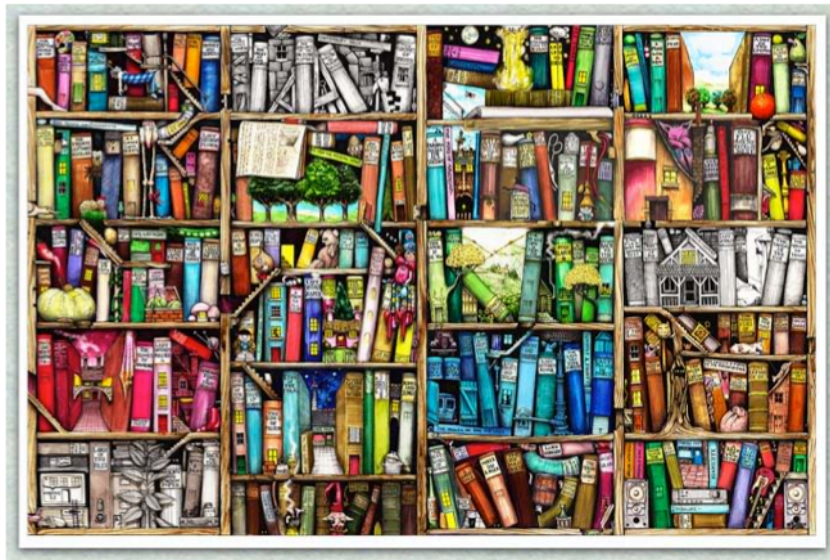




Literature as Windows on the World.
**A Literary Approach to Second Language Learning;
Cultural and Literary Competence in Toni Morrison's
«A Mercy» (2008)**



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Introduction

Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become. - C.S Lewis (BBC 2012)

When I was a little girl my parents used to tell me stories every night. As I got older, they read me stories from children's books and at a certain point they began just buying me audiobooks, as they were unable to satisfy my insatiable desire to be read to, all day every day.

Storytelling opened a new world to me, and my parents' background as foreign student teachers enabled them to tell me stories from other countries which gave me insight into, and knowledge about, other cultures. When I learned to read I felt an amazing sense of freedom as I finally could access all the stories I wanted; my favorites were fictional tales set in non-fictional settings and eras, e.g., Norwegian Viking legends. These kinds of stories opened my mind to learning about various historical periods while at the same time developing empathy for people who lived through the different ages. In retrospect, I now understand that this genre of story opened my mind to new knowledge and my heart to unfamiliar peoples and cultures.

As C. S. Lewis so eloquently illustrates in his quote, literature still enriches my life. It has provided me with cultural competence that enables me to engage new cultures and peoples with an open and constructive attitude, as well as certainly has contributed to irrigating the few deserts I have developed within me so far in my life. In an ideal world, I hope all my future students have the same love and passion for literature that I do.

During my years in university, my excitement for literature's possibilities has only grown, and as a second language student teacher, I have developed an enthusiasm for the use of literature in the upper secondary classroom. If teachers apply literature to the second language classroom it does not need to be restricted to the fulfillment of a singular competence aim; on the contrary, it can be used as a vehicle teachers can employ to acquire new knowledge and achieve new competencies in their students. Literature provides new perspectives regarding ourselves, others, and the global society we share. These possibilities are compatible with the Norwegian curriculum, where one of the objectives of second language learning is defined as:

In addition to learning the English language, this subject will also contribute insight into the way we live and how others live, and their views on life, values and cultures. Learning about the English-speaking world will provide a good basis for understanding the world around us and how English developed into a world language. Literature in English, from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare's sonnets, may instill a lifelong joy of reading and provide a deeper understanding of oneself and others. (Udir.no «Upper Secondary Education English Curriculum», 2012)

With the possibilities of literature in mind, my student teacher education inspired me to try to use literature in a more complete way than I had seen other teachers do in my experience, and to employ it as a vehicle to teach linguistics, grammar, basic skills and overarching aims, in addition to encouraging and facilitating personal growth.

This thesis will suggest an approach for implementation in the second language subject «English Speaking Literature and Culture». This suggestion is not a blueprint for how teachers *should* do it, but rather a reflective suggestion for how teachers *can* do it, as seen from the perspective of a future teacher who is very passionate about her career. This thesis and literary approach are pragmatic and focus on the pedagogical perspective of literature, and rather than function as a literary analysis of the novel *A Mercy*, it works to explain how teachers can employ the novel more holistically in a second language classroom.

My goal for this thesis is that my enthusiasm for incorporating literature in the second language classroom will inspire others, both new and experienced teachers, to engage in similar projects. I want to illuminate the benefits both teacher and student will gain from a literary approach, as well as explore the challenges it represents. This thesis serves as a launching point for a literary approach; it can be further developed to achieve its full potential, preferably through continued experience on the part of the author.

To display the possibilities a literary approach can present, I will use Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* in my suggestive teaching plan. I chose Morrison and her novel because her work spoke to me and taught so much. Furthermore, she sets her inspiring and engaging fiction in genuine historical settings. Her novels are about the black experience in America - experience forced by the international triangular trade which involved nearly all English speaking countries. Therefore, Morrison's works serve as starting points from which readers can build metaphorical bridges to nearly all English language literary traditions and cultures.

This thesis will focus on four main issues. Chapter One is dedicated to exploring two important terms for a literary approach: *literary* and *cultural* competence. These terms and what they encapsulate are important for teachers who intend to use a literary approach, as they establish the foundation for carrying out this method successfully. Cultural competence is widely mentioned in the national curriculum and I want to reflect on why the national curriculum asks Norwegian students to obtain it. On the other hand, the national curriculum barely mentions literary competence, so this thesis will more deeply explore this term. The chapter concludes with a short reflection on the importance of student competence in culture and literature.

Chapter Two is reflection on my relationship to, and experience with literature in my own education. The chapter is supported by theory from Bjørg Eikrem and Elin N. Vestli, and it focuses on the status of the use of literature in the contemporary classroom, and the positive effects of employing a literary approach. The chapter also maps challenges teachers may encounter with the literary approach, as well as possible solutions to them.

Chapter Three examines the challenge of finding eligible authors and literary works for the literary approach. It sets out to map the requirements that teachers must fulfill and to understand which considerations teachers should take into account to find suitable literature for the second language classroom. The chapter ends with an exploration on why Toni Morrison is an author who is especially suited for a literary approach. It also examines why *A Mercy* is an eligible literary work for a literary approach.

The fourth and final chapter suggests a literary approach to the subject «English Speaking Literature and Culture». *A Mercy* will serve as a point of departure for suggesting how teachers can fulfill the competence aims, the basic skills, and overarching aims of the national curriculum of second language learning through a literary approach.

1. Cultural and Literary Competence

Cultural and literary competence are important terms to know if you plan to try a literary approach in your classroom. While cultural competence is well known and widely discussed in the Norwegian curriculum's «Educational Principles» (Udir.no, my translation), literary competence is not even mentioned. However, literary competence is an important part of teaching and learning about literature, which in turn is a large part of the competence aims in many of the second language subjects in the curriculum (Udir.no). This chapter aims to explore the terms and what they encapsulate, and to contextualize them in the setting of the literary approach to second language learning in upper secondary school.

1.1 Cultural Competence

To develop students' cultural competence, so that they become able to participate in a multicultural society, the education should arrange for them to be taught about various cultures, and to gain experience with a wide specter of cultural expressions. The education should encourage cultural understanding, and be instrumental to develop personal insight as well as identity, respect and tolerance. Students should be introduced to art and cultural expressions that express individuality and community, and that stimulate their innovative capabilities. Students should also be given the opportunity to use their capabilities in various activities and expressional forms. These activities can give a foundation for reflection, emotions and spontaneity. (Udir.no 2012)

In the introduction I explained how my relationship to literature about other countries and my parents' job have given me a positive and open attitude towards foreign peoples and cultures. I believe these experiences have contributed to develop my cultural competence as it has enabled me to become more aware of my own culture, and to accept the differences in others. What I perceive as cultural competence corresponds with the Norwegian curriculum which describes cultural competence as a skill that enables students to become contributive and reflective participants in our multicultural world society. The curriculum states that development of cultural competence will lead to knowledge about various cultures, the similarities and differences between them, and practice students' understanding, respect and tolerance for the cultures of the world. The curriculum's expanded reason for developing students' cultural competence through second language learning is that it will provide them with a solid foundation from which they can grow to become reflective, emphatic, and spontaneous citizens of Norway and the world community. In the eyes of the national curriculum, to possess cultural competence is to obtain knowledge about, the understanding, respect and tolerance of, and insight into different cultures.

In my opinion, the second language setting is possibly one of the first educational settings where some Norwegian students are introduced to a deeper insight into other cultures. The second language subject of English offers insight to several cultures, some familiar as USA and Britain, but also to the less familiar ones as the native peoples of Australia and New Zealand; the Aborigines and the Maoris. With this in mind it would seem natural for the second language classroom to serve as one of the binding points between students' culture and the various cultures of the world. I would go as far as to argue that literature is one of the most eligible binding points between cultures, especially through literature produced by the targeted culture. Like the second language classroom strives to do, literature can serve as an arena where students can learn about a variety of cultures and their cultural expressions, similarities and differences, and a place that serves to address prejudice and suspicious attitudes towards other cultures, just like the Norwegian curriculum describes.

1.2 Literary Competence

The national curriculum emphasizes the importance of students' *reading competence* and *writing competence*, while the term *literary competence* is absent (Vestli 2008:15). The author of «Fra Sokkel til Klasserom», professor Elin N. Vestli labels the absence of literary competence in the curriculum as concerning, and she points out that while literary competence is rarely taught in upper secondary school, it is a requirement to obtain such competence in higher education. To Vestli, the national curriculum seems to focus more on productive reading and writing competencies rather than the skill set that is needed to comprehend, interpret and contextualize the literature that already exists, namely literary competence. The lack of targeted training of literary competence presents a challenge to the literary approach, and students who go on to university will experience a discrepancy in what they have been taught earlier and what will be expected of them.

Literary competence consists of four types of knowledge (Hennig 2010), and this section will explore each to clarify what they are and what they represent. For a student to be successful in his or her studies of literature, and for a teacher to succeed with her literary approach, they are both dependent on obtaining a well-developed literary competence. Students' literary competence allows students to better use their capacity for literary analysis in the second language classroom, and therefore it is important for a teacher to be able to separate between the types of knowledge this

competence encapsulates. If a teacher knows what the types of knowledge are, it can enable her to help students improve and practice their literary competence so that they can succeed in the second language classroom.

Åsmund Hennig (2010:82) defines the word «competence» (in relation to «literary competence») as the *knowledge, skills, abilities, attitude, interest* and *values* the holder, in this case the upper secondary school student, has for reading and understanding literature. Out of these attributes, Hennig claims that *knowledge* and *skills* are the most important as they determine how the student processes new information, and therefore affect students' learning potential.

Reading and writing competence are important to the learning process, and to master them, they need to be practiced from a young age. However, Hennig (2010:84) argues that the qualities of the competencies do not necessarily depend on the individual's age, but rather on the reading culture the student's family has. Paired together with an aesthetic sense and textual involvement, it is possible that a young child will be a competent reader at an early age, and therefore have a solid foundation on which to build his or her literary competence. We need to remember that as upper secondary school teachers we are greatly dependent on the groundwork provided by students' previous teachers, as well as their families. Therefore, to develop a student's competence in upper secondary school, there needs to be a solid foundation formed by the student's teachers in elementary and middle school, and by the students' families. If students do not have an evolved competence in reading and writing, the use of literature in second language learning will be difficult, as they will have a less developed literary competence as well.

