

THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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ABSTRACT

In *A Mercy* Toni Morrison tackles the multilayered and strikingly powerful Gothic “haunted” house metaphor from a female perspective. Her revenants and hauntings are not just individual, but also historical, political and cultural manifestations. Through the Gothic dwelling, Morrison explores the fragmented personal and familial identities, conventional gender arrangements, failed domestic ideology, racist and colonial past, etc., in a patriarchal society dominated by whites. Her transgressive rewriting draws attention to the impact of slavery and racism and, consequently, to the othering of ethnic females, especially blacks. Morrison not only depicts the unspeakable horrors of American history, but also provides ways for its regeneration, such as women’s empowerment and their struggle for self-definition. Morrison’s revisitation of the “haunted” house formula offers an alternative female perspective on American identity and history.

RESUMEN

En *A Mercy* Toni Morrison aborda la poderosa y compleja metáfora de la casa gótica “encantada” desde una perspectiva femenina. Sus fantasmas no son exclusivamente individuales, sino manifestaciones históricas, políticas y culturales. Mediante la mansión gótica, Morrison analiza la fragmentada identidad personal y familiar, las convenciones de género, la fallida ideología doméstica, el pasado racista y colonial, etc., en una sociedad patriarcal dominada por blancos. Su reescritura transgresora destaca el impacto de la esclavitud y el racismo y, consecuentemente, la alterización de la mujer étnica, especialmente las negras. Morrison no sólo describe los inefables horrores góticos de la historia americana, sino que también proporciona formas de regeneración, tales como el empoderamiento de la mujer y su lucha por autodefinition. La revisitación de Morrison de la fórmula de la casa “encantada” ofrece una perspectiva femenina alternativa de la identidad e historia americanas.

[. . .] *the haunted house has endured in American fiction. A profound versatile tool for examining the anxieties and tensions inherent in our national experiment, the haunted house finally seems like nothing less than a symbol of America and the American mind, of all the ghosts that haunt us, from the dark legacy of slavery to the failed war in Vietnam.*

Dale Bailey, *American Nightmare: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*

[. . .] *a tale [A Mercy] that not only emerges as a heartbreaking account of lost innocence and fractured dreams, but also stands, with Beloved, as one of Ms. Morrison's most haunting works yet.*

Michiko Kakutani, "Bonds That Seem Cruel Can Be Kind"

The widespread presence of the Gothic in American literature is predicated on its connection with the world of the unconscious, its dreams and spirits, with the mystery and evil of human life, and its uniqueness in representing the dark vision of American history, conveying the unspeakable aspects of the national experience: "the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history" (Goddu 10). Writers have found inspiration in the idiosyncratic contradictions of American history and its unsettling origins, using the Gothic genre to express them, because "the gothic [is] symbolically understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphor for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical" (Fiedler 28). Actually, the Gothic has become the best form to represent the shattered family and the concept of "otherness" in all its facets. That is why "marginal" groups of novelists, such as female and African Americans, who convey an alternative view to that of the dominant culture, Western patriarchal society, resort to this transgressive genre.¹ Many black writers, such as Toni Morrison, have employed the Gothic to deal with racism, slavery and its bitter legacy, which are conveyed in Gothic terms, as they already embody cruelty and horror: "African American Gothic [. . .] should be perceived [. . .] as deliberately articulating profound social horrors" (Hogle 218).

Gothic novels are closely linked to the architectural spaces in which the stories take place. In fact, the haunted house is one of their most pervasive supernatural aspects: "the most persisting site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic's allegorical turn" (Savoy 9). Many critics consider that the ancient haunted mansion should be seen as another character, if not the main one, of the Gothic romance: "the ancient mansion permeated with evil should be as much a

¹ See Teresa Goddu (11) and Louis Gross (2).

character in your story as any people in it" (Koonz 75). The haunted house is a complex, powerful and versatile metaphor, whose symbolism spreads to all aspects of human existence. It has been a potent image for the female's inner self and frequently associated with women's isolation, seclusion and loneliness. Its "hauntings are tied to domestic gender politics" (Carpenter and Kolmar 3). As Elizabeth Hayes has phrased it, "the houses in African American women's literature are often palimpsests of all four kinds of space—architectural, geographic, psychic, and communal—and thus they are multilayered signifiers." African American Gothic has used the haunted house "as the reflection of a collective, traumatic history" and "the locus of familial trauma:"

