men. Morrison later explores how she changes to become more wary of sexual attention.

Finally the Ney brothers' wagon stops to take Florens to her next destination. The driver helps Florens up into the wagon and his touch makes her feel shameful. There are seven people total in the wagon. It is snowing and Florens is nervous. Florens thinks that the snow will make the men happy, because animals are easier to track in the snow. However, Florens thinks the snow will not last

Again, Florens is paying close attention to her newfound identity as a woman who can attract the attention of men. In this moment, Florens feels shame at the man's touch. This contrasts with Florens's pleasure when the boy tips his hat, showing her ambivalence toward male attention.

Florens recites her route, which Rebekka made her memorize. After getting off the wagon, she is supposed to walk up an Abenaki trail. However, since the wagon arrived late, Florens is off her schedule.

That Florens is supposed to walk up an Abenaki trail to find the Blacksmith emphasizes the role native people played in establishing early roads.

The other people in the wagon talk about their time on a ship from Europe and how they believe they have almost finished their years of indentured servitude, but their master thinks otherwise. They are being sent away to work at a tannery. Florens does not understand why they are upset about having to continue their service, saying "everyone has to work." The other people in the wagon call her crazy and young, but then the driver tells them to quiet down.

The conversation between Florens's wagon mates shows the potential problems of indentured servitude: although supposedly on a limited contract, many workers were pressed into service for much longer than they were supposed to be. When Florens does not understand their displeasure, she comes across as naïve, but it also emphasizes the difference in slavery and indentured servitude—born a slave, Florence tragically cannot even conceive of a life free of forced labor.

When they reach the tavern, it is so dark that at first Florens doesn't see it. The Ney brothers go in the tavern. Florens hears scuffling sounds and sees that the indentured servants in the wagon are jumping out. Florens jumps out too. As the indentured servants run off into the trees, Florens is unsure of whether to go with them or to wait for the Ney brothers, who will undoubtedly be angry to find their cargo gone. Florens goes into the trees, feeling pulled toward the Blacksmith. She mentions the reason for her errand: the Blacksmith can heal Rebekka's illness, so Florens has to bring him back to the farm.

Florens's understanding of her fellow wagon mates as the "cargo" of the Ney brothers shows how she has internalized ways of thinking about people that reduce them to objects and sources of profit, rather than humans (since she herself has been reduced to an object). Again, Florens reiterates her compulsion to find the Blacksmith. This desire and love for him manifests itself as a physical feeling of being pulled towards him.


Florens walks through the trees along the road to the north. In the dark, though, she loses the road. She picks up snow to eat since she has no water. Suddenly, she smells wet fur and feels that there is an animal nearby. Then the odor disappears. Florens climbs a tree for safety. Once up in the branches, she knows she will not sleep because she is so afraid.

In contrast to Jacob's enjoyment of the American landscape, Florens's experience in the woods shows how, to someone without the means to rent a horse and a tavern room, the American wilderness can be threatening rather than exciting.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 returns to a third-person limited narrative, this time from the perspective of Lina. The chapter opens by describing how Lina had always been wary and unimpressed by the enormous **house** that Jacob was building, and had refused to go near it. Now that Jacob has died there, Lina thinks that his ghost will haunt the house. Lina thinks the house Jacob lives in now is perfectly serviceable, and there is no need for another.

As the narrative takes up Lina's perspective, Morrison makes it clear that Lina has a very different sense of priorities and ownership than the other characters. Unimpressed by and uninterested in shows of wealth and status, Lina is skeptical of Jacob's choice to build his house.


At first, Rebekka did not seem especially enthusiastic about the new **house** either. But at least, she thought, building the house would mean Jacob would be around more, instead of away trading. As the house was being built, Rebekka constantly had a smile on her face. Everyone else was in good spirits too. Lina thinks she never saw Jacob happier, not even when his children were born.

Lina seems perplexed by the level of happiness that Jacob feels as he builds his new house, showing again her completely different value system. When Lina thinks that Jacob was happier building the house than when his children were born, it seems as if Jacob has replaced offspring with material wealth.


Lina describes Jacob's choice to build the **house** as a decision to "kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself." She thinks that killing that many trees without asking the trees' permission is a recipe for bad luck. Lina sees Jacob's illness as the result of this choice. Lina finds his desire to build the house highly European and perplexing.

Lina's alternative sense of morality and religion becomes clearer as she discusses the danger of killing trees. Lina's belief that Europeans are perplexing also undermines traditional (and colonialist) views of European systems of ownership as rational and sophisticated.

Lina also wonders why Rebekka sent Florens to find the Blacksmith rather than swallowing her pride and asking the Anabaptists for help. After all, Lina thinks, if Florens finds the Blacksmith safely, she will not want to come back to the farm. Lina remembers watching Florens and the Blacksmith's courtship, starting with the first day the Blacksmith came to the farm. She thinks of Florens's startled face as they met him in the field, giving him directions to the house. Rebekka had come towards them, leading a cow behind her, and asked what the Blacksmith's business was.

When Lina cannot understand why Rebekka will not ask the Anabaptists for help, she shows that she clearly does not understand the animosity between Rebekka and the Anabaptists over their religious differences. To Lina, these religious differences are minute. Through her confusion, Lina shows how these religious divides, which are often the source of violence among Europeans, are arbitrary and unnecessary.

The Blacksmith did not look at Florens, who was holding a milking stool and looking mesmerized. Though Lina noticed Florens's crush, she thought for sure that the Blacksmith would be attracted to Sorrow, not Florens. When Lina learns from Rebekka that the Blacksmith is a free man, not a slave, she gets anxious knowing that he can marry and move about freely.

Lina harbors anxiety about the idea of the Blacksmith and Florens being together, concerned about the possibility that the Blacksmith could marry her and take her away. Lina clearly mistrusts men and romantic relationships, and worries about Florens's wellbeing.

During the meeting, the Blacksmith removed his hat and looked Rebekka in the eye, something that Lina has never seen an African do. Lina, who had been told that culturally Africans could only look children and loved ones in the eye out of respect, realizes that this is not true. Lina remembers that after her village was wiped out, she was taken to a town where a show of defiance from an African would be punished with a whipping. Lina sees this as one of the many contradictions in European culture. She thinks of Europeans as highly violent, but also occasionally warm, like Rebekka.

The fact that Lina had been told that Africans do not make eye contact out of respect shows how racist ideas were being traded not only among white people, but also were being peddled to natives. Although natives like Lina would be described among white Europeans in the 17th century as "savage," Lina's horror and confusion at their violence shows how white Europeans are, in fact, often the savage ones.

Lina thinks about the destruction of her village, wishing that she had known more about healing at the time so she could have helped ease her family's pain. She remembers her family lying on mats near the lake and thrashing around in blankets. The babies in the village died first, and then gave the disease to their mothers.

As Lina thinks about the destruction of her village due to smallpox, it's important to remember that smallpox arrived in North America as a result of the European colonization. In some places, smallpox was intentionally used to wipe out native people.

Lina recalls fighting off the crows that came to scavenge the bodies, along with two young boys who also survived. They finally gave up when the wolves came and climbed a tree for safety. The next day, European soldiers arrived, shot the wolves, and set the village on fire. The boys in the tree with Lina screamed, and the soldiers caught the boys in their arms as they jumped from the tree.

When the European soldiers burn the village, although they do it to prevent contagion, they come across as violent and destructive. However, they also catch the boys as they jump, showcasing the hypocrisy and contradiction that Lina sees as a key aspect of European ideology.

Lina does not know where the soldiers took the boys, but knows that they took her to live with Presbyterians. The Presbyterians liked her because she worked hard. They believed native men, unlike native women, were lazy. The church leaders told Lina that the sickness that infected her village was the result of God's anger at their laziness.

The church leader's assertions that God infected Lina's village because of their laziness comes across as highly ironic—since smallpox was brought to the Americas by Europeans and is a viral infection—but it also shows the way religious belief can be twisted to justify almost anything.

Because Lina did not want to be cast out by the Presbyterians, she adopted their faith and habits. Lina stopped bathing in the river and eating with her hands. She stopped mourning in front of others, since the Presbyterians thought of grief as sinful idleness. The Presbyterians gave Lina a European dress and cut her hair. She was not allowed to go to Sunday church services with them, but she did partake in daily prayers. Finally, the Presbyterians abandoned Lina when she did not follow their teachings well enough.

While Lina is living with the Presbyterians, it becomes clear to her that she must adopt their religion and customs in order to be accepted. Here, Morrison shows how religion is used as a colonial practice that divides native people like Lina from their customs and native faith. That Lina is not allowed to attend services with them also shows how religion reinforced racist policy.

Later, alone at Jacob's farm, Lina tried to remember the healing knowledge she learned from her mother before she died. Being the only person working on the farm, with Rebekka not yet there, Lina was incredibly lonely and struggled with survivor's guilt and the memory of her trauma. Lina still feels anxiety whenever she is around fire, as it provokes memories of the destruction of her village.

Lina's attempts to remember her mother's remedies suggest the existence of an alternative system of knowledge and healing to Protestant prayer. Meanwhile, the destruction of Lina's village was an enormous trauma for Lina, leaving Lina, like Jacob, orphaned.

Lina remembers Jacob's burst of activity as he waited for Rebekka to arrive from Europe. When she would bring him his dinner, she would occasionally find him in despair about his lack of success as a farmer. Lina helped Jacob plant the vegetables and take care of the livestock. She taught Jacob how to fish and keep pests away from the crops. However, neither Jacob nor Lina knew how to deal with the unpredictable weather. Jacob was not a skilled farmer: impatient, unable to tell the difference between weeds and crops, unwilling to seek advice. Jacob also ignored Lina's advice, resulting in a disastrous harvest.

Although Jacob still likes to think of himself as a farmer, Lina's account of their life on the farm offers an alternative perspective. Far from the romantic farm life in rural America that Jacob imagined, farming is difficult and unpredictable. Lina's view of Jacob's farm shows that the pastoral paradise Jacob desired is not possible without hard labor. Jacob's pride and unwillingness to listen to Lina causes his failure.

Lina found life on the Vaark farm unrewarding. Lina was not especially verbose with Jacob and she continued to process her memories of her village before the sickness and fire, working through her trauma and loss. When Rebekka finally arrived, Lina had mostly sorted through her past, reinventing herself.

Lina's trauma from the loss of her family and the destruction of her village continues to sting. 17th-century America does not have much space for grief— the Presbyterians see grief as sacrilegious, while farm life with Jacob requires constant attention.

With Rebekka now sick, Lina tries to use native remedies to heal her, putting magic stones under her pillow and brewing a medicinal tea for her to drink. She does not repeat the healing prayers she learned from the Presbyterians because they did not work on Jacob.

Lina's use of native rituals and remedies to heal Rebekka offers the reader an example of religion in 17th-century America outside of variations of European Christianity.

Lina remembers how they opened the iron gate to the new, big **house** to bring Jacob in to die in it, per his final wish. Although Lina sees the iron gate the Blacksmith made as a complete waste of time, she admires how he saved Sorrow's life. Lina ponders Sorrow, who Jacob had agreed to take from some lumberjacks that found her half drowned. Sorrow never told them where she came from, or her real name. The lumberjack's wife named her Sorrow and decided to get rid of her after realizing that she was unable to work effectively. When Sorrow arrived at the house, it annoyed Rebekka, but she knew also that they could use the help.

When Lina expresses her belief that the iron gate in front of Jacob's new house is a complete waste of time, it comes on the heels of her assertion that Christian prayer does not work. This is significant because the iron gate that Lina finds useless is loaded with Christian imagery: it is topped with a snake, evoking the story of Adam and Eve and the idea of sin. Lina's dislike of the iron gate reflects her generally skepticism toward Europeans and European religion.

Jacob had bought Lina, on the other hand, from the Presbyterians when she was fourteen. He searched through the slave advertisements in town before finding her. When Rebekka arrived on the farm later, Lina remembers that there was immediately tension between the two of them. Rebekka was annoyed by Lina's health and beauty, while Lina did not like Rebekka's air of authority.

Lina and Rebekka's initial animosity is due to the competition encouraged between women under male-dominated systems: Rebekka dislikes Lina because of her beauty, perhaps worried that she will attract Jacob's attention. Though Lina follows Jacob's orders, she resents Rebekka's female authority.

However, the animosity between Lina and Rebekka dissipated when Lina delivered Rebekka's first child. They became friends, confiding in each other and providing one another with company. Together they completed the farm chores, stumbling their way through them. They learned together how to work the farm and care for Rebekka's children. Rebekka, unlike Jacob, liked farm-work.

Motherhood unites Lina and Rebekka, ending their competitive relationship and showing how motherhood can bond women together. Lina and Rebekka use each other for help and company, showing how female community can be an invaluable source of support for women.

When Jacob brought Sorrow back to the farm, both Lina and Rebekka were unhappy about it. Rebekka found Sorrow useless, while Lina thought that she brought bad luck. Lina watched as Rebekka trained Sorrow to sew. She kept quiet when Jacob decided that Sorrow needed to sleep by the fireplace, a choice that made Lina suspicious. Lina was not jealous, however, since she learned to build shelter in all weather from her tribe.

Lina's suspicion when Sorrow is brought to sleep at the fireplace seems to stem from her belief that Jacob is sleeping with Sorrow. Sorrow serves as a point of contrast to Lina and Rebekka: she is unable to bond with other women, in part because she is constantly giving into the pursuits of men that support her instead.

The chief of Lina's tribe had predicted the Europeans would eventually die or leave the native's land. However, he was wrong, and he apologized for his error eventually. The chief had then predicted that the Europeans would continue to ravage the land forever, ruining the natives' sacred spaces and the ecosystem with their capitalist land system. Lina, however, having seen how Jacob and Rebekka ran their farm, believed that they were an exception to this prophecy. Jacob and Rebekka seem to Lina to be more respectful of the earth.