1.2.1 The Four Knowledges of Literary Competence

- *Textual knowledge* is knowledge of literary characteristics, terms, narrative structures, imagery and analytic capacity. Students need textual knowledge to understand *how* authors assemble literary texts, *what* the message of the text, and what it tries to convey to the reader. Textual knowledge enables the student to understand *how* the text appears as it does. It also provides the student with tools to disentangle intricate texts (Hennig 2010:265).

- *Contextual knowledge* includes knowledge of different types of texts, genres, literary history, authorships, and the ability to explain a text's historical, cultural and periodical context. Knowledge of the text's societal and cultural origin is also important (Hennig 2010:266). Contextual knowledge helps the student to expand their referential database, which in turn will expand their intertextual competence and help them in their analytical work.
- *Knowledge about reading* means that to be a good reader the student should know *how* he reads texts, evaluates them, and on that basis choose techniques appropriate for the type of texts he is reading, whether it is a newspaper article, a literary text or an ad. This competence is difficult to acquire, but once the student is able to use it, he will manage to *know how* to read different kinds of texts and therefore be able to better understand and analyze them (Hennig 2010:266-267).
- *Literary reading skills* are skills that theoretically come easier to children and adolescents than to adults, which in turn can make students in upper secondary school ideal readers. In comparison to adults, children and adolescents are more in touch with their imagination, and are able to interact with the text and «step into» the fiction through their imagination (Hennig 2010:267). It describes the capability to imagine the text and to engage in what they read. Hennig describes it as the ability to fill in the empty spaces in a story by using imagination. To attain literary reading skills the student needs to have the capacity to empathize with the characters in the text and to be open to other ways of thinking about it, and also towards other cultures (267). This competence also demands that the reader accepts that a literary text is ambiguous and that there is not only one right way to interpret it.

1.3 The Importance of Cultural and Literary Competence

Cultural and Literary competence are important for adolescents in the contemporary Norwegian society. As cultural competence prepares students for meeting with other, as well as their own, multicultural societies, literary competence enables them to understand and comprehend the content of literature, which in turn may give them more nuanced intercultural perception as well as prepare them for the requirements they will likely meet in their higher education studies.

In second language learning, cultural and literary competences are intertwined, as the one can lead to the other. Cultural competence may decode a literary work from a certain culture, while literary competence may allow students to widen their understanding about another culture through the literature it has produced. Together these capabilities lay a solid groundwork that can help them succeed socially and educationally.

2. The Literary Approach: Status, Possibilities and Challenges

The literary approach to second language learning presents many possibilities for learning, however, it may also present challenges for any unexperienced or experienced teacher. To be able to succeed with literature in the second language classroom there are many requirements that need to be met. In the following pages I will explore why literary approaches sometimes seem to be absent in the second language classroom, what positive effects the approach may represent, and also what challenges a second language teacher may meet when he or she wants to use literature in the classroom.

As a student teacher I spend much of my time reflecting on my role as a teacher. I plan how I want to convey what I teach and I wonder how I will be able to reach out to my students and help them to reach their academic goals in the best way possible. It is hard to determine which approach to fulfill curriculum aims is the best one, but in her book *What the Story has to Offer* Bjørg Eikrem suggests the possibilities literature brings to the classroom and shows how short stories and other literary texts like *A Mercy* can be used as a means for cultivation, and also as a vehicle to teach English linguistics and literature. I read her book for the first time as a preparation for my teacher practice period and to me, her book represented a type of approach that would fit nicely into the second language classroom of upper secondary school and gave me expectations to how the teacher I was to observe would teach their subjects. To my disappointment literature and Eikrem's literary approach were apparently absent in the classrooms I observed in my practice. The teachers I observed seemed slavishly bound to the textbook, and the constructed «literary» texts they found there. These «texts» were written by textbook authors to fit into the theme of the textbook chapters, and rarely carried any deeper literary meaning or connotations. Whether the reason for the absence was unengaged teachers or a lack of resources, I did not know, but the article «Fra sokkel til klasserom» by Elin N. Vestli gave me new insight.

Vestli introduces an explanation to why literature becomes lost between the teacher's time at university and by the time she sets foot in the classroom. She believes that there exists a discrepancy between the curriculum at university and upper secondary school which renders student teachers to feel unable to find suitable literature for their students. In her article, Vestli explains that the discipline of literature has always had a solid foundation in college and universities in Norway. Language students are taught a wide selection of canonical works by well known authors, and they

practice oral and written literary production- and analysis to achieve a strong literary competence. However, literature taught to teachers seems to get lost between university and upper secondary school, and Vestli (2006:9-10) seems to have the answer to why. According to her, the problem is above all based on one reason, which is a discrepancy between the literature teachers study in university and the literature that is considered appropriate for upper secondary school students. To Vestli, the discrepancy is founded in a lack of literary didactics in the teacher education curriculum, which leads teachers to become unable to find suitable literature for their students. The discrepancy interferes with developing a literary approach in second language learning in upper secondary school, and divests students of the opportunities, and positive effects literature brings into the classroom. Vestli also agrees with Eikrem to a great extent in that literature should have a more central place in the second language classroom, and launches the claim that national competence aims and basic skills are compatible with a literary approach. In her opinion, literature is the best way to reach these aims and skills as it provides insight and understanding in a way no other form can. According to Eikrem, literature can also be used to expand vocabulary, practice creative writing, language interaction, and make- and answer questions, which in addition to the competence aims can evolve personal skills like empathy, personal involvement and imagination (Eikrem 1999:40-41).

A few teaching experiences wiser I look back at my practice period with a greater sympathy for teachers who left out the literary approach in second language learning. The approach requires a lot of preparation as well as trial and failure, and I understand that the discrepancy allegedly found between teachers' time at university and their careers as teachers can cause a feeling that their knowledge of literature is not transferable to their students. With this in mind, I have sympathy for those who avoid the literary approach to second language learning. However, I do claim that if teachers put an effort into mastering the approach it will be worth the while. What I do not claim is that a literary approach is an easy approach, but I do believe that using literature can provide students with more than linguistic skills, it can also inspire joy, and interest in literature, and a feeling of fulfillment that excerpts from larger texts and textbooks do not.

2.1 Possibilities and Positive Effects

The English subject aims to provide students with tools to succeed in life, and to be a subject that practices cultural experience. It aims to give students the opportunity to participate in communication about personal, social, literary and interdisciplinary subjects.

The subject will also provide insight into how people think and live in the English speaking world. Communicative skills and cultural insight may encourage increased interactions, understanding and respect between humans with different cultural backgrounds. In this way the language and cultural competence preserve the generic cultivating perspective and strengthen democratic engagement and citizenship.

(Udir.no, English Literature and Culture 2012, my translation)

According to the national curriculum, the purpose of teaching upper secondary school students a second language is that they will become able to use the language properly and expand their understanding of the cultures that speak it. This means that in addition to knowing the linguistic system, the student is supposed to learn about the language's cultural expressions. To reach these goals the national curriculum consists of *basic skills* and *competence aims* that are designed to help fulfill the overarching aims in the best possible way. The basic skills in second language learning are that the student should be able to: *read, express himself orally, express himself in writing, to be able to count and calculate, and to be able to use digital tools*. The competence aims are formulated in sentences where each one is a singular aim that the student needs to master. They are divided into three groups: *language acquisition, communication and culture, and society and literature*. The curriculum seldom mentions literature as the basis for an activity, and even more rarely as a vehicle to fulfill basic skills and competence aims. In this section I will try to advocate for the possibilities literature has in the second language classroom and to explain how literary activities can be used to help students reach the overarching purpose of the second language curriculum as well as fulfill the competence aims.

First, according to Vestli, «through literature the reader does not only meet others, but also him or herself.» (2006:6, my translation). Vestli states that when a student studies literature he does not strictly learn about what he is reading, but he also learns about himself. This state is what Kramersch has named «the third space» (Kramersch 1993:148) which is the setting in which a student learns about another language and culture, and experiences it in relation to his own culture. In the third space students are able to achieve what is the purpose of the national curriculum of second language learning, to learn the language properly, to obtain cultural insight, respect and understanding, as well as to strengthen democratic engagement and citizenship.

Second, literature can be used directly to achieve competence aims. There are several examples in the curriculum where competence aims are formulated in a way that makes a literary approach an obvious choice, and I will demonstrate how in the last chapter of the thesis.

Third, literature can contribute to a student's participation in what Vestli describes as «the cultural discourse» (2006:6). The world we live in today is characterized by rapidly globalizing borders and Vestli believes that students who engage in international literature are enabled to participate in multimedia culture, such as authors homepages, blogs and fan sites (2006:6). She continues to explain that literary texts also help to expand students' direct and practical intercultural competence. Exposed to eligible literature, students will develop social empathy as well as an understanding of traditions, geography and daily life in the cultures they study (2006:7). The intercultural competence achieved through literature can prove valuable to the many young students who go on to study abroad and travel internationally.

Finally, literature can be used to train and improve the basic skills drawn up in the national curriculum. The five skills are «to read», «express oneself orally», «express oneself in writing», «to be able to count and calculate», and «to be able to use digital tools» are not necessarily activated while simply reading a literary text. Rather, we need to take all the possible literary activities into consideration, which among other can include research, writing, reading and discussion. In *What the Story has to Offer* Eikrem (1999) has created a system where she suggests that each literary text read by students should be presented together with student-centered activities before, while, and after reading:

- Pre-reading activities (Warm up activities to prepare students for the text they are going to read)
- While-reading activities (To help students understand the plot, characters or styles)
- Post-reading activities (To explore the text and check the students' response)
(Eikrem 1999:61-62)

The composition of the three kinds of activities relates to Marilu Henner's study of how to improve memory where she emphasizes the importance of what she calls «APR»: anticipation (pre-reading), participation (while-reading) and reflection (post-reading) (thedianerehms.org). According to Henner, these three aspects are crucial to a better recollection of an activity or experience, and they relate to and reinforce the significance of Eikrem's set of activities.

Eikrem presents a diverse selection of activities in her book, activities that can help train and improve each of the five basic skills. The activities in Eikrem's book focus on work with the literary text at the same time as each activity covers several of the basic skills from the national curriculum. If a teacher assigns a pre-reading activity where the students need to research the author or the text, and pair the research activity with a while-reading and post-reading activity that demands discussions and reflective writing, the students will get to practice almost all the basic skills in a single session.

2.2 Challenges

There are many good reasons why literature should more often be included in the second language classroom, although, to achieve the intended results there are some requirements that need to be met. One important requirement is a turn towards the inclusion of literary didactics in the curriculum in the teacher education (Vestli 2006:10).

Another requirement is the teacher's engagement and ability to separate her own literary competence from that of her students. To work with literature in upper secondary school is challenging, and a teacher who aims to use literature frequently will be forced to spend a lot of time preparing activities, monitoring reading, testing the students reading progress, and encouraging the students to continue reading. A teacher's continuing motivation to apply literature in the classroom, and his or her courage to try and fail is essential to accomplishing a pedagogical and goal oriented literary approach to second language learning. A class of students is not a homogeneous group, and their competence and needs differs, therefore, a teacher will be required to adjust his or her teaching so that all the students will benefit from it. This requirement makes collaborative work with literature, like the activities suggested in Eikrem's book, a good alternative way to work with second language learning. According to Noreen M. Webb (2008:607) collaboration in the classroom may even enable students to learn from each other. While students with strong competence support the ones with less competence, both groups can learn from each other, and therefore expand their competence through collaborative work.

The ability to separate between teacher competence and student competence is important to the student's progress. In *Litterær Forståelse* (2010) Åsmund Hennig stresses the importance of appreciating students' various ways of reading literature; while the teacher possesses a wider

philosophical perspective (84), the students might have more insight and knowledge of other aspects which make them just as much, maybe even better, at understanding a certain type of literary text. While the teacher has several years of literary training at the university level as well as life experience, the student may have acquired different life skills and textual experience which make him or her competent in another way, despite their young age.

