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Storytelling in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: A Journey to Freedom

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2024

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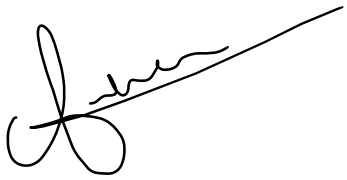

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Laura, for her guidance, great advice, and support during this process. Special thanks to my sister for her encouragement during the stressful times. Lastly, I would like to mention my friends, Alex and Janira, for their constant cheering. Their excitement has motivated me like I had never imagined.

Abstract: In her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, Morrison goes back to the early stages of the foundation of America and explores race relations, power dynamics and the quest for freedom in a period in which the term "racism" did not even exist. According to the author, she wanted to show where it all began, when there was "no civilisation that did not rest on some form of enslavement" (Morrison 2008).

This dissertation uncovers how storytelling is used by the protagonist, Florens, to enable her journey to agency. Therefore, in this TFG, I argue that Florens is able to heal and achieve her personal autonomy by telling her memories and experiences. Storytelling becomes a transformative tool for her as she reclaims her narrative and, consequently, her life within an oppressive system. By writing down her story, she reconciles with her traumatic past, especially with her relationship with her mother and the blacksmith, reflects on her humanity and forges an identity of her own that leads to her rebirth. To prove so, I will closely assess key moments in the story as main proof of Florens' journey to liberty, always focusing on the power of language and the characters' perspectives. Moreover, this paper will explore the context of slavery and neo-slave narratives, examine Morrison's use of narrative techniques in the novel, and lastly, analyse how the protagonist shapes her narrative despite ignoring her mother's side of the story.

Keywords: *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison, slavery, freedom, storytelling, perspective.

0.Introduction

The never-ending issue of race and slavery has been under examination since the first slave narratives were published in the 18th century. With this genre, written by former slaves who gave a representation of their experience in the United States, African American literature saw its beginnings. A century later, slave narratives evolved and led to what we refer to as neo-slave narratives.

Toni Morrison represented in her oeuvre the African-American experience whilst creating characters who embodied the legacy of slavery and its devastating consequences. The author herself has usually been praised for her storytelling prowess when addressing important issues in her work. Morrison was one of the most influential writers in American literary history, awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1987 and with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. As a novelist, not only did she focus on the notion of race but on the complexity of the social system. Moreover, she centred her narratives around black female protagonists, eradicating the white gaze and educating us on how to understand black lives.

The author's novels have become the subject of numerous studies and are taught internationally at educational institutions. Many critics have explored a wide range of topics such as Morrison's narrative techniques (Lindon Barrett), black women's literature (Justine Tally, Francis Smith Foster), the reality of slavery and the African American experience (Lucille P. Fultz) to other themes, such as maternal loss or motherhood (Jean Wyatt, Andrea O'Reilly), and the importance of personal and cultural memory (Tessa Roynon, Adrienne Lanier Seward). Additionally, all the research about *A Mercy* has always focused on analysing the different manifestations of enslavement depicted in the story. With this in mind, the initial aim before writing this dissertation was to find any form of liberation in the novel to bring a different or less studied perspective to the subject. In this case, it was observed that storytelling served this purpose.

A Mercy (2008), Morrison's ninth novel, considered a neo-slave narrative, is directly influenced by slave narratives since it portrays the African American experience from its origins. The author returns to early colonial America through Florens, the protagonist, whose story allows Morrison to trace back the beginning of slavery and racism. The protagonist, born into slavery, finds in literacy a weapon of resistance. After multiple traumatic experiences, Florens decides to write her life story on the walls of a

house that acts as a testimony of her transformation. In this dissertation, the purpose is to explore how storytelling enables Florens to achieve agency and find an identity of her own. One of the main objectives is to demonstrate that Florens' evolution is triggered by her reading and writing skills. Retelling her story allows her to heal from her traumatic past, reclaim her life and assert her humanity. She refuses to be silenced and, by voicing her story, she also gives representation to stories which were deprived of being told. To prove my thesis, this TFG has been divided into two different sections.

In the first part, I focus on the contextualization of slavery and slave and neo-slave narratives, which highly influence the novel, to gain a better understanding of the circumstances faced by the characters in the story. Moreover, I dedicate several pages to Morrison's narrative style and relationship with storytelling to comprehend her intentions when creating her novel, the issues of most concern to her, and how she planned to depict the African American heritage.

In the second part, I explore Florens' connection to agency and storytelling and how these factors contribute to shaping her narrative. Furthermore, I analyse two significant relationships in her life that act as catalysts for her to resurface as a storyteller: Her mother and the blacksmith. Lastly, in the closing section, I change angles and examine the same story, but through *a minha mãe's* point of view, to enhance the importance of perspective in the novel and to recognize how the failed messages between mother and daughter, separated by slavery, condition the protagonist's development.

Finally, this TFG ends with the conclusion section, in which there is a description of the findings of this dissertation. Additionally, there is a paragraph dedicated to the issues for further research in which I mention other areas of interest that I would like to explore in future investigations.

1. Contextualization

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) depicts how Florens, a young slave, embarks on a journey of self-realization after being sold to Jacob Vaark, a New England merchant, as payment to settle a debt with D'Ortega, owner of the plantation where she lives in. This traumatic event will condition the protagonist's development since she will never discover the truth behind her mother's decision to "sell" her off.

