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They Hatch Alone: The Alienation of the Colonial American Subject in Toni Morrison's A Mercy

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In Toni Morrison's Master's thesis, *Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated*, she argues that one defining characteristic of the twentieth century literary subject is his alienation.<sup>1</sup> The modern character in literature is, Morrison says, "a man apart." Morrison argues that the characters of Aldous Huxley, Thomas Wolfe, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce "evoke images of solitary, alienated people who, together, form a community of the isolated" (M.A. Thesis, 1). Their isolation, Morrison says, is what Nathan A. Scott, Jr. argues in *Rehearsals of Discomposure* to be the tragic flaw in the twentieth-century subject's relationship to his world. Scott contends that alienation, as reflected in English literature dating from the works of Edgar Allen Poe, has largely been "symptomatic...of a state of tragic disorganization and breakdown within the structure of modern civilization" (Morrison, 1).

More than fifty years later, after eight novels, a Nobel Prize in literature, and recognition as one of the most important novelists of the twentieth century, Morrison is still grappling with the problem of alienation. Her latest novel, *A Mercy*, concerns the lives of five main characters—Florens, Jacob, Rebekka, Lina, and Sorrow—who each suffer tragically from their alienation. These ethnically and socially diverse characters, who live and work together on Jacob Vaark's farm in 1680's Maryland, form precisely what Morrison would call a "community of the isolated" (1). They are unified by both material interdependence and psychological similarity as orphans, but each seeks relief from his or her alienation through attachments to individual persons or objects of status, to the exclusion of working to forge a sense of family or community with each other. These individualistic pursuits fail to satisfy their yearnings for love, safety and fellowship. Thus, the nascent "family" or community that arose at Jacob Vaark's farm, dissolves tragically. *A Mercy*, set in seventeenth-century America, illustrates that for Morrison, isolation or alienation was a tragic flaw for the colonial American subject, just as it was for his or her twentieth century counterparts.

### **Motherlessness and Mother Hunger**

According to feminist critic Saidiya Hartman, to be a part of the African diaspora is to be "motherless." In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman extends the meaning of motherlessness beyond just the literal loss of the mother-child relationship. She uses the anthropological idea of being motherless to stand for the broad loss of original kinship networks, as well as the loss of cultural identity, that was experienced by the African diaspora as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. She argues that to lose your mother is to be "denied your kin, country and identity" (Hartman, 85), and she asserts that to be a slave or to be descended from slaves is—often literally, and always metaphorically—to be an orphan.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's latest novel, *A Mercy*, also uses the idea of "motherlessness" as a definitive characteristic of being part of the diaspora. Like Hartman, she deploys the idea of "mother-loss"—of being orphaned—as a metaphor for familial and cultural displacement and alienation. Yet, Morrison extends the condition of being orphaned to all her characters, who represent a cross-section of seventeenth-century Americans: Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch rum trader and farmer; Florens is an African American slave; Rebekka is Jacob's Anglo farm wife; Lina is a Native American slave; and Sorrow is a mulatto servant.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison's use of the term alienation coheres with Marx's fourth concept of alienation: "man is alienated from man (from other men)" (Mezaros, 14).

Morrison's ethnically and socially diverse characters are burdened with a common affliction as a result of their motherlessness: a "mother hunger"—or a yearning for the lost kinship bonds of family—which compounds their alienation. Every one of *A Mercy's* main characters: Florens, Jacob, Rebekka, Lina and Sorrow, seek to relieve their "mother hunger" by forming attachments to individual persons or objects of status. These individualistic pursuits divert them, preventing the residents of the Vaark farm from forming a "family" with each other— from creating a network of kinship bonds that would soothe their mother hunger and allow them to transcend their alienation.