This section shows the devastation that European colonization and the European system of land ownership has wrought for the environment and for the native tribes who lived on the East Coast. Interestingly, Lina sees Jacob and Rebekka as counterpoints to this prophecy of the effect of Europeans. Jacob and Rebekka, according to Lina, are the "good" kind of European (although readers can see how they too are very complicit in the violence and oppressive systems of their peers).

Lina returns to thinking about Sorrow. She remembers one time when they trusted Sorrow, who was pregnant at the time, with milking the cows. When she did not handle the udders right, a cow had kicked, and Lina had had to leave the sickroom (it is unclear whether it is Jacob's or Rebekka's) to milk the cow herself. With Sorrow pregnant, she is even less reliable. Lina thinks that Sorrow brings misery wherever she goes. Lina feels certain that the deaths of Rebekka's infants are due to Sorrow's bad energy.

Lina's dislike for Sorrow becomes extremely clear in this section. When Lina describes how she believes Sorrow brings bad spirits with her, Morrison shows the side of Lina's spiritual beliefs that, like the European sense of religion, excludes and persecutes people who are different or marginalized.

One day while they were preparing mincemeat, Lina told Rebekka that she believes Sorrow carries bad spirits with her. Rebekka told Lina her baby died of a fever, not Sorrow's influence. They finished making the mincemeat, sealing it in a jar to cure for Christmas.

Rebekka, meanwhile, rejects Lina's belief that Sorrow brings bad spirits with her, as well as the Christian belief that her babies died because of God, instead preferring the more rational view that they died of fever.

Now, Lina thinks, Sorrow is pregnant again, and her baby will possibly survive this time. Lina wonders what will happen if Rebekka dies, and where she and Sorrow will go. The Baptists in the neighborhood are no longer on good terms with the Vaark family, because Rebekka blames them for refusing to baptize her babies. Lina thinks that Sorrow's presence also contributes to the bad relations between the Baptists and the Vaarks. Previously, the Baptists would bring gifts of food to the house, but now, with the contagious sickness around the house, they stay away.

When Lina wonders where she and Sorrow will go if Rebekka dies, she reveals the insecurity of her position as a slave. Lina is unable to live freely, so if Rebekka dies, her legal situation is very precarious. Meanwhile, although Rebekka clearly does not have strong religious feeling at this point, she does stop speaking to the Baptists when they refuse to baptize her children.

Willard and Scully, the indentured servants who sometimes work on the Vaark farm, stay away too. Lina is saddened by this, but chalks up their lack of loyalty to the fact that they are European. Willard is still working off his indentured servitude. He does not want to disobey and extend his service like he did in his younger days, when he tried to run away.

Lina's sadness that Willard and Scully do not go to the farm shows how close they have become. At the same time, Morrison shows the injustice and lack of liberty that indentured servants faced because of the strict conditions of their bondage.

Scully, meanwhile, is trying to finish his contract, hoping to be free before he is old like Willard. Scully inherited his state of bondage from his mother, who was sent to the colonies for her "lewdness and disobedience." Scully is unsure of exactly when his service is legally over, but he believes it is soon, because there is a contract supposedly saying so. Lina suspects, however, that Scully has not seen the contract and cannot read it if he has. Scully hopes that the "freedom fee" he will receive when liberated will be enough to let him start a new life as a free man.

The fact that Scully cannot be sure of the end of his contract because he cannot read shows how literacy is dangerous to the preexisting power structures of the 17th century. Illiteracy is used to ensure that white landowners can exploit their slaves and indentured servants, preventing people like Scully from advocating for themselves and keeping slaves and servants from sharing ideas.

Lina knows that Scully and Willard sleep together "when sleep was not the point," meaning that they have sex. Lina thinks this is why Jacob will have no men working on his property. Now, however, the plan seems to have backfired. Rebekka is sick, Sorrow is pregnant, and Florens is lovestruck and running after the Blacksmith.

Morrison heavily emphasizes the potential danger of romantic relationships between men and women throughout her book. Scully and Willard offer the reader a happy vision of what romantic love could be like outside of the constraints of heterosexuality.

Lina implores Rebekka not to die, wondering what will become of herself, Florens, Sorrow, and Sorrow's baby if they are left alone without a master. None of them are legally allowed to own property. Lina imagines the farm being claimed by the Baptists. Lina thinks that, although she liked being part of such a small family originally, it was prideful and stupid for Rebekka and Jacob to think they could survive on their own. Now Lina sees that they were never a family after all— just **orphans** that banded together.

Lina thinks again about what will happen to her, Florens, and Sorrow if Rebekka dies, drawing attention to the legal problem of their situation. Because of their status, there is no real place for Lina, Florens, or Sorrow in American colonial society unless they are owned by a white man, or at least a white person.


Lina looks out the window in Rebekka's sickroom. Rebekka mumbles feverishly, and Lina follows her gaze to her trunk that contains her luxury items. In the trunk, on top of a pile of silk, there is a mirror. Rebekka asks for it, and Lina picks it up hesitantly, not wanting to let Rebekka look at herself. Lina seems to harbor the superstition that, even if she were not sick, looking at her reflection would be bad for Rebekka's soul. Rebekka begs Lina for the mirror, and Lina reluctantly brings it to her. Lina feels certain Rebekka will die, and knows that her own life depends on Rebekka's, which depends on Florens finding the Blacksmith.

Lina's native spiritual beliefs show up again, as Lina believes that looking in a mirror will be bad for Rebekka's soul. Morrison brings up the idea of reflection and self-image here, an idea that repeats throughout the book. Rebekka here reflects on her religious beliefs and her lack of religious devotion, a fact that will become clearer later. Through the idea of self-reflection, Morrison suggests how misguided people's self-image can be.

Lina ponders Florens, thinking of when she first saw her when she arrived at the farm. Florens was frightened and quiet at first. Lina immediately became attached to her. Lina decided to protect Florens, trying to keep her from Sorrow and from the Blacksmith. Lina saw how Florens was attracted to the Blacksmith immediately, and saw the potential danger of it. No one else complained about him, because Rebekka was so happy that Jacob was home, and Jacob liked the Blacksmith immediately.

Lina's attachment to Florens is described like a form of motherhood— Lina tries to protect Florens from the people she thinks are dangerous, like Sorrow and the Blacksmith. Lina's fear of men and romantic relationships is very clear, as Lina is the only one concerned about Florens's budding relationship with the Blacksmith.


Lina remembers Jacob and the Blacksmith amicably talking while Jacob sliced an apple, and Jacob offering him a piece. Lina thinks she was the only one who foresaw the Blacksmith making Florens fall in love with him. Lina tried to temper Florens's expectations of his commitment, telling her she is only one "on his tree." Florens, however, responded that she is "his tree."

Lina's skepticism towards the Blacksmith's treatment of Florens suggests, even at this point in the novel, that Lina has been through her own romantic troubles. Romantic love, to Lina, is the potential to be hurt. For Florens, who has never been in love before, it is exciting.


Lina returns to thinking about when Florens arrived at the farm, quiet and shy, on the heels of Patrician's death. Though Lina and Rebekka had competed for Patrician's affection, Lina was the only one who paid attention to Florens. Unlike Sorrow, Florens can read and write, quickly completes chores, and responds well to affection and praise. Lina remembers lying down together at night, when Lina would tell Florens stories. Florens especially liked stories about protective mothers.

When Lina compares her love for Florens to her and Rebekka's affection for Patrician, Lina aligns her relationship with Florens to Rebekka and Patrician's maternal one. Lina performs the traditional functions of a mother, like telling Florens stories. Morrison uses Lina to show an example of surrogate motherhood, one unattached to blood ties but no less powerful.

Lina remembers one story that Florens especially liked. In the story, an eagle lays eggs in a nest high up away from predators. However, the eagle cannot protect her eggs from men. One day, a man climbs the nearby mountain and claims everything he can see as his. All of the creatures hear the word "mine" and wonder what it means. The echo of the man's words reaches the nest. The eagle tries to attack the source of the noise, but the man hits her with a stick. The eagle screams and falls. Florens asked where the eagle is now. Lina responded that she is "still falling." When Florens asked if the eggs survived, Lina responded, "we have." Florens fell contentedly asleep. Lina feels that she and Florens are connected through their mutual desire for a mother, and Lina's desire to be one.

Lina's story about the eagle and the traveler showcases the problems that she and other native people see in the European system of land ownership. Lina's description of the man, who seems to be European, as a "traveler" suggests that he does not belong in the place that he claims is his. Meanwhile, the natural world around him clearly does not understand itself in terms of ownership. Lina identifies her people with the eagle's eggs in the story, suggesting that, although now "motherless," they are still surviving in the oppressive colonial system.


Lina returns to the present and Rebekka, sick, seeing her face in the mirror. Lina leaves the room to do chores and to find Sorrow, so she can tell her to muck out the stalls. Lina goes into the cowshed and looks at the place where she and Florens used to sleep. Lina looks at Florens's rabbit skin **shoes**, which Lina made for her herself. Lina leaves, feeling shaken, and stands at the door. She decides to go find Sorrow at the river, where Lina knows Sorrow goes to talk to her first child, which was stillborn.

Morrison continues to give the reader examples of Lina's motherly love and care for Florens when she describes Lina looking at the shoes that she made for her. When Lina mentions Sorrow's motherhood and her stillborn child, she offers a small window into the potential heartbreak of motherhood with the sad image of Sorrow talking to her dead baby.

At the river, Lina does not find Sorrow. She does, however, smell fire. Moving towards the smoke, Lina sees a group of people camping beneath the trees. Lina recognizes them as the other passengers from Florens's wagon. Lina begins to worry about Florens. She greets one of the passengers, saying she recognizes them from the wagon and asking what happened to Florens. One of the women says she got off the wagon at the tavern and went into the woods. Lina is confused, but decides not to ask more questions. The group gets ready to journey on, packing up their things and heading toward the river. One of the men asks Lina not to say anything about seeing them, and Lina agrees to keep quiet.

When Lina stumbles upon the travelers from Florens's wagon, her immediate concern is for Florens. Again, Morrison shows that Lina has become a kind of foster mother for Florens, illustrating how motherhood is not necessarily a blood relationship, but rather a bond of caring. When Lina agrees not to say anything about the travelers, she exemplifies the fact that, prior to intense racial division, lower class 17th-century Americans (indentured servants and slaves) were much more likely to help each other as a class.


Lina walks back toward the house, happy that nothing bad has happened to Florens yet but worried that soon something will. She then goes back into Rebekka's sickroom, where Rebekka is praying. Lina wonders what Rebekka is praying for, since Rebekka has never been especially religious. She thinks Rebekka's deathly illness is giving her a sudden burst of faith. Lina returns to worrying about Florens, wondering how she will get by on her own. Lina reassures herself that Florens has everything she needs to find the Blacksmith safely. She wonders, though, whether Florens will return, whether he finds him or not.

Lina recognizes Rebekka's religious awakening, a phenomenon that Morrison explores more in Rebekka's chapter. Rebekka's prayer surprises Lina, since Rebekka's religious apathy has been consistent since Lina first knew her. Lina, as previously stated, has found Christian prayer unhelpful, and so her confusion is compounded with a mistrust of Christianity.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 goes back to Florens's perspective. Florens describes her night in the tree, which is extremely uncomfortable. She descends to find a better sleeping place. Florens eventually piles up the branches of a fir tree and crawls under them, where she won't have to worry about falling. Florens watches out for snakes, and tries not to think about how thirsty she is.

Again, Florens's experience of the American wilderness contrasts starkly with Jacob's experience riding through Virginia, showing how the idea of the American landscape as an "adventure" is only available to white Europeans with money.

To take her mind off of her discomfort, Florens remembers the wet ground on another night in the summer, when she was with the Blacksmith. She thinks of him telling her how he does his work and how much he enjoys it. The Blacksmith tells her how his ancestors clearly approve of his work because two owls appear when he says their name, meaning he is blessed. Florens asks the Blacksmith if they bless her too, and he tells Florens to wait and see.

Although the question of what will happen with the Blacksmith seems to be a source of anxiety for Florens, the memory of their love also comforts her. Unlike the other religious people in the book, the Blacksmith seems to follow a religion that includes communicating with ancestors, reiterating the breadth of types of religion in the colonies.

Florens thinks of how Lina tells her that some spirits look after warriors, while others look after virgins and mothers. Florens says she fits into none of those categories. She thinks she should do communion, as per the Reverend's instructions, but there is no communion in the woods. Rebekka, meanwhile, being nonreligious, would have no advice for Florens.

As Florens worries about her fate in the woods, wishing she had a spirit to look out for her or that she could do communion, Morrison shows how some people mix and match different religious ideas in an attempt to get what they need out of their faith.

Florens thinks of the time she, Rebekka, and Sorrow went to sell the cows and a village woman slapped Sorrow in the face. When Rebekka found out, she was furious. Meanwhile, Sorrow was peeing in the yard, not paying any attention to the people watching. Rebekka drove them all away, and once out of sight of the village, she slapped Sorrow in the face. This shocked Florens, because Rebekka never hits them. Sorrow didn't respond. Florens thinks that the look in Rebekka's eyes was like the look in the women's eyes as she and Lina waited for the wagon: not scary, but still a "hurting thing."

As Florens thinks of the time that Rebekka slapped Sorrow, Morrison shows how even a generally kind woman like Rebekka can be drawn into abusing vulnerable people. Sorrow's behavior and punishment embarrassed Rebekka, who, feeling responsible for her as her mistress, then slapped Sorrow. Although Rebekka seems kinder than other Europeans, she still does a "hurting thing" to her servants.

In spite of this incident, Florens feels that Rebekka has a good heart. She remembers when Lina asked Rebekka for Patrician's old **shoes** to give to Florens, and how Rebekka agreed, but cried when she saw Florens wearing them. Florens, meanwhile, asserts that she never cries, not even in her current situation.

Although Rebekka hurts Sorrow, Florens sees her love for her daughter as a sign that she has a good heart. Her motherhood redeems Rebekka's cruel behavior in Florens's eyes.

