March 2, 2019

Toni Morrison’s A Mercy as Pedagogy: Teaching Early American Women Writers

Lisa Smith

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Lisa Smith, Pepperdine University

Society of Early Americanists Eleventh Biennial Conference

Eugene, OR

Feb. 27-March 3, 2019

Panel: Race, Women, and the Market in Early America

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As educators in early American literature, we often seek to introduce students to voices from the past that might be relatively new to them—colonial women, African-Americans, Native Americans, Puritans. In my upper-level course on early American women writers, I attempt to do just that, but I have noticed that my attempts to introduce these writers to my students are somewhat hampered not only by the usual obstacles of archaic writing styles and unfamiliar life experiences, but also by the challenge to authentically present to students the realm these women inhabited as a coherent whole. The world of early America is at this point pretty far removed from the modern college student, and, too often, students appear to experience the writers in my class as isolated voices, disconnected from each other, each offering only a small, solitary glimpse into the colonial landscape. And since these writers also seldom shared any type of public sphere, the distance between them can appear even greater.

Like most teachers of early American literature, I’ve utilized the usual pedagogical tools to help students experience early America as a coherent, engaging, complete world into which they then can situate the writers whose voices they are encountering, but I’m never completely satisfied with the results. I began to wonder if historical fiction could create this colonial “world” for students, and I decided to experiment with using Toni Morrison’s historical novel *A Mercy*. In the novel, Morrison develops a circle of connections out of individual narratives from
early America—a “society in the wilderness” as she calls it. Morrison's “society” is composed of a variety of individuals from different life situations—a struggling African slave girl and her mother, a European farmer and merchant and his wife who have had no surviving children, a Native American female who alone lived through an epidemic that eradicated her entire tribe, an orphaned girl of mixed race who has endured sexual abuse and trauma, and two white male indentured servants who wonder if they will ever finish their terms of servitude. Although these individuals ultimately scatter by the end of the novel, they come together for a time and create a real community, centered on the home of the farmer and his wife, offering authentic support and friendship for all the characters. Morrison’s narrative technique also links the characters in that each chapter tells one individual’s story while also moving the overall plot and the other characters’ stories forward. My hope was that by entering the fictional world that Morrison creates in A Mercy, students would catch a vision of a coherent, three-dimensional colonial American universe into which they could better situate and appreciate the writers we were studying in class. This paper will use my observations and student feedback to share the students’ experiences with historical fiction in my early American women writers course.

Background

My course at Pepperdine University, a private liberal arts college in Malibu, California, runs one semester and covers most of the standard works: a few Native American writings, Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson, Anne Hutchinson’s trial, the Salem witch trials, Elizabeth Ashbridge’s spiritual autobiography, various 18th century poems, Revolutionary War memoirs, Mercy Otis Warren’s political writings, and Hannah Foster’s The Coquette. But we also look at lesser-known writings such as John and Margaret Winthrop’s letters, Mary Dyer’s Boston scaffold speech, Virginia Methodist Sarah Jones’ spiritual letters, and Virginian Ann
Page’s letters regarding slavery. The course meets twice a week and typically is comprised of twenty to twenty-four traditional third- and fourth-year students who usually have not studied literature since high school. They are all non-English majors with the most popular majors being business, integrated communication and marketing, psychology, and sports medicine or sports administration. We read Morrison’s novel just about halfway through the course, and the students have time during our class discussion to give written feedback on how the novel helped them understand the colonial world.

**Findings and Evaluation**

The vast majority of student responses indicated that Morrison’s novel gave them greater insight into the colonial world in general. Typical is this comment from a female student:

*A Mercy* very much helped to give me a wider perspective of the world some of the women we have read were a part of. Many of the women we read about were from the same time period as each other but had very different independent stories that did not often tie together. This made it hard to get a full picture of them as a person and of the environment they lived in. Contrastingly, *A Mercy* had such a complex, complete and connected world that I could see it all. Similarly, a male student noted: “I think the world that Morrison throws us into is so creative, unique, and lifelike. Being involved in so many different people’s perspectives so vividly [within] a single setting definitely helps you empathize with the time period [and] situations.”