## Florens

*A Mercy* begins in medias res, when Florens' mother offers her daughter as a proxy for herself, in a transaction which occurs between Jacob Vaark and one of his debtors. This eerie scene is retold throughout the novel from multiple perspectives (Florens, Jacob, Florens' mother), each time illuminating more about the actual event, as well as how each of the characters involved interprets it. In its retelling, this scene reverberates like an echo, emphasizing the way in which this bygone moment continues to exist in the evolving present of the novel, shaping not just factual circumstance (like Florens' presence on Jacob's farm), but also the thoughts and behaviors of Florens and other characters. This primal scene, which enacts a literal instance of mother-loss, therefore establishes a locus for the trope of motherlessness, which is repeated throughout the novel in each of the main characters.<sup>2</sup>

The moment, for Florens, is one of dispossession (by her mother), followed by displacement (as she is relocated to Jacob's farm), and affects her both materially and emotionally. As readers, we are introduced to the scene first by Florens herself, who describes the instance in spare detail: "Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due" (Morrison, 7). Here, Florens describes only the facts, as she is not given any explanation by her mother for her choice of son over daughter. But in a passage which follows shortly after, Florens gives a personal impression of the scene, explaining how her mother's abandonment has affected her. In referring to the pregnancy of Sorrow, Florens confesses: "I have a worry, because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand" (8). Since Florens cannot understand the message in her mother's eyes, a message which might explain her mother's choice, she can only read the facts: she has been given away, rejected, abandoned.

The effect this abandonment has upon Florens is profound, instigating what Lina, a Native American slave also in Jacob's charge, describes as "mother hunger": a yearning "to be or

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the term "primal scene" as Ashraf H.A. Rushdy defines it in "Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels." According to Rushdy, a primal scene is "the critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled" (*Contemporary Literature*, vol. 31, no. 3, p. 303). We will see the "secondary critical event" manifest in a subsequent chapter, when Florens' love is repudiated by the blacksmith.

to have [a mother]" (63). Lina explains that this hunger is encoded in the body of orphans like herself and Florens, saying that mother hunger "remain[s] alive, traveling the bone" (63). Like physical hunger, Lina's conception of mother hunger is that it is visceral, primary. Like physical hunger, it leaves its sufferers "reeling"(63), dizzy from want of nourishment.

Florens' mother hunger manifests itself most powerfully when Jacob hires a free Angolan blacksmith to help him build his opulent third house. Instantly, Florens is struck with an uncontrollable, lovesick worship of the blacksmith. On her mission to bring the blacksmith back to the Vaark farm so that he can heal Rebekka from the smallpox she is dying from, Florens remembers the first time she saw the blacksmith:

you are shaping fire with bellows. The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock for wanting to lick there. I run away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move. (37)

Her worship of the blacksmith is reflected in the way she imagines him—godlike—as he performs his work. Like a god, he "shapes fire." Like a god, his sweat is not sweat (which is associated with foulness) but "shiny water"—immaculate—and so tantalizing she wishes to consume it, to "lick there." She struggles to control this involuntary worship, running to the shed to escape, but "Nothing stops it." Then, she realizes that the blacksmith has become so large in her mind that there is no room for the rest of the world, which has become void and is now "nothing." In her conscious mind, in her world, the blacksmith takes up every spare inch: "There is only you. Nothing outside of you." The last lines of this passage demonstrate that Florens' mother hunger has been transferred to the blacksmith. She uses the trope of hunger to illustrate her desire for the blacksmith: "My eyes [...] are the hungry parts of me." Florens wishes to consume him with her eyes forever: "There will never be enough time to look at how you move." All her desire is concentrated upon the blacksmith.

Florens' instant, uncontrollable desire—her hunger—for the blacksmith, derives from the fact that she associates him with the safety and refuge of the family and home that she lost when her mother abandoned her. Indeed, she sees his black skin—his "outside dark"(115)—as proof of the authenticity of their connection. In a passage addressed to the blacksmith, Florens describes what she conceives of as her "inside dark" (115). She asks the blacksmith (rhetorically, because the blacksmith is not there) if this inner darkness is why her mother abandoned her; chose her, as she says, to "live without" (115). She is certain the blacksmith can answer her questions:

You will tell me. You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know that I am live. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the darkness is me. Is we. Is my home (115).

The sense of safety and refuge she feels at the mere sight of the blacksmith is reflected when she states that as she "falls into" the blacksmith, the fear—"fright" (which began when her mother abandoned her)—is gone (115). Here the blacksmith is described like a safety net. But more than safety, Florens collapses their identities into one because, she says, they share the same inner/outer darkness: "the darkness is me. Is we. Is my home." As she enters this darkness, as she "falls into" the blacksmith, only then is she "live" (115).