Florens's memories make her sad, so she thinks instead of the Blacksmith and her love for him. She says that when she's with him she doesn't need any religion, and that he can be her protection because he is a free man. Florens admits she does not really understand the meaning of free and unfree.

Florens sees the Blacksmith as a force that, unlike religion, can protection her from harm. For Florens, love is a religion. Florens's understanding of freedom, at this point underdeveloped, crystallizes later in the book.

Florens remembers going to search for the Blacksmith after he finished making Jacob's gate. She followed a path through the elm trees to a high hill, which was crawling with scarlet, sweet-smelling flowers. As she gathered some of the flowers, Florens heard a stag behind her. She felt a kind of "looseness" and wonders if that is how freedom feels. She does not think she likes it, and only wants to live with the Blacksmith. Florens said good morning to the stag, which leapt away.

As Florens thinks about the feeling of freedom, trying to get a sense of what freedom means, she understands freedom as a kind of "looseness" that is both exciting and scary. Florens's image of freedom also seems to be tied to nature and the American landscape, as she experiences the feeling alone in the woods.

Florens's mind wanders to Jacob's yearly bath in May. She remembers pouring hot water into the tub for Jacob to sit in. Rebekka washed Jacob until he was pink. Rebekka then took her turn in the water, washing herself while Jacob dressed in the house. Florens remembers that, as Rebekka was washing, a moose appeared. Rebekka stared at the creature fearfully. Lina shouted and threw a stone at the animal, prompting the moose to walk away. Jacob's came out of the house and Rebekka, naked, ran to him, though the moose had already left. Florens asked what Rebekka was afraid of. Lina told her "nothing." When Florens asked why she ran to Jacob, Lina responded, "because she can." Lina told her that the world shapes people, and Florens did not understand Lina, thinking that the Blacksmith was the shaper of her whole world.

When Florens thinks of the incident with the moose and the bath right after thinking about her experience of freedom, it is clear that Morrison is drawing a contrast between the two. In both stories, a large, potentially threatening animal appears. Florens feels "looseness" and fear when she encounters the stag, and Rebekka clearly is afraid of the moose. However, when Rebekka runs to Jacob even after the moose is gone, she exhibits a codependency that, although romantic and positive, seems to be the opposite of freedom as Florens sees it. Lina's comment also seems rather wistful—as if she has never had a romantic partner she could run to in times of need.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6 is told in limited third-person narrative from Rebekka's perspective. The chapter opens with Rebekka in her sickbed, wondering whether Florens will make it to the Blacksmith safely. Her feverish thoughts jump to Florens as a child, silent until Lina replaced her old **shoes** from her life in Maryland with the pair that Lina made for her.

As the narrator takes up Rebekka's third-person perspective, the narrative becomes even more unreliable, because Rebekka's fever gives her spiritual hallucinations and makes her think in religious terms.

Rebekka thinks about her physical discomfort, which only goes away when she is unconscious. Lina attends to her, conducting native healing rituals. Rebekka, meanwhile, hallucinates people standing over her bed. Many of these faces, like her daughter's, are imaginary. Lina's, however, is real, and Rebekka suddenly recognizes her as her friend.

Lina tries native healing rituals on Rebekka, showing again how the Vaark household, and 17th-century America in general, is a mix of different religious beliefs and possibilities.

Rebekka rambles to Lina, her mind returning to her transatlantic voyage. Rebekka remembers that, upon finally landing in North America, she was surprised by how much she liked Jacob when she finally met him. Rebekka's father, who was ready to be rid of her and the economic burden she imposed on him, sent Rebekka to marry Jacob after he heard from a crewman that a man abroad was looking for a wife.

As Rebekka thinks about her transatlantic voyage and the reasons behind it, it becomes clear that, although Rebekka is a free, unindentured, middle class white European woman, she was still sold for profit by her father— if not literally, then at least functionally.

Rebekka's mother, meanwhile, objected to what she saw as the "sale" (Rebekka's father received "reimbursement" for Rebekka's care) of her daughter because Rebekka's new fiancé was not religious. Rebekka's parents were fervently religious but totally unloving towards her and their other children. This gave Rebekka a fraught relationship with religion, as Rebekka feels little genuine religious faith, but plenty of guilt for her shallow belief.

Rebekka's parents serve as one of many examples in the book of people who are religious but morally corrupt and hateful. This affects Rebekka's own views of religion, making her only tepidly faithful. Moreover, and unlike so many other representations of motherhood in the book, Rebekka's mother is unloving towards her daughter.

Before Rebekka left, her mother warned her of the dangers of native people, who she described as "savages." As a result, when Rebekka first met Lina, she bolted her door at night and kept far away from her. However, as Lina has already described, they eventually became close friends through shared chores. When Rebekka watched Lina handle her first child tenderly, Rebekka felt ashamed of how she prejudged her.

Rebekka's mother's warning to beware "savages" caused her to avoid Lina. This shows how racist prejudice pervades European worldviews in 17th-century Europe and America. Ironically, Lina, a "savage," is kinder and more loving to Rebekka and her children than Rebekka's mother ever was.

Rebekka, in bed, revisits memories of the first hanging she attended. She remembers being two years old, and thinks that she would have been frightened if the crowd had not been so gleeful. Later, Rebekka attended the drawing and quartering of a Fifth Monarchist (a group of religious nonconformists persecuted in the 17th century), which her family enjoyed, but which gave her lifelong nightmares.

Not only is Lina not the "savage" that Rebekka's mother warned her against, but this passage reveals Rebekka's parents' true "savagery"—as she describes how they love watching the executions of religious separatist groups who do not share the same faith as them.

The city that Rebekka grew up in was dangerous, so the dangers of the new world did not turn Rebekka off. Compared to her childhood in England, North America was not especially violent. Rebekka feels that news of battles between colonists and natives seems distant from her life.

Again, Morrison ironically shows how the ideas of "savagery" that pervade European understandings of the colonies are misguided. On the other hand, majority-white England is extremely violent.

Rebekka enjoys the sweet, clean smell of the air in America, so unlike the rancid city air in England. She also likes the plentiful wood to burn in the winter, thinking sadly of her siblings freezing in England. Rebekka finds the American countryside is preferable to the busy, dirty London streets.

Meanwhile, Rebekka's preference for the American countryside plays into her and Jacob's dream of an American pastoral, removed from the corruption and pollution of European city life.

Rebekka only casually attends the local meetinghouse for services. Unlike what her parents told her, the Anabaptists in the region are not Satanists, but kind people. In England, both the Anabaptists and the Quakers are beaten for their views. Rebekka remembers when the king pardoned Anabaptists on their way to be executed, disappointing her parents.

Although colonial America is full of religious tensions and disputes over religious differences, Rebekka shows that England, where people with different beliefs are executed, is far less tolerant of religious difference.

Rebekka was chosen in school to undergo domestic service training. However, Rebekka left the program after four days because the head of the program was sexually harassing her. When Rebekka's father found the advertisement looking for a woman willing to travel overseas for marriage, Rebekka hoped it would save her from her dismal prospects in England. Rebekka looked forward to her arranged marriage as a way to escape her mother, her dismissive brothers, and the men who leered at her in England.

Rebekka's choice to go to the colonies was a way for her to escape the harsh realities of life as a woman in 17th-century England. Although Rebekka experiences much more privilege than her servants as a free white woman, her past is still plagued by sexual harassment and the legal and societal limits placed on women at the time.

When Rebekka first moved in with Jacob, she visited a nearby church. The churchgoers explained their beliefs to Rebekka. Rebekka tried to be respectful, listening patiently to their doctrine. However, when they refused to baptize Patrician, Rebekka turned away from the church.

Rebekka's religious experiences with her parents seem to be a big factor in her lack of religious vigor. Moreover, her protective motherhood makes her furious that the nearby church will not baptize Patrician.

Rebekka's mind focuses on her daughter Patrician. She thinks about processing her grief with Lina after Patrician's death, when she was kicked in the head by a horse. According to the religion in which Rebekka grew up, expressing grief is ungrateful. However, after watching three of her babies die in infancy, it broke Rebekka's heart to lose Patrician at age five. Rebekka then had to bury her twice, because the ground was still frozen the first time they tried.

Rebekka expresses her difficulty with religion after the death of her daughter Patrician and of her other children in infancy. In the type of Protestantism she was raised in, taking time for grief is not tolerated. Rebekka's frustration with this cultural norm is similar to Lina's, a commonality the women bond over.

At present, Rebekka is ill and still mourning Jacob's death only a few days before. Her thoughts, though, leave Jacob again and return to Patrician, her hair matted with blood after the accident. Rebekka remembers that when the ground finally softened and she and Jacob buried Patrician, she sat on the ground and stayed there all night. No one, not Lina, Jacob, or the local Pastor, could get Rebekka up.

Morrison emphasizes the immensity of Rebekka's grief and the potential pain of motherhood when she describes Rebekka lying on the ground all night after burying her daughter. Clearly, motherhood for Rebekka has been heartbreaking because her children have all died.

When dawn came, Lina left jewelry and food as offerings on the grave, part of her native religious practices, and told Rebekka that Patrician and the babies that Rebekka lost are in the stars. Rebekka thought this was "pagan stuff," but found it more appealing than Christian heaven.

Although many forms of European Christianity in the colonies assert that they are the only correct religion, Rebekka finds the native idea that her children are in the stars much more comforting.

This reminds Rebekka of one summer day when she and Lina sat sewing and doing laundry, discussing God's role in people's lives. Rebekka told Lina that she doesn't believe that God knows they each exist, in spite of having created them. The two women laughed. Rebekka wonders if Patrician's accident was punishment for that blasphemous conversation.

While Lina's religion comforts Rebekka in her time of grief, Rebekka does still seem to blame Patrician's death on her blasphemy and other Christian concepts. Rebekka cannot shake the system of Christian ideas of sin and punishment.

Rebekka, feverishly thinks again of her journey across the Atlantic, hallucinating the women she met on the boat. There were seven other women in the cramped steerage section. Rebekka remembers the range of baggage, clothing, speech, and attitude among the women, a mix of disgraced middle class daughters, prostitutes, and thieves. Only Rebekka was crossing the ocean for marriage. The others were having their passages paid by relatives or people they would go on to work for as indentured servants.

The women that Rebekka meets on her transatlantic voyage are a mix of different kinds of people, and mostly not reputable ones. These women have been left with few options in the legal, social, and economic systems of 17th-century England, which do not allow women to own property, become educated, or access a number of lucrative jobs.

Over the course of their voyage, Rebekka learned more about her co-travelers, discovering their talents and their backgrounds. Rebekka became closest with Dorothea, and when she told her she was about to be married for the first time, Dorothea laughed and told Judith there was a virgin in their midst. They traded bawdy jokes until Anne, offended, told them to stop. A crewman above them closed the hatch, plunging the women into darkness. Then they lit the lamp and huddled around it.

Although the women on Rebekka's ship are from many different walks of life, they bond by talking about marriage and sex, two things that, as women in 17th-century Europe and the colonies, define their lives and their access to money. The women provide a temporary community for each other in the harsh nautical conditions.

Patty asked where Abigail was, and Dorothea called Abigail, who was in the captain's cabin, a "lucky whore." She imagined the good things (berries, wine, etc.) Abigail was probably eating at his table. The women quibbled over Dorothea's comments. Rebekka then offered to share the cheese and biscuits she brought with her for the trip.

Abigail, who the captain chose to join him in his cabin for sex, shows how women's bodies become bargaining chips for them to gain money, necessities, and power. The other women's jealousy makes them say nasty things about her.

The women pretended to have tea together in the low lamplight, imitating what they imagined was aristocratic behavior. Judith spread out her shawl for a tablecloth, and Lydia heated water. There was no tea, so they drank hot water with rum and ate Rebekka's cheese and biscuits. Rebekka remembers how, although the women around her were women "of and for men," while they had tea together they were "neither." At last the lamp died, and everyone was quiet and still. Time felt, in that moment, eternal to Rebekka.

When Rebekka thinks that the women on her ship are "of and for men," she acknowledges that, in their society, living in a way that is not "of and for men" is functionally impossible, because of the constraints in place that keep women from gaining power. However, when they are removed from male society, the women form a female community that is entirely their own.

After they landed, the women did not pretend that they would meet up again, parting unsentimentally. This turns out to be accurate, and except in her fever dreams at present, Rebekka never saw them again.

Despite their bond on the boat, the women's diverse social and economic classes mean that they become divided immediately upon landing.

Rebekka then remembers seeing Jacob for the first time and thinking he was "bigger" than she had imagined. Jacob, who Rebekka called "Mr. Vaark" until she became comfortable with him, helped her with her boxes, took off his hat, touched her face, and smiled. Rebekka felt that Jacob's whole life had been leading up to meeting her, since when he saw her he seemed so satisfied.

Although on the boat Rebekka seemed happy to be away from the demands of men, when Rebekka meets Jacob, her satisfaction with him eclipses her frustration with having her options limited. Their relationship is immediately intimate and romantic despite being an arranged marriage.

Rebekka refuses Jacob's offer to help her into the wagon. Rebekka intended to accept no pampering, thinking that they needed to be partners in work. Jacob took Rebekka to a coffeehouse with a sign reading "Marriages performed within" on the door. The cleric there married them. Afterward, they got back in the wagon to head to Jacob's farm.

Rebekka's marriage to Jacob gives her the self-sufficient partnership she desires, rather than chivalrous pampering. Their marriage is not religious whatsoever— it is not even performed in a church.

When Rebekka and Jacob slept together for the first time, Jacob seemed shy to Rebekka. Rebekka thought that sex was nothing like how Dorothea or Lydia described it to her. Jacob and Rebekka came to learn each other's preferences, habits, etc. Jacob did not care especially about religion, and was indifferent to Rebekka's own spiritual choices. Rebekka chose not to join the local church. Rebekka and Jacob developed a supportive relationship, needing only each other. However, although they planned on having children, Rebekka had trouble nursing. All of their children born after Patrician died in infancy.