[T]he emergence of ethnic minorities' voices shook the very foundations of haunted house literature—Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) make it the site of rememory: the traumatic past returns, to force the living and the readers to confront a History of racial violence. (Michlin, "Haunted" 3)

In Morrison's fiction, the house becomes a kaleidoscopic trope. She deals with the desire of black people to have a home they can call their own, the traumatic assault of the vulnerable black female's house, the expulsion of black people from their houses and their ensuing exile, the epic quest for a true home, and so on. The traditional Gothic haunted house "is present in many of Morrison's works: for example, the spiteful 124 Bluestone Road [. . .] which *Beloved* haunts, or the Convent mansion in *Paradise*, where the mystical and ghostlike women, reside" (Beaulieu 146).

A Gothic and Gender Studies reading of the novel will reveal a foundational myth of Gothic fiction upon which Morrison draws in *A Mercy*, the haunted habitation, a definitely "failed home," a dark place and a site of terror, which stands for the return of the repressed. Her baleful haunted dwelling delves into the identity conflict of the Black individual, especially of the females. Morrison's rewriting of the haunted Gothic house expresses the personal, familial, social, historical and cultural trauma of African Americans, and ethnic Americans in general, in early colonial America. She subverts the conventions of the haunted house formula to expose American racist culture, creating a transgressive view of the black female self and the American national experience:

[T]he house that Jacob built [. . .] is, in a *mise en abyme* of the house of fiction reclaimed by Toni Morrison, a reinscription of History and *herstories*—a palimpsest of black *repossession*, haunting, and setting on fire, of the house that slavery built. (Michlin, "Writing" 105)

A Mercy is

set in the paradoxically familiar and mysterious world of the Gothic [. . .] [it] features all of the mandated tropes: a fragmented narrative, destabilized identities, the image of the double, a haunted house, dangerous villains, endangered women, and anxious encounters with the Other and the self. (Anolik 418)

It tells the story of “an unfinished mansion that becomes haunted by its dead master” (Updike), Jacob Vaark, a Dutch farmer. In the plantation, Jacob lived with his wife, Rebekka, his female servants—Lina, the Native American, Florens, the Angolan ex-slave and Sorrow, the shipwrecked “mongrelized” girl (120)—and the indentured servants, Willard and Scully. Unlike 124 in *Beloved*, Vaark’s manor is not mentioned until later in the narrative. Notwithstanding, the book begins when Jacob, the stereotypical self-made man, visits Senhor D’Ortega’s estate to collect a debt. Despite his disdain towards the Portuguese gentleman’s way of life, his mansion, Jublio, captivates him, and he decides to erect one of his own:²

“[he] envied the house, the gate, the fence. [. . .]. So mighten it be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property?” (27).³

Aware of his shortcomings as a farmer, Vaark had already started commerce and, after his visit, he can see an enterprise ahead of him that will lead him to the stars, to amass a fortune: “the silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable” (35). From that moment until it is constructed, Jacob’s “dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog” (35). And yet, Jacob only “inhabits” his dream dwelling when he dies.⁴ His request at that time is to be taken to his still-unfinished home. In the middle of a typical Gothic storm, which evokes feelings of fear and the supernatural, his wife and his female servants “hauled [his corpse]” into the “evil” manor (89).

The haunted house is characterized as uncanny, Freud’s definition, the negation of the word for “home” (unheimlich), which “inscribes the home as site and/or source of terror” (Michlin, “Haunted” 3). In *A Mercy*, the depiction of the supernatural is neither connected to a malign structure, as in the first part of *Beloved*, nor is it clear if there are actual spirits haunting it.⁵ The visitations of the Dutch farmer’s manor are associated with what Dale Bailey calls “the contemporary

² As Monica Michlin points out, Jublio is, ironically, a misspelling of Jubilo, and “a cruel signifying on the meaning of Jubilee (on the day of emancipation) in the African-American tradition” (2014, 108).

³ Toni Morrison. *A Mercy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008 (all subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page number included in parentheses in the text).

⁴ As Michlin argues, Jacob’s death of pox “fallen upon his dream house,” can be interpreted as “an allegory of slavery as a curse upon America” (2014, 108).