Morrison's ninth novel uncovers the nature of slavery during the seventeenth century in early colonial America. The author reveals the institution of slavery as a system profoundly connected to power and hierarchies. When servitude was still raceless, but society was already building the basis of the so-called New World. Thus, Morrison "addresses the complex process of planting and legalizing the connection between forced servitude and race that is at the core of the formation of the New World" (Seward 244). It is prime to consider that, in the story, each and every single character is under some sort of enslavement. Nevertheless, Morrison's main focus is on the experiences of the female characters and, consequently, on gender dynamics. In other words, she offers a "compelling critique of the harmful effects of the subservience to a European imported ideology of patriarchal supremacy by dealing specifically with the politics of representing normative masculinity" (Seward 243). In short, *A Mercy,* in Morrison's own words, is the ideal place to witness how racism saw its beginnings (Morrison 2008).

1.1. Slavery

It is common knowledge that slavery existed long before it was officially institutionalised. For this reason, it is complex to pinpoint a specific date and place of origin. Enslavement was practised due to various reasons such as economic factors, social hierarchies, territorial expansion and even religious practices.

In *A Mercy*, the author centres on the beginning of slavery in the Americas, which stems from the European colonization of the New World. It is important to stress two different moments in slave history. Originally, during the 17th century, the British Empire became one of the major importers of African slaves to their British colonies in North America. Prior to that, the Atlantic slave trade had already been established in the 15th century, when Portuguese merchants brought numerous African slaves to what we now refer to as Brazil. These facts are necessary when understanding the novel's context and

background since it is set in the "latter part of the seventeenth century, when Maryland was still under the rule of the British Crown, Virginia under Papist Portugal, and the transatlantic slave trade in its infancy" (Fultz 4).

In the novel, there are no explicit details of how Florens' mother was enslaved. She, like many others, was captured, sold and forced to bear children. She even admits that she ignores who Florens' father is (Morrison 142). Thus, Florens was already born as an enslaved girl. Until Vaark's arrival, they served D'Ortega, a Portuguese man involved in the slave trade. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider that slavery, as every other experience in life, is represented as a historical event that shapes the character's occurrences. This is visible in the mother-daughter story used to reflect on several methods implemented to preserve slavery: Separation, abandonment, and orphanhood. Therefore, the author expresses that the immorality of slavery destroys family ties (Fisch 97). Morrison depicts the system, still not institutionalized, as a mindset in which it was believed that everything and everyone was for rent and sale (Morrison 2019).

Despite Florens being a slave among other slaves, the African ones belong to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy because "in antebellum America, the legally woundable African- American body serves as this locus of incontestable reality for the violent processes verifying the ideologies of slaveholding and white supremacy" (Barrett 428). They are seen as the Other, which entitles white people to this sense of possession over them since "ownership of others in early American culture is connected to class and social hierarchy rather than strictly to race, thus providing a broader boundary for separation of self and other" (Seward 82). As a consequence, they are denied an identity. A common example is that they do not even know their age: "Lina says from the state of my teeth I am maybe seven or eight when I am brought here […] since then, […] I must be sixteen" (Morrison 12). With this, Morrison presents parallels with slave narratives because "many of them begin with discontinuous birth narratives. That is, the narrator does not know precisely when he/she was born or his/her exact age because the institution of slavery and trafficking of slaves often rendered it impossible to locate a precise date of birth" (Tally 169). Nonetheless, the novel explores slavery through the voices who suffer from it, but also through the eyes who benefit from it.

1.2. Neo-slave narratives

A Mercy can be considered a neo-slave narrative as it explores the legacy of slavery and its effects. Before the foundation of this genre, African American literature was born with slave narratives written by former slaves during the 18th and 19th centuries. Hence, we could argue that "slavery paradoxically becomes the foundation of literary production" (Fisch 119).

Slave narratives evolved progressively and led to neo-slave narratives in the 20th century. These narratives, whose authors did not experience enslavement firsthand, reflect on the connection between slavery and factors such as race, identity, memory and trauma and how they are historically represented. We could consider that this genre develops as a response to the impact of slavery in modern society. In other words, they "debate the degree to which past practices remain current" and "provide a means of seeing a frequently represented institution differently" (Babb 289).

Toni Morrison took neo-slave narratives to new heights. As an African American author, she understood the connection between literacy and the "African-American body in particular" (Barrett 415). Thus, she gave protagonism in her work to the physical body and contradicted what had been already culturally represented (Barrett 429). It is necessary to understand that, with neo-slave narratives, many authors fought against the restriction of African Americans to live without literacy, which meant to "immure them in bodily existences" (Barrett 419). In other words, they were reduced to be seen as tools or even animals that could be forced or manipulated into serving, working and reproducing. But, when entering literacy, they gained "important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body" (Barrett 419). With slave and neo-slave narratives, slaves recognised literacy as a sign of humanity and found their voice and identity in the written. They could prove that they had existed all along and turned these narratives into a source of representation. As a result, Morrison, like many other writers, created a legacy that became "historiographical evidence of US slaveholding society" (Barrett 416) since they wanted to uncover the harsh reality of the nation's founding. We could conclude that one of the aims of both slave narratives and, especially, neo-slave narratives is to recover history by focusing on how the "story is told", turning these genres into powerful "literary artefacts" (Fisch 116).