The task of finding books that are both educational and appealing to adolescents may be challenging for teachers who tend to be from an older generation than their students. In addition to the content, students' attention span also presents a challenge to the novel. The access to the newest Hollywood productions and state of the art computer games represent a challenge to the classic novel form, and even though some new forms like the Graphic novel bridge the gaps, adolescents still need motivation to help them focus and to keep reading, especially if the literary text is long like a novel. Student reading motivation is an important part of a successful incorporation of literature in the classroom, and it is greatly dependent on the student's individual reading competence and literary competence, as well as interest and determination. An appealing book is helpful for student motivation, and in the context of meaningful assignments and a varied teaching plan, at the same time as it engages the students it can serve as a powerful tool to fulfill basic skills, overreaching-, and competence aims.

The challenges I have mentioned are just a mere example of the ones teachers and students may encounter. My motivation for mentioning them is not to give a complete list of obstacles and solutions, but to show that the literary approach can be demanding and that it requires preparation and determination, as well as a teacher who has the courage to try and fail. My motivation is also to show that obstacles does not need to be discouraging, but that they rather should be seen as constructive challenges that can encourage teachers to reflect on their own and their students' competences, needs and interests.

3. Eligible Authors and Literary Works

In addition to enable fulfillment of educational aims, the author and the literary work needs to be interesting and subjectively relevant to the student. These two expectations to a literary work can be challenging to accommodate, and in this section I will try to discuss some viewpoints on the challenge and help clarify which requirements are important. I will also introduce the author and work I will later suggest for a literary approach to second language learning, and explain my reason for choosing them.

3.1 Literature for Students

To choose a literary work for others, especially adolescents, is a difficult task. As a teacher you want your students to feel that that the book has subjective relevance, at the same time as it is relevant to their lives, and has an educational effect. It may sound overwhelming, but Hennig's main advice to teachers when they choose literature for the classroom is very basic: the literary work should *appear as literature for the students* (Hennig 2010:133, my translation). By this he means that the literature needs to be accessible to students in its form and content, and that it should be enjoyable for them. With this said, even though a literary work at first does not seem like the kind of literature students would read on their own initiative, there are many actions a teacher can do which may contextualize the chosen work to make it more accessible and relevant to students. For example by giving a short lecture on some of the main themes where the teacher tries to make a connection between the book and the students' lives visible. However, Hennig underscores that even though a text does not have an immediately obvious subjective relevance to students, the most important thing is that the teacher helps them *find* it during the reading process (gtd Hennig 2010:133). This can be achieve by for example asking students questions that can lead to their own discovery of the literary text's relevance to their own lives.

3.2 Toni Morrison and the Literary Approach

Toni Morrison's literature is suitable for a literary approach, part because of her status in the American literary canon, and part because of the themes Morrison writes about such as the diversity of American lives, past and present.

Toni Morrison holds an M.A. in English literature, and has taught the subject at the university level, including the world-class institutions of University of New York, Princeton and Yale (Taylor-Guthrie 1994:XV). Her student and teaching experience, combined with her work as an author, editor, theorist and critic has given her insight into the world of readers, and therefore given her the skill to compose literature that entices young readers to participate and become involved in the text.

Adolescents view television, the internet, and an interactive media culture on a daily basis - media that feeds them with information that may lead to pacify, instead of involving them. It is important to Morrison to function as a counterweight to this culture, and to make her readers enter «into active participation in the non-narrative, nonliterary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself/herself to a cool and distant acceptance of data» (Morrison 1984:387).

Morrison writes in a pedagogical manner, not in the way that she instructs how to solve problems or in the way that she gives ideal solutions to them. Rather Morrison uses her characters' thoughts and actions *to show*, instead of *to instruct* her readers, which is another component of what I see as good literature. Her novels can be seen as life lessons, and Morrison uses every opportunity to warn against what she sees as common mistakes made by humans, and to demonstrate what happens if they are not aware of their actions. In a telling conversation Morrison says «(...) my mode of writing is sublimely didactic in the sense that I can only warn by taking something away.» (Taylor-Guthrie 1994:74) In this case Morrison talks about the relationships between the men and women in her novels. The interviewer wonders why their relationships always fail, and Morrison explains that it is because she wants to warn people of what will happen if they treat each other without respect, or make the same mistakes as her characters. In this way Morrison warns her reader by taking away her characters' happy ending, just like a literary lesson. This sort of instructive approach to writing, especially the way she encourages readers to get involved with the text may motivate adolescents who normally struggle in their engagement with literature.

On the background of discussion on internet forums, and my own interest in her literature, I believe that Morrison's writing style has an attracting effect on adolescent students. However, as Morrison employs African American oral traditions in her writing, and at times uses an oral way of writing, her challenging language may to some readers be deterring, slow down the reading process, and even discourage students from attempting it, especially to non native speakers who are used to standard English. With this in mind, it is important to find literary works that seem approachable to students in terms of length and difficulty level at the same time as it can challenge and involve them. As such, *A Mercy* is a suitable novel. With its 165 pages, handy size, and defined chapters, it comes off as a manageable novel. The chapters are short and they focus on one character at the time, which makes the novel more manageable in the classroom and during an analysis.

4. *A Mercy* in the National Curriculum

Hilary Mantel writes that Morrison's themes of solidarity, community, compassion and family in *A Mercy* «go to the root of what humanity is, what society is for.» (Mantel 2008).

The themes in *A Mercy* which Mantel emphasizes above are important to humanity and society, and therefore even more important to pass on to the generation of adolescents coming of age in the early 21st century. The society and culture of today constantly expose teens and young to mass media and commercials that try to convince them to buy the «right» kind of clothes, cosmetics, electronics, accessories, and just about every other consumer product. These forms of media work to convince them that a consumer lifestyle makes them who they are, and it may become imprinted in them that only when they consume the featured products and become a part of the mass-culture that they are perceived as «normal» and «valuable». Marketers shift the focus on *what* you do to *who* you are, and literature, including *A Mercy*, can function as a counterweight to the culture that Margaret Thatcher's role figure in «The Iron Lady» described as: «It used to be about trying to do something. Now it's about trying to be someone.» (The Iron Lady 2011). With this in mind, educators can employ *A Mercy* as a starting point for training basic skills, fulfilling competence aims, and to fulfill overreaching aims that can give students the ballast they need to participate in the global society and literary scene as well as the Norwegian one, in a positive and constructive way.

This section will recommend a curriculum using the competence aims of the second language subject «English Speaking Literature and Culture» as a point of departure, as well as explain how these goals are to be reached through attention to literary elements in *A Mercy*, including title, setting, characters, narration, themes and ending.

4.1 Fulfilling Competence Aims through the Literary Approach

The second language subject divides the competence aims in «English Speaking Literature and Culture» into three groups: *Language and Language Acquisition*, *Communication and Culture*, and *Society and Literature*. First, the two groups *Language and Acquisition* and *Communication* contain competence aims that draw on reading, writing, and literary competence. As stated in Chapter One, these competencies improve through reading literature and writing. The competence aims include

work with, and discussions about, literary form, style, viewpoint and literary terminology. While instructors can obviously use *A Mercy* to fulfill the competence aims in these two groups, this section will especially focus on the third group, *Culture, Society and Literature*.

4.2 Competence Aim 1

Competence Aim 1 requires that students should be able to interpret a wide selection of texts. Texts can be sonnets, short stories, and novels, and *A Mercy* fits in as a contemporary text in the form of a novel. *A Mercy* is certainly a modern text that expands students' understanding of colonial / renaissance literature as the novel also deals with society and 17th century politics.

To reach this aim it would be natural to analyze the whole text, but it can also be useful to start with the title of the novel, to analyze it separately, and to illustrate context from which students can interpret the whole text later. The following section will examine how the title can be interpreted and how it can create a context to the novel, as well as demonstrate an alternative to how a teacher can employ the interpretation in the classroom.

4.2.1 Suggested Interpretations of the Title

A Mercy's title conjures up many ideas about its meaning, and has strong relevance to the novel's subject matter. Does it describe the Vaark farm and the sheltering role it has for the orphans who live there, or does it describe Jacobs' choice of Florens over her mother?

The interpretation that Morrison based the title on the role of the Vaark farm is well supported in the story. Jacob came to the farm from an orphanage and found love with his wife Rebekka who had grown up in a loveless home. The servants, Lina and Sorrow, were abandoned and rejected by their previous owners, and Florens was rejected and unwanted by her mother. In the shelter of Jacob Vaark's farm the characters find freedom and peace, even in their toilsome lives.

To these characters, the Vaark farm represents a second chance at what can resemble happiness, a place where they may be themselves and practice the way of life they want. The Vaark farm, as Morrison states in an National Public Radio interview in 2008, is «the earliest version of American individuality.» Like settlers in the New World, the inhabitants of the Vaark farm search for a second chance, to find a sanctuary for all individuals and religions.

The last two pages of the novel suggest the second interpretation, where Florens' mother says the following: «it was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human.»(Morrison 2008:164-165). Florens' mother describes Jacob's action of saving her daughter from a traumatic future at the D'Ortega plantation as a mercy. In her eyes, the act was not a miracle of God, but an act of mercy shown by a human. Florens' life at the plantation would have been as her mother described her own, like «an open wound that cannot heal.» (Morrison 2008:161). Her mother chose to see the separation of herself and her daughter as a mercy instead of a tragedy, because she knew her daughter was in the hands of a kind man, and not prey for sexual abusers as she had been.

This interpretation also opens the possibility of analyzing the novel from the perspective of black female experience, including issues such as what have been called «the triple burden» of race, class and gender, and the systematic separation of African American families in the slavery era. By analyzing the title of the novel students may find themes they can go on to study, which can lead them to a deeper understanding of the novel and American history. They may hopefully come to the conclusion that the time *A Mercy* is set to was an important time that also influences today's society.

4.2.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

Instructors can use a title analysis for several purposes. As a point of departure, the teacher can ask students to reflect on the meaning of the title and to brainstorm on what the novel will be about, but the teacher can also employ activities that can lead to the fulfillment of several competence aims as in the following example:

Eikrem (1999:63) describes an activity named *Positive or Negative*. She designed the activity to encourage personal involvement in texts and vocabulary, and it aims to make students interact with the language and enhance their language awareness. The activity asks students to assign emotional value to words to decide whether they carry positive or negative connotations.

In *A Mercy's* case, *Positive or Negative* can be altered to fulfill the competence aim, while the teacher can ask her students to use the title as a starting point, and to reflect on its meaning. The instructor can also add words/expressions from the text where they ask students to place them into one of two columns: «*positive*» or «*negative*», depending on how students perceive the words. It is important to tell the students that there are no *right* or *wrong* answers, and that the purpose of the

activity is for them to be able to explain *why* it is positive or negative to them. In the end, teachers divide students in groups of three to explain and discuss why they have placed the words in the columns, and what connotations they have to the title. Classes can also use this exercise to discuss such a polarization of negative and positive words; does words need to be either positive or negative or can they be both? The teacher can go on to address students' attitudes about positive and negative connotations, as well point out dualistic attitudes towards certain words.

The teacher can also ask students about the results of their brainstorming, and later in the course when they finish the novel she can follow up by asking them to compare their first assumptions with what they now know to encourage a literary discussion on the relationship between the title and the content.

If the teacher is alert, and makes sure to provide students with the terminology they need for the discussion, *Positive or Negative* will enhance students' literary analytic vocabulary, as well as literary language in both written and oral language. The following discussion of the title interpretation will train communication skills and further exercise the use of literary terminology. In summation, these activities also train the basic skills of reading, speaking, and writing.

4.3 Competence Aim 2

Competence Aim 2 requires students to analyze two or more longer fictional literary works. The interpretation of *A Mercy* is transferable to this aim, and the interpretation and analysis complement each other and give the students the opportunity to explore a novel and its context.