Florens' love for the blacksmith soon becomes pathologically possessive: she reacts twice with violence when their bond is threatened; first, when Malaik (the little boy now at the

blacksmith's cabin) appears to want her gone; and second, when the blacksmith sees that she has hurt Malaik, which causes the blacksmith to repudiate her love. When Florens first reaches the blacksmith's cabin, her joy and relief at seeing him again is visceral: she "trembles," loses "fear that [she] may never again taste the sugar of [his] shoulder;" and the "glee in [his] eyes kicks [her] heart over" (135). Her hunger for the blacksmith is being fed, at last. But her feasting joy is interrupted when the blacksmith points to a little boy "a foundling" (136), whom he has taken in. The boy is Malaik—father dead, mother unknown. Immediately, Florens is brought back to the memory of the primal moment her mother abandons her: "it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy" (136), and conceives of this moment as a replay of that abject dispossession (what she here refers to as her first "expel" [136]). What heightens further her fear of being, again, not chosen—again ousted—is how the little boy seems already to possess and be possessed by the blacksmith: "I worry as the blacksmith steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me" (136).

After the blacksmith departs to heal Rebekka, Florens and the boy are left waiting together, each uncomfortable with the other. As Florens lays down for bed, she is visited by an image of her mother, who, "as always [...] is trying to tell [her] something" (137), a message she cannot hear. Florens becomes restless at the "small creaking" of Malaik, who she knows is watching her: "Eyes big, wondering, and cold" (137). Florens' believes she sees hate in the young boy's eyes, but as readers, it is difficult to ascertain whether Florens' perception is correct or not, as she is simply being paranoid. Nevertheless, she assumes he does want her gone, and her reaction is, once again, visceral: "I feel the clutch inside. This expel can never happen again" (137). Her determination to protect her territory (the blacksmith), combined with her paranoia that the boy will "expel" her, shows that Florens is tipping precariously towards unpredictable action. When her boots disappear, Florens becomes convinced that the boy is sabotaging her. It is none too surprising, then, when what might normally be a mundane trigger—the boy begins to cry—unhinges Florens. She grabs and pulls his arm, cracking his shoulder, which silences him as he faints from shock or pain, with blood dripping from his mouth. Clearly, Florens' yearning for the blacksmith—a craving for the safety and refuge that was denied to her when her mother abandoned her—has become destructive in its possessiveness.

Florens' volatile, violent reaction to the threat of dispossession is repeated when the blacksmith returns to his cabin and sees the broken-shouldered, bloody-mouthed Malaik laying mute on the floor. Naturally, the blacksmith's reaction is to protect the boy. Because Florens is the only other being present, he correctly assumes her guilt. Florens, though, is again drawn back, in memory and feeling, to the moment of her abandonment, when her mother chose her brother over her. Twice she repeats that she is "lost" because the blacksmith chooses the boy "without question," and calls his name first: "Tight. No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first. [...] I am lost" (140). When the blacksmith informs her she must leave, these words of his "cut." Florens feels he is "killing" her (141-142) with his choice. She says: "Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever" (142). Here Florens views the blacksmith's rejection of her as the direst threat to her safety; a threat to her very life. She cannot abide this rejection, "Not again. Not ever" (142). Florens' reaction is to fight. She attacks the blacksmith, striking him first with a hammer, then with tongs until she sees him "stagger and bleed" (158).

## Rebekka

Rebekka Vaark's motherlessness originates from different circumstances than those of Florens, but ultimately has the similar effect of creating a self-alienating over-reliance upon a single individual (in this case Jacob Vaark). Rebekka is Jacob's wife, sold to him when she was sixteen by her English parents, who treated her and her siblings with the "glazed indifference" of zealots who "saved their fire for religious matters" (74). In other words, her parents not only denied her love, but cast her off as an expendable good, abandoning her. Her memories of her childhood in London were nightmarish, scenes "made permanently vivid by years of retelling and redescribing by her parents" (75) of crowds attending hangings, drawings, quarterings, and similar executions. Rebekka found these brutalities and her life in London "repellant" (77). Her discomfort at home and in London made her eager for an out; she was "impatient for some kind of escape. Any kind" (77). Being sold to an American farmer was such an out. However, she expected little from her new country and unknown husband. She consoled herself that her new role as wife would at least protect her from inhabiting the other roles available to her as a woman: servant or prostitute (78). Further, if she bore children, she would be "guaranteed some affection" (78)—some relief from the vacuum of love she came from. Like Florens, Rebekka was dispossessed by her parents. But unlike Florens, Rebekka had never known the comfort and safety of a loving parent. Rebekka could only imagine an improvement in her future life as wife to an American farmer, Jacob Vaark.