Rebekka discussed sex with Dorothea and Lydia before she has sex with Jacob for the first time, showing how female communities can serve as a place for women to gain knowledge about subjects that are taboo in other circles. It does seem, though, that the kind of sex Dorothea and Lydia, who are prostitutes, have is very different than Rebekka's sex with Jacob. Again, neither Rebekka nor Jacob is interested in religion.

Jacob, convinced the farm would never be profitable, began to spend more time trading. Although Rebekka found Jacob's stories of his travels exciting, they also made her worry about the threatening world beyond her farm. Jacob sometimes would bring Rebekka a new servant to help her with chores or gifts.

Jacob's failure as a farmer and turn to trading constitutes a failure of the romanticized pastoral life that Jacob dreamed of. Unsatisfied by the rustic life of a farmer, Jacob gains wealth as a trader.

Eventually Jacob started to tell Rebekka fewer stories and bring her more elaborate gifts. Rebekka did not ask him questions and instead smiled at the presents. Finally, though, Rebekka asked him where the money for the gifts had been coming from. Jacob told her he had "new arrangements." Rebekka now thinks that these beautiful, useless gifts should have made her unsurprised by Jacob's eventual decision to build his new, huge **house**. Rebekka was unhappy about the house, thinking it was useless and boastful.

Jacob's increasing silence suggests that his pursuit of money is leading him to unsavory business deals that he would rather not discuss. In exchange for his absence and silence, Jacob gives Rebekka expensive but useless gifts, showing how, although meaningless, Jacob has begun to value material wealth above all else.

One day as she shaved him, Rebekka told Jacob she did not think they needed the enormous new **house**. Jacob responded by telling Rebekka that need was "not the reason" for building it. The purpose was legacy, Jacob said. He insisted on building it.

Jacob seems to be attempting to make up for his lack of male children by building a mansion that he can leave as his "legacy" to display the wealth he has attained.

The building of the **house** brought lots of men, equipment, and horses to the farm, including the horse that kicked Patrician in the head. Rebekka did not notice Jacob coming down with smallpox in the frenzy, only realizing he was sick when he collapsed. No one came to the farm after that for fear of catching the sickness and the laborers left.

The fact that the horse that kicked Patrician in the head was a horse that was brought to the farm to work on Jacob's mansion shows that, like giving Rebekka gifts in exchange for his silence and absence, the house building is not worth the human cost.


Per Jacob's final request, Rebekka and the servants carried Jacob into his new **house** to die. It was raining, and they struggled with the gate, laying him in the mud so they could undo the hinges. Finally they got into the house and set Jacob down. Jacob died and Rebekka closed his eyes. Rebekka, Lina, Sorrow, and Florens sat down on the floor and cried.

Jacob's death renders the mansion, although intended to be his legacy, empty and unfulfilling. The scene of Jacob's demise shows how material wealth cannot stave off sickness, and its value disappears in death.

Rebekka's sickness feels like a bad joke to her, and she thinks of how Dorothea used to say "Congratulations, Satan," when the ship rocked violently. Rebekka hallucinates seeing the women from the ship in her bedroom and listens to their imaginary chitchat. Just like the women Rebekka knew in real life, the hallucinated women are self-centered, but they offer Rebekka comforting distraction.

In her sickness and distress, Rebekka hallucinates her friends from the boat, bringing her calm and distraction. Although they are not real, Rebekka's imagination of her friends shows how female community can leave a lasting impact and provide memories of comfort and support to fall back on.

Rebekka thinks of the Bible story of Job, who was once prosperous before God subjected him to a series of punishments to test his faith. Rebekka thinks that all along Job only wanted God's attention anyway. Rebekka wonders, though, whether a female Job would feel the same. After all, Rebekka thinks, "invisibility was intolerable to men," and a female Job would have already known the humility and fidelity that Job had to learn.

As Rebekka thinks of Job, she imagines what his story would be like if he were a woman. In doing so, Rebekka draws attention to the fact that male stories are centered in both the Bible and literature in general. She also thinks about how women, unlike men, are used to being invisible, highlighting a double standard.


Finally the women Rebekka imagines fade. Lina is sleeping on the floor at the foot of the bed. Rebekka thinks that even before Jacob's death, she missed him often. With Jacob gone, neither Patrician nor Lina nor the Baptists were enough to keep her occupied. Rebekka dislikes the Baptists especially. She thinks that their definition of God is even narrower than her parents'. In their faith, no one except those who join their church are saved, and no black people, Catholics, or Jews can be saved.

When Rebekka states that the Baptists' definition of God is extremely narrow, she notes that they do not believe that black people, Catholics, or Jews can go to heaven. This shows how racism (and xenophobia in general) is built into the doctrine of many religions, and can be used as an excuse to perpetuate bigotry.


Rebekka holds a particular grudge against the Baptists because they refused to baptize her children. Moreover, they have plenty of living, healthy children, while all of Rebekka's children have died. Rebekka feels jealous and guilty about her own failure when she sees the Baptists' children.

Rebekka's personal grief with the Baptists is due to their refusal to baptize her children, who subsequently died. As a result, according to many Christian religions, Rebekka's children cannot go to heaven.

Besides, Rebekka thinks, the Baptists did not help her loneliness when Jacob was gone. The loneliness struck without warning. Then, finally, Jacob would arrive to dispel her sadness. Rebekka happily remembers listening to him tell the stories of his travels while holding a baby on her lap, forgetting her loneliness in those moments.

Rebekka's intense loneliness during Jacob's absences show how emotionally dependent she is on him. Despite her strong friendship with Lina and the children that she has at various points, Rebekka struggles to be happy without her husband.

Rebekka's thoughts then turn to a memory of a conversation with Lina. The two women were sitting by a stream doing laundry. Lina was holding Rebekka's baby. Rebekka asked Lina if she had ever slept with a man. Lina replied that she did once, and that it was "not good." When Rebekka asked more about it, Lina implied that the encounter was violent. Lina handed the baby to Rebekka then dressed and walked with Patrician back to the house, carrying the laundry basket.

Lina's past relationships with men have been violent, at least according to what Rebekka garners from this conversation with her. For Lina, sex and romance are sources of trauma that she does not feel comfortable discussing. Lina is one of many women is the book who experiences domestic abuse and/or sexual violence.

Rebekka, now alone with her baby, thought again how lucky she was to be with Jacob. Jacob did not beat Rebekka, although wife beating was common and legal with certain restrictions. That protection, however, did not extend to lovers outside of marriage. Rebekka wondered if Lina's lover was a native, a rich man, or a soldier or sailor. Rebekka suspected he was a rich man since she had never known a kind one.

Rebekka's reflections on wife beating, though clearly not disturbing to her, are jarring to the reader. The fact that wife-beating is legislated shows how domestic abuse is sanctioned and normalized by the government, emphasizing how the oppression of women is built into the legal system.

Rebekka reflects that only her mother has ever hit her. Now, Rebekka is unsure of whether her mother is still alive. Rebekka once received word that her family had moved, but that is the only info she has gotten about them over the years. Rebekka wonders how her mother might look now, and if old age would make her kinder.

Although Rebekka is not literally an orphan, she is entirely disconnected from her family. Thus Rebekka, estranged from her unloving family, could be considered one of the many orphan figures in the book.

Rebekka begs for her mirror, and Lina finally gives it to her. Rebekka looks at her ruined face and apologizes out loud to it. Lina begs Rebekka to let her take the mirror away, but Rebekka clings to it.

Rebekka's sadness at her reflection is due to the fact that smallpox leaves sufferers physically disfigured for life, marring her beauty and her ability to find a new husband.

Rebekka thinks of how happy her life was before Jacob's death. Rebekka remembers the role that the Blacksmith played in their lives, functioning like an "anchor." She remembers how Lina was afraid of him, Sorrow grateful to him, and Florens in love with him. Rebekka sent Florens to go find the Blacksmith because he was the only one Rebekka could rely on. Rebekka trusts Florens because she is smart, and because she has affection for her, although it took a while to develop.

As Rebekka recalls her relationship to the Blacksmith, Morrison uses her account to further situate the reader in the network of relationships in the text, showing how the Blacksmith fits in with the Vaark household. Rebekka's conviction that Florens is the right one to find the Blacksmith draws attention to Florens's devotion to him.

Though Jacob had thought that giving Rebekka a girl close to Patrician's age would comfort her, Rebekka had found it insulting. She paid little attention to Florens when she arrived. Anyway, Lina adopted Florens so thoroughly that Rebekka did not have to do much to care for her. Ultimately, Florens's eagerness to please endeared her to Rebekka. Rebekka attributes this people-pleasing inclination to the fact that, according to Jacob, Florens's mother was eager to give her up.

Rebekka recounts Florens's arrival at the Vaark household and her subsequent ability to win Rebekka over with her eagerness to please. Rebekka diagnoses Florens's desire for praise as a result of her mother's perceived lack of interest in her daughter, suggesting the importance of the mother-daughter relationship and the potential trauma that could result from a bad one.

Rebekka also sees this as the psychological reason for Florens's fast attachment to the Blacksmith. Jacob did not worry about Florens's attraction to him since the Blacksmith would not be around for a long time, and since his work was invaluable. Jacob was right, since the Blacksmith cured Sorrow of her illness. Rebekka prays that the Blacksmith can do the same for her, and that Florens can persuade him to come.

Rebekka also diagnoses Florens's quick affection for and trust in the Blacksmith as symptomatic of her mother's neglect as a child. Clearly, Rebekka sees a healthy maternal bond as supremely important in establishing healthy romantic relationships later in life.

Rebekka tells herself it will all be all right, just like how her loneliness was always okay in the end. Rebekka rationalized many of her marital anxieties, including Jacob's increasing greed. Regardless, Jacob was present in Rebekka's life, sleeping next to her at night, until his sudden death.

Although Rebekka and Jacob enjoyed a loving partnership, Rebekka often kept her feelings about Jacob's choices a secret. This shows how, even in their relatively happy marriage, Rebekka's female voice is silenced.

Rebekka wonders if the Anabaptists were right and her self-sufficiency and happiness with Jacob were blasphemy. Rebekka thinks again of her shipmates, who trusted in themselves. The Baptists, meanwhile, trusted in God, leading safe and meek lives. Rebekka juxtaposes the shipmates and the Baptists, thinking how they would each think the other were deeply flawed.

As Rebekka juxtaposes her friends from her transatlantic journey with the Baptists she knows in town, she clearly differentiates between two different ways of going about life: one which is self-sufficient, independent, and pleasurable, and the other which is pious, meek, and safe.

Still, Rebekka thinks that they have the "promise and threat of men" in common. Rebekka thinks that some women, like Lina, have withdrawn completely from men. Others, like Sorrow, have become victims of them. Rebecca's shipmates "fought" men, while the Baptists "obeyed them." Rebekka identifies herself as a woman who reverted to a child-like state without her man. A widow, Rebekka notes, has no legal status in 17th century America. Rebekka thinks this makes sense with the story of Adam and Eve, the original widow.

As Rebekka contemplates how the different women in her life deal with the "promise and threat of men," she highlights how impossible it is to navigate life as a woman in 17th-century America without sacrificing something. Each of the strategies that Rebekka lists entails some sacrifice. When Rebekka highlights widows' lack of legal status, she also shows how the oppression of women is legally constituted.

The Anabaptists feel completely comfortable with this black-and-white version of the Adam and Eve story, with Eve goading and betraying Adam. According to Rebekka, they also have binary understandings of good and bad, and clear-cut understandings of good and bad people. For example, according to the Anabaptists, natives and Africans do not have access to heaven.

Rebekka implies that she sees the story of Adam and Eve, and by extension relations between men and women, as more complicated than the straightforward Bible story might seem. Rebekka reiterates that Anabaptists deny the possibility of heaven to people of color, highlighting that spiritual element of racism.

The Anabaptist vision of heaven is not only divine but thrilling, an adventurous paradise with music and feasts and dreams come true. According to the Anabaptists, if a mother is religiously devout, her children might get into heaven. More importantly, in Anabaptist heaven, there is an abundance of time to enjoy the benefits of heaven—sleigh rides and skating, good weather when desired and no illness, pain, aging, or dying.

Although Rebekka seems skeptical of many of the Anabaptist teachings, as she ponders their vision of heaven many aspects of it appeal to her. For example, Rebekka, whose children were not baptized, likes the idea that, if she *is devout enough, her children could still go to heaven.*

To access this heaven that the Anabaptists dream of, Rebekka would only have to believe in their faith. Rebekka pictures herself talking with Jacob again. Now, though, with her husband gone, Rebekka is alone with the servants. Sorrow is worried about what will happen to her if Rebekka should die. Lina, though, seems unconcerned for her own future, as if "she has seen and survived everything."

Rebekka thinks that, in order to access the heaven that so appeals to her, all she must do is genuinely believe and participate in the Anabaptist faith. Rebekka clearly has developed an anxiety about her future as a widow and about her life after death. She longs to talk with Jacob, as she could in heaven.

Rebekka remembers how, the second year that Jacob was away, she, Lina, and Patrician almost starved in an off-season blizzard. Rebekka recalls Lina going to the river, breaking the ice, and collecting salmon to feed them. Rebekka thinks that "that was Lina," before wondering if it was, in fact, God. Rebekka wonders if her voyage to America and the death of her whole family is a test from God. Rebekka's thoughts race as she wonders whether Florens will make it back with the Blacksmith in time to save her.

As Rebekka becomes more and more drawn to the possibility of attaining a place in Anabaptist heaven, and as she becomes more and more ill, she begins to re-read some of her past experiences, like Lina catching salmon, as God's doing. This is ironic, considering that Lina can catch salmon thanks to her upbringing in native culture, which is diametrically opposed to Christian religion.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7 resumes Florens's first person narrative. Florens describes how she finally fell asleep in the forest, waking up whenever something in the woods made noises. Florens dreams of walking cherry trees ripe with fruit. In her dream, one tree bends down towards her and she wakes up screaming. When she wakes, the trees are fruitless and exactly where they were when she fell asleep. Florens sleeps again.

