

A Response to Mother's Wish : The Shoe Motif in A Mercy

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A Response to Mother's Wish: The Shoe Motif in *A Mercy*

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I. Introduction

In her ninth novel, *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison sets a slave girl named Florens as a protagonist, who blindly longs for “shoes.” The story centers on the development of Florens in the 1680's America, that is to say, a time when slavery was still in its infancy in America. She is sold as security for a loan to a plantation owner named Jacob Vaark (whom Florens called “Sir”) by Senhor D'Ortega, who owns Florens, her mother, and her younger brother. What is important to note here is that it is her mother who offers Florens to Jacob. Florens is abandoned by her mother when she is eight years old, and her mother's rejection becomes traumatic for Florens. Indeed, throughout this story, she continues to pursue other's affection and to ask the reason why her mother abandoned her. Although the reason is told by her mother in the final chapter of this story, Florens never knows her mother's real intention. Her development and change are intensively depicted in two scenes: 1) her journey to seek her lover, the blacksmith (who has no name in this story), 2) the climactic incident at the end of the journey, in which Florens knocks the blacksmith down and returns to the wilderness.

First, we must draw attention to a sentence, in the second paragraph of the first chapter: “The beginning begins with the shoes” (*A Mercy* 4). Here, it is clear from the outset that Morrison will make the shoes a key motif in this story. It is noteworthy that Florens is never able to stay “being barefoot and always beg for

shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days" (4) since before moving to Jacob's farm. Her mother, however, is "frowning" and criticizes her "prettify ways" (4). After arriving at Jacob's farm, she still longs for shoes. Significantly, she wears Jacob's boots, namely, man's shoes when she sets out on her journey to seek the blacksmith's house. However, after her knocking him down, she becomes *barefoot* and needs no more shoes. Accordingly, it is obvious that the main focus of the story is her relationship with the shoes.

Previous studies have focused on the development and change of Florens and her relationship to motherhood, and few critics have mentioned the shoe motif in this novel. Among rare exceptions, Justin Tally points out that "the major trope of the novel is Florens' obsession with shoes, which makes an equally clear call to the Negro Spiritual" (Tally 64).¹ Added to Tally's theory, Tessa Roynon also mentions:

. . . shoes in this text are not juxtaposed with words but rather allied with them, almost interchangeable with them. . . . Here Morrison engages with two key leitmotifs in the African-American struggle for emancipation: with footwear, and with letters, and with all the power and possibilities they entail. *A Mercy* fuses the two, suggesting that while literacy is pivotal to physical freedom, words, like shoes, are the *sine qua non* of making one's way (Roynon 56, emphasis is original)

Their studies, however, fail to explain why Florens blindly longs for the shoes and why Morrison depicts a figure who becomes barefoot and returns to the wilderness at the end of the story. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to answer the two questions and to explain how the "ill-fitted" shoes which she wants to wear express her sexual desire, in contrast to the "fitted" shoes made by Lina, a Native American servant on Jacob's farm, in order to protect Florens' feet. We will also make it clear

¹ Justin Tally also quotes the song of Negro Spiritual: "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes. When I get to heben gonna put on ma shoes, gonna walk all ober God's heben, heben. Ev'rybody talkin' heben ain't going there, gonna walk all ober God's heben" (Tally 64).

what is the relationship between the shoe motif and Florens who acquire her new self in the ending. Paying attention to the shoe motif in the story will bring us to the true meaning of Florens' mother's wish.

II. The Shoe as a Symbol of Sexual Desire

First of all, we have to concentrate on Florens' passion for the shoes:

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I [Florens] am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for *shoes, anybody's shoe*, even on the hottest days. My mother, a *minha mãe*, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. She relents and lets me wear the throw away shoes from Senhors' house, *pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top*. As a result, Lina says, *my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires*. (4, emphases are mine)

Here, we notice, Florens wears a pair of high-heeled shoes even though the shoes are old and broken—"pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top." As Lina says, Florens' feet becomes useless for a slave by always wearing shoes; that is to say, a slave girl does need not shoes but strong soles to survive the world. Florens, however, neither listens to Lina nor cares about the response of the people around her.

William A. Rossi, a podiatrist, in *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* (1976), investigates "the foot's natural erotogenic character" (5), and states that: "We wear shoes chiefly for sex-attraction purposes—to send out sex signals, consciously or subconsciously. And we select particular styles of shoes to convey particular kinds of sex messages" (69). About children's desire to wear the shoes for adults, he says:

It's no coincidence that this early fashion awareness in footwear is paralleling the earlier age of sexual maturity. These young children are using their shoes to establish their sexual identity and signify their readiness to launch into "serious" boy-girl relationships. (18)

This theory applies to Florens' desire to wear shoes. Through her action of wanting and wearing shoes (even if they are "ill-fitted") she shows consciously or unconsciously her sexual desire, which she already has even though she is only eight years old. When Florens' mother says to Florens: "you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye" (166), it will be clear that Florens has already begun to mature physically as a mature woman, and to wish wearing high-heeled shoes to show her sexual attractiveness. In fact, her mother notices that her owner, Senhor D'Ortega, is charmed by her attractiveness.