Indeed, Rebekka is fortunate. Jacob is kindly and tolerant, and instantly approves of her, smiling as if "this was what his whole life was about, meeting her at long last" (86). As their love deepens, Rebekka and Jacob "[lean] on each other root and crown. Needing no one outside their self-sufficiency" (87). They sequester themselves at their farm, shunning opportunities to build bonds with members of their outer community (rejecting, for example, their local religious congregations [87]). Rebekka's dependence upon Jacob, however, is especially pronounced. Jacob acquires a new profession as a trader, which has him gone for long stretches of time, traveling to exotic, exciting, and sometimes dangerous locales, to scout new sources of wealth. When Rebekka's husband returns, he is filled with stories of adventure and danger. These have the effect of heightening Rebekka's impression of "a disorderly, threatening world out there," protection from which [Jacob] alone could provide" (88). Rebekka's early memories of brutal, filthy, and chaotic London made her feel like easy prey for a vicious world.

Rebekka's dependence upon Jacob becomes problematic for her when he is absent; causing her to—literally—lose sentience to the world around her. Rebekka describes her despondence during Jacob's absences as "solitude without prelude that could rise up and take her prisoner" (93). This unstoppable wave of loneliness could arrest her unexpectedly even during the most mundane moments. Here she describes such an instance:

She might be bending in a patch of radishes, tossing weeds with the skill of a pub matron dropping coins into her apron. Weeds for the stock. Then as she stood in the molten sunlight, pulling the corners of her apron together, the comfortable sounds of the farm would drop. Silence would fall like snow falling around her head and shoulders, spreading outward to wind-driven yet quiet leaves, dangling cowbells, the whack of Lina's axe chopping firewood nearby. (93)

As she performs the routine and simple farm chores she has perfected, an inexplicable "snow" of silence mutes out the "comfortable" sounds of the farm. Here she conceptualizes Jacob's absence as an unnatural coldness—a snowfall in the "molten" heat of summer—as well as a loss

of awareness to the soothing sounds of her home. Even when sound “eventually” returns to Rebekka, her loneliness “would remain for days. Until, in the middle of it, he would ride up shouting, ‘Where is my star?’” (93). Clearly, Rebekka is dependent upon Jacob for her feeling of comfort. Moreover, her connection to the world through her senses is distorted when her yearning for him takes over—the world becomes soundless. Rebekka elaborates upon the loneliness she feels when Jacob is away, describing it as a “commanding and oppressive absence,” a “vacancy” (92). She says that in this overwhelming emotional void, she learns the “intricacy of loneliness: the horror of color, the roar of soundlessness and the menace of familiar objects lying still. When Jacob was away. When neither Patrician nor Lina was enough” (93). Here, again, we see Rebekka’s dependence upon Jacob alone to suppress her abysmal emotional void—indeed her own “mother hunger.” Although she is surrounded by caring others—Lina, her little girl Patrician, Florens, and kindly local Baptists—Rebekka’s conviction that the world is comfortable and safe for her only with Jacob present, precludes her from finding solace in the love of those surrounding her.

### **Jacob**

Jacob Vaark, Rebekka’s husband and Florens’ master, represents yet another casualty of motherlessness, as his mother died in childbirth, and his father abandoned him. Like Rebekka and Florens, he too, seeks nourishment for his mother hunger from a single, faulty source. However, whereas Florens and Rebekka seek their solace from individual persons, Jacob undertakes to find his in material possessions. Damaged early by his status as both “misborn and disowned” (33), Jacob gradually allows his yearning for a family legacy to metamorphose into a desire for material wealth; a wish which is most strikingly represented in his decision to build an opulent third house.