Florens's fears in the American wilderness transform into nightmares of walking cherry trees. Again, the American pastoral—this time represented by the fruit-bearing orchard trees— becomes monstrous and menacing rather than innocent and enchanting.

Florens wakes up to sunlight. Florens heads northwest until she reaches a patch of thick brush. She pushes through, reaching an open meadow. Florens then reaches apple trees. Florens suddenly stops, hearing the sound of hooves. Several young native boys ride up to her. The men circle and smile at Florens, who is afraid, and speak in a language she does not understand. Florens drops to her knees out of fright. One of the riders dismounts his horse and offers Florens a drink from his canteen and a strip of leather to chew on. The boy then runs and jumps onto his horse, and the three riders disappear.

Florens's walk through the meadow and apple trees and her encounter with the native boys seemingly restores the idyllic pastoral image that has been lost during the rest of Florens's travels. Florens's initial reaction to the native boys is fear, perhaps reflecting the pervasive stereotype that natives are "savages." On the contrary, however, they give Florens a helping hand.

Florens aims north once again, following the hoof prints of the boys on horses. Florens thinks of a time when she was having sex with the Blacksmith and he put a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. Lina knew what was going on between them, and she told Florens one night while they were going to bed to be on her guard. Florens, though, was too tired to answer. She thought instead of the Blacksmith.

Florens's thoughts return to her intimacy with and lust for the Blacksmith. When Lina warns Florens that she should be careful not to get hurt by the Blacksmith, she displays a motherly impulse to protect Florens. Florens, however, who is still quite naïve in matters of love, ignores Lina.

As Florens was falling asleep, Lina told her about her bad experience with her lover, with whom she met in secret. Florens's sleepiness disappeared and she sat up to listen to Lina's story. Lina talked about how the man did not drink rum the second or third time they met, but he hit her with his hand. Then one day he punched her, and another day whipped her. The abuse progressed. Lina described walk through town wiping blood from her nose, with the townspeople believing she was drunk because the pain made her stumble.

In order to get Florens to listen to Lina's request that she be careful with the Blacksmith, Lina tells Florens her own story of abuse. Strikingly, Lina's story not only features horrific abuse by her partner, but also a community that, despite its piety, makes no attempt to help Lina get out of her abusive situation.

The Presbyterians stared at Lina when she appeared covered in blood. Ultimately they decided to sell her. They forced Lina to sleep outside and eat from a bowl "like a dog" because they did not want her in the house. Jacob purchased Lina, but first she put two rooster heads in her lover's **shoes** to curse him.

Rather than trying to help Lina, who has been living among them and adopting their culture, the Presbyterians cast Lina out. This exemplifies how abused women may be ostracized by their supposedly "righteous" communities.

Lina focused her attention back on Florens to tell her that she must be wary of men. She asked Florens if the Blacksmith planned to take Florens with him. Florens had not thought of this question, knowing that the Blacksmith cannot marry her because she is a slave. But Florens is determined to go where he goes, and knows that since Rebekka sent her to find him, her trip is lawful.

Once again, Lina is sharing her own story of abuse to try to warn Florens of the potential dangerous of men and sex. Morrison shows how female relationships and community can allow women to share knowledge and try to protect one another in an oppressive patriarchal society.

Florens walks through the forest, thirsty and tired. She arrives in a part of the woods where cows are grazing, thinking there must be a village nearby. Florens sees a path in the woods and follows it. She sees two cottages, but there are no signs of life inside. There is a church off in the distance so Florens assumes the villagers are at prayer. Needing shelter for the night, Florens decides to knock on one of the doors. Florens spies a light in a house, and she knocks on that door.

Morrison offers the reader another image of pastoral rural America in this village. Morrison also suggests how religion structures daily life in many communities— the entire village, except for one household, seems to be at prayer.

A woman with red hair answers the door. She is suspicious of Florens and asks who sent her there. Florens tells the woman she is alone and she is only looking for shelter. The woman asks Florens more questions about whether anyone is with her, if Florens is a spirit from another world, and whether Florens is a Christian or a heathen. Florens tells the woman she is an **orphan**, and finally the woman lets her in.

Widow Ealing's initial questions reiterate that Florens has stumbled into a deeply religious (and isolated) community. Although Florens is technically not an orphan, she identifies herself as one. Orphanage, although a kind of alienation, also allows Florens to gain Widow Ealing's sympathy.

The woman tells Florens her name is Widow Ealing. She excuses herself for her hesitancy in helping Florens, telling her there is evil about. She gives Florens porridge and bread to eat, which Florens devours with a thank-you. Florens notices that there is a girl lying on one of the beds in the room. The girl's black eyes are looking in different directions. Florens finishes her food and the Widow asks why she is traveling alone. Florens explains that she is on an errand to save her sick mistress.

Widow Ealing's widowhood is significant because, as Rebekka notes in her chapter, widowhood is an extremely vulnerable position for women in 17th-century America. Without a husband or father, widows are untethered to men, and because women are unable to own property or otherwise live independently, widowhood is a state outside of social rules and expectations.

The girl lying in the bed sits up and says something about death. Florens notices that the girl appears to be around her age. The Widow does not respond. The girl then stands and limps to the table, showing Florens the bleeding cuts on her legs. The Widow explains that the girl is her daughter, Jane, and that the cuts on her legs are to "save her life."

Clearly, something strange is going on, although it is not yet clear exactly what. In Daughter Jane and Widow Ealing, Morrison gives the reader another example of the mother-daughter relationship—this time, one that is threatened by religious persecution.

Widow Ealing closes the shutters and blows out the lamp for bed before saying her prayers. Daughter Jane goes back to her bed. Florens lies near the fireplace in the dark and sleeps, occasionally awakened by the Widow and Jane's intermittent speech. She overhears Daughter Jane ask Widow Ealing how she can prove she is not a demon, and then hears the Widow respond that "they" will decide. They continue to talk about demons, God, the devil, and how Daughter Jane will be judged.

As it becomes clear that Daughter Jane is being threatened because the townspeople believe she is a demon, Morrison evokes the story of the Salem Witch Trials. The Salem Witch Trials were a much written about series of witch trials in 17th-century Massachusetts, and are widely considered to be an example of the dangers of group-think and fanaticism.

Widow Ealing tells Jane that God will not abandon her, and that she will be safe because, unlike her, demons do not bleed. Florens thinks that that is a good thing to know, and that her own mother should be teaching her these things. Florens falls asleep again, then wakes up to animal sounds outside. The Widow begins her morning routine, and Florens goes to the commode. When she returns she sees Widow Ealing opening up the wounds on Jane's legs again.

Jane's persecution is an example of how intensely and uncritically religious communities can be dangerous, even for people, like Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane, who seem to be a part of the community that is persecuting them. As women living alone, the Widow and her daughter are especially vulnerable.

The Widow, Jane, and Florens have breakfast, praying beforehand. After the prayer, Florens moves to cross herself like she learned in Catholic Maryland, and Jane stops her with a shake of her head. They eat except for Jane, who eats nothing. Florens washes the dishes. Suddenly, Florens hears footsteps on the path, and visitors approach the cottage.

Clearly, since Jane stops Florens from crossing herself (a symbolic act associated with Catholicism), Florens has found herself among a Protestant community of some kind. Although Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane are being persecuted, they continue to follow their strict customs.

The Widow invites the visitors inside. She shows the visitors Jane's wounds, insisting that Jane cannot be a demon because demons do not bleed. The visitors then turn to look at Florens. The Widow explains that Florens is a guest. One of the women says she has never seen a black person, and the rest of the visitors say she is "the Black Man." There is a child with the visitors, and when she sees Florens she cries inconsolably. Her mother takes her outside.

"The Black Man" is a name for the devil and a reference to the fact that many 17th-century Christians believed that the devil had black skin. This is another example of how Christianity in the 17th century was deeply entwined with racist ideas. The townspeople, who have never seen a black person, thus seem to think Florens is the devil.

Florens feels she is in danger. She decides to show them the letter that Rebekka gave her to explain her errand, and so she removes it from her stocking and holds it out to them. None of the visitors will touch it, so the Widow breaks the seal on the letter and unfurls it. Only one of the people in the room, a man, seems to know how to read. He reads it aloud. Rebekka justifies Florens traveling alone in the letter and confirms the necessity of her errand.

When Florens shows her letter to the visitors, she attempts to justify her presence and account for her existence. This shows how, as a woman and a black person, Florens's presence without her owners is constantly subject to interrogation and her movement is severely restricted.

The visitors discuss the letter. They then tell Florens to take off her clothes. They examine her without touching her. Finally they tell Florens to dress and they leave the room. As Florens puts her clothes back on, she hears quarreling. The visitors discuss whether Satan could have written the letter. When Florens reenters the room, the child who is with the visitors screams, and the visitors leave.

The townspeople's examination of Florens is cold, invasive, and disturbingly dehumanizing. It also it an example of how black bodies and the bodies of slaves were constantly subjected to scrutiny— a consistent practice throughout the history of slavery and racism.

The visitors depart with the promise that they will consider the letter and return when they've decided if it came from Satan. The Widow kneels to pray, and then she leaves to go find the sheriff. Jane cleans her leg wounds and waits with Florens. As the sun begins to go down, Jane boils duck eggs and wraps them in a blanket. The she motions to Florens to follow her.

Again, Morrison depicts the shocking ignorance and irrationality of this religious community. Despite the fact that black slaves are fueling the North American economy, the townspeople have never seen one, and are quicker to believe Florens is the devil.

The two girls run through the pasture and into the forest. They arrive at a stream, and Jane hands Florens the eggs, telling her to leave and showing her the right way to the village where Florens needs to go to find the Blacksmith. Florens thanks her, and Jane kisses Florens's forehead. As Florens walks away, she turns back and asks Jane if Jane is a demon. Jane smiles and says yes, then tells Florens to get on her way.

Jane and Widow Ealing's kindness contrasts sharply with the townspeople's mistrust and aggression. As result, when Jane says that she is, in fact, a demon, she gives the reader cause to question the entire moral structure of Christianity and the colonies. Jane's "demonism" is more in line with modern morality than 17th-century norms.

Now alone, Florens feels drained and worries about the fact that she left the letter with the visitors. Now Florens has no documents stating her status and affirming the legality of her presence. Florens thinks of her mother again. Then she thinks of the Blacksmith, anticipating the comfort and safety she will feel again when she is with him.

For a black woman like Florens, being undocumented is dangerous. Also, in Florens's recurring thoughts of her mother, especially in contrast to the Widow's commitment to Jane, Morrison shows how her perceived abandonment continues to traumatize Florens.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 follows Sorrow's limited third-person narrative. The narrator begins the chapter by stating that Sorrow does not mind when the other characters call her Sorrow because "Twin" continues to use her real name. Over the course of Sorrow's narrative, it becomes clear that Twin is a delusion that Sorrow has invented. Sometimes Twin gets her attention with that name while Sorrow is doing her chores, distracting her from what she is doing.

As the narrative changes to Sorrow's perspective, it immediately becomes clear that Sorrow suffers from some kind of mental illness when she begins describing her relationship to Twin. This, like Rebekka's illness, renders the narration in Sorrow's chapter especially unreliable.

According to Sorrow, she met Twin under one of the hammocks of the ship she was on after everyone else who was on it had drowned. Sorrow survived because, when the ship was looted, she was high on opium and being treated for boils in the ship's surgery. The next thing Sorrow knew when she came down from the medicine was that everyone else was gone.

Sorrow suffered an enormous trauma when her ship, which was Sorrow's home during her entire childhood, sank and then was looted. Twin, who appears to Sorrow after the shipwreck, seems to be linked to Sorrow's inability to process the trauma.

Sorrow grew up on that ship and had never lived on land before. Alone on the looted ship, and the only survivors, Sorrow and Twin left the shipwrecked boat and walked on the shore. They ate dead fish and ignored the sight of the dead bodies in the water. A tide swept Sorrow out to sea. The next thing she knew she awoke naked under a blanket next to a woman with white hair looking over her. The woman told her she was not dead. Sorrow saw Twin at the foot of the pallet she was lying on. Comforted, Sorrow fell asleep again. When she woke up again, the lumberjack's wife gave Sorrow men's clothes to wear.

Again Morrison emphasizes the traumatic nature of Sorrow's past, dwelling on the dead bodies around her. All the main female characters of color in the book experience trauma (Lina's village is destroyed and she is abused, Florens's mother is raped, Florens is seemingly abandoned by her mother). This suggests that women of color are especially vulnerable to trauma in the social and legal system of colonial America.

Sorrow put on the clothes and ate breakfast. When Sorrow's saviors asked her name, Twin told Sorrow not to tell them, so she said nothing. The lumberjack and his family asked Sorrow questions about her past, and she gave them very little information, only saying that she was on a ship, and that she got to shore thanks to a whale. The lumberjack's wife named her Sorrow since she would not reveal her real name.

As Rebekka suggests elsewhere, the fact that Sorrow grew up on a ship around very few, if any, women, possibly accounts for Sorrow's problematic relationships with men and her inability to form meaningful relationships with other women.

The lumberjack's wife tried to get Sorrow to care for the geese. Because of Sorrow's sea legs, she stumbled and tripped throughout her first day. Sorrow failed at managing the flock, and so the housewife gave her simpler cleaning tasks. Sorrow failed at them too, and the housewife scolded her. Sorrow enjoyed taking short walks with Twin in between her tasks, and the narrator notes that Sorrow occasionally had "secret company other than Twin."

The fact that Sorrow was not raised by women, and so not socialized to be traditionally feminine, becomes evident as Sorrow cannot complete basic cleaning and farm work. Though her inability to complete these tasks may also be due to her mental instability, Sorrow shows how gender in 17th-century America is socialized and codified.