2. **Morrison's narrative style**

Toni Morrison is known for exploring the African American experience in her novels. She fabricated her stories concentrating on the legacy of slavery, race relations and facing oppression and discrimination in America. As previously mentioned, she used historical events as context and background for her fictional work. Her perspective was always centred around those who suffered from some form of oppression but gave a unique voice to her female characters. Because she paid significant attention to memory and recollection, her novels are often nonlinear and present a fragmented perspective, with multiple stories unfolding successively. As a result, she often used the stream of consciousness in her novels, which allowed her to shift points of view and bring together different voices in order to coexist in her stories. Additionally, these voices belong to characters from contrasting backgrounds who are facing different challenges. What this means is that they all have a platform to express themselves since "in each of her novels Morrison creates a fictional universe populated with both major and minor characters who are all allowed to occupy the narrative spotlight" (Tally 159). Another characteristic that can be seen in Morrison's narrative style is that she treated the past as something that is unfinished and continuously unfolds to reshape the time ahead. To return to the past, she used flashbacks, which enabled her to revisit specific themes, moments and even techniques which "positions her characters, her readers, and the society-as-readers to discover that the (recurring) past is a reservoir from which the future can be drawn and redrawn in more expansive and enabling ways" (Tally 160).

In her writings, she always introduced different elements to pay homage to the African American heritage and culture to enrich her storytelling. In fact, she used the term "Africanism" to denote the "undercurrent of blackness in American literature and culture, […] and as a term for designating the unspeakable in discourses about class, sexuality, issues of power and domination" (Tally 115). It is relevant to understand that African American writers share similarities with their work because of a common experience or a similar perception of that same experience (Gates 1).

With Morrison, it is important to underline the dialogical relationship that she established between the reader and narrator as a literary device (Fultz 1). It is as if the narrator spoke directly to the reader hoping for a response or reaction. Because Morrison's work is based on "reader positioning" (Tally 154), her gaze is always on the reader's needs and response so that they become a co-creator of the story. Her novels

have allowed us to read beyond the page "[…] to evoke memories and experiences that we have never had" (Seward xv). Even presently, Morrison still educates us through her stories. To put it differently, she understood her role as an artist but also as a teacher and "adapts and extends both conventional and African American narrative poetics in order to create the framework for this role" (Tally 155).

In sum, the author provided her fiction with multiple techniques with an aim in mind. She wanted to put an end to the negative stereotypes associated with African American authors since every white reader perceived every black speaker as an unreliable narrator. To do so, she wrote her novels to advocate for a new generation of readers, for more representation, participation, and interpretive competence (Tally 152). This is why agency and storytelling are predominant in all her stories.

2.1. Approach to storytelling

Storytelling is used to convey a specific message or evoke strong emotions and insights through a literary work. In this case, Morrison created her novels to express a social and cultural commentary and to connect, on a deep level, with her audience.

Storytelling is used on *A Mercy* to represent collective memory, explore identity and reveal generational and historical trauma within the African American experience. It could be seen as an attempt to preserve the legacy of African American culture by shedding light on silenced or dismissed stories. Morrison herself once affirmed that "stories and narratives spea[k] about us, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections" (qtd. in Lucille 2). She regarded stories as life, so she used memory as a document "[…] to envision and articulate the individual collective past of slavery" (Tally 168). This illustrates the intricate connection between the oral and the written tradition and how the author used the former to infuse her narratives with the essence of African American history previously passed down through the spoken word. In this case, Morrison makes use of "the Call/Response pattern of writing which holds special significance in Afro-American oral tradition. This technique serves not only as a medium through which actual history is being revisited but also as means of accepting and healing traumatic experience" (Shilaja 154). By looking back, both author and reader are able to understand the character's present and future.

With storytelling, she created awareness in her readers of their own prejudices and expectations (Tally 103). To do so, she retold history from the inside, focusing on the subjectivity of those oppressed by slavery, in this case, on Florens. Morrison's storytelling not only granted her that but allowed her to give voice to African American women's bodies. She filled them with language (Barrett 432), and they became significant. This is observed in *A Mercy,* for instance, when Florens' mother narrates her raping: "They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in" (Morrison 142). This quote focuses specifically on a disturbing physical experience since *a minha mãe* describes what happened to her since she is seen as an object that someone can claim. By voicing this traumatic episode, she affirms her existence as a human and claims that she does matter, and so does her body. In addition to that, Morrison also resorted to storytelling to state that black women had been recording American history since their arrival, "defying the laws and customs that imposed silence upon them" (Foster 1). Moreover, with her storytelling, she rejected the white dominant language and its culture and wrote under her own conditions and terms: "Morrison through the inclusion of call and response dialogues and occurrences of black grammar rejects white mainstream language" (Shilaja 159).

In short, whether in fiction or non-fiction, Morrison's storytelling enabled her to examine numerous themes of major concern that always revolved around the different manifestations of racial and gender issues.

2.2. Narrative structure and techniques in *A Mercy*

Morrison's work is a testament to her writing prowess. In this novel, she concentrates on numerous techniques and devices to create a richly multifaceted and enticing experience. The book's arrangement is important since it is divided into twelve chapters, six of them are narrated by Florens in first person and present tense, and the other six are narrated by the rest of the characters in third person (omniscient point of view) alternating between past and present tense. So, we have multiple perspectives that highlight the complexities of each character. Therefore, "Morrison undertakes narration as a communal act, manipulating the voices of her characters" (Shilaja 154).