Lina, Jacob’s Native American slave, assesses the ironic impracticality of her master’s decision to build a third house, saying: “There was no need for the third [house]. Yet at the very moment when there were no children to occupy or inherit it, he meant to build another, bigger, double-storied, fenced and gated like the one he saw on his travels” (44). Here, Lina shows her disdain by emphasizing that because he has no heirs, clearly his decision to build this house is only to satisfy himself, the result of an appetite for extravagant material comforts which he has gained through seeing the wealth of others during his travels.

Another, more subtle motive for his grandiose project also emerges from the text: the construction of Jacob’s house distracts him from the grief and disappointment of having his children perish, one by one. Rebekka’s reflections upon her husband’s gradual change illuminate the correlation between the tragic “failure” of his family (the death of his children), and Jacob’s new ambitions. Rebekka wistfully remembers her husband’s humble aspirations when they had married: “he had been content to be a farmer” (44). When she later notes that “as the sons died and the years passed, Jacob became convinced that the farm was sustainable but not profitable. He began to trade and travel” (87), the reader begins to see that Jacob’s steadily increasing absorption in increasing his wealth is proportional to the loss of his children. Only once each of his sons is in the grave does Jacob take on the construction of his grandiose third house. The effect this project has upon Jacob is to cheer him from the discontent that he has suffered from “as the sons died and the years past” (87). Lina reveals this when she states “The last few years he seemed moody, less gentle, but when he decided to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself, he was cheerful every waking moment” (44).

Furthermore, Jacob himself conflates the ideas of material and familial legacy when he discusses with his wife his intention to build a new house. As Rebekka gently challenges his plan, saying “We don’t need another house [...], certainly not one of such size,” Jacob answers her that “need is not the reason, wife [...]. What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (88/89). Here, Jacob admits there is no “practical” reason for his decision (no “need,” he says). Instead, he insists that the value of his investment lies in its function as his legacy: it is what he is “leaving behind.” Although Jacob cannot leave sons behind (nature has seen to that), he can embellish his home as much as his riches allow. Thus, Jacob’s material ambitions—exemplified strikingly in the construction of his third house—substitutes for the family he has consistently been denied. Although Jacob’s third house quiets the grumbling of his mother hunger—which was exacerbated by the death of his children—ultimately, it compounds his loneliness by funneling his energy and efforts away from creating a sense of family with the people surrounding him.

## Lina

Lina, Jacob’s Native American slave, also falls victim to mother hunger. She, too, seizes upon an individual, in this case Florens, as the salve for her longing. Prior to Florens’ arrival on Jacob’s farm, Lina has coped with her motherlessness by expunging the memory of her family, who, along with her entire tribe, has been decimated by smallpox. She explains that the isolation of her new life, combined with the memory of her dead family and perished tribe, threaten to undo her:

Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world. The company of other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life: when to vacate, to harvest, to burn, to hunt; ceremonies of death, birth and worship. (50)

Her world—a world rich with the communion of family and extended kin, and the rituals which sustain and celebrate life—has died. She has experienced an apocalypse. In order to save herself from “breaking,” she tries to obliterate those memories. But Lina’s erasure of the idyllic memories of her past is not perfectly successful: she is still afflicted with a “tiny yet eternal yearning for the home [she] once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything” (59). This yearning—Lina’s mother hunger—lies latent, poised to announce its presence when a target surfaces. For Lina, this is Florens, whom she “fall[s] in love with [...] right away,” because “Some how, some way, the child assuaged [that] tiny yet eternal yearning” (59). Lina immediately figuratively “adopts” Florens, claiming her as her own before a potential rival, Sorrow, has a chance to interfere.