⁵ In the traditional Gothic habitation, the unquiet ghosts of the departed family members come back to haunt the living.

haunted house formula [that] dispenses not only with ghosts, but with ontological uncertainty," in which readers end up wondering if "anything spectral really happens?" (5). In Vaark's mansion, the haunting comes from its structure, as a metaphor for its "diseased" colonial capitalist origins. As Michlin claims, most contemporary American postcolonial stories of haunting do not portray a haunted house *per se*, but "in their rewriting of identity and History as haunted" ("Haunted" 3). In *A Mercy*, Lina is convinced that Sir, who escapes "his grave to visit his beautiful house" (143), will haunt its rooms forever. The "ghostly presence," along with the fact that it was a poxed place, frightens people away, evincing the connection of the haunted house with slavery (as a disease). Willard and Scully could see, night after night, his "ghostly blaze," which "began near midnight, floated for a while on the second story, disappeared, then moved ever so slowly from window to window" (144). They believe that Jacob is "content to roam his house," where he rightfully belongs, although it seems that this is just the glow of Florens' candle, while she is writing her personal narrative on the floor and walls of the Dutch farmer's grandiose abode. The black girl might actually be the true "revenant" that haunts the house: "her dark skin [. . .] misinterpreted by others [. . .] allows them to consider her 'a thing apart' [. . .] a ghost or a demon, an abject other" (Heise-von der Lippe).

Vaark's mansion as a patriarchal haunted habitation deals with notions of identity, race, gender, family, history and community. *A Mercy* exposes the conflation of the ominous haunted habitation and the psyche.⁶ As Maurice Beebe writes of two typical Gothic abodes, the House of Seven Gables and the House of Usher, "the house-human metaphor" unveils "the correspondence *and* conflict between the physical and the psychological" (13). As usually happens in the conventional Gothic castle, Sir's last house, is the figure for its rightful owner, Jacob himself. There, the dreams of wealth of a "misborn and disowned" (33) orphan are finally "fulfilled," and he can finally get rid of the "fog," the penuries that have accompanied him his whole life. In the landowner's houses, Morrison parodies the fairy tale, "The Three Little Pigs." The first house the Dutch farmer constructs is "weaker," made with green wood. The second one, however, was "strong." Bereft of children who can inherit it, there was no need for a third one, Rebekka and Lina think. In contrast to the fairy tale's message about the importance of hard work, when Vaark decides to erect his manor, instead of his intelligence, he displays his colonial sins: pride, desire for ostentation and lofty ambitions. Hence, the "third" house, as the embodiment of Jacob's self, stands for the futility of his genteel dreams and delusions of grandeur. And yet, his mansion also surely becomes the personification of the female self through Florens' transgressive writing. The ex-

⁶ Williams argues that the **concept** of the psyche as house is familiar in the psychoanalytic literature of dream interpretation, as in Jung's famous dream about exploring a house or as in Julian Jayne's theory of consciousness itself as an "analogue space" (44).

slave engraves her private thoughts and emotions on the Gothic patriarchal dwelling. Female Gothic exemplifies the heroine's feelings by means of the image of the enclosed space, which is redolent of either her inner self or the repressive society where she lives, or both: "the image of interior space, with its prisonlike atmosphere is used to indicate disorder of the world for its female inhabitants" (Fleenor 13).

The haunted dwelling fractures the cult of domesticity, revealing the true male and female spheres in relation to the public/private (domestic) dichotomy. As Ann Williams contends, "a castle" has "a private and a public aspect" (44). The public aspect expresses its external identity, its consciousness, which is linked to the male, the patriarch, "A man's home is his castle." The Gothic house stands for the man's position regarding its inhabitants and the outside world: the male is the only ruler in his domain and the house is his property coextensive with his "properties" (his psyche). Thusly, "the castle," a "man-made thing, a cultural artifact" (44), illustrates man's culture. Jacob's haunted mansion symbolizes his power and wealth in his role as a patriarch of the household and prosperous businessman. His way of showing off how successful he has become. On the other hand, the domestic aspect of the haunted habitation is associated with the woman. Its inner space connotes "the culturally female, the sexual, the maternal, the unconscious" (44). The woman's sojourn in the "castle" is a "journey to the otherworld:" "if the female is the 'other' of 'male' culture, so must culture—the house—be 'other' to her" (44). Williams concludes, "The [Gothic castle] embodies the principles of cultural order:" "It is a public identity enfolding (and organizing) the private, the law enclosing, controlling dark 'female' otherness" (44). The "unhomely haunted" manor truly becomes the uncanny space of the female Other, Florens and Sorrow.