As mentioned, *A Mercy* follows a non-linear structure and a fragmented narrative in which each story builds on the other with a layered style: "the disorderly structure allows the audience to "remember" these events along with Florens" (Seward 209), as it parallels the nature of memory and how humans recall past events. The audience is expected to read into every single word and try to decipher its meaning. This allowed Morrison to tell the character's journey and let the reader learn about their relationships. In the story, the characters form a small society that ends up disrupted and reveals that humanity always needs some sort of community. Even Morrison (qtd. in Fultz 13) said the following:

> "I wanted this group to be sort of the earliest version of American individuality, American self-sufficiency, and I think I wanted to show the dangers of that. You really do need a community. You do need a structure. Whether it's a church, or religion, as Rebekka thinks . . .. There is no outside thing that holds them together" (qtd. in Fultz 13).

In addition to all of that, Morrison employs lyrical prose in the novel and gives a unique and distinct voice to every character. This helps the audience to differentiate the character's experiences and ways of thinking and feeling. We can observe differences between Lina and Florens' interventions, for example:

> "One day, ran the story, an eagle laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and paws that hunted them. Her eyes are midnight black and shiny as she watches over them. At the tremble of a leaf, the scent of any other life, her frown deepens, her head jerks and her feathers quietly lift […]" (Morrison 57).

In this quote, Lina uses a poetic and evocative language with full and complete sentences. The passage shows how Lina acts as a mother figure who cares and tries to protect their children. Moreover, this proves how Morrison achieves "an oral quality within her written work by including characters who tell stories to one another as well as to the reader, favoring the first person's voice. Through the articulation of these stories, the listeners can understand and empathize with them […]" (Shilaja 154-5). We could consider that Morrison is trying to highlight the importance of voicing our stories to show more compassion and understanding. This contrasts with Florens' way of speaking:

> "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" (Morrison 102).

Here, we notice that Florens speaks with directness and simplicity, and only in the present tense. Her speech is characterized by repetitions and short sentences that reflect the urgency of her situation. In this case, Florens is being inspected by a group of religious people to see if there is any sign of evil in her because of the colour of her skin. Thus, the quote reveals the dehumanizing effects of slavery and racism and helps the story to ground in its cultural context. Florens' descriptions are vivid and explicit, which enables a "reconnection with one's social environment thereby allowing the victim to reclaim the suppressed traumatized self" (Shilaja 154-5).

As already anticipated, the novel begins with Florens, the protagonist, as she directly addresses the reader: "Don't be afraid" (Morrison 10). Nevertheless, she does not write her story for the reader but for her former lover: The blacksmith. Her contributions in first person and present tense not only distinguish her from the other characters but also give her a sense of instancy, which allows her to focus on the present moment. The other characters' life stories are used to build Florens' own story and complete the missing parts, which leaves the reader no choice but to "fill in what the narrative ellipses leave out" (Fultz 5). Morrison disrupts the timelines to blur past and present, so we face an unrevealed present and a past yet untold. Florens as narrator is unable, for instance, to conjugate verb tenses, which indicate the "disturbances of her signifying capacities" (Wyatt 130).

Finally, the narrative structure of the novel finds its origin in the separation of the mother-daughter story. Put differently, *A Mercy* starts with Florens' parting from her mother and the traumatic effects that she suffers from it and ends with a concluding chapter narrated from her mother's perspective in which she uncovers the real reason for her actions in the past. We could state that the structure goes through a cycle that comes back to the starting point but with a completely transformed protagonist.

3. Relationship between agency and storytelling

Agency is a term that, used in literature, refers to the capacity of a character to make life-altering decisions that carry the action of a story. Through agency, characters prove to have control over their lives and destiny and have a significant impact on the story. Agency is often portrayed as a developing aspect of a character's personality since it is

an inherent quality that can evolve when maturing and growing. Also, it is strongly connected to themes such as freedom, autonomy, and strength.

On the one hand, in *A Mercy*, agency is a central topic explored through the different backgrounds, social structures, personal choices and circumstances of the different characters. Nonetheless, this dissertation focuses solely on Florens' journey to agency. The protagonist, subjected to an oppressive system, finds agency through a small but meaningful act: Telling her story. Storytelling allows her to express herself, gain a better understanding of the world around her, develop an identity, and engage in acts of resistance since, as an enslaved girl, she is forbidden to learn how to read and write. Thus, she also represents the agency of women living in a patriarchal society as she challenges traditional power dynamics and redefines the notions of power and liberty. Overall, agency serves multiple purposes for Florens however, by sharing her story, she asserts her presence in this world and reclaims her humanity. She carves out a space for herself in a system that has forced her to remain silent. This can be observed in Lina's first impression of the protagonist: "Florens had been a quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement" (Morrison 57).