During the move to Jacob's farm from Senhor D'Ortega's, right after she is abandoned by her mother, a woman takes her "wooden shoes" (7), and then she arrives at Jacob's farm and wraps her feet with rags. Jacob's wife Rebekka narrates this situation at the beginning of Part Six: "She [Florens] needed *shoes, proper shoes*, to replace the dirty scraps that covered her feet, and it was only when Lina made her some did she say word" (72, emphasis is mine). The shoes Florens wears are "proper shoes," namely, the "fitted" shoes that Lina made for her. Here, while "ill-fitted" shoes for her are a symbol of her sexual desire, the "fitted" shoes are a physical and mental protection to give her an essential power to survive. We must not forget that at this time she had already been abandoned by her mother, and, without the shoes, she could not make the first step toward development and change.

Before we come to Florens' change, I need to explain the blacksmith who attracts Florens. We should notice that the blacksmith is, unlike Florens, a free black man. He comes to Jacob's farm to help the construction of Jacob's new home and to build the entrance gate of the home. After seeing the blacksmith and becoming

fascinated by him, Florens quits wearing the “fitted” shoes Lina made for her. Worrying that the blacksmith “had already ruined Florens” (61), Lina tries to dissuade her from pursuing his affection and tells her: “you are one leaf on his tree” (61), that is to say, the blacksmith will not pay exclusive attention to Florens. Florens, however, does not listen to Lina at all and answers her: “No. I am his tree” (61). She is convinced that she and the blacksmith are one in body and spirit. Lina notices that Florens changes at a dizzying pace after falling in love with the blacksmith:

At the sight of cobwebs strung from blade to bed, Lina sighed, then caught her breath. Florens’ *shoes*, the rabbit skin ones she had made for her ten years ago, lay under the sleigh—lonely, empty like two patient coffins. (63, emphasis is mine)

Florens’ change is disappointing to Lina. She determines to be the “wall between Florens and the blacksmith” (60), because she wants to “protect her [and] keep away from the corruption” (60). Although she attempts to pour out her affection on Florens like a mother, her love is not returned, and Florens neglects the shoes Lina made for her. This scene stresses Florens’ change since her seeing the blacksmith and the enhancement of her sexual desire; after this episode, Florens puts on Jacob’s shoes and sets out on her journey to the blacksmith in order to satisfy her sexual desire. As a result, this attempt leads her to acquire her new self.

III. A Journey to seek the blacksmith and the Shoe Motif

Then, let us consider why Florens seeks the blacksmith in Jacob’s shoes. The blacksmith has a skill to cure pox, and he had already cured Sorrow, a black servant girl at the farm. Jacob, however, died from it before the completion of his new home. Now Rebekka is infected with the disease; accordingly, Florens is being sent on an

errand to inform the blacksmith of her disease. Rebekka and Lina choose the shoes for her, and it is worth noting the reason why they choose the shoes: "They'd stuffed her [Florens'] feet in good strong boots. Jacob's. And folded a clarifying letter of authority inside" (97). It is obvious that she becomes strong physically and mentally with shoes. During the journey, for example, she chooses to go "her own route once the others [the people who took the same wagon with Florens] had crept away. Correctly. Bravely" (66). In short, what makes her strong is her sexual desire that stems from her wish to see the blacksmith and from a delusion that she is an adult woman by wearing the shoes for adult people, which are as a symbol of sexual desire. On the way to the blacksmith's house, she drops by a home of a mother and a daughter. Here, she experiences the second eviction by the towns people who are suspicious of Florens and believe she is a limb of the devil because of her color of skin. After the eviction, however, she continues her journey to achieve her goal to see the blacksmith. She keeps telling herself: "I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (70).

Her mental "corruption," namely, the awakening of her new self finally begins when she arrives at the blacksmith's house and finds a boy named Malaik there. ("Corruption" implies dishonest conduct, physical decay and infection, but here, I would like to emphasize that the "corruption" in this story does not have a bad influence on Florens. As a result of the "corruption," she acquires her new self and the hard soles of her feet; accordingly, the "corruption" is an essential stage for her.) She begins to doubt the blacksmith's love for her, for Malaik is now the person to whom the blacksmith pours out his affection, not her. After the blacksmith leaves for the farm, Florens takes off Sir's boots and lies on his cot "trying to catch the fire smell" (137) of him. The metaphor reveals that her sexual desire for the blacksmith and wish to monopolize his love has reached a climax. She notices, however, that Malaik approaches her and that he wants her to leave the house. Nevertheless, Florens keeps telling herself that further eviction cannot happen to her. Next morning, she notices her shoes have disappeared. Florens' words: "First I notice Sir's boots are gone, I look all around, stepping through the cabin, the forge in

cinder and in pain of *my tender feet*. Bits of metal score and bite them” (139, emphasis is mine) reminds us of Lina’s word in the beginning of this story: “As a result, Lina says, *my [Florens] feet are useless*, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires” (4, emphasis is mine). Florens is convinced that it is Malaik who stole Jacob’s shoes from her, and she snatches his doll from him, places it on a shelf “too high for him to reach” (139). He screams and screams, and then she pulls his arm. She hears “the shoulder crack but the sound is small” (139-40). Finally he drops into fainting. It is then that the blacksmith comes back from the farm, and she finally understands that the person to whom the blacksmith pours out his affection is not her but Malaik.