A partial analysis can be relevant to fulfill this competence aim. I would suggest an analysis of the ending of *A Mercy*, as it presents themes such as historical and personal experience, women's rights as well as characteristics of the African American oral tradition like the meaning of Florens' return to the Vaark farm, all of which are relevant to this and other competence aims e.g., aim four and six. The following section suggests a method for how the ending may be analyzed, and it explores what students may find when they do this assignment. The section also highlights how the teacher can guide her students to a better understanding of context. At the end, it will also suggest an activity the teacher can employ to address the competence aim in the classroom.

4.3.1 Suggested Analysis of The Ending

The ending in *A Mercy* portrays Florens as she returns to the Vaark farm. The blacksmith has rejected her, she may have killed him, and she is walking bloody and broken down back to the community she once left without hesitation or regret. Florens returns to the site of her own unhappiness, and at first her return may be interpreted as a defeat.

A Mercy's ending can be read and interpreted in multiple ways, but it is important to read it from a culturally sympathetic perspective to fully understand the African American symbolism of the events. Morrison's own opinions of her novels' ending is also an important aspect the reader needs to keep in mind. In a National Public Radio interview (Ulaby 2008) Morrison said that to her, an ending of a novel or a story does not need to be what the majority considers a *happy ending*. To her, personal achievements, an epiphany, a reconciliation, or any type of personal felt happiness, are worthy denouements of a novel. Morrison said that if the reader could trace any movement towards maturity in themselves, that too is an ending, because it has done something to them, even just created a feeling.

In addition to knowing Morrison's relationship to endings, it is crucial to interpret the ending from an African American literary critical perspective. To a white student in upper secondary school, Morrison's view above may present a challenge in the analysis and interpretation of the ending in *A Mercy*. This is why it is important to provide students with background knowledge needed to analyze texts they are not accustomed to read, and especially genres they have not interacted with before. In *A Mercy's* case, the essay «Rootedness» (Morrison 1984:198-202) can be used as preparation for the analysis, as a non-fictional introduction to Morrison's world of literature. This essay gives students knowledge about Morrison's and the African American novel's relationship to ancestors, it also explains Morrison's view on the novel form, and literature's challenge of being political and beautiful in the same time. By selecting sections from African American- and female literary criticism, like Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* and Morrison's «Rootedness, the teacher can assign them to students and give them a stronger foundation from which they can analyze the novel. Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* aims to explore the two Anglo-American and the French feminist literary criticism, and in the former part there is a eight pages long text on «Images of Women' criticism» (42). This text describes a well known critical approach that was popular in the 1970's. The approach focuses on how stereotypes of women, created by both men and women, are portrayed and appear in fiction. The text is informative, and it can help students become aware of

whether or not Morrison gets her readers to think about these female stereotypes in *A Mercy*, or if they recognize any in the fiction they read in general.

As a counterweight to the first impression, Morrison's «Rootedness» (2008) offers a different interpretation of the ending: «When the hero returns to the fold-returns to the tribe-it is seen by certain white critics as a defeat, by others as a triumph, and that is a difference in what the aims of the art are.» (Morrison, Denard 2008:63). Morrison emphasizes that the ending can be interpreted in more than one way, but that the reader needs to take Morrison's incorporation of African American traditional characteristics into account. While a traditional white narrative perspective might interpret Florens' return to her roots as a defeat, an African American traditional reading will interpret the return as a reinforcement of the African American traditional values of community and solidarity, and a triumph.

The second to last chapter is narrated by Florens in the present tense, and she mentions her feet like she did in the first chapter. While they in the beginning were soft and delicate, she now wants her mother to know that they have become as hard as Cypress, a tree with extremely hard wood. Morrison use of imagery contributes to the literary part of the analysis, allowing students to practice the full range of the traditional literary analysis. According to Florens her feet are hard like Cypress because of her long, shoeless walk from the blacksmith to the Vaark farm. The change in her feet is transferable to her personality, and can be interpreted as personal growth, as she has experienced love and loss. The change can also be seen as a reconciliation, Florens' reconciliation with her life as it is. Either way, her soles have become hard and impenetrable, physically, but also mentally as she has become more resistant to the mental burdens the slave life represent.

4.3.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

To analyze the ending of *A Mercy*, students must have read the whole novel and remember the events and changes that have taken place in the course of the narrative. For students to be able to remember these events, they ought to carry out a version of Eikrem's *Filling in Boxes* activity (1999:77). Eikrem designed this activity to exercise students' language interaction and to encourage personal involvement in the text. The performance of the activity will also enhance students' language awareness and expand their vocabulary, as they must look up unfamiliar words (77).

To prepare for the activity the teacher creates a template such as the one below; they are partially completed to function as an example:

Florens	Rebekka	Lina	Sorrow
African American, orphan, given to Jacob as compensation for debt, obsessed with blacksmith, practically adopted by Lina, sent to get the blacksmith to heal Rebekka, is the narrator of the story and is also the protagonist, hurts the blacksmith's adoptive son, attacks blacksmith, walks home bloody, writes her story on the floor of Jacob's mansion	British, from a heartless family, practically sold by her parents, post-ordered, Jacob's wife, friends with Lina, sick, widowed, healed by blacksmith, suddenly religious, starts to treat Lina badly, turns to the settlers for community instead of the others at the farm, tries to sell Florens and Sorrow	Indian, left by former family, first woman on the farm, takes care of Rebekka and Florens, dislikes Sorrow, warns Florens about the blacksmith, baths naked, does not trust Rebekka and Jacob's instincts, has a strong rootedness in her Indian heritage,	Orphan, imaginary friend Twin, saved by the sawyers, raped, pregnant, miscarriage, pregnant by deacon, gives birth to baby girl, renames herself Complete,

The template should include the most vital pieces of notes about the characters throughout the novel.

Classes can split the activity into two parts - an individual section and a group work section. The individual section is active through the entire novel and students take notes they feel are important to the characters' development and to the progress of the plot. When they have completed the reading students gain a complete overview of the most important events in the characters' lives. By tracing their experiences and thoughts in the separate characters' boxes, students may trace possible changes in the characters' behaviors, appearances or personalities. The teacher can then ask students to reflect on the changes they find, and then divide the class into groups of three.

In the group work section, the teacher can ask students to discuss the changes they have discovered in the characters, to compare their findings, but also to try to analyze what these changes represent. The teacher can also follow this activity by assigning one of the suggested non-fictional or critical texts and ask students to use them to analyze the instance when Florens returns to the Vaark farm or the women's situation as unprotected females when the novel ends.

These activities have many functions. The template can provide the teacher with a way to monitor students' reading progress and their understanding of the plot while the group work encourages student discussions and the activation and training of their literary and analytic vocabulary. The

group work also enables students to share their knowledge with each other to build literary competence together, and to help each other develop new and interesting analyses.

4.4 Competence Aim 3

Competence Aim 3 requires students to evaluate a movie and other artistic expressions. Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved* was dramatized in the form of a major motion picture where the screenplay follows the text in the book, and can be applied to this aim. Studios have yet to dramatize *A Mercy*; however, the benefit of using a movie derived from Toni Morrison, like *Beloved*, is that many of the themes in *A Mercy* are also present in *Beloved*. According to Jane Atteridge Rose in «Approaches to Morrison's Work: Pedagogical», Morrison's «central issues - thematic and stylistic - have not changed much over the thirty-plus years that she has been writing» (2003:24), therefore *Beloved* can be used to broaden students' understanding of Morrison. It is important to note that *A Mercy* is historical precedent to, and functions as a prequel to *Beloved*, and therefore the two stories complement each other. The movie *Beloved* also offers an opportunity for the students to compare the historical context of the two works, as they are set in separate historical periods.

4.4.1 Suggested Teaching Activities

To fulfill this competence aim, teachers can allow students to view the dramatization of *Beloved*. To ensure that students evaluate the film, instead of just watching it, the teacher needs to make an formal evaluating frame of the in-house movie. The lights must stay on, and the teacher can prepare students by generating a discussion before the screening. The teacher can ask students about recurring themes, characteristics of narrative techniques in Toni Morrison's authorship, and which examples they believe will be recognizable in the film. The teacher can then provide a follow up by presenting Morrison's style and question whether it is «realistic» or «magical realism», or even discuss themes such as slavery and its effect on America and Great Britain's culture and society, to prepare students for the tone and feel of the movie.

The teacher can also present students with a question sheet. Teachers may use some of the following questions on the question form for *Beloved*:

Describe who the following characters are:

- Beloved
- Paul D.?
- Denver?
- Sethe?
- And what are the relationships between the characters above?
- Would you define *Beloved* as a ghost movie? Explain your answer.
- What themes do you feel are present in the movie?
- Would you recommend the movie to your friends? Explain your answer.
- Would you say that the movie is in line with what you know about the African American oral tradition? Explain your answer.

When the movie has ended, the teacher divides the class into groups where they can discuss their answers and compare their findings. When they have shared opinions in groups, the students should pair up with a different student and try to explore the themes they felt were present in the film. The teacher must make them aware that they have to support their opinions and arguments with examples and events in the movie, as well as ask them to write down their findings and arguments in an evaluation of the movie. The teacher can either ask the students to prepare to present their findings to the class or explain that they will hand in the text as the teacher will evaluate and grade it.

This activity fulfills the competence aim and exercises basic skills such as speaking and writing. The students are supposed to discuss their findings, and use and practice their literary vocabulary. By watching a film, students are not limited to reading about the massive trauma victims of slavery were exposed to, but able to see it, and even feel it, as visual impressions can be more powerful than words. With that in mind, the teacher should also be aware that the movie contains sexual, violent and disturbing scenes that may make some students uncomfortable.

4.5 Competence Aim 4

Competence Aim 4 requires that students interpret literary texts and other cultural expressions from a cultural, historical, and societal perspective. Toni Morrison invests a tremendous amount of time in historical research for her novels, which results in *A Mercy's* realistic, historical setting in the New World during the 17th century. The historical accuracy in Morrison's portrayal of early America gives a valuable and complementary viewpoint to the perspectives asked for in this competence aim. Toni Morrison's background as an African American during the Civil Rights Movement, and her involvement in contemporary politics as in the election of President Barack Obama are worth exploring, and they can also function as starting points for further exploration of literary texts produced in relevant cultural and historical periods.

To fulfill this competence aim, a study of the setting of *A Mercy* is relevant. The setting shows the environmental, social and political context of the novel, and students can find much information through their interpretation. By comparing the novel's setting with non-fictional historical sources, students can evaluate and use a critical approach to Morrison's rendering of the 17th century, and discuss whether it is representative of the time or not. The following section will suggest an interpretation of the setting, as well as how a teacher and his students can work with the interpretation in the classroom.

4.5.1 Suggested Interpretation of the Setting

As Morrison explains in interviews (Morrison 2008), the reason *A Mercy's* settings are as vivid and lively as they are is due to months of research about 17th century, fauna, wildlife, and political and social conditions. Ropjukwat¹ explains that the current national history curriculum, the book *Tidslinjer* begins every chapter about a new period with a short fictional narrative. The narrative helps students empathize and identify with a period of time they have not experienced themselves. I believe that *A Mercy* has the same effect as these narrative introductions, as it provides a historical setting and background for what students will need to know to be able to fulfill upcoming competence aims.

The plot occurs in the latter half of the 17th century. The story begins in 1682 when America was a sanctuary for religious refugees, such as the Protestant villages Jacob travels through and the Presbyterian settlement close to his farm. The country had already begun to grow financially and plantation owners had started to import slaves from Europe and Africa (Jordan, Walsh 2008:11-12) to increase their workforce and profits. The fact that poor, white Englishmen were kidnapped, sold, and shipped to the New World as slaves is unknown to many, and the analysis of *A Mercy* can be used together with Jordan and Walsh's *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America* (2008). This book is about white slavery and its background, and students should read parts of the book to challenge the dominant image of exclusively black slavery.