When Sorrow bled, the housewife told her it was her period. However, she did not bleed again in the subsequent months, and it became clear that Sorrow was pregnant. The lumberjack finally decided to get rid of Sorrow. Jacob came to examine Sorrow, asking questions about her age and health. The lumberjack told Jacob he could rename her, and that although she was "a bit mongrelized," Sorrow would work without complaint.

Sorrow's lack of a mother figure during her childhood means that she is completely out of touch with her female body and does not know the signs of pregnancy. This section is also where Morrison hints at the fact that Sorrow is mixed race, when the lumberjack calls her "mongrelized."

Jacob took Sorrow away to his farm on horseback. During the ride, Sorrow vomited. Twin was happy when they saw the farm. Sorrow evaluated Rebekka and Lina when she met them, contrasting their skin colors and observing that they both had straight noses. Lina washed Sorrow's hair for fear of lice before letting her in the house. Jacob told Rebekka that Sorrow would sleep in the house, and when Rebekka asked why, Jacob said that the lumberjack told him that Sorrow wandered. That night, Sorrow slept by the fireplace, comforted by Twin's presence.

When Jacob tells Rebekka that Sorrow would sleep in the house, and Rebekka asks why, there seems to be an underlying implication from Rebekka and Lina that Jacob wishes to sleep with Sorrow. Other characters repeat this suspicion; however, Sorrow's narrative reveals nothing that supports it. Still, what appears to be Jacob's sexual interest in Sorrow alienates her from them.

The next morning, Sorrow threw up her breakfast. Rebekka told her to work in the vegetable garden. As she picked turnips, Sorrow saw Patrician at the garden's edge and waved at her. Patrician waved back. Lina appeared and shooed Patrician away. In the morning, Lina checked around Sorrow's bed to make sure she didn't steal food.

Lina clearly finds Sorrow immediately untrustworthy, as evidenced by the fact that she will not let Sorrow near Patrician. Lina's harsh prejudgments prevent Sorrow from finally attaining the female community previously unavailable to her.

Lina does not often speak to Sorrow, but she was the one who told Sorrow she was pregnant. Sorrow recalls her utter shock. When she asked Lina's advice, Lina walked away. Rebekka, on the other hand, did not seem to notice that Sorrow was pregnant. Although Sorrow's baby died when it was born premature (according to Lina, that is), Rebekka's baby survived until he was six months old. When he died, the family buried him next to Rebekka's other child who died.

Again, Sorrow clearly has not had women in her life to instruct her about the symptoms of pregnancy. Lina fills this role (which perhaps a mother might otherwise do), but walks away when Sorrow looks to her for further advice, clearly indicating that she will not play any kind of maternal role for Sorrow.

When Sorrow's baby was born, she thought she saw it yawn. Lina, though, told her it was dead, and wrapped it in cloth before putting it in the river to be carried away. Sorrow cried at the (debatable) stillbirth, but Twin told her not to cry since she was there with her. Sorrow relied on Twin increasingly, talking and walking with her.

It's unclear whether Sorrow's baby was actually alive when Lina cast it away, or whether Sorrow is imagining it. Lina's narrative, however, never indicates that she intentionally drowned it, suggesting that Sorrow's belief that it was alive is incorrect.

Sorrow began meeting with the local deacon in secret. He brought her cherries and walnuts and implored her to keep their meetings quiet. He brought her a neckerchief that she threw in the stream, knowing that if Lina saw it she would tell Rebekka. Rebekka lost another another child, but Patrician stayed healthy until the horse kicked her in the head. Lina blamed Sorrow for the children's deaths.

Sorrow's "meetings" with the deacon are described in a way that heavily suggests that Sorrow and the deacon are having sex. This shows the hypocrisy of the deacon's religious teachings, since premarital sex in 17th-century America would be condemned by most Protestant sects.

Sorrow remembers that Florens arrived on the farm next, and Sorrow was happy to meet someone new. Twin, though, got jealous, and told her not to reach out and touch one of Florens's braids. Lina led Florens away, and, according to Sorrow, "thereafter, the girl belonged to Lina." Lina kept Sorrow away from them, encouraging Florens and Rebekka to mistrust her. Although Lina helped her birth her child, Sorrow continues to think that the baby was born alive, and that Lina drowned it in the river. She still pictures the baby breathing water.

Sorrow's stillbirth and lost chance at motherhood obviously continues to cause her emotional distress, as evidenced by the fact that she keeps imagining her baby breathing under water. Sorrow's obsession with the water may also stem from her traumatic experience after the shipwreck, when she nearly drowned. Sorrow's difficulty in overcoming the loss of her baby shows the potential pain and heartbreak of motherhood.

Several years later, the Blacksmith arrived at the farm. Sorrow remembers how Lina was afraid of him and tried to warn Rebekka about him, but Rebekka paid no attention because she was so happy that Jacob was home. Sorrow and Twin, meanwhile, did not know what to think of the Blacksmith. Then one day, as Sorrow was returning from the stream with water, she collapsed with a fever. The Blacksmith saw her fall, picked her up, and took her to a bed. Lina brought the Blacksmith vinegar, which he put on Sorrow's skin. Then, while Rebekka, Jacob, Lina, and Florens watched, he heated a knife and lanced one of the boils, then fed Sorrow a drop of the blood from it.

While Lina, who is generally wary of men after her own experience of sexual violence, immediately mistrusts the Blacksmith, Sorrow withholds judgment. In Sorrow's own experience, men have provided her with much more support than women, albeit while also trying to have sex with her. The Blacksmith's technique for healing Sorrow's illness is a mix of practical healing (putting vinegar on the boils, for example) and spiritual ritual (like feeding Sorrow one drop of her own blood).

Sorrow lay outside in a hammock with the women fanning her. She hallucinated that she and Twin are on the ship she grew up on. She remembered her shock at feeling the ground under her feet for the first time. Sorrow thought of how the Captain had raised her like a future crewman rather than a daughter, only teaching her to patch and sew sails.

During Sorrow's sickness, the reader gets a slightly better idea of her life on the ship. Morrison shows the reader how Sorrow was not raised in a traditionally feminine way, making her transition to "normal" (gendered) life difficult.

The Blacksmith insisted that Rebekka and Lina feed Sorrow nothing during her sickness, only fanning her and soaking her boils in vinegar. Finally Sorrow's fever broke. The boils disappeared and Sorrow's strength gradually returned. Everyone was impressed by the Blacksmith's healing powers. Lina, though, worried that the sickness would spread to them all and tried to keep Florens away from Sorrow.

The Blacksmith's healing powers— which seem more like early medicine— serve as a counter to the various other types of more religiously based remedies, like Christian prayer and Lina's native remedies. In general the Blacksmith, who is never named, is a figure shrouded in mystery and power.

However, Sorrow thinks, Florens became sick anyway—with love for the Blacksmith. One day Sorrow was lying in a meadow listening to Twin tell her a story when she saw the Blacksmith and Florens together. Sorrow watched them have sex, thinking it was like "dancing," until they finished and dressed. Sorrow watched the Blacksmith say goodbye to Florens with a kiss, which amazed her. Sorrow realized that no one had ever kissed her.

Sorrow's amazement at Florens and the Blacksmith's relationship heavily hints at the violent and unaffectionate nature of her own sexual experience. The tragic fact that Sorrow has never been kissed, despite having been pregnant twice, implies that Sorrow has never had an example of happy and loving sex.

When Rebekka gets sick and sends Florens to find the Blacksmith, the Blacksmith returns alone. He asks how long Rebekka has been ill and enters Rebekka's bedroom, sitting beside her. Rebekka thanks him repeatedly. The Blacksmith leaves the room and Lina follows him. Sorrow, though, lingers by the door long enough to see Rebekka get down on her knees and pray. Sorrow thinks that Rebekka seems entirely alone in the world, even with her servants, except for God.

Sorrow witnesses the first signs of Rebekka's religious conversion as she watches her pray on her hands and knees. Although the Blacksmith has come to heal her, Rebekka seems to think that the Blacksmith's healing is the work of the Christian God. When Sorrow thinks Rebekka is alone in the world except for God, she highlights Rebekka's sadness.

Sorrow tiptoes away and out into the yard. She sits down in the grass, stroking her pregnant stomach. Through the kitchen window she overhears Lina asking the Blacksmith where Florens is and when she will return. The Blacksmith gives few answers, telling Lina that Florens will come back "when it suits her." The Blacksmith then leaves the house, smiling as he passes by Sorrow, and walks over to the new **house**. He strokes the iron fence he made for Jacob. Then he stands before Jacob's grave before going inside the enormous empty house and shutting the door behind him.

Lina's motherly anxiety emerges as she interrogates the Blacksmith, who she does not trust, about the whereabouts of her surrogate daughter. The Blacksmith, meanwhile, continues to be a mysterious figure. When he goes into the house and strokes the iron fence, he seems to be contemplating something, but there is no hint whatsoever about what he is thinking, leaving the reader to speculate (and reminding us of the symbolic nature of the house and the fence in particular).


Before sunrise the next morning the Blacksmith leaves again. Sorrow stands in the doorway, unable to sleep, and watches him ride away. Lina clearly is still upset about Florens, wondering whether the Blacksmith was telling the truth. Sorrow wonders if, despite his healing powers, Lina is right that they cannot trust him. She doubts it though, remembering how he saved her life and had known that Rebekka would live. Sorrow thinks Lina is just overprotective of Florens.

In this section, Morrison shows the dynamics at play that cause Sorrow to be continually unable to connect with Lina. While men repeatedly help Sorrow (even if it's in exchange for sexual favors, like in the case of the deacon), Lina has continually denied Sorrow's attempts to be close to her.

Sorrow is so pregnant she cannot bend down or lift anything heavy, so she cannot do anything about the farm running wild. The livestock are uncontained and the laundry is molding because no one is hanging it. Rebekka is still ill, and Lina is so distracted by Florens's absence that she does nothing to help.

With Jacob gone, the farm falls into a profound state of disrepair. Jacob's pastoral dream culminates in chaos and ruin, far from the innocent rural life he and Rebekka imagined.

One day, Sorrow's water breaks. Rebekka is still sick, and Sorrow, who still thinks her first baby was born alive, does not trust Lina to help her. Sorrow walks to the riverbank where she hopes to find Will and Scully on their raft, thinking that they could help her. Sorrow begins labor alone before Will and Scully hear her. She stands in the river and they deliver the baby. Scully cuts the umbilical cord and hands the child to Sorrow. Scully and Will congratulate Sorrow and offer to take them back to the farmhouse. Sorrow says thank you and declines, wanting to rest. The two men wade back to their raft.

Although at the time childbirth was usually a life event during which women helped other women, Sorrow feels unable to seek aid from the women she lives with. Instead, Will and Scully, two men, help her. Sorrow gives birth in the river, adding to the many associations that Morrison makes between Sorrow and bodies of water. Unlike the last birth, when her child was stillborn or drowned, this child survives.

Sorrow wraps the baby in a blanket and dozes on the riverbank. Just before sunset she wakes up and nurses the baby. Sorrow feels accomplished for doing "something important" herself, without being saved by a man. Twin is nowhere to be found.

Although Will and Scully help her deliver, Sorrow feels personally accomplished, as giving birth is the first time she does something significant on her own, without a man.

Two days later at the farm, Lina hides her disgust with Sorrow and continues to worry about Florens. Rebekka says nothing about the baby. Sorrow says to Rebekka that it was good that the Blacksmith came to heal her, and Rebekka chastises her, saying only God can cure. Each of the women distances herself from the others, caught up in her own problems and thoughts.

Rebekka's response to Sorrow's comments about the Blacksmith reflects her sudden religious transformation. Following Rebekka's sickness, the friendship between Lina and Rebekka, previously a source of support for both women, dissolves.

Twin has completely disappeared from Sorrow's consciousness. Sorrow stops wandering, and is now able to complete chores and care for her child. Sorrow sees the sea in her daughter's gray eyes. She says to the baby that she is her mother, and tells her "my name is Complete."

When Sorrow says she sees the sea in her daughter's eyes, she evokes the water imagery that used to be so traumatizing for her because of the shipwreck and the death of her first child. Now, however, water has a positive signification. Sorrow renaming herself as "Complete" also signifies a major step for her—she no longer needs Twin, but feels fulfilled as her own person (along with her daughter).

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9 returns to Florens's first-person narrative. Florens finally arrives on the Blacksmith's property, smelling the fire and ash from his forge. When the Blacksmith sees her, Florens notices the joy in his eyes. He asks why she is there and laughs at her dirty clothes. When Florens tells him why, the Blacksmith frowns and says he will ride to Rebekka immediately. Florens will wait for him at his house, since it is faster to go without her, and for "another reason."

As Florens finally arrives at the Blacksmith's house, he seems happy to see her, which gives Florens hope for their future. However, the scene is not the romantic reunion that the reader may have expected, or that Florens dreamed of. Instead, it is far more casual and subdued.

The Blacksmith looks toward the doorway, where Florens sees a little boy holding a cornhusk doll. The Blacksmith tells her the little boy is Malaik, and that he cannot be left alone. The boy's father died while driving a cart and the boy was found sitting quietly in the back on it. The Blacksmith is taking care of Malaik until the town decides where to place him. The Blacksmith notes that they may never do so, since the boy is dark-skinned. Florens wonders if the Blacksmith intends to treat him as a son.

In Malaik, Morrison gives the reader yet another example of an orphan, and through his adoption by the Blacksmith, another example of an alternative family. When the Blacksmith tells Florens that the town may never "place" Malaik because of his skin, he indicates the racism that pervades his town and is increasing throughout the colonies.

The thought worries Florens, and as she watches the boy hold onto the Blacksmith's finger, she wonders if the boy, not her, is the Blacksmith's future. The Blacksmith sends the boy to play in the yard, bathes Florens, and gives her stew. Florens and the Blacksmith talk about their future together, and Florens tells him she wants to stay with him no matter what happens to Rebekka. With the Blacksmith, Florens feels safe and good about her body.

