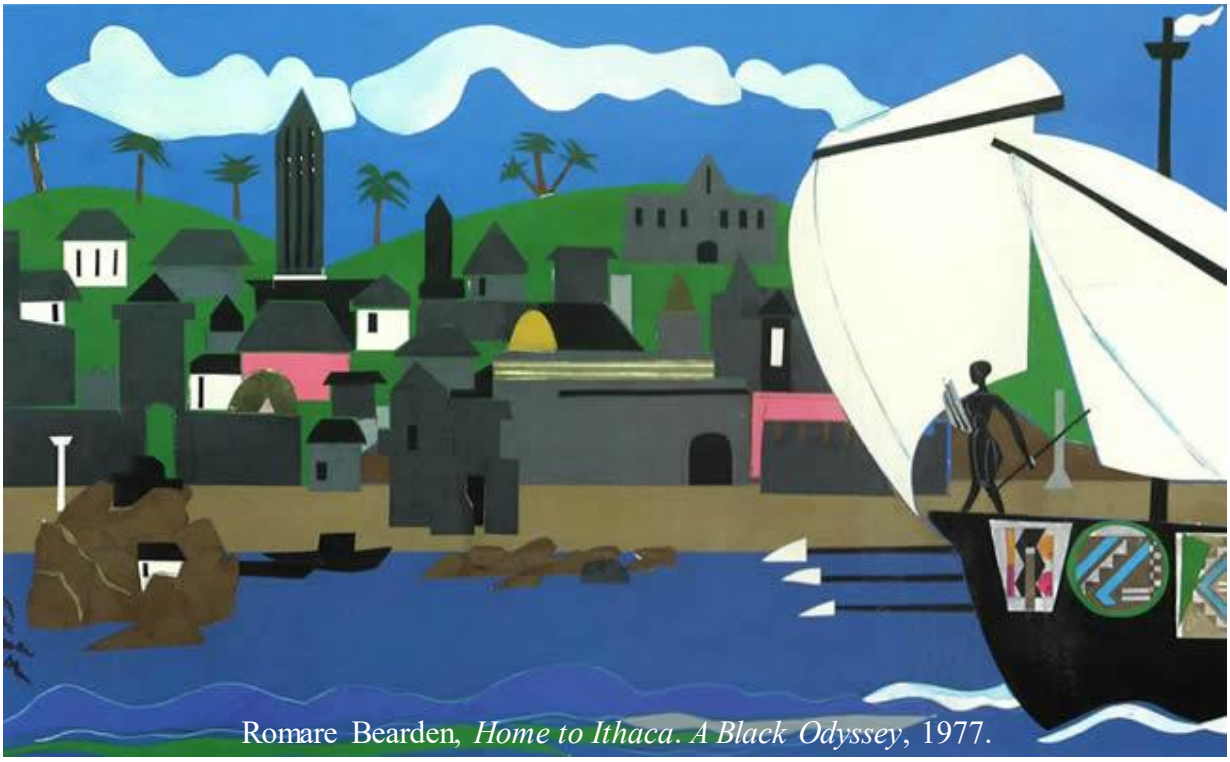
Classical Reception in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*



Romare Bearden, *Home to Ithaca. A Black Odyssey*, 1977.

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21 December 2019

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1. Introduction and Methodology

Black classicism, sometimes called *classica Africana*, is a relatively new area of research in both classical and English literary studies. Since the *Black Athena* controversy of 1987, *classica Africana* has remained divisive, viewed as either revisionism or an implicit admission of the whiteness of classics proper. The historic construction of the classical tradition as both white and a marker of universal humanism has similarly made its reception an important but fraught topic in black diasporic literature and criticism. In African American literature, the problems of *classica Africana* relate to a tension between integrationist and segregationist positions (Rankine, *Ulysses in Black* 29-30). Former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley used their knowledge of Latin and Greek literature to convince white audiences of abolition; the contemporary African American reader and writer might therefore resist engagement with the classics as a standard against which one's humanity is judged. However, a refusal to engage with the classics risks accepting its construction as white property. The central relationship between American identity and the classics means that such a refusal would also deny the central role African Americans play in shaping American culture. Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison are two African American authors who, I argue, work to undermine the polarization of these positions. Their reception of the classics is an important but relatively neglected feature of their work. For example, both the nameless protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Milkman Dead in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) invite comparisons with Homer's Odysseus; Odysseus himself is the adaptable hero *par exemple*, whose epithet *polutropo[s]* (1.1) also evokes linguistic translation and transformation. Ellison and Morrison strategically engage with classical literature to destabilize the construction of both the classical and American traditions in terms of whiteness; as such they renegotiate not only the classics, but also American culture.