Lina’s possessiveness of Florens causes her to act with increasing hostility toward Sorrow, and culminates in the possible homicide of Sorrow’s baby. Lina mistrusts Sorrow, believing her to be “bad luck in the flesh” (53), and a “natural curse,” who “dragged misery like a tail” (55). She believes that Sorrow is a source of wickedness who “can’t help the evil [she] make[s]” (56), inadvertently causing calamities to happen around her, such as the death of Rebekka’s sons (56). But Lina gives little reason for her impression of Sorrow’s as a walking disaster, other than Sorrow’s physical appearance: “Red hair, black teeth, recurring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed silver—gray eyes that raised Lina’s nape hair” (53/54). Once Florens arrives, Lina’s hostility towards Sorrow becomes especially intense. Lina explains this as her desire to “protect [Florens], to keep her away from the corruption so natural to someone



like Sorrow” (60). Thus, Lina is uncensored in her efforts to keep Sorrow at a distance from Florens: “Whenever Sorrow came near, Lina said ‘Scat,’ or sent her on some task that needed doing immediately, all the while making certain everyone else shared the distrust that sparkled in her own eyes” (124). The most disquieting of these efforts to suppress Sorrow’s “evil” presence comes when Lina wraps Sorrow’s newborn in sacking and sends it down the river, before the new mother can determine whether her baby was really, as Lina says, stillborn (123). In fact, Sorrow is certain that she sees her infant yawn (123). The possibility that Sorrow’s baby was alive, and that Lina committed infanticide, is given plausibility when Lina implies that she hopes that Sorrow’s infant dies: “Sorrow was pregnant and soon there would be another virgin birth and, perhaps, unfortunately, this one would not die” (56). As was the case with Florens, Rebekka, and Jacob, Lina’s mother hunger—which manifests in a possessive attachment to Florens—causes her to behave in anti-social and destructive ways. Her behavior towards Sorrow is not only potentially sinister (if she did, indeed, kill Sorrow’s infant), but also generates disharmony between the residents of Jacob’s farm. By driving a wedge between Sorrow and the rest of residents and by hoarding the attention of Florens, Lina adds to the unlikelihood of a nourishing alliance forming between the individuals on the Vaark farm; individuals who do, in fact, depend upon each other for their livelihood, and who could, potentially, find the “refuge and consolation of a clan” (58) by reaching out to one another.

## Sorrow

Sorrow’s reaction to her motherlessness is, among the characters in *A Mercy*, rather unique. Instead of latching onto another person or to material objects, Sorrow’s loss of family—the result of a pirate’s raid of the ship she lived on—causes her to experience a psychic spilt, represented in her “identical self”(117), an imaginary friend named Twin. Yet, Sorrow’s attachment to Twin mirrors the dependence Florens, Rebekka, Jacob and Lina have upon their chosen “salves.” Like Florens’ blacksmith and Rebekka’s Jacob, Twin represents safety and comfort. Furthermore, Twin, like Jacob’s third house and Lina’s Florens, also fills the void left by Sorrow’s lack of family.

Twin materializes in a moment of profound crisis and abandonment for Sorrow, who is the lone survivor of a raid upon the pirate ship that has served as the only home she can remember. With her father, the captain of the ship, nowhere to be found, Sorrow wanders the destroyed decks, rummaging for food and checking for survivors. Then Twin appears, and Sorrow says, “they have been together ever since” (117). Together they face the morbid, threatening reality of their immediate circumstances:

Both skinned down the broken mast and started walking the rocky shoreline. The bits of dead fish they ate intensified their thirst which they forgot at the sight of the two dead bodies rocking in the surf. It was the bloat and sway that made them incautious enough to wade away from the rocks into the lagoon just when the tide was coming in (117).

The ubiquity of death, destruction, and peril in Sorrow’s circumstances, as described in this passage, is overwhelming: “dead fish,” “broken mast,” “dead bodies,” “rocky shoreline,” and the threat of drowning, loom as hazards and also as reminders of Sorrow’s desolation. Yet, Twin’s presence in this passage provides a lifeline. Although she is imaginary, Twin functions as a flesh-and-blood being would: she is Sorrow’s ally in survival.

Twin takes on a central role in Sorrow’s reality, becoming her “safety, her entertainment, her guide” (119). But Sorrow’s reliance upon her is also problematic, as the more she retreats

into the refuge of her “identical self,” the more she is shunned for being “daft,” “strange,” and melancholy” (51). Twin exacerbates Sorrow’s alienation in part by encouraging her to lie to and to withhold information about herself from those who attempt to help her, such as to the sawyer’s family, who initially rescued her, and later to the residents of the Vaark farm. Sorrow’s absurd responses to the questions of these potential “real life” allies give her audience ample reason to assume she is “daft,” and “strange.” She says, for example, that “gulls” were her only ship mates, and that “Mermaids. I mean whales” rescued her from the ghost ship (119).