Western society and its structures are mirrored in the patriarchal family institution and the father, the patriarch, is the representative of the law of society, the "Law of the Father." In the conventional Gothic romance, the haunted dwelling is associated with the family: "the Gothic myth itself is the patriarchal family" (Williams 87) and "certain features of the Oedipal are consistently foregrounded" in the Gothic genre (Sedgwick 22).⁷ In *A Mercy*, Morrison exemplifies the destruction of the patriarchal family through the haunted house.⁸ Before Sir's death, Morrison depicts a patriarchal "family"—"small, tight," Lina says—in the social chaos of a primeval unruly New World: "A good-hearted couple (parents), and three female

⁷ In the traditional Gothic romance, Williams writes, the haunted house is linked to the name of a particular family (44), an embodiment of its history. Nevertheless, in *A Mercy*, there is not the family-habitation symbiosis that we can see in the typical Gothic house. Nor is the Gothic plot developed in close conjunction with the family tree and its history, at least as in the conventional Gothic romance. Its structure will never be one with the "family line," as its history commences with Vaark, and all of his children are already dead when it is finally erected.

⁸ Black women writers frequently address the idea of the fragmented black family, hence reflecting the appalling effects of slavery and racial dynamics on the family unit, especially the disruption of the mother-child relationship.

servants (sisters, say) and them helpful sons," a family which Willard and Scully consider as "the closest either man would know of family" (144). Vaark, the plantation patriarch, prearranges his marriage with Rebekka, a sixteen-year-old girl who comes from an England in turmoil on condition that she is a "healthy, chaste wife willing to travel abroad" (74), to secure a spouse that can help him with the farm tasks and give him heirs. Thus, Morrison defines her objectified and subordinated position in the patriarchal world of the plantation. Her status as a wife is not as different from that of the other household female servants and her arranged marriage—her own mother calls it a "sale"—resembles other forms of human trafficking. In his patriarchal role, Jacob rules over the women who really run the farm, while he devotes himself mostly to the manly work of travelling and trading.

According to Marilyn Chandler, the haunted habitation is "the stage on which the dramas of sexual politics [. . .] class warfare," and racial politics are played out (4). In Vaark's plantation family, the connection between its diverse inter-racial women grows into companionship and sisterhood. They are a clear example of the sort of female community in which "when their [women's] sensitivity to the plight of each other traverses the lines that separate them—class, race, religion, nationality—extraordinary things can happen" (Morrison, "Foreground" 136). The unlikely group of female characters provides "defiant ways to challenge and subvert the prevailing gender *status quo* by focusing on female community and self-definition as liberatory practices" (Gallego-Durán 104). Nevertheless, Sir's death signals a dramatic turning point of the story, when the world as Jacob's women have known crumbles around them and scatters into pieces. The patriarch's decease and his grand dwelling destroy the females' bonding and community, further emphasizing women's powerlessness to control the domestic sphere under the patriarch's rule, or even their lives and destinies, decisively dependent on him. The haunted habitation brings death and disruption to the patriarchal family, revealing the truth about them: "they were not a family—not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all" (59).

The breakdown of the female household unfolds the patriarchal male-female dynamics and its structures of gender oppression and subjugation. At that time, women alone, not even white women, can survive. Rebekka, as a widow, shares the female servants' vulnerable situation because "without the status or shoulder of a man [. . .] a widow was in practice illegal" (98). As Mar Gallego-Durán underscores, "The emphasis on female illegality runs across racial lines and promotes the desirability of male protection and guidance as the only recourse for these women, thus legitimizing the patriarchal order and its 'natural' foundations" (104). Without men, their providers and protectors, women are extremely compromised and assailable at both personal and social levels: "Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters [. . .] subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile" (58). Ergo, Rebekka has to return to the church and the Deacon's

friendliness, or she would be the victim of “political and economical disenfranchisement [. . .] and of the avarice of the male for more property” (Tally 71). Her heart turns cruel out of fear and loss of her status as the household mistress. She reproduces patriarchal patterns in the relationship with her servants, illustrating the “gendered and class-based as much as racialized forms of servitude” and exemplifying “religious fanaticism and its perverse meshing with racial and gender politics” (Michlin, “Writing” 109, 111). The bigoted Rebekka, as the White Mistress, puts Lina, her former companion, into a subservient position, beats Sorrow and does not allow her or her baby near the fireplace, the core of the domestic space.⁹ She also prohibits the servants’ entrance into the mansion, and even decides to sell off Florens and give Sorrow away.