The exact site of the novel's plot is East coast North America. The Europeans, mainly British, French, and Hispanics have reached the northern coast and settled colonies in Virginia and Maryland. The beginning is set in Maryland where Jacob rides to see Senhor D'Ortega. From there he travels back to his farm, the Vaark farm, which is located in Virginia.

The political circumstances in America at the time play an important role in the novel's setting. The story takes place directly after the first civil conflict in the American colonies, Bacon's Rebellion, which led to harsh treatment and unfair laws for blacks. Virginia, at the time, was led by Governor William Berkeley, whose friendly politics towards Native Americans provoked the uproar among frontiersmen, servants, and poor whites and blacks. The rebellion led to increased oppression of

¹ Tom Ropjukwat, teacher of history at Breivika upper secondary school. Conversation 04.25.2012.

blacks and a set of rules which included that any white had the right to kill any black for any reason (Morrison 2008:8).

Bacon's Rebellion is a historical event, and students can find complementary information in American history books like for example excerpts from Tom Thomas' *Bacon's Rebellion, 1676: America's First Revolution* (2009). This book provides an introduction to the historical setting of Bacon's Rebellion and goes back 35 years before the rebellion to explain the background for it, and also why British William Berkeley's politics ended up as the trigger of Bacon's rebellion. Using historical sources will also provide experience in reading non-fictional texts as national competence aims require.

Social conditions in early America affect all the characters in the novel. Oppression was not restrictively dependent on the color of your skin either; women were also the victims of discrimination. Governments prohibited them from owning land and they were expected to be «pleasant» and hard working at the same time. The personal and individual safety of women in 17th century America was non-existent, as is especially evident when Rebekka and the other women are left alone and destitute after Jacob's death. The book *Women's Roles in Seventeenth-Century America* edited by Merril D. Smith (2008) can be used as a non-fictional supplement to add historical context to the lives of the women in the novel as it has interesting and engaging descriptions and information about women's roles in America in the time which *A Mercy* is set.

An analysis of the situation of the Vaark farm's female inhabitants can be a starting point for discussions about women's rights. *A Mercy* exposes the harsh reality women faced in the 17th century, and the novel can further function as a launching point to discuss the legal and societal conditions that were later taken up by the suffrage movement and women's rights in contemporary USA and Great Britain. *A Mercy* and women rights are a relevant theme for the competence aim for an in-depth study in the English subject «English Speaking Literature and Culture».

The analysis of the setting in *A Mercy* can also lead to a greater understanding of the historical and cultural background of USA and Great Britain, and about how the population of the New World expanded and evolved.

4.5.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

To fulfill this aim an interpretation of the setting in *A Mercy* is necessary. An interpretation of the setting of the novel can give students insight to Native American, black, and white backgrounds in America, as well as the background and history of modern American society.

Teachers should use an altered version of Eikrem's activity *Tracing Characters* (1999:72). In Eikrem's version, students are supposed to trace characters' characteristics to give them a context where they can explore the personalities further. In this case the teacher must make a template like the one below, some boxes are partially completed to function as an example:

Name	Florens	Rebekka	Lina	Sorrow
Origin	African	Great Britain	America	Unknown
Culture	African	Native American		
Status in the New World	African Americans, equal citizens, but oppressed and discriminated against even today	Widowed female, owns land, but exposed to danger		
Culture	African	British	Indian	Unknown
Hopes	To be loved	To be safe		To be complete
Worries			Loosing her community	Loneliness
Who are their descendants, and what conditions do they live under today?	African Americans, equal citizens, but oppressed and discriminated against even today	North-American women, suffragette movement, equal to men in theory, but research show that they make less money than men	Indians, reservations, assimilated	

As in Eikrem's version of *Tracing Characters*, this activity aims to encourage students' personal involvement and empathy. Students will fill in the form and through their individual work, the activity also trains language interaction and awareness, and help students connect language to emotions and feelings (72). The difference between the original activity and this version is that the characters are not the ones who are really in focus, but the peoples they represent. Florens represents the African Americans, Rebekka the white women, and the Brits who came to America, Lina the Native Americans who were oppressed and killed, and Sorrow the ones who did not belong to any obvious group or culture, but who still were a part of the Black Atlantic culture Paul Gilroy

writes about in *The Black Atlantic*. The four women origin in different cultures, but as their lives and surroundings change they are joined in a new, common culture which transcends ethnicity and demonstrates what Gilroy describes as a transnational cultural construction in his book. Gilroy's theory about a common transatlantic culture can add to the students' understanding of the relationships between the characters as each of the women has totally different backgrounds, but at the same time they belong to a common community which have joined them together, affected them personally and will forever be a part of them. By interpreting the characters' origin, culture, status in the New World, their hopes and worries, and how their descendants live today, students will be able to gain a wide understanding of the cultural, historical and societal perspective of *A Mercy*, USA and Great Britain.

If possible, the teacher should expand the activity and encourage students to use the internet or other digital sources to carry out further research to supply, or double check, their findings in various forms and contexts. In this way, students can learn to be critical of what they read, and to practice the last basic skill - to be able to use digital tools.

4.6 Competence Aim 5

Competence Aim 5 requires students to discuss non-fictional texts with a cultural and societal focus. Students can complete this aim by using a thematically related non-fictional text. By applying Morrison's essay «Memory, Creation, and Writing» from *Thought* (1984) students can discuss Morrison's own thoughts about her work as well as her beliefs and motives for writing. According to Rose (2003:24) «Memory, Creation, and Writing» functions as Morrison's own «preface or essay»(24) that informs her audience of her work, and it will come in handy for students who read her work for the first time. Morrison's text «Rootedness» is also applicable to the competence aim, and the texts provide a strong foundation for fulfilling the competence aims above, as well as for providing a deeper insight into American culture.

4.6.1 Suggested Teaching Activities

For this competence aim, «Rootedness» in Hazel Ervin's *African American Literary Criticism 1773-2000* (198-202) is pertinent. In the four pages Morrison discusses African American culture, the function of the novel in society, and the role of politics in literature. She reflects on how the presence of an ancestor affects the African American novel and on the oral tradition in African American literature. Morrison also explains how she sees the novel as an art form created for the middle class, and stresses her opinion that writing needs to be about the community, the village or you to be anything at all. Morrison believes that literature needs to be political, if not, it will be tainted, and therefore she presents the challenge of literature as a need to be «unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.» (Morrison 1984:202).

Students can be tempted to read the piece relatively fast and therefore miss important points, but if the teacher provides questions to catch the essence of the piece, students will profit greatly from the activity. For «Rootedness» the following questions are suggested:

- What does Toni Morrison regard as *black literature*?
- Who were the intended audience of the novel, and why?
- What does Morrison say is the function of the African American novel?
- What are the things Toni Morrison tries to incorporate into her fiction? And what is her motivation for doing so?
- Why is the *ancestor* so important to Toni Morrison?
- What does Toni Morrison think about art without political influence, and why does she feel this way?
- What does Toni Morrison mean by «music is no longer exclusively ours», and are you able to find any resemblances between music and her style of writing?

These questions serve to keep students alert while reading, and the answers they find will be educational in a socio-cultural way; they describe important sides of Toni Morrison's authorship, and her view on literature. To include oral practice and reflection on the text, the teacher can encourage a discussion within smaller groups of students. Alternative discussion themes can be:

- Is Rap and Hip-hop music reserved for African Americans only?
- What do your ancestors mean to you?
- What is art without politics?

These questions aim to bridge the gap between the themes in the text and make the similarities between them and the students' lives visible. All adolescents in contemporary Norway have an opinion of Rap and Hip-hop culture, they all have ancestors, and they are on a daily basis affected by politics, so the themes for discussion can be used to teach that *A Mercy*'s content is valid to students' lives as well as to the characters in the novel. The discussion may bridge the gap between the students and what they experience as the unknown in the novel.

4.7 Competence Aim 6

Competence Aim 6 requires students to discuss the United States' and Great Britain's cultural positions today and how these positions relate to their historical and cultural backgrounds. In a way, *A Mercy* proves useful for the understanding US's and Great Britain's cultural influence on today's world. The settlers and the Africans were in America because of Great Britain's involvement in the Triangular Trade and their role in colonialism. *A Mercy* is a tremendous starting point for discussions, and the novel's setting serves as a historical starting point as it is an important aspect of the beginning of the British Empire. The presence of African American culture in contemporary music and clothing can also be a starting point from which students can be asked to discuss their way backwards in time to reveal the origin of African, and other influences, on American and British culture.

To understand the United States' and Great Britain's cultural position today, students need to be aware of the countries' historical and cultural backgrounds. By studying these themes, students will become familiar with the Triangular Trade, as well as its effects and eventually its role in the world. Paul Gilroy writes about the intricate effects of the Atlantic trade in his book *The Black Atlantic*, where he claims that there are no African, European or Caribbean cultures or peoples, but rather one black Atlantic transnational culture which transcends ethnicity; a culture which is common for all those affected by the Atlantic slave trade. The book is complex, but the teacher can use its topic to illustrate the similarities between cultures affected by the Atlantic trade, and to decide whether they are, in fact, a common culture. In the first chapter Gilroy discusses The Black Atlantic as a counterculture of Modernity and he states the following about how he pictures the transnational culture:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship-- a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion-- is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. (...) Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (Gilroy 1993:4)

This imagery is strikingly fitting, and it can be used to assist students in understanding Gilroy's theory and to enter into a discussion on the Triangular Trade. The next section will suggest how themes in *A Mercy* can be interpreted, and while some of the elements are directly relevant to the competence aims, others will indirectly also serve to provide historical and cultural knowledge about the historical and cultural background of the United States and Great Britain. The end of the section will suggest how a teacher can work with the competence aim in the classroom.

4.7.1 Suggested Interpretation of Themes

In her 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison has taken a greater chronological leap than she has in her earlier fiction. While she previously set most of her stories in the recent past, she has now moved back to the 17th century, the site of the beginning of New World slavery.

The reason why I believe Toni Morrison and her work, *A Mercy*, would be eligible parts of a literary approach are many: The novel not only addresses the racial division between blacks and whites, but also highlights the conflict between settlers and Native Americans. The macro-perspective of the novel draws attention to the political and social conditions in the New World, while the micro-level contextualizes and problematizes the challenges of the characters that live in the community at the Vaark farm. The author explores each of their individual backgrounds and, in doing so, illustrates the diverse destinies that American slavery helped to create. The framing narrative focuses on the community they share, the black experience, and the black female experience.

Black Experience – Contextualized

The servants on the Vaark farm are not exclusively black. The only black slave is a young girl named Florens, who serves together with the red haired Sorrow, and Lina, a young Native American. This racially mixed composition may seem diverting to the theme of the black experience, but in *A Mercy* Morrison has traveled back to the New World to describe the era segregation and institutionalized racism from whites to blacks was emerging.

In the introduction of Jacob's chapter, the narrator reveals his thoughts:

When that «people's war» lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter opposing tribes and running the Carolinas of their land—spawned a thicket of laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason (...) they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. (Morrison 2008:8)

The war Jacob refers to as the «people's war» is Bacon's Rebellion. The people who participated were both black and white, but as his quote informs us, the consequences only affected the black participants who were prosecuted and hanged. The rebellion led to what is seen as the first step towards racial oppression in America as blacks were labeled as less worth than whites, and they were not allowed to bear arms, travel alone or to arrange gatherings. Morrison writes that the beginning of white-to-black racial oppression in the New World was this historical event, even though few are aware of its importance. By including this context in the novel, Morrison not only helps her readers to understand the dynamics between the characters, she also encourages her readers to become more aware of how the dynamics of racial inequality and oppression developed.

