

# Jacob vaark in a mercy essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Although some consider material wealth to represent one's worth, no financial measure can express the value of personal integrity when an individual encounters moral challenges. In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, the author explores this concept through the behavior and character of Jacob Vaark, a white farmer trying to make a living in the New World. Initially committed to avoiding slave trade, he involves himself by accepting Florens, a fourteen year-old, from the affluent D'Ortega to repay a debt. This decision begins his spiral from modest sustenance farmer to obsessed, narcissistic landowner who then destroys himself and his legacy. Consumed with building a mansion as a monument to him, Vaark loses his path and his moral clarity and transforms into an amoral consumer just like D'Ortega. His pursuit of material wealth leads to his death and causes great suffering for those he loves. While Vaark justifies building his opulent mansion with self-perceived superiority over D'Ortega, he forgets to consider how this reflects his own moral character.

Vaark enters his meeting with D'Ortega as a humble, self-made farmer vowing not to participate in the slave trade, but leaves the meeting as a man not too different from D'Ortega himself. In his visit to settle his debt with D'Ortega, Vaark's "Seeded resentment now bloomed." (19) He then asks himself, "Why such a show on a sleepy afternoon for a single guest well below their station? Intentional, [Vaark] decided; a stage performance to humiliate him into groveling acceptance of D'Ortega's wishes" (19). Vaark finds that D'Ortega uses the extravagance of the afternoon to confirm D'Ortega's higher standing in their community. With his disdain for D'Ortega and all he represents, Vaark commits to displaying his integrity, a

characteristic absent in D'Ortega and pledges not to acquiesce to D'Ortega's ways. He says to himself, "Where else could rank tremble before courage?" (29). He then turns his back to D'Ortega, "letting his exposed, unarmed back convey his scorn" (29). Vaark realizes that the New World values an individual's personal character and capabilities more than inherited wealth and status. Vaark can use his courage and wit to show D'Ortega that he does not fear him.

Instead, Vaark feels contempt for D'Ortega and the slave business and he embarrasses D'Ortega by turning his back on him. Vaark uses this humiliation to inflate his opinion of himself even more. But even with such great disrespect for D'Ortega and his ownership of slaves, Vaark eventually sinks to his level by accepting a slave in payment of a debt Vaark rationalizes accepting Florens by believing that she will help his wife cope with the death of their child, Patrician. He says, "...perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place... if she got kicked in the head by a mare, the loss would not rock Rebekka so" (30). Vaark uses the death of his child as an excuse for taking Florens as currency. He wants to think that taking her is an act of altruism, not an act of greed. He uses Florens to acquire as much wealth as D'Ortega and to justify his inflated opinion of himself. Accepting Florens solidifies Vaark's devolution from modest, unassuming farmer to covetous, slave owning man.

Vaark tries to use the house as a testament to himself and as his legacy, but ends up destroying himself and his living legacy simply by constructing the mansion. He decides to build the mansion after the meeting with D'Ortega, where he recognizes the fact that "only things, not bloodlines or character,

separated [Vaark and D’Ortega]” (31). Vaark’s contempt for D’Ortega confuses him into believing that he must demonstrate his superiority over D’Ortega with material goods, not just substantive character. Denying goodness in his simplicity, Vaark changes his views and assures himself that only things separate and differentiate the two men. Vaark’s situation is ridden with irony. He believes in his superiority over D’Ortega because of his own, humble, non-materialistic ways in the New World. But he twists his thinking and convinces himself that only overtly showing his value through an expensive home will validate his superior position.

Even more irony arises during the construction of the house. Vaark explains the house to Rebekka, saying, “ What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (104). He wants to secure his legacy through building the house. But the construction itself, in turn, destroys his real legacy. Vaark has “ Men, barrows, a blacksmith, lumber, twine, pots of pitch, hammers and pill horse, one of which once kicked her daughter in the head. The fever of the building was so intense she missed the real fever, the one that put him in the grave” (104). Vaark’s living legacy, his daughter, has died first and then he works himself into such fervor that he ignores his own health, thus destroying his own being. Vaark’s original goal is to leave a lasting impact for others, but he allows material greed to become his only memory.

In contrast to D’Ortega, Lina, a captured Native American, values courage and commitment to the community. To Lina, Vaark’s sumptuous plantation represents everything negative the European explorers have brought to the New World. These Europeans and their culture destroy Lina’s native people and she deeply resents their imposition on the land. She says, “ 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 to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples" (64). Lina believes they cannot control their needs to subjugate the natives. She initially regards Vaark as different because of his considerate behaviors and thinks, " They seemed mindful of a distinction between earth and property, fenced their cattle though their neighbors did not, and although legal to do so, they were hesitant to kill foraging swine.

They hope to live by tillage rather than eat up the land..." (64). The Vaarks treat their land respectfully and enjoy their lives even though farming does not make them wealthy. After Vaark begins building his house by destroying trees to make space for the construction, Lina notices, " The last few years he seemed moody, less gentle, but when he decided to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself, he was cheerful everyone waking moment. Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up malfortune" (51). Vaark, once committed to protecting the land for his family and others, has become infatuated with acquiring material wealth to secure his legacy and erases his pursuit of all goals other than his own aggrandizement. The house represents all that Lina dislikes about the Europeans and their dogmatic belief that they alone can own the earth. In Lina's view, Vaark has become the essence of a European.

Just as Lina comes to distrust Vaark because of his single-minded pursuit of opulent wealth, Rebekka loses Vaark to his race to exceed D'Ortega. Vaark, in the end, loses respect and his life because he fixates his energy on

chasing a meaningless legacy. Although the mansion is grand, as he believes himself to be, he does not live to see the house completed. After his death, his loved ones do not remember him as he wishes to be. Instead, Vaark's loved ones recall him as a man who succumbs to the material desires that overcome Europeans. His house paradoxically represents all the negatives about Vaark's character, not the great achievement he originally conceives. The material wealth that he wishes to attain destroys all non-material wealth he possesses. He loses his identity as an unpretentious, simple farmer and becomes a stereotypical European consumer. A Mercy powerfully exemplifies why material wealth does not validate self-worth and emphasizes that only strong character defines a lasting legacy.