The situation of Vaark’s household women, as that of the Gothic heroine, is especially harsh, because they are orphans, parentless, and in many aspects, if not all, dispossessed. In primitive America, orphanhood and deprivation unify them all Native American, European American, African American, or even “mongrelized:” “they are all orphans, abandoned and rescued, connected and separated by the many forms of *othering* the novel exposes” (Michlin, “Writing” 107). In *A Mercy*, only two “members” of the family, Florens and Sorrow, dwell in the haunted house, which is traditionally explored by young, orphan females who are in a rite of passage into adulthood. Florens is an “orphan” because she thinks her mother got rid of her and has never overcome this early hurtful “abandonment,” and Sorrow was the only survivor of a shipwreck. As Anissa Wardi writes, Florens and Sorrow represent the Diaspora, as untamed land and water (Sorrow has “never lived on land”), reproducing “collective displacement” in seventeenth-century colonial America: “Together, they map a biophysical environment inflected with African diasporic history” (23).

According to Goddu, “the gothic serves as a mode of resistance. By writing their own gothic tales, [Morrison and Harriet Jacobs] combat the master’s version of their history; by breaking the silence, they reclaim their history instead of being controlled by it” (155). In *A Mercy*, the haunted mansion becomes “a site of resistance to the patriarchal logos” (Hayes). Morrison emphasizes its “structure as a palimpsest and ghost, a queer space that resists, contrasts, and responds to patriarchy, misogyny and heteronormativity” (Bennet 45).¹⁰ Like many of her novels, *A Mercy* is, at some point, about women living without men, struggling on their own. Devoid of male protection, the destitute ethnic females have to fight the ghosts and demons of patriarchy. Florens and Sorrow contest Rebekka’s authority and claim the haunted dwelling. They manage to “create home, problematized” of the forbidding mansion. Morrison shows how the term “home” can have an utterly

⁹ Michlin thinks that the allegory of slavery as pox seems clear in Rebekka’s radical conversion to white supremacy, “a nightmarish embodiment of the white mistress” (“Writing” 109).

¹⁰ Bennet is writing about the Convent in Morrison’s novel *Paradise*.

different meaning for “those whose lives are in exile [. . .] for those who are denied property rights, land ownership and even citizenship” (Wardi 34, 35). The black girl carves her story in the patriarchal habitation with a nail, which, as Wardi states, is a “metaphorical instrument of home and nation building;” her “act of writing herself onto the structure claims dominion over a landscape of slavery” (34). Florens’ female counter-narrative tells the ex-slave’s journey of self-discovery. Through her writing, she confronts the ghosts of the colonial past and fights Americans’ collective cultural amnesia. The nail, as a phallic instrument, symbolizes the black girl’s vindication of her transgressive new sense of self:

Florens’ act of inscription can be read as an awareness of the power of dominant imperial discourse to shape reality, and thus she maps her own narrative onto the space of power. Realizing that she has no legitimate claim to place, she not only inserts herself onto the home by occupying it, but she marks it as her own. She writes herself and her belonging into being. (Wardi 34)

In *A Mercy*, which is heavily “invested in maternity” (Hayes), the mother-daughter conflict, a central Female Gothic theme (Fleenor 15-16), is mediated through the “haunted dwelling.” Both Florens and Sorrow, the manor’s true occupants, are deprived of daughterhood and motherhood, respectively. Florens’ confession surfaces her painful feelings toward her mother’s “desertion,” while Sorrow claims her role as a mother, sheltering her baby in the haunted habitation, thus, they develop some agency over their lives. In Vaark’s big mansion, the gilded vines of the blacksmith’s gate end in flowers each of which “When the gate was opened [. . .] separated its petals from the other. When closed, the blossoms merged” (150), hence intimating that Florens blossoms in the haunted dwelling. Sorrow, on the other hand, has changed her name to Complete, in her new status as mother.¹¹