Another theme related to slavery is the blacksmith's critique of Florens. This theme highlights the problems with the different types of enslavement that the novel sketches and not just the explicit and stated slavery of Florens, Sorrow, and Lina; Willard and Scully's indentured servitude is examined, as is Rebekka's practical enslavement within the village, as she is forced to assimilate to their way of life to survive as a widow. The village does not force Rebekka to change, but her need for protection and acceptance from the villagers makes her adapt to their way of life. In contrast to the enslavement of the other Vaark farm servants, the blacksmith criticizes Florens for having enslaved herself. He does not want to be with her because her obsession with him has made her suppress herself and give dominion over herself to another.

In sum, *A Mercy* features new ways of looking at enslavement and uses history to remind the reader that slavery does not need to take the same form as its traditional and narrow definition.

Furthermore, the novel highlights the truth that race and skin color were not the original motives behind enslavement in North America.

Community

The communities in *A Mercy* differ greatly from the ones we are used to seeing in Morrison's fiction. The Vaark farm is the community of the people who live there, and as opposed to the exclusively black communities shown in *Sula*; the people in *A Mercy* are not solely black, but a mixture of white, black and Indian. Readers often analyze the differences between characters as one of their collective weaknesses. To the contrary, these differences are the source of strength that keep them bonded together. Despite their different backgrounds, races, and stations, they all work towards the same goal of building and improving their community.

The Vaark community's counterpart is the village, or settlement, where a group of Presbyterian immigrants live. Jacob Vaark decided to build his house outside the settlement and therefore becomes an outsider in the eyes of the villagers. Although Jacob does business with the settlers, his farm is not a part of the settlement, but rather an individual entity. This perspective in regards to the position of the farm within the larger community is in line with Morrison's intention, as explained in a National Public Radio interview:

I wanted this group to be sort of the earliest version of American individuality. American self-sufficiency. And I think I wanted to show the dangers of that. You really do need a community, you do need a structure, whether it's a church or a religion like Rebekka thinks, or whether it is just (...) belonging to a military unit, or belonging to a tribe. (...) But that's the tension. Then, in an ad hoc world and it's a tension now. How to be an individual, and yourself, and how to adore privacy, and at the same time belong to something larger than you are. And that tension is always going to be there. Always. (Ulaby 2008)

In her essay «Community» Lisa Cade Wieland (2003:83-88) describes Morrison's belief in the importance of community as strong. She describes Morrison's childhood in an Ohio neighborhood as a setting where community solidarity was strong and everyone contributed in raising the neighborhood children. Wieland writes that Morrison's childhood is the foundation of her extensive incorporation of the importance of community in her novels. Wieland notes that for Morrison, even though a community is flawed, an individual's personality is constructed through, and inseparable from it. As opposed to the traditional Western notions where identity sometimes is seen as a

reflection of an inner essence, Morrison uses her novels to launch «representations of community which suggest that identity is constructed through social relations.» (Wieland 2003:84). The way Morrison portrays community carries positive signals to adolescents as they can become inspired to nurture their social relationships in their communities instead of escaping them like some does during the years they come of age.

According to Wieland, a character in Morrison's fiction that chooses to stay in his or her community will feel complete even though the community is flawed and will create other restrictions for them (85). On the other hand, Morrison also creates characters that leave their community. In those instances, Morrison uses them as an example of what happens to the individuals who are totally self-reliant. She explains it as a need «to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see – this is what will happen.» (Ervin 1999:202). By historical connection, Wieland explains that Morrison sees a community as the bearer of a cultural memory the individual needs to be a part of to become whole. The individuals in Morrison's fiction who chose to leave their communities tend to experience tragedy. In addition, they are generally considered outsiders and a threat to those within communities.

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison therefore complicates the definition of community as she portrays the inhabitants, and small community, of the Vaark farm as outsiders to the community of the settlers. To the settlers, the people at the farm are strange and not to be trusted. This distrust is best exemplified when Rebekka, who has the same religious background as the settlers, approaches them to have her child baptized and later as a widow who wants to join their congregation. In both examples, the settlers view her with skepticism and question her intentions. Rebekka is friends with an Indian and treats her slaves like her friends, relationships that the Presbyterians consider sinful. At the end of the novel, when Rebekka assimilates to the Presbyterian way of life. She employs the characteristics of Morrison's returning community member as she returns to the values, traditions, and community she once belonged to back in England, despite the fact that it seemed flawed to her at first.

4.7.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

To be able to place the events in the novel in cultural and historical context is vital for understanding Morrison's idea of community. In this connection, the teacher can present a version of Eikrem's activity *A Route of Escape* (1999:92). This activity aims to personally involve students, train human relations, reactions and empathy. In addition, it allows practice of cultural and geographical knowledge, while the discussion practices listening, speaking and vocabulary.

Eikrem's *A Route of Escape* is constructed to match a short story, but in the case of *A Mercy* it will have a different perspective than the original. In this version, the teacher needs to find a world map, preferably an interactive one she can display on a big screen. Eduplace.com has a practical one.

With the map displayed, the teacher should place students into groups of three and give the following quote:

During the 1600s and 1700s, people who lived on the continents of Europe, Africa, and North America all had products that the others needed. For example, Europeans produced furniture and tools, while colonists in North America had fish and lumber. Many ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean carrying these and other goods to trade between the continents. The three continents formed the points of large triangles, giving the trade routes their name. (Eduplace.com 2012)

After students have read the quote, the teacher can give students one of the following assignments:

1. Great Britain and Europe – What was their role in the Triangular Trade and what were their commodities? How has the Triangular trade effected today's culture?
2. The Thirteen North American Colonies - What was their role in the Triangular Trade and what were their commodities? How has the Triangular trade effected today's culture?
3. Africa - What was their role in the Triangular Trade and what were their commodities? How has the Triangular trade effected today's culture?
4. The West Indies - What was their role in the Triangular Trade and what were their commodities? How has the Triangular trade affected today's culture?

When students have completed their tasks the teacher puts the groups with the same assignment together and asks them to discuss their findings and opinions. When the groups have discussed between themselves and shared their analysis, they will present their work to the rest of the class. If

necessary, the teacher can sum up the session with additional information/perspectives she feels may be missing.

This activity trains all the basic skills, as students must read, speak, write, and use digital tools for research. Students will also need to discuss their assignment and opinions within their groups, as well as be able to explain them when they pair up with other groups for the same assignment.

4.8 Competence Aim 7

Competence Aim 7 requires students to discuss cultural events and news from English speaking countries. To draw connections from a literary work directly to contemporary events and news can present a challenge, but there are other ways that students can utilize literature. Reading *A Mercy* and Morrison's non-fictional texts provide a contextual and referential frame, from which students perceive and interpret contemporary news and cultural happenings. Exposure to literature, in addition to the exposure to contemporary music like rap and hip-hop, enriches students' understanding of the culture of the country they study, which will result in an expanded understanding of, and greater personal participation in the events that occur there.

4.8.1 Suggested Teaching Activities

Historical fiction such as Morrison's can function as a context from which contemporary media such as television and the internet can be explored. Although not completely, historical fiction can illuminate important questions that are relevant to the news students see on TV and the internet. It is impossible to suggest an activity that will be applicable to the news of the future, but themes can be suggested that *A Mercy* can provide background information for.

Issues such as racism, violence, ethnocentrism, women's rights and community are important themes around the world at any given time. The themes present in *A Mercy* gives students the opportunity to reflect on them and to form an opinion and understanding of them. This reflection makes these themes easier to spot and interpret in applicable news from the English-speaking world. The non-fictional texts written by Morrison are also useful as they present many thoughts on, and information about, the black experience in America.

A Mercy cannot provide an understanding of all cultural events and news from the English-speaking world, but historical fiction gives a foundation that can help students expand their understanding of news from the English-speaking world.

4.9 Competence Aim 8

Competence Aim 8 requires students to complete an in-depth study of a chosen literary and cultural topic. For this competence aim, Morrison and *A Mercy* offer a wide selection of literary themes throughout the novel, along with cultural background through Morrison's biographical and non-fictional works. The book *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (1994) offers a wide selection of perspectives on her and others' writings, and provides students with ideas about how to write, and what to write about. The in-depth study does not need to involve *A Mercy*, however the book is a good example among many others, and the historical information gained through the novel, and through Morrison's background, give students a solid foundation from which they can interpret other literary works.

The characters in *A Mercy* provide a rich register of personal traits, and the characters represent certain issues, themes, and historical types of people and events that students can use as points of departure for their in-depth study. The following section will suggest a summary and interpretation of the characters, and ends in an example of various approaches students can use for their in-depth studies.

4.9.1 Suggested Interpretation of Characters

By the time students reach upper secondary school they will have analyzed characters in fictional texts using a conventional New Critical approach to reading literature. In «English Speaking Literature and Culture» they have the chance to build on this skill.

The students can be asked to analyze whether the characters are *flat* or *round*, what the characters' actions and motivations are, or to consider the author's motivation for casting and creating her characters. In *A Mercy's* case the latter task is very possible as Morrison has written, and talked widely about the intentions for her work, and about how her characters help develop her narrative vision. In the following section I will suggest one way in which the characters in *A Mercy* might be analyzed.

Florens

Florens is the protagonist of *A Mercy*. In the novel's introduction, Florens is approximately sixteen years old, yet also the same age as when it ends. In between, we are taken back to her childhood at the D'Ortega plantation and on a journey that comes to change her life and define her for ever. The journey Florens embarks on is her personal quest to find freedom, happiness and self.

Florens does not know the identity of her father. However, given the circumstances of plantation life, while also taking into account her mother's story in the end of the novel, she is most likely the result of one of many rapes of her mother. During Florens' childhood, her mother also feared for her daughters safety and future. As a young girl, Florens caught the eye of Senhor D'Ortega, because she wore high heeled shoes thrown out by their mistress. When Jacob is told to take one of D'Ortega's slaves as payment for a debt, Florens mother sees an opportunity to save her daughter from the life she she describes as «an open wound that cannot heal.» (Morrison 2008:161). Florens, however, views her mother's action as a rejection of herself in favor of her little brother. This experience together with Rebekka's rejection of her at the Vaark farm, turns Florens into a young, insecure girl who is hungry for love and acceptance from others.

At the Vaark farm Florens experiences acceptance from Lina, the Indian servant, who like her mother worries over Florens' soft and delicate soles. Lina believes Florens is the only person in Virginia who «has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady» (Morrison 2008:2). It seems like Lina is worried that the young girl does not have the tough skin she needs to survive as a woman in the rough conditions in the New World.

Florens' hunger for love and acceptance leads her into a sexual relationship with her counterpart, the black *free* blacksmith. She mistakes their relationship for true love, and on his departure, she is lovesick and obsessed to be with him again. Her obsession leads to a violent attack in his home where the blacksmith is badly hurt, and Florens leaves without knowing if he survived.

The novel is Florens' narration to the blacksmith, her explanation to her actions towards him, and a narrative of her journey from, and back to, her community at the Vaark farm. The novel ends in the same place as it starts, with Florens' own words to the blacksmith, as she is writing her story on the floor of Jacob Vaark's abandoned mansion.

At first Florens' personality seemed fragile, she felt alone and rejected, while in the end she sounds strong and powerful. Her journey towards personal liberation was long and violent, and students can find it interesting to explore the Blacksmith's critique of her and her obsession with him, and how it relates to her development. The relationship between the two characters can represent a dependency they may relate to in their own lives, as adolescents often find themselves in a progress where they are growing up and becoming more independent.

Jacob Vaark

Jacob Vaark is the central member of the Vaark community. Jacob is strongly viewed as «the good» slave owner. This is largely due to the fact that, for an extended period of time, Jacob avoids business related to the extreme slavery seen in southern plantations and in the Caribbean.

