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A Mercy Essay

A man sees a boy feeding a stray dog. He asks, “Why feed the dog? It doesn’t make much of a difference in the world. There are millions of stray dogs.” The boy replies, “But it makes a world of difference to this dog.” Mercy is an act of kindness given from a compassionate person to someone in need. Toni Morrison's A Mercy discusses the impact of mercy on people's lives in America during the late 17th century. A Mercy is told from many different perspectives and one perspective is from a girl named Sorrow. She works on a ship her whole life, but is shipwrecked and then is taken care of by multiple people. In A Mercy, many characters receive mercy, such as Sorrow, and mercy changes the outcome of their likely fates. Through Sorrow’s experiences, Toni Morrison illustrates that mercy has the power to positively change someone's life: Sorrow's life is positively changed because of (1) mercy shown from the Sawyers' family which fulfills her physiological needs; (2) mercy shown from Jacob fulfills her need for continuity; (3) mercy shown from Will and Scully that give her life meaning.

Morrison illustrates that if Sorrow was not shown mercy by the sawyers' family after she was shipwrecked, she would have died at a young age. For her whole life, Sorrow has lived on a ship, but is shipwrecked. Morrison describes the dire situation after the shipwreck, "After searching for survivors and food, fingering spilt molasses from the deck straight into her mouth...the bits of dead fish they ate intensified their thirst." (117) Sorrow could have easily died from exposure to the elements. Sorrow was barely surviving and ate scraps that would not last very long. If one is dead, nothing else matters. Nothing can be done to improve one’s situation. Sorrow's destiny was a premature death and all hope in her living would have been lost. Instead, the sawyers' family shows her mercy and saves her life. After Sorrow is found and taken in by the sawyer family, she "woke up naked under a warm wet cloth on her forehead....The sawyer's wife came in holding a man's shirt and a boy's breeches 'These will have to do for now,' she said. 'I'll have to make you something more fitting..Sorrow put on the dry boy clothes, then followed a scent of food. Once fed an extravagant breakfast, she was alert enough to say things. (117-118) The sawyer family provided for her physiological needs by giving her shelter, clothing, and food. The sawyer family nicely took care of Sorrow and gave her much more than she needed to survive. Survival, above all, is always the first necessity of humans. This act of mercy gave her life from her destiny of premature death.

Morrison illustrates that if Sorrow had not been shown mercy by Jacob during her stay with the sawyers' family, she would have eventually been cast out by the sawyer's family and left to die. Even after the Sawers' family showed her mercy by giving her the basic necessities, Sorrow proved to be useless to them by not being able to do basic chores. As Sorrow has lived on a ship a large part of her life, her "bare feet fought with the distressing gravity of land. She stumbled and tripped so much on that first day at the pond that when two goslings were attacked by a dog and chaos followed, it took forever to regroup the flock. She kept at it a few more days, until the housewife threw up her hands" (119). Sorrow had difficulty adjusting to land, so she struggled with her chores, and the Sawyer's wife gets frustrated. It is very frustrating to try to get someone to do a seemingly simple task, but seeing them do a poor job at it. That frustration over time can lead to disliking that person and to the realization that it is more trouble to have that person around. If Sorrow had stayed, she might eventually be forced to leave. Sorrow would not last very long by herself, so her situation is dire. Sorrow would not have been able to have continuity in her life and she faced the immediate risk of being cast out. Before she was cast out, Jacob, a farm owner, shows up and was willing to take her from the Sawyers’. Jacob knew Sorrow was not very capable, and when he recalled the situation, he described that, "Once before he found it hard to refuse when called on to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child." (33) Jacob finds it hard to not take in an unwanted child such as Sorrow. Jacob taking Sorrow is an act of mercy. If Jacob was out to find the best labor for his farm, he would not take Sorrow, instead finding someone more capable. Jacob took Sorrow because he felt compassion for Sorrow, saw her dire situation, and ignored her ability to work. If Jacob had not taken Sorrow, she would have been cast out. By showing Sorrow mercy, he fulfills her need to be safe and gives her a long term solution.

Morrison illustrates that if Sorrow had not been shown mercy by Will and Scully when she delivers her baby, neither Sorrow or her baby may have survived, and Sorrow would lose all meaning in her life. Once on Jacob’s farm, Sorrow gets pregnant. Lina, another servant on the farm thinks that Sorrow is cursed because she thinks she suffers a mental illness because she can’t focus and do her tasks. Lina helps Sorrow deliver her baby, but drowns it because she thinks that Sorrow is cursed and unconvincingly tells Sorrow it was stillborn. Sorrow mentions that, "it took years for Sorrow's steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina's palm to recede" (123). For years, Sorrow is traumatized by the thought of Lina drowning her baby. Drowning a baby is a horrible thing to do and horrifying to the mother. Because of that, Sorrow can not get over it. Lina perceives that Sorrow has a mental illness because even though her physiological needs and safety needs are fulfilled, she does not have a purpose. By drowning her baby, Lina made Sorrow’s condition much worse and moved her farther away from finding a purpose. Sorrow needed someone to show her mercy and demonstrate kindness. When Sorrow is pregnant again, she is forced to go somewhere away from the farm because she does not trust Lina. Sorrow goes out into the woods to have her baby, but is found by two of Jacob’s male servants, Will and Scully. “They both understood Sorrow’s plight as quickly as they would any creature about to foal. Clumsy a bit, their purpose confined to the survival of the newborn, they set to work” (32). As soon as Will and Scully saw Sorrow in need, they immediately and willingly come to her aid. Rather than doing what Lina did to Sorrow’s baby, they cared for Sorrow and her baby and Sorrow was able to have and keep her healthy baby. If Will and Scully had not helped Sorrow, both her and the baby’s lives would be in grave danger. Sorrow's baby brings Sorrow meaning and purpose in her life and makes her feel complete. This act of mercy has a very powerful effect because it is so much better than how Lina treated her. If Sorrow had not been shown mercy, she would have continued to be traumatized from her first pregnancy and she would have not found a purpose in life.

Sorrow's story showed how mercy she received enabled her to fulfill Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological needs, need for continuity, and meaning in life Sorrow's basic physiological needs are fulfilled by the mercy from sawyers' family because they kept her alive. Sorrow's need for continuity are fulfilled by mercy from Jacob because he takes her in his household for a long time despite Sorrow's incompetence at household work. Sorrow's need for purpose and meaning in life is fulfilled by mercy from Will and Scully because they enable her to have a baby, who makes Sorrow's life complete and meaningful. Morrison demonstrates how it is possible to go from a low standing situation to achieve their potential when they get the support they need through acts of mercy. Through the story of Sorrow, Morrison inspires us to be merciful to others so that we can help live a complete life like Sorrow does.