The Gothic romance illustrates “the continuing power of guilty past deeds to haunt the present” (Williams 29): the haunted house becomes a symbol of “the sins of the fathers” visited upon their children. There is a curse of evil upon Vaark’s manor, which is entwined with the racist and colonial American past, with slavery. As Williams claims, “the castle” “is marked, haunted by ‘history’—the events of its own development” (45). Sir’s palatial estate stands for the patriarch’s wishes for wealth. It discloses the unspeakable crimes of colonialism, identified with the haunted mansion through Vaark’s participation in the rum trade and consequent support of human enslavement, which is at the roots of his ill-gotten riches. The haunting of the manor is a metaphor for the inescapability from its colonial origins. The way Jacob’s body is carried into the unfinished house when he dies epitomizes his debased moral principles and his futile genteel dreams: “They had to lay him in

¹¹ Florens’ flowering symbolizes her quest for selfhood and agency. According to Michlin, another pun implicit in Florens’ name is that of gold Florins, used in human trafficking (2104, 118).

mud while two [of the women] undid the hinges and then unbolted the door to the house” (89). The elaborate entrance of the “third” house is meant to be the “gate of heaven” with its “ironwork aglitter,” a clear reference to *Paradise Lost*, even though the serpents welded into it could be interpreted in a disturbingly racial way in their relationship with the devil. Indeed, the blacksmith is the god Hades who forges the gate of the underworld, “the world of the damned” (51), where Sir’s dead body is taken as his last wish. Contradictorily, the mansion comes to be both the house of “paradise” and hell:¹² “it’s only mercy or the lack of it that makes the American landscape heaven or hell, and the gates of Eden open both ways at once” (Gates). In fact, as Bennet says about the Convent in *Paradise*, “the tension between space and shelter, good and evil, paradise and hell finds physical expression” in Vaark’s mansion (46).

The Gothic house is not only haunted by its colonial past, but it also becomes a symbol of colonialism itself. The Dutch farmer stands as a representative of the colonist ideology. He sees himself as “making place out of no place,” which, as Wardi contends, responds to the English legal concept of *terra nullis*, the idea that land was essentially uninhabited. Thus white men justify their colonial claims, making native people exiles in their own land. Out of envy of Senhor Ortega’s plantation house, Vaark decides to build his own manor, “pure, noble even, because it would not be compromised as Jublio was” (27). He is convinced that he can attain D’Ortega’s station “without trading his conscience for coin” (28). However, as Justine Tally rightly observes, “Vaark envisions his American Dream through the replication of a southern planter’s house, also financed by his trade in rum, based on the sugar production of the slaves in the conveniently distant Caribbean” (65). Sir betrays his founding principles when he persuades himself that there is a profound difference between the slave labor at Jublio and “a remote labor force in Barbados,” accepting that

With the ‘trade in human flesh’ [. . .] he can reap the rewards of slave production without getting his hands dirty [. . .] a fairly accurate portrayal of the building of the new nation and its massive accumulation of wealth on the backs of third world poor and enslaved. (66)

Hence, the grandiose house, whose lack of name contrasts with D’Ortega’s estate, embodies the morally ambiguous provenance of Vaark’s fortune and his failed values symbolize the foundations of the future United States, inasmuch as Jacob and Rebekka are primary figures of the Old Testament (Tally 66). Indeed, as Bailey

¹² Michlin claims that Morrison complicates the reading of the pox, the house and the serpents adorning its gates with contradictory interpretations that “shimmer kaleidoscopically:” the blacksmith has both a demonic and a Christ-like role (because of his healing abilities and as embodiment of black freedom and agency). These interpretations point to the farm as a paradise lost, “the nearby town is called Milton” (“Writing” 108).

writes of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, there might not be “literal apparitions” in *A Mercy*, “but the specter of materialism—the soul-devouring ghost of the American Dream” (12), on which the American national identity is founded. Just like the mansion of *Gatsby*, “that great Faustian overreacher, pitiable and terrible as he strives to grasp a dream forever just beyond his outstretched fingers—to transcend his class origins” (Bailey 13), Sir’s manor exemplifies his thwarted genteel ambitions and the American dream. When Rebekka tells Jacob that the house is “[s]omething befitting not a farmer, not even a trader, but a squire,” he answers her: “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (88, 88-89). Nevertheless, his hollow colonial dreams cannot be fulfilled, his descendants will not inherit Sir’s wealth and there is “No one to stand in awe” at the size of the unfinished mansion or to admire its sinister gate (51).