This thesis examines the ways in which Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* engage with Greek and Latin literature. I show that both authors allude to the classics in their novels, which can be considered examples of black classicism. More importantly, I consider the impact of these classical references, how they shape our interpretation of the novels and comment on the classical tradition itself. I divide the following two chapters between Ellison and Morrison, using a similar substructure for both chapters to exploit the interconnections between the novels. Taking the authors' essays on the function of myth as my point of departure, I move to a close reading of the novels, using reception theory to consider their relation to the classical tradition and to each other. *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* closely align with the classical genre of epic in their presentation of a male protagonist who departs on a heroic journey. However, the novels refer to a range of classical sources, including tragedy (indeed, the classical epic also incorporates other genres). I therefore divide my textual analysis broadly between epic and tragedy, but I also track recurring tropes such as *nostos* (homecoming) and *katabasis* (journey to the underworld). I compare and contrast Ellison's and Morrison's reception of the classics alongside their treatment of themes such as identity, difference, family and home. I hope to show that the novelists both foreground the historical role of the classics for African Americans and challenge its use as a symbol of cultural hegemony. In the process, they undermine underlying notions of cultural purity and canon formation. In using the classics to explore the contradictions of African American identity, Ellison and Morrison destabilize the polarities which trouble "black classicism" to transform both the classics and the foundations of American identity.

Reception theory follows from the premise that "meaning is realized at the point of reception" (Martindale, *Redeeming the Text* 3). A text's meaning is therefore constructed within the reader's "horizon of expectations," which includes their knowledge of other texts (Jauss 13). Through this intertextuality, reception becomes a dynamic process: a text can read and

redefine a previous text; equally, it can determine the framework within which later texts are read. These ideas of dialogue and appropriation are particularly apparent within the hierarchical tradition of classical epic, where each text competes to be "first" (*primus*) by rewriting the genre in its own image. For example, Ovid plays with the dynamics of genre by presenting his own version of the *Aeneid* in his *Metamorphoses* (13.623-14.609). Ovid minimizes the highlights of the *Aeneid*, reducing the Dido episode to five lines (14.77–81); on the other hand, he develops Virgil's references to metamorphosis into episodes which take over the narrative. Stephen Hinds argues that Ovid expands these "Virgilian stories of metamorphosis" (105) in an aggressive move of poetic appropriation: "Rather than construct himself as an epigonal reader of the *Aeneid*, Ovid is constructing Virgil as a hesitant precursor of the *Metamorphoses* . . . in Virgil these myths [of metamorphosis] are fragmented, scattered, unresolved: not until Ovid's own poem are they gathered into perfection and system" (106). Ovid uses his belatedness to launch a "bid for teleological control" (106) and paradoxically assert his own primacy in relation to Virgil. This primacy is built on a reformulation of the epic genre with Ovidian metamorphosis as its central theme. The dynamics of the epic tradition are therefore both conservative (based on primacy and origins) and potentially transformative (it is the later text, not the former, which defines the genre). Still, the structure of the reception of epic poses problems to writers who wish to challenge canon formation and cultural hegemony. Since the epic works in terms of primacy and belatedness, how can writers transform the tradition and still challenge its hierarchical assumptions?

Just as the epic was generally considered the prime genre in Greek and Roman culture (with the exception of Aristotle's *Poetics*), so Greek and Roman texts have been used as the ultimate standard of literary achievement (as the name "classics" suggests). In the context of black classicism, classical texts have been used as "weapons of cultural imperialism, forced upon persons of African descent as the model of culture, and used to supplant indigenous

literature" (Wetmore 7). In America, the classics were used as a standard of universal human values against which black humanity was measured: "Proponents of integration (white and black alike) used classicism to affirm that African Americans could take their place alongside the American elite – as human and refined" (Rankine, *Ulysses in Black* 30). Thus Wheatley's master defended her humanity with her "inclination to learn the Latin tongue" (8) and Douglass used classical rhetoric to persuade audiences towards abolition. Similarly, the post-emancipation debate about the role of classics for educating American citizens had a racial aspect. Whereas Booker T. Washington prioritized industrial training, W.E.B. Du Bois presented citizenship as a cultivation of humanity, which included classicism (Rankine 26). In the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 70s, many writers rejected the classics for a deliberately Afrocentric aesthetics. The backlash to black classicism can be understood within this context, as a rejection of having one's humanity up for debate (Rankine 31). Still, the classics need not be accepted as white cultural property: this neglects the work of black classicists such as William Scarborough, as well as the classicism of writers like Wheatley and Douglass. Indeed, both Ellison and Morrison experienced a classical education: Ellison took four years of Latin at high school and Morrison minored in classics at Howard University. In addition, Martin Bernal's seminal study *Black Athena* (first published in 1987) contests the European origins of classical civilization. Bernal argues that Greek civilization was primarily influenced not by Europe but by African and Asiatic cultures (although the backlash to his study confirmed for many that classics remains an institutionally racist discipline).