Florens clearly sees Malaik as a direct threat to her love with the Blacksmith. This seems to have to do with her childhood abandonment by her mother, who (as she thinks) chose to stay with Florens's baby brother. Still, Florens continues to idolize the Blacksmith, stating that she is willing to give up her life on the Vaark farm for him.

When the Blacksmith leaves, Florens is calm, but she notices that the Blacksmith does not hug or kiss her. The Blacksmith prepares his horse and asks Florens to water the beans and collect the eggs. Malaik sleeps behind the door of the Blacksmith's bedroom. Florens takes off her **boots** (formerly Jacob's boots) and lies on the Blacksmith's cot.

Again, the reunion between Florens and the Blacksmith seems a little off. The tepid nature of the Blacksmith's feelings comes across when he does not try to hug or kiss Florens. When Florens notices this, she becomes increasingly anxious.

Florens pictures her mother standing at the door, holding her younger brother's hand and trying to tell her something. Florens tells her to go away. She hears a creak and knows that Malaik is standing near her cot. She gets up and asks him what he wants, but the boy stays silent. Florens thinks he hates her and wants her to leave. Florens worries that the Blacksmith will choose Malaik over her like her mother chose her little brother.

Meanwhile, Florens's thoughts of her mother and younger brother indicate that she connects her current situation with her mother's abandonment in the past. This suggests that Florens has been trying to fill the void of her mother's lost affection with romantic affection from the Blacksmith.

Florens falls asleep again and dreams that she is on the edge of a lake. She wants to put her face in the lake. As Florens approaches, she realizes she has no reflection. Daughter Jane is kneeling next to Florens. She looks in the water as well and tells Florens not to worry because she will find her reflection. When Florens wakes up, she imagines that her mother is standing next to the cot and holding Malaik by the hand instead of Florens's baby brother. Florens hides her head in the blanket.

The idea of reflections recurs throughout the novel, from Rebekka's desire to look in the mirror during her sickness to Sorrow's Twin, who is, according to Sorrow, identical in appearance. Florens's dream, in which she cannot see her reflection, seems to indicate a lack of self-identity, perhaps because she is so desperate for love and approval from others.

The next day the Blacksmith is still gone and Malaik and Florens stay far away from each other. Florens watches the horses in the pasture until it gets dark. That night she does not dream or imagine her mother. The next morning Florens makes porridge for herself and Malaik. Malaik stands in the road with his cornhusk doll, looking in the direction the Blacksmith went when he left.

Although Florens and Malaik seem to hate each other, they also both have the same reaction to the Blacksmith leaving, and sit staring out at the road waiting for his return. Both are effectively orphans, and both are desperate for the Blacksmith's attention.

Florens notices that Jacob's **boots** are missing. Florens watches a snake crawl around the garden until nightfall and goes back into the cabin. Malaik returns to the house as well. At the dinner they are both quiet. Florens thinks Malaik has stolen the boots. Florens thinks that Malaik is evil, and his power is contained in his cornhusk doll. Florens snatches it from him and puts it up on a shelf. Malaik screams and cries.

As Florens becomes more and more distressed, the reader sees Florens exhibiting the same deluded spiritual convictions as the townspeople who persecuted Jane: without real reason except her own jealousy, she convinces herself that Malaik is inherently evil.

Florens runs outside to avoid the sounds of Malaik's cries. When he finally is quiet, she goes back inside and finds that the doll is no longer on the shelf. Instead, it is abandoned in a corner. When Malaik sees Florens he screams again. Florens grabs his arm to stop him, but she pulls it too hard and hears his shoulder crack. Malaik screams from pain then faints.

Florens's paranoia about Malaik's "evil" culminates in this violent encounter, in which Florens breaks Malaik's arm. Notably, Florens believes that Malaik possesses occult powers, highlighting the spiritual aspect of Florens's fears.

Florens hears the Blacksmith outside. He rushes inside and shouts for Malaik. When the Blacksmith sees Malaik limp on the floor, he becomes furious, pushing Florens and asking what she has done. The Blacksmith lifts the boy up and cries out when he sees that his arm is broken. Then he sets the arm and puts the boy down. Florens wonders why the Blacksmith pushed her around and blamed her without knowing that she was the one who hurt Malaik.

When the Blacksmith pushes Florens, he embodies Lina's fears. The psychological trauma of Florens's mother's abandonment causes Florens to lash out at Malaik and then results in the Blacksmith's backlash, showing how violence against vulnerable people often perpetuates itself.

The Blacksmith slaps Florens and she curls up on the floor. She thinks that the Blacksmith has clearly chosen the boy over her. Florens feels cowed and lost. The Blacksmith tells Florens that Rebekka is healed and that he will hire someone to take her back to the farm.

Again, the Blacksmith's violence towards Florens puts her in company with the other female characters in the book, most of whom have suffered from some kind of male oppression or assault.

Florens begs him to let her explain, but the Blacksmith tells her she is a slave. Florens insists this is only because Jacob traded for her, but the Blacksmith tells her she has become one since her "head is empty" and her "body is wild." Florens begs the Blacksmith to own her, and the Blacksmith tells her to own herself. The Blacksmith tells her she is a slave by choice. Florens crawls to the Blacksmith, but he steps away from her. Florens is shocked and feels like she is dying.

In this section, Morrison explores the question of what it means to be a slave, and whether it is only a legal state or a state of mind. When the Blacksmith insists that Florens acts like a slave, with an empty head and a wild body, it is hard to evaluate whether this is a kind of mystical truth being revealed about Florens, or whether the Blacksmith is just using it as an excuse to leave Florens without guilt.

CHAPTER 10

Chapter 10 is told in limited third-person narrative from Willard and Scully's perspectives. The chapter begins with Willard and Scully seeing a shadow near the big, new **house** Jacob was building before he died. Willard and Scully watch the house over the course of several days and suspect that this is Jacob's spirit haunting the house.

Willard and Scully's belief that they see a ghost in the window adds to the book's already clear interest in occult and spiritual forces and how they intersect with religion. The house, meanwhile, continues to be a center around which the characters gravitate.

According to the narrator, the residents of the Vaark farm are the closest thing either Willard or Scully has to family. Unlike Willard and Scully's frequently absent owner, Jacob never yells at them. He even gave them rum for Christmas. Willard and Scully were so sad about Jacob's death that they disobeyed their master's orders to avoid the house and volunteered to dig his grave. They buried Jacob and now, thirteen days later, they suspect his spirit is haunting the **house** nearby. The men see Jacob's spirit glowing in the second story of the house at night.

Although Jacob exploits Willard and Scully's labor, just as he does with the slaves he owns, Jacob's kindnesses toward Willard and Scully still make them develop affection for him. As she does throughout the book, Morrison shows the heartbreaking, exploitative, and complex relationships between bonded people and the people they serve.

Willard and Scully help Rebekka repair the farm that ran wild during her illness. Rebekka pays them for their work, marking the first time they have earned wages. To Will and Scully, the women (including Florens, who has returned home) on the farm now seem distracted. Willard thinks Lina seems like she is about to boil over. Scully, who has been ogling Lina for many years while she bathes, also senses this change in Lina.

As Rebekka works to repair the farm and begins paying Willard and Scully for their work, Morrison exhibits the difference in social mobility between white indentured servants and black or native slaves. While Lina and Florens have effectively no possibility of upward mobility, Willard and Scully begin to see their situation change.

Rebekka too has changed. Her hair has gone gray and she tires more easily than before. She only cooks and mends, never doing yard work. Rebekka also frequently reads the Bible. Willard predicts that Rebekka will remarry soon. When Scully asks why, Willard tells him that she needs to do so to keep the farm, and that he predicts she will marry someone from the village.

Morrison reiterates Rebekka's religious conversion. Moreover, Willard emphasizes what Rebekka has already noted herself: that widows in 17th-century America effectively have no legal status without a husband. In order to keep the farm, Rebekka must remarry.

Only Sorrow's change seems to be for the better. With her baby, she is more focused on and capable of doing chores. Her devotion to her child, though, comes first. Willard and Scully, who helped her deliver the baby, act like godfathers and offer to take care of the baby when Sorrow is busy. Sorrow declines though, wanting to care for it herself.

Motherhood, meanwhile, has done wonders to improve Sorrow's mental wellbeing. With her child, Sorrow can focus more on household tasks. Sorrow exemplifies how motherhood can allow for personal transformation and growth.

Florens's change seems strangest of all to the men. She has become moody since returning from the Blacksmith's farm, and when they first saw her, Florens seemed hardly like a "living person" to them. Florens walked right past them without saying anything, and they leapt out of her way.

That Florens hardly seems like a "living person" to Willard and Scully fits neatly into the fact that, as is later revealed, Florens is actually the "ghost" that Willard and Scully see in the window of Jacob's house.

Willard and Scully had just returned that morning from a narrow escape with a bear while hunting partridge. They were smoking when Willard heard a crackle and saw a bear coming towards them. The men ran away and separated. Scully climbed a tree. The bear, however, could climb trees, and stood up against it, trying to catch Scully's foot. Scully pulled out his knife and thrust it at the bear, hitting her in the eye. The bear tumbled to the ground. After a while of rolling around on the ground, the bear walked away to find her cubs. Scully and Willard emerged from their hiding places. Then they raced out of the forest to the road, where Florens march angrily past them.

Like many of the descriptions throughout the book, this scene shows the hidden threat of nature under the seemingly peaceful and romantic pastoral scenes of rural America that characters describe. Significantly, the bear that attacks Willard and Scully is also a mother bear, and the scene that plays out is one that occurs in many permutations throughout the book—that of a mother attempting to protect her offspring.


The narrator explains Willard's background, stating that Willard was sold for seven years to a planter in Virginia, anticipating that he would be freed at age twenty-one. However, a series of crimes added time to his sentence, and then he was sold to a farmer in the north. The farmer lent him for periods of time to Jacob in exchange for use of some of Jacob's land. Prior to Scully's arrival, Willard was often lonely. He thought of Virginia, where he was one of twenty-three men working in the tobacco fields. Now in the north, Willard disliked the cold weather and the wildlife at night. Scully's arrival was a relief to Willard, and together they became friendly with the people working on the Vaark farm as well. A few runaway attempts added more time to Willard's sentence.

As she gives the reader information about Willard's background, Morrison fleshes out some of the details of what life might look like as an indentured servant— a form of bondage that modern readers may not be especially familiar with. Morrison shows some of the different challenges that bonded people faced when working in the Southern colonies versus the Northern ones, contrasting the more difficult working conditions of the South and the crueler slave owners with the isolation and difficult weather in the North.

Willard's social life improved even more when Jacob decided to build his **house**. Willard helped as a laborer. The Blacksmith came to forge the fence, crafting a beautiful fence with decorations that first appeared to be vines. On further inspection, however, Willard saw that the vines were actually snakes.

The snakes on the top of the fence that the Blacksmith built allude to the story of Adam and Eve, and so associate the house with sin. This sin may be Jacob's greed as well as the fact that he gained his wealth through a slave economy.


Willard liked the Blacksmith until he realized that the Blacksmith was a free man getting paid for his work. Seeing the Blacksmith compensated for his work and not being compensated himself made Willard furious, and he and Scully began refusing to do anything for him. Relations between the two men improved again when Willard slipped in dung and ripped his work shirt, causing him to change into his collared shirt. When he saw the Blacksmith, the Blacksmith gave him the thumbs up and said "Mr. Bond. Good morning." The use of the title "mister," far above his station, made Willard feel dignified. From then on, the Blacksmith always addressed Willard as "mister." Although Willard is annoyed by the fact that the Blacksmith, an African, is free and Willard is not, he lets go of his resentment.

Although Willard likes the Blacksmith, he clearly harbors internalized racism, as he cannot stand the idea that the Blacksmith, who is a black man, is paid for his work while he, a white man, is not. This suggests that Willard feels his race makes him inherently superior to black men, even skilled laborers and free men like the Blacksmith. When, however, the Blacksmith addresses Willard as a superior, Willard's vanity is flattered enough that he gets over his bitterness. Morrison shows here how a white person's low social status can actually exacerbate feelings of racism—a fact exploited by the white upper classes in order to keep poor whites from joining with poor blacks to overthrow their wealthy masters.

Willard understands how the Blacksmith charmed Florens. He comments to Scully that he "never saw anything like it," with Florens totally love struck and willing to meet the Blacksmith whenever and wherever he wants. Scully is even more shocked by this behavior. The narrator, taking up Scully's perspective, goes on to describe how he feels about each of the women on the farm, starting with Lina.

Willard and Scully think about Florens's infatuation with the Blacksmith in terms of her sexual availability to him, rather than in terms of her emotional state or wellbeing. In doing so, they ignore Florens's desire for the Blacksmith, objectifying her in the process.

Despite Scully's voyeuristic gaze upon Lina as she bathes, Scully admires her as a person, thinking that her loyalty to Rebekka and Florens is not submission but an affirmation of self-worth.

Although Scully seemingly only sleeps with men, his voyeurism of Lina reveals his lack of respect for women's privacy and agency over their bodies.

Although Scully joins Willard in mocking Sorrow, he also admires her. He thinks the look in her eyes is not blank but patient. Scully is the only one who doesn't think Sorrow is crazy because she talks to herself. Scully thinks of Sorrow as private, and admires how her pregnancy makes her glow.

Scully harbors incredibly problematic views of women, but he is also one of the few characters who sees and respects Sorrow's personhood apart from her race, mental illness, and difficulty completing work.

Scully moves on to Florens, determining that "if he had been interested in rape," he would have preyed on Florens. Scully describes Florens's defenselessness, eagerness to please, and tendency toward self-blame. However, Scully notices that since Florens returned from the Blacksmith's cabin, none of these things are still true. After seeing her brush past them on the road, Scully thinks of Florens as "untouchable." Despite his disturbing evaluation of Florens's susceptibility to rape, the narrator assures that, beyond his habit of watching Lina bathe, Scully is uninterested in sex with women. Scully sees Florens's change from sexually susceptible to guarded as predictable.