In its colonial materialistic orientation, the white race de-spiritualizes the world.¹³ Unlike indigenous cultures, Europeans consider the land as a source of power and profit instead of a source of life, destroying the harmony between humans and the wilderness. In *A Mercy*, the haunted mansion discloses how Europeans consumed natural resources with little regard for the impact on nature, further defining home in colonial terms. Lina, as representative of Native Americans’ strong connection with the wild, comments how the erection of Sir’s ostentatious farm “distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees,” while Jacob replaces them “with a profane monument to himself” (Wardi 43, 44). As Wardi argues, “*A Mercy* links nation building—the creation and inhabitation of the country—to the consumption of natural resources to the trafficking in human flesh” (23). Lina truly believes that killing those trees “would stir malfortune:” Jacob’s daughter dies in an accident during the mansion’s construction and he dies before finishing it. In *A Mercy*, Morrison tackles what can only be interpreted as the deadly meaning of patriarchy in the House of Man through the story of a young female ex-slave written on the walls of a “veritable ‘White House’ inhabited only by a Dead White Male” (Tally 63). She questions all kinds of enslavement and criticizes the legitimization of the ownership of property at the expense of nature. The violation of ethnic individuals is paralleled by the violation of nature. In the New World, European colonialism is conducive to the eventual exhaustion of natural resources, the spoilage of the land, the American Indian Genocide and the ownership of other human beings. Vaark becomes infected with what Native Americans envisage as European settlers’ unique pathology: “Cut loose from the earth’s soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny

¹³ As Paul Scott Derrick says: “That act of taking control over the land—of converting the land into ‘property,’ into something to be appropriated, manipulated, controlled and exhausted by man—is the primordial act, the inception of the American identity. It is also, for us, the Original Sin” (371).

to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples” (Gates).

In *A Mercy*, as the haunting is associated metaphorically with the manor’s structure, tainted by its colonial origins, “the house cannot be redeemed; instead it must be destroyed” (Bailey 23). At the end of the novel, after Sir’s death, there is no exorcism and his spirit keeps “haunting” the big mansion. Florens realizes that her telling, initially for the blacksmith to read, may “need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall” (161). The final destiny of the grand house will be to burn down and, ultimately, come back to nature: “fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the oil of the earth” (161). Lina, who loathes the mansion that brought misfortune upon Vaark’s family, will help Florens destroy it. Despite her devotion to Mistress, she now “loves fire more.” The story of the black girl flying in the ashes stands for all of those stories that were never told.¹⁴ Florens finally accepts herself on her own terms, “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full” (161), which contrasts with her dream of erased identity, her faceless reflection in the blue lake. Florens and Sorrow’s act of defiance and resistance when they occupy the haunted dwelling, the black girl’s inscription and “emancipatory” burning of the patriarchal habitation to ashes signal female empowerment and their engagement in a process of self-definition and self-determination. As Michlin contends, Florens’ is a tragic story in its endless repetition of trauma; notwithstanding, “there is also a celebration of resilience, of emancipation through telling and writing, through reflection and confession, through mourning and the desire to love and be loved, beyond all forms of subjection and domination” (2014, 119).

To sum up, *A Mercy* is “an examination of personal and national identity contained by the Gothic archetypes of the haunted dwelling and the ghostly haunting” (Gross 17). Morrison highlights the political, historical and cultural dimensions of the Gothic haunted habitation, which represents the fragmentation of personal and family identity, the failed domestic ideology, the haunting of the racist colonial past and culture, religious fanaticism and power relations in a primeval America, pivotal time in African American history. Morrison deconstructs the haunted home formula and enlarges its thematic scope to comment on racism and slavery. Her rewriting of the traditional haunted house multiplies its symbolic implications, from the American self to a national metaphor. As Bailey points out, Morrison resorts to conventional Gothic haunted settings “not only to indict American culture, but to suggest ways it might be profitably reformed” (6). Hence, she emphasizes ethnic females’ resistance to the patriarchal order and their struggle for self-definition in a chaotic world. These destitute women recover agency and claim “possession” of their selves through the haunted mansion. Morrison’s

¹⁴ In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave says that “The house ought to be purified with fire—purified until only its ashes remain” (184).

revisitation of the Gothic haunted dwelling in *A Mercy* becomes a powerful metaphor for the ethnic Female Self and her transgressive counter-narrative. Hers is an alternative vision of American identity and history.

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