On the other hand, storytelling, in Florens' case, serves as a powerful tool of agency since it allows her to reclaim her voice. What at first started as a love letter to the blacksmith ends as a love letter to herself because by simply registering her story, she is able to process her experiences: "I don't know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory…" (Morrison 64). By writing her memories down, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and gains insights that lead her to forge an identity of her own, something that she was deprived of from her birth: "There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me" (Morrison 140). In this quote, Florens reflects on the importance of recording her experiences and emotions and demonstrates her capacity to claim her own desires. Furthermore, Florens faces adversity by narrating her life and resists the dehumanizing effects of slavery. She finds her humanity in the written and becomes a fully realized individual. We could argue that storytelling is a form of catharsis to Florens as she finds redemption and healing from it. In other words, storytelling empowers her as a human and as a woman, as "language has not only the power to retrieve but also to heal and to comfort" (Shilaja 153). The following quote evidences Florens' journey and change of mentality: "In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am

wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words" (Morrison 139).

Agency and storytelling are inextricably linked because they both guide Florens to knowing her "self". She becomes an agent who drives the narrative. Nevertheless, before she is able to reconcile with herself, she is incomplete, and her storytelling mirrors that. This means that as long as she feels insufficient, her story will be too. As a result, her narrative is nonlinear as she is recalling past memories; thus, "it makes sense that the story begins *in medias res* and that bits and pieces of it are missing" (Fultz 5). As a child, she longs for a freedom that is symbolised through her desire to wear someone else's shoes since she does not have an identity of her own: "The beginning begins with the shoes. I am never able to abide being barefoot" (Morrison 10). No one has taught her that she has the ability to walk on her own, and does not learn that lesson until the end of the novel: "See? You are correct. *A minha mãe* too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (Morrison 141). She is now in absolute possession of herself by affirming her transformation. And what is most important, her story remains, and so does she: "Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the World" (Morrison 141). With this quote, Florens declares that she has become one with the story. As Fultz contends:

> "We may view Florens's storytelling as a process of sense- and self-making. Her real desire, subconscious at first, is for self-knowledge and self-consciousness, which could only occur through recognition, and that could only come through the telling of the story […]. This is all the more important because the community in the novel has all but disintegrated. All that remains is the narrative" (Fultz 12).

Through Florens' literacy, we observe yet again Morrison's concerns with the body of the oppressed. The written language enables them to reproduce their physical experiences, so that a body that is at first "voided of language becomes a body filled again with language" (Barrett 427). We could conclude that Florens' character mirrors Morrison's preoccupations with maintaining the authority of one's narrative. Her agency and storytelling make her a representative of all the female African American authors who were silenced or were not recognized as deserved. Florens' words free her because, for the first time, she is the sole possessor of something: "I am lettered" (Morrison 11).

In conclusion, the protagonist achieves agency through literacy, which grants her a developing knowledge of herself as a human, as a woman, as a daughter and as a slave.

By understanding her circumstances and her past experiences, "that results in her ability to inscribe her bildungsroman on the walls of her owner's unoccupied mansion" (Fultz 102), she expands and evolves.

3.1. Florens' role in shaping her own narrative

Because Florens is the protagonist of the novel, she plays a significant role in shaping the story as an act of renewal. What this means is that she is able to leave her past behind and begin anew. Through the course of the action, we learn the different forms of oppression she is being subjected to. Despite her circumstances, she shows agency through introspection and by actively seeking to define her identity. As the narrator of half of the fragmented narratives, her interventions are presented as a personal diary, which allows her the freedom to make her voice be heard. As Roynon declares:

> "Florens' "telling" is a hybrid text. It is a Portuguese inflected pidgin English that only colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade could have produced. The non-anglo nature of her language […] testifies both to her oppression and through the fact that it is a written as well as a spoken account (Roynon 81).

We learn Florens' story as she writes it on the walls and floors of one of the rooms of Vaark's abandoned mansion: "My telling can't hurt you. You can think what I tell you a confession" (Morrison 10). Because she retells her personal experiences, the audience becomes intimately connected to her and embarks on this journey alongside her. She is literate, which is quite unusual for any enslaved person. Especially at that time, when it was considered unlawful to teach slaves since they were seen as more dangerous if they gained knowledge and wisdom. As a result, the protagonist shows moral agency from an early age due to the lessons received from the Reverend Father: "Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway […]" (Morrison 12). This means that we also witness her cognitive maturing.

It is relevant to mention that Florens' narration does not follow the same pattern as other neo-slave narratives and slave narratives as we find a narrator that begins the story addressing the reader and not with the so common phrase "I was born". Morrison does not use this since Florens is already showing agency and asserting her existence

despite her current circumstances. Moreover, at first, we ignore that we are not the only ones Florens is writing to. This is significant because her story is also a confession, an intent to face her "sins", heal from them and, thus, reconcile with herself. She undertakes both a spiritual journey through her storytelling and a physical one that leads to the blacksmith: "I am coming to you" (Morrison 63). Therefore, we could observe that "the act of writing about the quest becomes the quest itself and vice versa" (Roynon 82). In addition to that, we need to reflect on what Florens' narrative represents when she states: "Now you will stand to hear me" (Morrison 140). This may imply that she is speaking on behalf of those who were silenced and is trying to verbalize their stories too. Florens' location when phrasing her narrative is relevant because Vaark's house symbolizes her years of enslavement and source of oppression. Inscribing her story on the walls of the mansion is an act of freedom. Her words will remain in the place that saw her arrival as a young enslaved girl and her departure as a free woman. By releasing her story, she is also releasing the stories of those who were not able to do so: "Florens has produced—and we along with her—an originary narrative that will sustain future generations" (Fultz 13).