Jacob is a non-believer who in opposite to the other characters never turns to something bigger than himself, like a religion, community or an ancestor, to seek help or guidance. This feature in Jacob is what Morrison describes as a dangerous characteristic, because she believes that when you disconnect yourself from history and your surroundings it only leads to bad things. Morrison once said, her writing aims «to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see – this is what will happen.» (Morrison, «Rootedness» 339-344). Jacob may be one of the characters who is used to emphasize what Morrison is trying to tell her readers, that they need to stay in touch with their surroundings to do well in life.

Jacob dies from smallpox early in the narrative, after fighting his way from an orphanage in England to his own land in the New World. His literacy and an inheritance from an uncle provides him with a job and later on a home and a new chance at happiness in America, where his trade is in lumber and land. He and his post-order bride, Rebekka, develop a loving relationship, and together with his Indian servant Lina they build the foundation for the community. Largely in part due to the childless marriage and his own childhood and being more motivated by compassion, than by profit, kind hearted Jacob takes in Florens and Sorrow. However, Jacob's kind hearted actions are in sharp contrast to his involvement in the Caribbean slavery. Jacob's morals are questionable and students can use his actions as a point of departure for reflection on his role in slavery, is his involvement in the extreme Caribbean slavery defensible as long as he is kind to the slaves at his farm?

Lina

Like Jacob, Lina's role at the Vaark farm is to be the glue that keeps the different personalities together. She is one of three survivors of an Indian tribe that was infected with the measles. The disease rendered her an orphan, much like many of the others on the farm. Her survival caused Lina to feel guilty. However, her survivors-guilt makes her treasure the solidarity and community she finds at the farm. Lina is set in her ways, but loyal to her surroundings and provides a safety to their community. Lina's personality helps Rebekka be at ease in the New World and the two of them become best friends. Even though Lina was bought to serve, Scully, a servant at a neighboring farm, sees her role at the farm like more of an equal to Jacob and Rebekka, than a slave.

Lina respects and loves Jacob and Rebekka, but her Indian heritage warns her of the white exploitation of the land. She trusts their intentions, but not their instincts. Lina's personality is comforting, safe and like a rock that they can lean on and trust in. She represents the forgotten slaves, the enslaved Indians, but also the strong African American mother and grandmother who Morrison sees as a black cultural treasure (Parker 1979:65). Morrison draws comparisons between the traits of Indian and African characters, as both are in direct contact with their natural and ancestral surroundings and see the supernatural as a natural part of the world. Morrison emphasizes the positive effects of the connection they have to their roots and to nature through Lina's constructive role in the community.

Rebekka

Rebekka is Jacob Vaark's wife, whom he post-ordered by placing an add for a wife in a English newspaper, from England. She was practically sold by her parents, which highlights the lack of power held by women in the 17th century. However, the two of them share a loving marriage. Rebekka finds the six-week long journey to the New World a preferable alternative to the life she was prepared for in England. Rebekka grew up in a pietistic family, where her parents showed her and her siblings little affection. Her pain is great, as none of her own children live to receive her love. Aside from Jacob, her only closer friend is Lina, and the two of them take care of the farm when Jacob goes away on business. Together the two women form a strong bond, but their relationship is tested upon Rebekka's recovery from smallpox.

Rebekka's new found role as an unprotected widow at an unprotected farm forces her to distance herself from Lina in order to be accepted and protected by the church and people from the nearby village. The fact that she has no husband makes her dependent of the protection the settlers can provide for her, and therefore she needs to assimilate to their beliefs and lifestyle, which render her friendship with the Indian Lina impossible. Rebekka is forced to priority their economic and personal safety over their close friendship, but by doing so she also ensures Lina's safety. When Rebekka returns from the church meetings, Florens describes her eyes as being «nowhere and have no inside» and her dress as «dark and quiet» (Morrison 2008:157). The description of Rebekka foretells a dark future for their community, which is later confirmed as she advertises Sorrow and Florens for sale.

Rebekka is a symbol of the condition of the white women the New World. When women were married, they lost all rights to own property, and even though she became recognized by the law and financially independent as a widow, a woman without a man was still an easy target for exploitation and harassment and (Smith 2008:xix-xxi).

Sorrow

The character of Sorrow is complex. She is neither black, white or Indian, but of mixed race with red hair and grey eyes. She grew up on her father's ship. She had never set foot on land until the ship ran aground, and she was left all to herself. Abandoned and orphaned she was taken in by a sawyer before they grew tired of her clumsiness and gave her to Jacob Vaark.

At the farm, Sorrow is close to useless, as she rarely completes her work. She is more interested in her imaginary friend, Twin, than her real surroundings. By creating Twin, Sorrow turns to someone «bigger» than herself, someone outside of her who can guide and comfort her, who allows her to gain support from an outer source. She turns to what to her represents an ancestor; a security and a protector, a support Morrison has said can provide historical connection and protection in life.

Sorrow is repeatedly raped by young boys before she leaves the sawyers, and upon her arrival at the Vaark farm a deacon, most likely from the village, sexually exploits her in the woods.

It appears that Sorrow is mentally absent and naive, as she is surprised each time she finds out that she is pregnant. The first pregnancy results in a stillborn baby, but the second gives her a daughter

that revitalizes her and gives her someone to care for and love. When her daughter is born, Sorrow renames herself *Complete*.

In the course of the novel Sorrow is infected by smallpox, but she survives as the blacksmith heals her with African traditional medicine. Healthy and happy, Sorrow plans an escape towards the novel's end, as she grows to understand Rebekka's plans for her and her baby.

Sorrow's transformation in the novel is remarkable, she goes from simply existing to becoming the most important person in someone's life, a mother. The personal growth she experiences is massive and it can prove interesting for students to try to analyze why Sorrow feels such a change in herself that she changes her name. Is Sorrow's need to mean something to someone caused by herself, or does the reason lie in slavery and its effects?

The Blacksmith

Morrison found the historical background for the character of the blacksmith, while she studied African history. She read that there were free Africans who came to America alongside the Europeans, and she wanted to include one of them in her novel. According to Morrison's interview in *A Mercy's* audiobook, (Morrison 2008) these Africans who traveled to America came for the similar reasons as many Europeans, to explore and to make a better living in the New World.

The blacksmith was hired by Jacob to build an iron gate to his new mansion. It was at the Vaark farm where he met Florens and where they started their short, but passionate relationship.

The blacksmith represents everything that Florens desires. He is dark, handsome, strong and free. He takes pride in himself and his work. All through the novel, the blacksmith's story is omitted, nor is his name revealed. His feelings towards Florens are also unarticulated, which leaves us in the dark as to whether he wants her as badly as she wants him.

The blacksmith seems to be artistic and spiritual as his blacksmith skills are widely known, as is his knowledge of African medicine cures Sorrow and Rebekka's sickness.

Willard and Scully

Willard and Scully are two white-male indentured servants at Jacob Vaark's neighboring farm. Their owner has lent them to Jacob to pay off a debt, and the men enjoy the warm community at the farm.

While Willard exchanged his labor for his passage to the New World, Scully was sold to a church by a man who claimed to be his father. Both of the men work to be freed from their contracts, and in their toilsome lives they have found comfort in each other. The men met while they were fleeing a snowstorm, and ended up spending a night together in a cowshed. In the novel Morrison writes : «there in the warmth of animals, their own bodies clinging together, Scully altered his plans and Willard didn't mind at all.» (Morrison 2008:152), describing Scully's sexual approach towards Willard. The night together revealed their sexuality and the men paired up as friends and lovers.

More than Scully, Willard has a hard time accepting that the blacksmith gives them orders. Asked to assist the blacksmith, as he builds the iron gate, Willard refuses to take orders from a free black man being paid for the labor Willard has to do for free. Morrison casts the white servants to underscore the fact that slavery was not based on the color of your skin. Their presence is important, and they represent another minority group in the novel, as gay men and women in the 17th century were as also oppressed as women and blacks.

4.9.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

This competence aim is open, and students can independently choose their own writing topics. If the teacher uses a literary approach to second language learning as has been suggested, students will already have in depth knowledge of a novel, and this competence aim gives them an opportunity to explore a theme of their choice even further. To illustrate ideas for what students can explore in their in-depth studies I have suggested some topics where students can analyze the characters and what they represent:

- Discuss Florens' role as narrator and character in the novel. How does Morrison's relationship to ancestors relate to the narrative?
- What is Lina's role in the Vaark community? Which well-known character in Morrison's authorship does she represent?
- What relationship do Willard and Scully have, what are their backgrounds? How do the enslavement of Willard and Scully differ from Florens, Sorrow and Lina's?
- Rebekka is left at the Vaark farm as a widow with three slaves. What happens to her relationship to Lina, and why does she suddenly change her life when Jacob dies?

The assignments give a foundation from which students can carry out an in-depth study. The following is only an example; the whole novel offers a wide range of themes students can explore i.e., literary, cultural, and historical like stated above. As an alternative, the teacher can suggest that students carry out a character analysis based on the kinds of characters from *A Mercy*. Whom would they label as round characters and who are flat? As round characters evolve and change, their personalities evolve in terms of dealing with conflict (Britannica.com) and their actions have an effect on the central conflict in the plot. Flat characters on the other hand, tend to be less thoroughly portrayed and have minor roles in the central conflict. To help students trace the characters, the teacher can create a template like the one below and ask the students to fill it in like I have demonstrated:

Character	Florens	Lina	Rebekka	Sorrow	Jacob	Willard and Scully	The black-smith
What does the character look like?		Indian, long hair		Grey eyes, red hair, pregnant	White male, handsome	White males, working men	
What does the character say?		Advises Florens, comforts Rebekka		Little, rarely speaks to others than Twin			

Character	Florens	Lina	Rebekka	Sorrow	Jacob	Willard and Scully	The black-smith
What is the character feeling?	Love, loneliness, rejection, desperation		Loneliness, fright			They care for the women at the farm	Anger towards Florens when she hurts Malik, nothing else
What traits does the character have?	Determination, timelessness		Hard working, determination	Naive, clumsy	Smart, determination, a little greedy, kind		
How does the character respond to other characters?	Friendly, curiously	Brusque, but kind		Naive,	Polite, kindly	Kindly	Happily, carefree
What role does the character have in the central conflict?	Protagonist		Central role, important to the plot			Not important	Heals Rebekka - important
Does the character surprise?	Yes, her attack on the black-smith	a bit, but she acts accordingly to her personality	Yes, her actions towards Lina		Yes, his sudden need for a mansion and more money	No	No
Is the character realistic?	Yes		Yes				

When students answer these questions they will be more aware of the differences in how Morrison has portrayed the characters and the teacher can use their answers from which to launch a discussion of which ones are round and which ones are flat. It would also be interesting to have students explore how the differences and similarities of the characters matter for the novel's community, and whether the traits of the characters help make sense of culture, race, and gender issues in contemporary society. This activity would practice the connection between literary and cultural competence and help students become aware of the relationship between the two competences.

4.10 Three Important Competence Aims

Three important competence aims from Language and Language Acquisition, which are important to literature students, should also be included. They require students to be able to:

- Discuss the connection between form, content and style in sentences and texts.
- To master terminology used to analyze non-fictional literature, film and other esthetic forms of expression.
- Discuss linguistic characteristics in various genres from various periods and regions. (Udir.no, «English Literature and Culture», my translation)

The following section suggests an interpretation of the narrative characteristics that are unique to *A Mercy* and the African American literary tradition. The section reveals what students may encounter in their study of the form, content, style and linguistic characteristics, and it also suggests what students will gain through the study of narration in *A Mercy*.