As teachers of literature, we are probably not terribly surprised by this result, but I’d like to highlight a few of the reasons I believe *A Mercy* helped students connect with early America as I’ve pondered their responses to the novel.
First, *A Mercy* is a *story*, and a good story at that. The power of fiction to create a world that seems absolutely possible and at the same time absolutely intriguing is of course a primary reason students are drawn into Morrison’s fictional universe. As one student noted, “In *A Mercy*, the setting is more developed. The plot is understandable. And the reader can identify with and relate to the characters. Indeed, the reader is able to journey along with Florens [the main character].” Another appreciated Morrison’s “more lyrical and powerful way of writing,” compared to the writing we had been reading. The *completeness* of Morrison’s story struck another reader: “Sometimes, incomplete, disjointed stories and facts and outlines dehumanize the experiences of the people of a time period. *A Mercy* instead allows us to follow individual characters and connect with them and thus empathize with them and the complexities of their characters, as well as the complexities of their world.” One student voiced the sentiments of many when he noted, “*A Mercy* has contributed to our ability to consider the bigger picture, and makes the women feel more real rather than some ancient, irrelevant character[s].”

Other students noted the power of the novel to complicate the early American world, or to show the nuances more clearly than had the historical writings. One student admitted, “When looking back in history, it is easy to see things as black and white . . . . But reading *A Mercy* has made me realize that early American society was just as nuanced as our society is today.” Interestingly, another student adjusted her view of the women we had been reading in the class because of the novel: “Reading *A Mercy* . . . . [helped me] grasp a better understanding of the horrors of African slavery. . . . Now more than ever I see these colonial women [we have been reading in class] as heartless and cruel.”

The struggle and difficulty of life in early America came through strongly in *A Mercy*, giving students sympathy for the lives of the female writers. Many students noted how
challenging life seemed in early America, something they had not really recognized in our class readings. Said one: “Things that seem simple in the modern world (traveling, walking alone, marriage) required a lot of bravery and courage in early America.” Another student noted, “In the shorter [class] writings, it was evident that the women were upset, but *A Mercy* helped me piece together the background that led to these strong emotions.” And since the novel showed not only choices made but also the repercussions of those choices, one reader commented, “I definitely feel I have a better understanding of the women of that time because I am not only zooming in on the one event they were writing about, but I can begin to wonder how those events played a key role in the rest of their lives and how it transformed them and their thoughts.” Interestingly, another student admitted her initial disapproval of what she called the women writers’ “moderate actions in the face of oppression/evil.” Noted this student after reading the novel:

> It’s easy to say women had it hard back then, but to actually put faces and names to these women—to put context and emotion to their story—to walk their path with them . . . it’s a whole other level. . . . To actually witness the character struggle with this world and its effect on their own worth—it’s heartbreaking. I suppose when you think about it in this regard the [women writers’] “moderate” actions seem mammoth, and the “halfway” pursuits seem like full-on sprints to justice.

This sympathy for the historical women writers seemed to come in part from Morrison’s use of a third-person narrator for the stories of all the characters in her novel except the main protagonist. Remarked one reader, “Although reading real historic journals is very interesting, I enjoyed diving into the thoughts of individuals and being able to follow them and watch them
transform throughout one’s life.” Noted another, “The third-person point-of-view makes it feel like the [narrator] has compiled the thoughts about each character and then goes on to explain what they have. I think strangely enough the third-person point-of-view adds a more authentic tone than first-person point-of-view [does] for the . . . characters.”

Obviously, this is an extremely interesting comment and reveals just how distanced these student readers are from the women of early America. More than one student noted that the fictional experiences of the characters in A Mercy actually authenticated the historical experiences of the real women they had been reading. Said one, “Since reading A Mercy, I feel as though we are better able to sympathize with all of the previous women we have read about in class as their problems seem more real and less fictitious.” Noted another, “[Reading A Mercy] leads me to appreciate and rethink the ways in which our earlier writers talk about their lives. Almost as though the fictional nature of A Mercy adds validity to the nonfiction we’ve read.”

A few students attributed their distrust of the experiences of the women writers to their assumption of colonial censorship. One student had this to say:

When we read about Rowlandson’s captivity or Ashbridge’s struggle with Quakerism, we only feel as though we are breaking the surface in understanding their struggle and emotions and even thought process. When they recount their trials, they likely feel the need to outwardly praise God and appear somewhat stoic as that is what was expected of them during that time period. However, if we were friends we would likely be able to comprehend their deeper thoughts and true emotions, and in a sense A Mercy is able to provide that “friendship.” We are able to see into their minds and get a sense of their true struggles, not the polished versions we have been reading up until now.
Another student asserted, “The fiction filters out the censorships inherent in authorship. Each word of the literature we have been reading was deliberated, even the captive accounts were edited.” Certainly, the ability of A Mercy to “validate” actual historical accounts points to the sheer power of historical fiction to create and immerse students in a forgotten world.