Again, while Scully does not sleep with women, his misogyny is chilling as he evaluates how easy it would be to rape Florens. Morrison's use of Scully as the mouthpiece for this disturbing analysis shows how rape is not necessarily rooted in any inherent heterosexual male compulsion, or even really in actual sexual relations between men and women, but rather in the culture of patriarchal power and how men see and relate to women as objects.

Scully then moves on to Rebekka. The narrator states that Scully did not dislike her, but finds her suddenly pious behavior after Jacob's death cold and cruel. Scully views Rebekka's refusal to enter the new **house** as a punishment to everyone who worked on it, including Jacob. He thinks of her behavior as a way of expressing her anger at Jacob for leaving her behind.

Scully offers a critical view of Rebekka's religious conversion, highlighting how Rebekka has become cold and unsympathetic as a result. The house, which was once so beloved, has become a relic of life before Jacob's death and a monument to Rebekka's grief.

The narrator then delves into Scully's early life, noting how as a child Scully was leased to the clergy by his father. By the time he was twelve, Scully had been "loved and betrayed" by an Anglican minister. Scully did not blame the man for blaming their sexual relationship on him. The clergy elders gave Scully to a landowner (the landowner Scully is still with), hoping that in a rural area Scully's interest in men would end.

Though Scully is not a woman, he, like many of the women in the book, has experienced troubling sexual relationships with men. Scully's abuse by a minister highlights again the hypocrisy of Christian religion as it is presented by many Europeans and Americans. Like Sorrow's deacon, Scully's minister shows the seedy underbelly of Christian clergy members.

Upon arriving at the farm, Scully intended to run away, but he was prevented from doing so by a snowstorm. Scully and Willard tried to rescue the animals so they did not die of the cold. They snuggled together to keep warm and developed a romantic attachment to each other. Scully decided to stay at the farm until he was freed and given money to buy a horse.

In Willard and Scully's relationship, Morrison offers the reader a sense of romantic possibility outside of the confines of heterosexuality and its unequal power dynamics, which have proven to be devastating for the other characters in the book.

Scully had begun to lose hope that he would ever gain his freedom. But then Jacob died and Rebekka began paying him and Willard. Scully has quickly accumulated money. Scully tries to keep Rebekka happy so she will continue her payments. Meanwhile, Willard's guess that Rebekka will soon remarry disturbs him, because he worries that a new husband would change the arrangement he has with Rebekka.

Scully and Willard's wages mark a difference in the possibility of their upward mobility. Rebekka's remarriage also comes up again, and Scully's worry shows how remarriage would strip Rebekka of the fragile agency she gained since Jacob's death.

In order to keep Rebekka happy and keep his payments coming, Scully does not say anything about her increasingly nasty behavior towards her other servants. When Rebekka beats Sorrow, takes down Lina's hammock, and decides to sell Florens, Scully is quiet. However, he tries to do nice things for the women. Scully builds a box for Sorrow's baby to sleep in and tears down the advertisement for Florens's sale. He thinks that the consequences of Jacob's death are sad.

Scully's silence at Rebekka's increasing cruelty shows how indentured servants might be divided or pitted against black or native slaves through the threat of losing their minute advantages. The threat of losing his salary outweighs Scully's solidarity with his fellow servants, and so keeps him from standing up for his friends.

Scully thinks that they used to be the kind of family that "carved companionship out of isolation," but that that sense of family turned out to be false. Without shared bloodlines, Scully sees nothing to unite them. Still, Scully imagines that, with his new wages, he and Willard may be able to make a future for themselves.

Scully's sense that the Vaark household was an artificial family that turned out to be false speaks to the impossibility of loving and trusting relationships between slaves and slave owners, who give into greed and racism and can never truly overcome the unequal and corrupt power dynamic of the relationship.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11 returns to Florens's perspective. She is walking alone through the night away from the Blacksmith's house to the Vaarks' farm. The trip is difficult without Jacob's **boots**. Florens thinks that after losing the Blacksmith she will be more guarded against people who would take her in only to throw her away again. Florens wonders if the Blacksmith is afraid of her.

Following her rejection by the Blacksmith, Florens's naiveté has disappeared and been replaced by wariness. She is now guarded against the idea of romantic love as security, instead believing that she would be abandoned by any other lover who would come her way.

Florens thinks of how, after the Blacksmith rejected her, she tried to strike him with a hammer before he wrestled it away from her. Florens then tried to bite him, while Malaik screamed. Florens grabbed the tongs the Blacksmith uses to work metal and swung them at him, making him bleed. Florens then ran away, **shoeless**.

In retaliation for the Blacksmith's rejection and his nasty words about her acting like a slave, Florens attacks the Blacksmith, arguably proving true his accusations of her lack of control over herself.

It has been three months since Florens ran away from the Blacksmith. Still, she keeps picturing their violent final encounter. At night Florens leaves Lina asleep to go into Jacob's mansion and scratch words into the wood of one room. Florens, still addressing the Blacksmith, says that if he is still alive or ever heals he will have to bend down to read what Florens has written, scratching away the wood with a nail (it is unlikely the Blacksmith will come back; Florens seems to harbor this delusion because she still is in love with him). Florens does not cry as she writes until the lamp burns down and she falls asleep.

Florens has deluded herself into believing that the Blacksmith will return to read what she is writing at night on the walls of Jacob's abandoned house, despite the fact that he has no reason to do so. Also, Florens's nighttime trips to the abandoned mansion explain what Willard and Scully were seeing in the window— it is not Jacob's ghost, but rather Florens's silhouette as she writes.

During the day, Florens does chores that she thinks are nonsensical, like cleaning the chamber pot they never use. They adjust the graves in the meadow again and again and clean the spot where Jacob died, though no one uses the **house**. As Florens cleans, she is cold, and thinks that Rebekka has forgotten how cold the outhouses are in winter and what that cold could do to an infant like Sorrow's.

Florens describes more of Rebekka's strange behavior following Jacob's death and her religious conversion. Rebekka's demands that they clean the spot where Jacob died over and over again reflect her anxiety in the wake of his death.

Florens thinks that although Rebekka was cured of her disease, she is still not well. Rebekka attends church and returns to the farm with a blank look in her eyes. She wears dark clothes and prays constantly. She also forces the servants to sleep in the cowshed no matter the weather, saying that sleeping outside in hammocks is for "savages." On one very cold night Sorrow seeks shelter for herself and her baby in the house and Rebekka slaps her. Florens thinks that if Rebekka knew she were in the house every night scratching her writing into the wood she would whip her. Florens blames Rebekka, not the church, for Rebekka's new and harsh behavior.

Florens's descriptions of Rebekka's blank look after attending church suggest that Rebekka is being brainwashed in some way. While she formerly accepted Lina's native customs, she now sees sleeping in hammocks as "savage." Meanwhile Rebekka's behavior is actually becoming more "savage," as she slaps Sorrow for protecting her baby. Florens sees Rebekka's change as a personal fault rather than blaming the church, suggesting that Florens believes cruelty is not implicit in religion.

Florens learns from Scully and Willard that Rebekka is going to sell her but keep Lina. Meanwhile, no one will take Sorrow and her baby. Florens admires Sorrow's devotion to her child. Sorrow has changed her name and plans to escape. Florens is appalled by how Rebekka treats Lina, making her walk with her to church then forcing her to wait by the side of the road. Their former friendship has deteriorated.

Sorrow's change following her child's birth continues to make her seek out a better life, as indicated when Sorrow, who was previously so co-dependent, decides to strike out alone. Meanwhile, Rebekka and Lina's friendship dissolves in the face of Rebekka's change of belief.

Florens thinks of how Lina tried to warn her about the Blacksmith. She thinks again of a time the Blacksmith told her that slaves are freer than free men, because true enslavement is when something inside you withers and leaves behind a kind of wildness. Florens thinks that she withered in the Widow Ealing's closet when the villagers examined her. Still, Florens learned from Jane to continue risking punishment for good reasons despite danger.

As Florens analyzes the Blacksmith's understanding of slavery, she understands what he means about "withering," since the invasive and dehumanizing experience she had at Widow Ealing's house made her feel that way. Still, Florens does not feel that she has entirely given in to the feeling.

Florens has covered the entire room with the writing she has scratched in the wood. Although her arm aches, she keeps carving. Florens realizes that the Blacksmith will never read her words, since he cannot read. She hopes he will learn. She thinks that if he does not read them, no one will. Florens thinks about burning the **house** so that the words fly up in the air in ash.

As Florens writes, it becomes clear that she desires for someone to hear out her story, or at least that she feels a need to tell it. Her desire to burn the word-covered house seems to suggest that, if the house represents the institution of slavery, Florens would like to destroy the whole thing to expunge her past and start over new.

Florens thinks that the Blacksmith is correct, and there is something wild in her, but that she is also still Florens. Florens thinks she is a slave, but still free. Florens says she still has one big sadness: that she cannot communicate with her mother. She thinks that her feet are finally hard and callused like her mother wanted.

In this final section of Florens's narrative, Florens's description of her hard feet suggest that Florens's loss of her shoes is a metaphor for her loss of innocence as she finally confronts her traumatic past and the condition of slavery.

CHAPTER 12

Chapter 12 takes up Florens's mother's first person narrative, addressing Florens. She describes how she knew that men would soon begin noticing Florens's developing breasts. Florens's mother thought that no good could come of a romance even if it were with someone like Figo, who is kind. Florens's mother remembers how Figo used to play with Florens in the yard. Florens's mother thinks how her love could not offer Florens any protection, especially with Florens's precocious affinity for **shoes**.

The opening of Florens's mother's narrative shows immediately that, unlike what Florens believes, her mother cares deeply about her. Like Lina, her mother worries about the influence of romance on young Florens's life, highlighting the fact that traumatic romantic relationships are a common experience among women.

Florens's mother tells Florens that the catechism has nothing in it against slavery and its evils. Florens's mother hoped that the Reverend teaching them to read would help them. The Reverend taught them to read because he believed it was right, despite the fact that it was illegal.

Although the Reverend is kind to Florens's family, Florens's mother notes that the catechism is not explicitly anti-slavery, highlighting how religion fails to address the moral problem of human bondage.

Florens's mother remembers when Jacob came to eat at the D'Ortegas' house, and how he did not like the food or the company. She remembers how he never looked at her "the way Senhor [D'Ortega] does," and thinks he is not an animal like D'Ortega.

Florens's evaluation that Jacob, unlike D'Ortega, is not an "animal" inverts the typical racist slaveholder rationale that slavery is acceptable since slaves are like animals.

Florens's mother admits that she does not know who Florens's father was. Florens was conceived when Florens's mother and several other slave women were gang raped at D'Ortega's instruction.

Florens's mother's rape shows the unimaginable violence of slavery, and how it makes women especially vulnerable.

Florens's mother thinks about the constant struggles over land and power in Angola, where she came from. She recounts men burning each other's houses and how she was moved around because of these power struggles. She remembers being locked in a pen with other slaves, sold to white men, and put on a canoe with white men as guards. On the boat, some slaves tried to jump out and were killed by sharks. Then they were transferred to a ship full of rats and human waste, where they were lashed and wished to die.

As Florens's mother begins to describe her journey from Angola to the colonies as a slave, the horror of the slave trade is revealed in full force. In contrast to D'Ortega's detached descriptions of slave ships, Florens's mother's account gives a first-person, emotional narrative of the inhumanity of slave ships and the violence she endured.

Florens's mother remembers them talking about Barbados onboard, and wishing she were dead. When they finally arrived in Barbados, Florens's mother was relieved by the clean air and being able to stand up straight. She was put in a pen and the white men conducted tests on them to see their physical abilities. Florens's mother then went to work in the cane fields. In Barbados, Florens's mother was treated for the first time not like a person from her country or her family, but like a "negrita." She notes how all of her traditions became irrelevant to the white people overseeing her, and only her skin color was important to them.

As Florens's mother arrives in Barbados, the reader must think of Jacob's investments there, and how he believed that he could profit from the slave trade while keeping it far away and so remain morally clean. Florens's mother's account dashes that belief by forcing the reader to connect Jacob's investments with the real harm done to people like Florens's mother. Morrison also identifies the conflation of African identities into one black identity as a kind of cultural violence.

D'Ortega then bought Florens's mother and shipped her to his tobacco farm, where Florens's mother was gang raped. The men who did it later apologized to her, and an overseer gave her an orange. The silver lining of the trauma, Florens's mother notes, is her children.

Florens's mother's rape is even more disturbing when the reader considers that it was ordered by D'Ortega, and so the men who raped her may also have been unwilling. Only motherhood consoles her.

When D'Ortega began sexually abusing her, Florens's mother tried to tell the Reverend, but he did not believe her and only told her to pray. Florens's mother tried to protect Florens from the same abuse by putting a cloth around her chest, but she catches D'Ortega's eye anyway. When Jacob came, Florens's mother thought that it was her only chance to save her daughter. Florens's mother begged Jacob to take Florens in order to keep her away from D'Ortega.

As Florens develops from a child into an adolescent, Florens's mother begins worrying that D'Ortega will sexually abuse her daughter like he does her. In the ultimate selfless sacrifice, Florens's mother gives up her daughter to Jacob, who she believes will not hurt her the way D'Ortega would.

When Jacob says he will take Florens, Florens's mother thinks it is not a miracle from a god but a "mercy" from a human. Florens's mother kneels before Jacob to thank him. She prays that Florens will understand why she begged him to take her, ending the book by begging Florens to "hear" her.

Jacob's act of mercy highlights the completely unjust power dynamics of slavery, in which all a mother can do to protect her children is appeal to white men who will decide to help or hurt only on a whim. This tragic finale gives the novel its title—the "mercy" comes from Jacob's casual decision—and also shows how the inhuman institution of slavery has insured that Florens's mother's ultimate message, despite her desperate wish, was not passed on to Florens, who does not recognize her mother's sacrifice and continues to believe that she abandoned her out of preference for her brother.

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