Furthermore, Florens' role in shaping her narrative can also be seen as a resurrection. Rejected by the blacksmith at the end of the novel, she perceives it as the same rejection she experienced with her mother and unconsciously emerges as a storyteller. She has the urge to tell what happened to her, like she is seeking justice. So, we determine that Florens' story may also be a goodbye letter to her former lover. We later learn that the blacksmith is illiterate and will not be able to read Florens' word: "You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (Morrison 140). This also presents parallelisms with the mother – daughter story, which will be analysed in the following sections, since Florens will never learn the reason behind her mother's decision to give her away: "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me" (Morrison 142). In both cases, the message needs to fail in order to enable Florens' self-consciousness. In regard to the blacksmith, the relationship is relevant for Florens' story because her desire for him "awakens in Florens her first significant conscious encounter with self" (Fultz 7). Put differently, by developing feelings for another person, she acknowledges herself as an individual. After the separation, she learns that she does not belong anywhere and that it is her responsibility to find a place to coexist within herself.

She transcends the relationship with the blacksmith and transforms it into a lesson to bring together the parts of herself by capturing them in her story:

> "But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be" (Morrison 138).

In this quote, Florens demonstrates that she is no longer a slave by choice in any area of her life since she now owns herself. In the end, she has realized that "in her literacy lies the potential for her freedom and escape […]" (Roynon 81). It is pertinent to mention that despite the blacksmith being a catalyst for Florens, he is not the cause of her transformation. He is merely the channel through which Florens experiences a catharsis and decides to act on it. She unleashes her wild side and embraces it: "Significantly, she begins to recognize and give more presence to the animal-like […]. It is this wilderness, this animalistic self that Florens ultimately reconciles into one knowing self, being in and of the world" (Fultz 10).

Overall, Florens acquires sufficient knowledge to learn from her past experiences and transcend them. Born again, she writes her story with no judgement whatsoever as she retells it as she lived it. She does not leave any details behind nor hides her thoughts and feelings. In other words, Florens never shows any sign of shame when revisiting her past memories. She even acknowledges that she has "willingly placed herself as the subordinate in this unequal relationship, which she must ultimately reconcile in order to achieve self-consciousness" (Fultz 8). She has risen into her most authentic self and does not seek external validation: "Her demand for recognition by the external other has transformed into the confident narrator of her life. Both Florens and the reader now grasp the significance of this rebirth and can fill in the gaps that Florens's telling has left out at various points in the narrative" (Fultz 11). Florens has become an active participant of her life by writing her story. In simpler terms, she has transformed her narrative into her reality.

4. Love and motherhood

After focusing on Florens' journey to agency reflected through her storytelling, it is now prime to analyse another significant theme that is strongly linked to all of the above: The mother-daughter story.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Florens is separated from her mother and her brother at an early age. She is used as payment to settle a debt, and Jacob Vaark becomes her new owner alongside his wife Rebekka. Once installed in her new "home", she meets Lina, a Native American woman who is also a servant to the family. Lina becomes her protector and nurturer and serves as a mother figure to Florens: "Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks but when she did her light, singsong voice was lovely to hear" (Morrison 56). Nonetheless, Florens spends her childhood and teenage years longing for her birth mother, trying to understand what she perceived as a rejection: "A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me" (Morrison 13). This past event is reproduced in Florens' mind throughout the entirety of the novel, which indicates that any "[…] reenactment of the trauma is a common symptom of unresolved trauma" (Wyatt 138). Hence, her desire to find answers drives much of the action because the significance of this relationship is a key factor when shaping Florens' identity.

Morrison writes a story about separation to depict how the institution of slavery "[…] goes beyond the destruction of personhood. It rips apart families and makes the mother/child bond virtually impossible, or at the very least, perverted" (Fultz 6). The absence of a mother impacts Florens' growth and development since, as Morrison says, the presence and absence of a relative, conditions the success or happiness of a character" (qtd. in Fultz 13). *A minha mãe* has been denied the right to be a mother, and Florens has never had the opportunity to be a daughter. Thus, the author reflects on a series of failed messages between the slave daughter and the slave mother (Wyatt 128) that determine Florens' expectations and aspirations in life.

In short, love and motherhood are essential elements when considering Florens' growth since maternal loss in the novel is associated with sacrifice and yearning for a connection that can never be fulfilled. Through Florens and her mother, we learn the complexities of the power dynamics within this relationship in the context of slavery.

Morrison defines maternal identity as a "site of power for black women" (O'Reilly 1) however, we will uncover that what Florens sees as something ripped from her is, in truth, a source of empowerment given by her progenitor.

4.1. *A minha mãe's* side of the story

The final chapter or epilogue of *A Mercy* is narrated by Florens' mother as some sort of journal. She has been absent throughout the course of the action but is still present in the protagonist's life. The audience finally learns her story and experiences the past events through her perspective. *A minha mãe* reveals how she was enslaved and, eventually, had no choice but to give her daughter away to save her. The ending is a counterpoint to the foregoing chapters since it allows the reader to fill in the gaps and complete the story. As previously mentioned, Florens will never receive this message and truly understand her mother's intentions, but we will. Thus, we become a bridge between mother and daughter and, in some capacity, we contribute to connecting both stories. Nevertheless, Florens never benefits from the task the readers perform.