Not only did reading A Mercy help students feel the force and reality of the colonial world, but it also reinforced ideas of community and the interconnectedness of women’s experiences. While the women writers we had been reading in class often seemed to each exist in their own isolated space and time, the students were struck by the intersections of the lives of the characters in the novel and made connections back to the historical women writers. One student commented that Morrison’s novel offered “context to the reality of the times and insight into how these different characters interacted with one another . . . . provid[ing] a believable scenario that in turn allowed me to understand the historical texts we read.” Another student commented:

The book emphasized the essence of community that developed among women apart from the male-dominated world. Seeing through the “window” of the Vaark household gave me an entirely new perspective that I didn’t get with the individual works of literature we’ve read up to this point. For example, with Anne Hutchinson, we learned from the complaints of her trial that she held meetings with other women to discuss sermons. . . . Even during the Salem Witch Trials, Mary Easty spoke on behalf of other innocent women in order to protect them. . . . This sense of female community is prevalent throughout the novel.
The presence of female community in the novel even helped another student escape what she called the “very gloomy” writings of the class and enjoy the realization that in the novel “they all got along at one point and that there were good relationships, even if they fizzled out in the end.”

Connected to the experience of community was a similar appreciation for how *A Mercy* enabled the existence of multiple perspectives. One student commented on the “women of varying backgrounds” in the novel and how they “added an extra layer of depth and allowed for a mix of perspectives.” Another student remarked that “reading the multiple perspectives in *A Mercy* aided in relating to the women as a whole.” And, interestingly, historical fiction seemed to allow for the perspectives of those who did not have access to writing or publication in the real colonial world. One reader noted that some of the fictional characters “lie on the margins of what I’ve always learned in school. Reading their stories expanded my understanding of colonial life and conflict.”

Perhaps one of the most intriguing results of the assignment was seeing the direct connections students made between characters in *A Mercy* and the women writers we had read in class. One student noted the differing perspectives of Mary Rowlandson and the Native American character Lina in the novel:

It is interesting to me how different yet similar these characters are. Rowlandson resents the Native Americans because they killed her family and ruined her way of life. She sees them as heathens. Lina, a Native American, judges the Europeans around her because they burned her village and their way of life appears strange and unnatural. In a sense, Lina sees the Europeans as heathens.

Another student was struck by a scene in *A Mercy* in which the young slave girl Florens is examined for signs of being a witch. Noted the student, “We had discussed this, but reading it in
first person narrative gave the witch trials a much more tangible horror. It’s awful to hear and be transported into exactly what some of these women might have gone through.” Another reader connected the despair of the novel’s widow Rebekka with a Native American poem we had read entitled “Widow’s Song.” One student received greater insight into Anne Bradstreet’s poetry lamenting the loss of her grandchildren through Rebekka’s loss of her children in the novel. And one student was moved by the extreme, even violent lengths to which both women in the novel and the women writers would go to find and defend their own identity, connecting Mary Easty, who allowed herself to be executed rather than confess to witchcraft, to Florens, the main character in the novel who embraces her own desire for violence to assert her identity:

What I now understand is this desperate need to find self. I think [of] Mary Easty, just as she knew she was to be killed for being a witch, she knew she could [get] out of it by confessing. She held true to herself by denying her accusers until her grave. I see this in Florens’ narrative when she embraces the “feathery thing” and finally takes her identity out of the people around her, her mother’s rejection, and the blacksmith’s rejection.

These direct comparisons of characters in the novel to the writers we had read were noted by many students as being insightful and impactful.

So, my experiment with including modern historical fiction in my course on early American women writers was interesting and felt successful, definitely providing students with a greater understanding of and sympathy for the colonial world and the women who lived in it. I believe the same results can be expected with other novels set in colonial times as well as courses with other types of students or focuses. As one student noted, somewhat poetically, “Story breathes life into history. A Mercy sang the reality of being a woman, a slave, a human.”