4.10.1 Suggested Interpretation of Narration

A Mercy displays structure, language, and literary elements that has its origins in the traditional African oral traditions, but Morrison's literature is also rooted in elements of the Western literary tradition. Morrison's fiction is inspired by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner who she wrote her master's thesis on (Espinola 2003:380-382), therefore it is easy to track the traits of modernism in her novels which can turn the reading into a confusing chore for some. Her incorporation of multiple narrators, sliding focus, and oral language and composition may get in the way of the message, however, it also shows how Morrison integrates African American traditions into the Western novel form rather than to return to an original «innocence» of a pure African form. To appreciate her style fully, competence in and knowledge of American and African American literature is necessary, and a teacher of the novel needs to prepare his or her students so they become able to absorb and process the narrative form. The following sections will work to introduce several important Western and African-American characteristics in *A Mercy*.

Structure

A Mercy is divided into twelve chapters. The first and second to last chapters are narrated from the same time and place, by Florens the protagonist. The chapters in between switch between the viewpoint of Floren's first-person present time perspective and the omniscient third-person past tense perspective of the other characters.

The first chapter starts *in medias res* as we are flung into Florens' stream of consciousness. The second to last chapter is narrated in the same way, and both are messages to an unnamed audience – presumably her lost love, the blacksmith. The protagonist narrates these two chapters from Jacob Vaark's empty mansion where Florens is carving her story into the wooden floor.

The remaining chapters narrated by Florens are also in present tense, but she narrates them from a different place, namely her journey to and from the blacksmith's home. Her language is characterized by an oral style, as the sentences at times are unstructured and demand to be read several times.

The chapters narrated from the perspective of the other characters are woven in between Florens', allowing each of them to speak one by one in between Florens' chapters. These chapters feature an omniscient point of view and reveal the characters' backgrounds, dreams and intentions. The effects of *A Mercy's* narrative characteristics are many, and with the right degree of competence, this intricate novel can become enjoyable instead of frustrating. The ability to hear Florens' thoughts, to travel with her, and to hear her message to the blacksmith all help readers understand and empathize with her and her actions. The omniscient narrator of the other characters' stories allows them to provide separate pieces of information that in the end weave a complete narrative. The insight into each character's background, dreams, and intentions provide us with information that enables us to understand their challenges, the relationships between them and the choices they make. In the end, the narrative ties all the strings together and completes Florens' story supported by the minor narratives of the other characters. Florens' mother narrates the last chapter. She speaks from an unknown place and tells her own story in past tense, first person perspective.

The Oral Tradition of Storytelling

Morrison draws heavily on the African-American oral tradition (Lane 2003:255). In *A Mercy*, Morrison incorporates oral characteristics that have the effect on the narrative of making it audible, in addition to being readable. This characteristic is common in Morrison's fiction, and it is an important agent for her, as her aim is that her «stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well.» (Ervin 1999:199). The act of storytelling is familiar to Northern-Norwegians, as several generations have grown up with characters like Arthur Arntzen's *Oluf*. Like African American orality reinforces the African American traditions and values, the

Northern-Norwegian storytelling keeps alive the cultural memory and past that is the foundation of the Northern-Norwegian culture. The resemblance of the purpose of two types of oral traditions can be an interesting comparison to students, as it can make it more easy to relate their own culture to the African American culture.

Secondly, the oral tradition incorporated is the form of the novel, making Florens' journey the framing narrative of all the other stories. Florens narrates her journey systemically, while the other characters' stories appear in between and fill the information gaps of her tale. In her essay on narration, Lane (2003:154) labels this characteristic as typical for the African oral tradition and for Morrison's authorship.

Call and Response - an Element of the Oral Tradition

The structure of *A Mercy*, where Florens repeatedly narrates a chapter followed by another character, functions as «call and response». «Call and response» is a traditional African oral characteristic that serves as an extension of, and rooted in, the spirituals sung in southern cotton fields. Names and places that have yet to be introduced are mentioned in Florens' chapters, which generate questions in the reader's mind. Florens' «call» creates this effect. The chapters in between, narrated by the other characters, serve as explanations, which give background information and fill in information gaps, created by Florens. These function as the «response». The multiple narrative voices and the shifting between them complement each other and create an important and meaningful dynamic.

Lisa Cade Wieland's (2003:239-245) essay on Morrison's narrative voice confirms my claim that Morrison's switch of narrator in the chapters is a version of call-and-response, as she states that «having more than one narrative voice tell a story recalls the call-and-response pattern found in the African American tradition.» (240).

The Incorporation of the Supernatural

The presence of supernatural elements, like metaphorical signs, rituals, and traditional myths are also present throughout the novel, especially in Florens' and Lina's lives. Both characters are open to the supernatural and read signs that appear around them and in nature. As early as the first chapter, Florens dedicates a large part of her message to describe the signs she reads and what they signal. She also questions whether her audience can read the signs as she does: «(...) Another is can

you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron.» (Morrison 2008:1). As early as the first chapter, readers bear witness to Florens' traditional African perspective of the world, where the supernatural is a natural part. Florens even asks the reader whether they can read the signs like she can, and challenges her audience to be aware of the signs that appear in her narrative and around them by taking an active role in the narrative.

Ancestors

Morrison also incorporates the presence of an ancestor in the novel, which is another characteristic of the African American oral tradition. The ancestor is present in nature, the cultural traditions Florens and Lina turn to, and in the form of Florens' repeatedly appearing mother. The presence of an ancestor is also traceable in Florens' character as mentioned earlier in the text.

According to Shanna Green Benjamin (2003:4) ancestors in the African tradition transcend space and time, stay accessible to the living, and link the souls of the present with souls of the past. Benjamin goes on to claim that Morrison, as a literary elder, modifies the use of ancestors into a literary device «that explores the manifold ways in which characters relate to their ancestors and, by extension, their communities.» (4). Benjamin's comment is fitting to the ancestral presence in *A Mercy*, where Florens is in a constant, conscious and subconscious, dialogue with her mother, Lina, and herself about which choices she should make and where she belongs.

Florens' character employs several characteristics of ancestors. First, as opposed to the other characters, she narrates in present time even though she shifts between being at the Vaark mansion, and on her journey to find the blacksmith. First, she employs an ancestral relationship to time, and is able to tell her story from the perspective of someone who can be more than one place at once. The second feature of her 'ancestor-ness' is that her timelessness allows her to transcend space. Florens narrates in present time despite the fact that she switches between places. This reveals that she moves through space and time on her own initiative, as African ancestors supposedly do. Florens and her mother, who appears throughout the novel, are closely connected and her connection to her elders underscores her attachment to her heritage and community.

4.10.2 Suggested Teaching Activities

A narrative analysis of a novel can be challenging for students, especially narrative analyses of African American novels where the African American oral tradition is incorporated. With this in mind, the teacher has a responsibility to acquaint students with the narrative techniques they may encounter in their reading. The most useful alternative is for the teacher to introduce the African American oral tradition in regards to the supernatural, the role of ancestors, call-and-response, and even the structure and narration of *A Mercy*. This is a wise investment of the teacher's time, as students will avoid being discouraged by the challenging narrative style; on the contrary, they will recognize topics the teacher has introduced and be able to enjoy the reading as opposed to worrying about identification of narrative forms. An introduction of the African American oral tradition is important to make students acquainted with it, but it is important for the teacher to keep from reinforcing a feeling of otherness among the students. It may be relevant to try to build bridges to the oral tradition we find in our own Norwegian culture to display resemblances and to keep from alienating students from the literary work they are reading, but rather allow them to identify with the novel.

By lecturing on the topic students be acquainted with form, content and style. They will also have to listen – and learn – to how the teacher employs literary terminology. The lecture can also lead to discussions on characteristics as students can ask questions and make the teacher elaborate on topics they want to know more about. The study of narrative characteristics trains basic skills, as they can be read about, written about, discussed and researched.

I want to complete this chapter by stating that the activities that accompanies the eight competence aims are suggestions, not blueprints to how they need to be fulfilled. Each activity can be adjusted to fit a special literary work, teacher and his or her students.

Conclusion

When I began this thesis, I was unaware of the challenge I was undertaking. I did know that the work would demand my complete attention, make me sacrifice student life as I knew it, and force me to reconcile with a daily life that only contained writing, reading, eating, and exercise. What I was not aware of, as silly as it may sound, was the personal and academic maturation I would attain. This maturity has helped me grow academically and strengthened my personal determination and persistence.

In the process of writing, I have reached new heights of academic sophistication. The purpose of this thesis was originally to describe how teachers could use literature in the second language classroom. However, on a personal level, I aimed to expand my own knowledge about the subject and to prepare myself for bringing my thoughts into practice, which I will be doing this upcoming fall.

In completing this thesis, several of the goals I set for the thesis and myself I have attained and my developmental curve has been steep. Besides what I have learned about myself, I have come to know a tremendous amount about the literary approach, and these lessons I will remember and carry with me as I complete my studies at the University of Tromsø:

Firstly, I am aware of the fact that a successful literary approach can be dependent on the efforts that the teachers before me have provided for the students who enter my classroom. However, I have also learned that if students have a low literary and cultural competence all is not lost as teacher encouragement can renew students' confidence, as well as assist them in filling the knowledge gaps and irrigate the deserts they have developed in their minds. By being involved with my students and identifying their knowledge and needs I can assist them reaching their goals.

Secondly, I have learned that it is crucial for me to take my students' cultural and literary competence seriously, even though it differs widely from my own. I need to make use of the competence they possess in their own specialized areas and, rather than to undermine it, help them develop their unique knowledge bases even further. In this way, my classroom will be characterized as a place where cooperation and respect are the foundation, as opposed to an implicitly condescending, top-down environment from teacher to students.

Thirdly, working on the suggestive literary approach made me appreciate all the possibilities that exist. The ones I describe are a small percentage of acceptable methods and materials, and I have become fully aware that the possibilities are endless. With that said, I have become even more careful in ensuring that the teaching activities I provide to my students are specifically adapted to fulfill the competence aims. I have reinforced the importance of clarifying the objective of the tasks I give, with the intent that students understand the tasks and the goal are designed to attain. The literary approach may be confusing to some students, thus demanding an even greater necessity that the teacher clarify and explain the meaning of the activities she provides. This is important so students are clear as to why they are doing what they are doing so they may approach these activities in a rewarding way.

Last, but not least, I have learned that what I suggest as beneficial approaches in this thesis may not be as helpful when they are put into practice, depending on the context of each class and assignment. I will bring with me my suggested activities, but I will also be aware that I will need to alter and adjust them to make them applicable to my future students and classes.

What I have mentioned thus far is merely a fraction of what I have learned, but it captures some of the most important things that I will carry with me as a future teacher. What I have learned also serves to generate new questions I have not yet been able to reflect on or find solutions to in my thesis. As I am aware that my thesis is a suggestion and a mere start from which to add a complete literary approach to second language learning, I briefly want to mention the questions I feel left with as I complete this stage of my education.

First, I wonder how my future students will react to the literary approach if they have not encountered it in their previous studies. Will they be able to observe and accept this possibly completely new and different way of practicing linguistics and language skills?

Second, if I am able to introduce the literary approach successfully, will the benefits I have predicted be traceable in my students, and will they at all be able to adapt to the fact that literature can bring them new competence and knowledge of linguistics, culture, and history?

Finally, I wonder how I will be able to evaluate the learning outcomes of the literary approach. I have reflected on how to teach through literature, but not on how to evaluate the outcomes of what I plan to teach.

I hope, and believe, that I will be more capable of answering these questions as I start teaching. Allegedly, with experience comes knowledge and confidence. Having completed this thesis, I have obviously reflected much more than when I started, and would like to conclude with some wise words I will bring with me into my career and life:

Books are the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. They are engines of change, windows on the world, lighthouses erected in the sea of time. - Barbara W. Tuchman (Think Exist)

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