A minha mãe recounts her journey long before Florens is sold to Jacob Vaark at the age of eight. She narrates her traumatic memories when she witnessed the warring tribes in Africa, the burning of her village, her capture and how she ended up being sold and bought by, as she calls him, *Senhor*:

> "I was burning sweat in cane only a short time when they took me away to sit on a platform in the sun. It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants" (Morrison 144).

At the auction block, she learns the dehumanizing effects of slavery and, once living under the D'Ortega family, that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (Morrison 143). Hence, she becomes a victim of this new and unknown system in which "the cultural codes of the New World replace her personal memories and reinforce the prevailing culture" (Seward 91).

When focusing the narration on Florens, she explains that her daughter is growing and her body is changing: "Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest.

And they see and I see them see" (Morrison 142). In this quote, she warns us that the masters at the plantation have also noticed Florens' blooming, and worries that they will act upon it soon. As known, enslaved women were raped for the pleasure of their masters and to bear more children as they always needed more slaves to work on their plantations. *A minha mãe,* victim of these brutalities firsthand, does not want her daughter to face the same destiny as she did, but she does not have any help or resources to prevent this from happening: "Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no" (Morrison 142). With this narration, Morrison depicts black motherhood as "radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture" (O'Reilly 1). *A minha mãe,* because of her circumstances, cannot exert her role as a mother: "The position of slave mother thus imposes an unbearable contradiction: as a mother, her most basic commitment is to the preservation and protection of her child, yet as a slave mother, she is powerless to protect a daughter whose body belongs to the slave owner who would violate her" (Wyatt 131). Nevertheless, she decides to show resistance in an unexpected way, but she first makes sure that her daughter learns how to read and write since she views knowledge as a source of protection: "I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make your way. What I know is there is magic in learning" (Morrison 142).

The opportunity presents itself with Vaark's arrival. Observing the trader, she finds out that he is different: "His way, I thought, is another way. His country far from here. There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want" (Morrison 142). Jacob Vaark sees them as human beings, so Florens' mother makes the heartbreaking decision to give her daughter away. She wants Florens to have a better life and sacrifices her relationship to set her free: "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy" (Morrison 145). *A minha mãe* has, metaphorically speaking, stayed on her knees since that moment, hoping that her daughter can someday "[…] 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" (Morrison 145). With this quote, Morrison not only highlights the fatal consequences of colonialists and slave owners exerting control over enslaved people to define the self but also the common mistake of giving ourselves to others. In other words, the author believes individuals should be the sole possessors of themselves and never seek authority over other humans.

In conclusion, Morrison finishes her novel by addressing the missed messages between mother and daughter that Florens is still trying to decipher in her dreams: "In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something" (Morrison 93). By voicing her story, the one she never had the opportunity to pass on to Florens, she manifests the need to survive and preserve one's integrity. It is a message of empowerment, a wish for her daughter to be an empowered woman ultimately. This is why Morrison connects the last chapter narrated by the mother to the previous one narrated by the daughter since the former is desperate to get the message to the latter, and the latter is in need for the former's message. As Wyatt claims:

> "[…] the transmission can never occur. The poignancy of irremediable separation between slave mother and child thus infuses the narrative structure, their estrangement given textual form by the distance between opening and closing chapters and the block to their communication given material form by the stuff of all the intervening pages" (Wyatt 131).

4.2. Florens' side of the story.

After examining *a minha mãe's* story, it is now time to look into the same story, but from a completely different angle: Through Florens' eyes. We need to be mindful of Morrison's intentions when writing this particular story since we could interpret that she never wanted Florens to find out about the truth in order to represent the forced separations of slavery and so that Florens could carve out a specific path for herself.

As mentioned, Florens is born into slavery. She is the result of a rape, and so is her brother. As a little girl, she ignores her condition as an enslaved person, but she is always curious about the world that surrounds her. She wants to grow up and be able to wear shoes of her size: "When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days" (Morrison 10). Florens, because of her age, does not understand that to survive she needs to be unnoticed. This is why her mother warns her constantly: "Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says […]" (Morrison 10). However, Florens is innocent and genuine, and her obsession with the shoes will not be resolved until the end of her journey. After recalling her life at the D'Ortega's house, Florens centres her narration on retelling the moment when she is sold in an abrupt and rapid way since this is how she experiences it:

> "Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says […]" (Morrison 12).

Florens does not see this act as a sacrifice but as a betrayal and a rejection. She cannot comprehend the reason why her mother offered her to a stranger. Her perception is now distorted and this is how she sees the world she lives in. Consequently, she interprets the situation by believing that her mother has chosen her little boy over her. This image turns into a recurring nightmare that haunts Florens for years: "[…] that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron" (Morrison 10). This sudden change of lifestyle instils in her a sense of abandonment and fuels a desire for belonging and connecting with others: "These thoughts are sad in me […]" (Morrison 64). This eagerness for approval is "reminiscent of the slave children on her mother's journey who show off their assets for the white buyers to be chosen; unaware of their final destinations, they perform so as to be recognized as deserving and special" (Seward 86). The absence of her mother conditions her to make questionable decisions, such as utterly giving herself to the blacksmith: "I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (Morrison 65).

