

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Character backgrounds:

Florens is a teenage girl born into slavery on a Maryland plantation. Lina is a Native woman owned by Jacob Vaark. Lina began her life in her native village which was eventually burned by European soldiers following an epidemic. She was then "given" to a village and sold to Vaark. Lina and Florens met on the Vaarks' farm and have a mother-daughter relationship.

Excerpt:

Not only was she [Florens] consistently trustworthy, she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval. They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories. Stories of wicked men who chopped off the heads of devoted wives; of cardinals who carried the souls of good children to a place where time itself was a baby. Especially called for were stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters. Close to heartbreak, Lina recalled a favorite and the whispered conversation that always followed it.

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. Her talons are sharpened on rock; her beak is like the scythe of a war god. She is fierce, protecting her brooding young. But one thing she cannot defend against: the evil thoughts of man. One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, "This is perfect. This is mine." And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow. Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle's eggs quiver and one even cracks. The eagle swivels her head to find the source of the strange, meaningless thunder, the incomprehensible sound. Spotting the traveler, she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound. But the traveler, under attack, raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming she falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow. Screaming, screaming she is carried away by wind instead of wing.

Then Florens would whisper, "Where is she now?"

"Still falling," Lina would answer, "she is falling forever."

Florens barely breathes. "And the eggs?" she asks.

"They hatch alone," says Lina.

"Do they live?" Florens' whispering is urgent.

"We have," says Lina.