I don’t hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost because
your shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik. . . .
Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true? You see
the boy down and believe bad about me without question. . . . You
choose the boy. You call his name first. You take him to lie down with
the doll and return to me your broken face, eyes without glee, rope
pumps in your neck. I am lost. (140)

Florens then goes on to say to the blacksmith: “You alone own me” (141), and he answers her: “Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child” (141). The blacksmith’s words: “Own yourself, woman” are not only his refusal of Florens, who deeply depends on him and continues to pursue his affection, but also a trigger of the awakening of her new self. Finally, “the hammer is in my [Florens’] hand” (142).

Obviously, losing her shoes has influenced Florens. She, who cannot restrain her temper toward Malaik and who experiences the third eviction by the blacksmith, becomes barefoot and is freed from everything that oppressed her, that is to say, from the obsession of wearing the shoes to express her sexual desire and to

assimilate to civilized society. She finally succeeds in acquiring her new self, and returning to the wilderness, she decides to survive in the world alone. Her transfiguration is obvious as can be seen in the reaction of Willard and Scully, who work in Jacob's farm. They are surprised at Florens' drastic change:

Strangest was Florens. The docile creature they [Willard and Scully] knew had turned feral. When they saw her stomping down the road two days after the smithy had visited Mistress' sickbed and gone, they were slow to recognize her as a living person. First because she was so blood-spattered and bedraggled and, second, because she passed right by them. Surely a sudden burst of sweating men out of roadside trees would have startled a human, any human, especially a female. (146)

What is significant about Florens' change is that she passes right by the two men without being startled by them. Her barefoot figure obviously shows that she acquires a power to survive her life without the shoes and does not need the "ill-fitted" shoes to extend herself to try to act as adults. Indeed, Florens will in time make the soles of her feet hard enough to bear walking without shoes. We must draw attention to her last words to her mother:

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.
I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress. (161, emphasis is mine)

Florens' message to her mother also can be understood as an announcement to herself and her mother. She decides not to long for shoes, for example, high-heeled

shoes, upon which her mother frowned, and she resolves to survive by herself. We can say, here, Florens' bare feet show that now she is able to control her sexual desire.

It is important to consider her mother's words in the last chapter of this novel. There she confesses the reason why she abandoned Florens: "There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your [Florens'] vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple. Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no" (162-63). In fact, her mother attempted to protect Florens from sexual exploitation by Senhor D'Ortega. Consequently, offering Florens to Jacob was the only thing she could do. Her mother had already expected that Florens' longing for shoes would lead her to a degenerate life. As her expectation shows, the last incident when she knocks the blacksmith down is triggered by her shoes. Florens would not have captured Senhor D'Ortega's eyes and not have been abandoned by her mother, if she did not long for the shoes to express her sexual desire. She never knows her mother's real intention of abandoning her. However, we may say that her mother's message—"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" (167)—reaches to Florens. Florens' corruption is triggered by three evictions and losing the shoes. Therefore, she becomes a barefoot woman who does not need to depend on others. As a large number of critics point out, at the end of this story, Florens succeeds in acquiring her new self.²

IV. Conclusion

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that the shoe motif in *A Mercy* is used to symbolize Florens' sexual desire and as a narrative tool of

² James Braxton Peterson, for example, points out that Florens succeeds in gaining her new self in the end of the story. See Peterson.

controlling her destiny. Her longing for the “ill-fitted” shoes implies her sexual desire consciously or subconsciously. Moreover, it is noteworthy that her changing attitude toward the “fitted” shoes Lina made for her also emphasizes the enhancement of her sexual desire. Florens, in the end of the story, finally succeeds in renouncing her shoes, acquiring the hard soles of her feet to survive in the world, walking on her own bare feet, and gaining enough power to control herself. Indeed, the figure in the climax can be said a response to her mother’s word: “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” (167).

The shoe motif is effectively used to depict the characters’ external appearance and is mentioned many times in other works of Toni Morrison. In her second novel, *Sula* (1973), for example, Sula’s grandmother named Eva decorates her one-leg with “a black laced-up shoe” (31) and had “a regular flock of gentleman callers” (41). From the description, she seems to be able to satisfy her sexual desire by showing the men her leg ornamented with it. To take another example, Sula’s mother named Hannah wears “a *man’s* leather slippers” (42, emphasis is mine). Considering another female character named Pilate, who wears “unlaced *men’s* shoes” (38, emphasis is mine) in Morrison’s third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), the female figure that wears man’s flat shoes instead of a woman’s high-heeled shoes has a possibility to be a much-discussed subject. Thus, the analysis of the shoe motif enables us to read Morrison’s novel from a new perspective.

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