Moreover, Twin takes on the role of an autonomous character in the novel: one who is fiercely possessive of Sorrow. We see this dynamic play out when Florens first arrives on the farm. Sorrow is pleased to see the new face, but as she reaches out to touch one of Florens’ braids, Twin stops her, and shouts “‘Don’t! Don’t!” (124). Although Sorrow can see through “Twin’s jealousy”(124), Twin nonetheless manages to successfully thwart a connection between the young Florens and Sorrow. Lastly, Sorrow’s reliance upon Twin for “friendship [and] conversation” (123) detracts from her ability to connect meaningfully with those around her, by making their friendship and conversation superfluous. Thus, although Twin is a relatively consistent source of nourishment for Sorrow’s mother hunger, she ultimately compounds Sorrow’s alienation, by causing her to retreat into a world no other soul can enter. Indeed, her imaginary Twin disables Sorrow from forging “real life” bonds with those around her.

### **They Hatch Alone: The Alienation of Motherlessness during Colonialism**

In Lina’s chapter, she tells Florens an allegorical story of an eagle mother and a wandering traveler. As the story goes, an eagle has just laid her eggs and is on heightened alert for any threats to the safety of her young. A traveler stops to look out on the valley he sees before him. As he gazes at the tremendous beauty of the valley, he laughs, saying “This is perfect. This is mine” (62). The mother eagle hears a threat implicit in his tone, and “she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound” (62). He, in turn, strikes her, sending her hurtling downward in an eternal freefall. When Florens inquires as to the fate of her unhatched eggs, Lina replies that “They hatch alone” (63). Florens, on edge about the baby birds’ fate, asks if they live. “We have,” Lina says (63), implying that the baby eagles in the allegory represent Florens, Lina, and other diasporic peoples who, like them, have been orphaned by colonialism.

Now motherless, the baby eagles “hatch alone” (62). This is an incongruous assertion because, although hatching motherless, the baby eagles are not truly alone; literally, they hatch side by side with one another, inhabiting the same “home”—their nest. Thus, they are *alone*, *together*, fitting Morrison’s concept of the “community of the isolated” (M.A. Thesis, 1). Like the orphans in *A Mercy* (Florens, Jacob, Lina, Rebekka and Sorrow), who inhabit the same “nest” of Jacob’s farm—they are alienated from each other, as they are unable to provide for one another the love and emotional security (the sense of family) that they lost when they became motherless.

If we read *A Mercy* as an allegory describing the “creation” of America, then *A Mercy* implies that modern, twentieth-century alienation was planted long ago, by the familial ruptures prevalent in the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> Morrison’s characters, read this way, comprise a complete

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<sup>3</sup> These familial ruptures included the slave trade (which we saw through Florens), the decimation of Native Americans by colonists or European diseases (which we saw through Lina), death via high seas travel (which we

cross-section of the diverse diasporic peoples who populated the seventeenth-century American colonies. African slaves are represented by Florens, Native Americans by Lina, European settlers—both male and female—by Rebekka and Jacob, and mixed-race peoples by Sorrow. *A Mercy*, as we have seen, depicts each of these characters or groups of people as motherless, casualties of one or another of the tragic familial dissections particular to, or common in, the colonial period. But for Morrison in *A Mercy*, the tragedy only begins with the Sunderings of colonialism, which created a “motherless” people in colonial America. The motherlessness that results from these ruptures manifests in each of these characters as a yearning for kinship—a “mother hunger”—which causes those afflicted to pursue relief from their yearning through the single, fallible sources of individual persons or possessions. Ironically, the attachments these characters acquire only guarantee their alienation. In shunning the opportunity to create a family or community with one another (thereby solving their common problem), they become a “community of the isolated.” Thus, Morrison adds to the literature concerned with alienation written by her predecessors Woolf, Faulkner, Eliot, Joyce, Hemingway and Huxley, showing how the seeds of twentieth-century alienation were sown directly into the soil of colonial America.

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saw through Sorrow), and the abandonment or sale of offspring to relieve the burden of feeding them (which we saw in Jacob and Rebekka).

**Works Cited**

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