The protagonist meets the blacksmith one morning when he comes to work at Vaark's house. She is immediately captivated by him since he is a black free man. Soon after, they begin a "hidden" affair. Lina tries several times to warn Florens, but she is completely oblivious: "When Lina tried to enlighten her, saying, You are one leaf on his tree, Florens shook her head, closed her eyes and replied, No. I am his tree" (Morrison 57). Florens spends most of the novel physically travelling to find the blacksmith, as requested by Rebekka Vaark, and spiritually travelling to find answers from her mother. Therefore, her relationship with her lover is a repeating pattern since Florens will be faced with the same situation she once lived with her mother. In a conversation with Gail Caldwell, the author explained that "[t]he past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again" (qtd. in Tally 160). This can be seen in the following quote:

> "This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expel. Now I am seeing a little boy come in holding a corn-husk doll" (Morrison 121).

At this moment, Florens has already reunited with her lover, but she is received with a surprise. The blacksmith has taken under his wing a little boy called Malaik, who reminds the protagonist of her little brother. After an altercation between Florens and the boy, the blacksmith immediately focuses his attention on Malaik, which Florens perceives as yet another rejection. Because she is fuelled by a feeling of unworthiness, she misreads what she sees as a preference for others. Until that moment, her identity has been built on a give-and-take game between love and loss because her sense of abandonment has influenced her relationship with herself and with others. This traumatic event forces Florens to confront reality and revisit her upbringing; something that she has been actively avoiding, and that can be observed when she dreams about her mother telling her something, and she refuses to hear: "A minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something. I tell her to go […]" (Morrison 122). As Seward discusses:

> "[…] Trauma, repeated in her dreams, represents the bodily pain of separation and grief that Florens feels in regard to the loss of her mother. At the same time that the dream defines Florens as unworthy to be chosen by her mother, it reminds her that she has missed the message in her mother's eyes" (Seward 86).

Florens experiences some sort of epiphany and decides to write her story for all the reasons previously mentioned in this dissertation. However, after learning more about Florens' past, we observe new reasons for her to decide to tell her journey: Because the blacksmith has never asked her for her side of the story, so she decides to write about it (Roynon 85), but also to convey a message, something that as readers know that her mother was deprived of sharing. Moreover, what unites mother and daughter is the need "to get a message to the beloved" (Wyatt 140), but Florens is the only one who has the opportunity to do so. As a wounded adult, she achieves selfhood by reconnecting with her past memories. In other words, "This reconnection and reclamation is achieved through what Morrison has termed rememory. Healing occurs when the son or daughter is able to remember the mother, mourn her loss, reconnect with her and recreate for themselves an identity as a mothered child" (O'Reilly 40-1). Florens even affirms that by

saying the following: “When the letters are memory we make whole words” (Morrison 12).

To conclude, Florens finishes her story by circling back to the shoes. She has, physically and metaphorically, no longer fragile feet to walk by herself and directly addresses her mother: “Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (Morrison 141). All this time, she has been thinking about her mother, and despite they will never have the chance to communicate, we could believe that *a minha mãe’*s message has reached Florens through a different and unexpected path (with the blacksmith). Put differently, Florens never receives that piece of information, but she learns to own herself (something that her mother always wished for her) through her experience with the blacksmith. *A minha mãe’*s prayers have been answered. It is a mercy in fact.

5. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have thoroughly analysed *A Mercy*’s protagonist, Florens, in an attempt to validate my thesis statement. After exhaustive research, it has been demonstrated how Morrison uses storytelling as a mechanism to explore her character’s growth, in this case Florens’. At the same time, this dissertation has proved that Morrison built a character who embodied many issues surrounding the African American experience. Furthermore, it has been shown how Morrison focused her narration on the mother-daughter story to depict the dehumanizing effects of slavery. To prove so, the first half of this dissertation is dedicated to the context behind slavery and slave and neo-slave narratives to then examine Morrison as a writer and the impact of her work on American and African American literature.

Through the analysis carried on in the second half, it has been observed that storytelling serves multiple purposes to Florens. It has been found that, by learning to read and write at an early age, the protagonist is able to retell her story. Although her initial intention was to write some sort of letter to the blacksmith, Florens realizes, along the way, that she is registering her story since she needs to heal from her past. She has the urge for justice and she finds it in the art of writing. Her story is presented like a personal diary, something that she is able to own for the first time, and by becoming the possessor of her words, she exerts agency and discovers her freedom.

It has been shown in this TFG Florens' relationship with her mother and the blacksmith as background to comprehend her emotional development and understand her present circumstances. Her connection with these two characters has always been associated with a feeling of rejection. By writing down her emotions, she experiences an epiphany in which she meets her humanity. Something that she was never familiarised with as an enslaved person. Therefore, Florens has used literacy to carve out her autonomy and individuality.

To conclude, throughout the analysis of *A Mercy* and the secondary sources, I have expanded my knowledge of African American literature and its tradition. However, I have introduced in this TFG some aspects that I could not fully develop within the scope of my dissertation. For instance, there is a significant episode in the novel when Florens' body is examined by a group of religious people at Widow Ealing's house. This moment allows the protagonist to reflect on her humanity since she, for the first time, understands that her skin colour may be perceived as a problem by the white gaze. After having read, but not used in this dissertation, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (1988), in which Morrison reflects on American literature, I have realized that it would be interesting to study how the author discusses the white gaze in her books connected to slavery. Lastly, I would also like to engage, in the future, in some further research areas in which I could explore Morrison's female characters in the novels she wrote that deal with the trauma of slavery through a comparative investigation.

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