Similarly, studies of the classics and African American literature must acknowledge and negotiate the hierarchy implied by "classical reception." As several critics note, the problem is how to avoid affirming classics as the property of Europe, and Greece as the pure origin of Western thought, whilst acknowledging the use of classics to justify European white supremacy (van Weyenberg 44). Critics should be wary of valuing an African American author's literary

achievement insofar as they use the classics, or reading only for classical allusions as if these are valuable in themselves. Such approaches privilege Greek and Roman over African American cultures and reinforce the cultural hierarchy so often contested by the works in question. Another problem with reading African American receptions with a classical "original" in mind is that it reinforces a sense of cultural otherness, explaining "foreign" black culture in white Western terms (Wetmore 21). Or studies compare African American and Greek cultures to posit universal mythic patterns (which they usually base on classical texts).

This study hopes to negotiate the many pitfalls of writing about classical reception in African American literature. Firstly, I try to frame Ellison and Morrison's classical reception within the broader themes of their work, rather than making their classicism the sole focus and end goal of this thesis. By comparing the two authors, I explore the differences between them rather than assuming African American literature as a monolith. There are specific intertextual links between Ellison and Morrison, beyond a classical context, which make them an appropriate choice of comparison (in particular the structural echoes between the two novels and Morrison's reception of Ellison). I do not wish merely to appeal to their status as African American writers who use the classics – I am interested in the specific dynamics between them. I also explore the historical context of African American classical reception, both as presented within the works and through their differences. In this way I hope to avoid privileging a conception of universal myth over historically and politically specific meanings. At the same time, I use an intertextual framework to avoid reading Ellison and Morrison in restrictedly sociological terms. Both authors have a tradition of being read this way, and have spoken against it. As Ellison writes, "the main source of my novels is other novels" ("Interview with Isiah Reed" 56). Finally, a comparative study can imply an opposition between African American and classical culture, which infers an underlying assumption of cultural purity. This thesis hopes to show that the novels in question effectively challenge the idea of cultural purity.

Both Ellison and Morrison show a commitment to cultural hybridity and difference, even as they exploit the similarities between African American and classical cultures to powerful effect.

2. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

2.1. Myth and Ritual

Much of Ellison's reception, both positive and negative, has hinged on the idea that he aimed to write apolitical fiction. His focus on literary aesthetics instead of politics and articulation of a universal American humanism makes Ellison vulnerable to criticism of neglecting his socio-political responsibilities as an African American writer. Ellison's reputation as a modernist has not helped matters: it suggests that Ellison accepts an inherently racist and elitist tradition, which limits transformation to the private, aesthetic sphere (Nadel 24). Patrice Rankine notes that Ellison's classicism is often viewed within this framework, as a retreat from political concerns and tacit acceptance of Western literary hierarchies (*Ulysses in Black* 81). However, Ellison appropriates classical myth for highly political purposes. His understanding of ritual adds a socio-political force to his depictions of rites, sacrifices and dream-states, which work to "restructure the collective unconscious" (Rankine 126). Moreover, Ellison's reworking of the Ulysses myth riffs on Homer, Joyce and African American folklore. In so doing Ellison critiques the whitening of the classical tradition and argues for the integration of African Americans in American politics and culture. However, it must be noted that Ellison's model of integration does not presuppose universal humanism as we commonly conceive it – that is, a model of Western culture over and above all others. Rather, Ellison imagines a kind of humanism central to the American democratic promise: the "puzzle of the one-and-the-many" ("Hidden Name and Complex Fate" 207). His reception of the classics is both political and existential: Ellison not only imagines new possibilities for American culture but also moves from the American dream to one of human relations as a whole. However, Ellison is also ambivalent in that such a dream remains a dream; Invisible Man stays to some extent trapped underground, his homecoming postponed beyond the novel's reach.

Ellison's classical reception should be understood within the context of his conception of myth. In his essay "On Initiation Rites and Power," Ellison references Lord Raglan's *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936). Raglan argues that the narrative of the hero recurs in many different cultures. This is because the hero's narrative solidified into a universal archetype, or "monomyth," through ritual retellings. Such rituals serve to satisfy the human desire for universal ideals. Raglan's conception of myth has a Jungian basis: myths and archetypes link the conscious level of human experience to the collective unconscious they all share (Rankine, *Ulysses in Black* 125-6). Ellison claims he was reading Raglan during the writing of *Invisible Man*. He describes Raglan as "concerned with the manner in which myth became involved with the histories of living persons, became incorporated into their personal legends" ("On Initiation Rites" 524). The archetype of the hero is thus also the narrative of "great leaders" (524). Ellison thus locates his literary interest in the ritual function of myth in the "historical moment" of writing *Invisible Man*, which he characterizes as a crisis of African American leadership: "I was very much involved with the question of just why our Negro leadership was never able to enforce its will. Just what was there about the structure of American society that prevented Negroes from throwing up effective leaders?" (525). Ellison then explored this social question through the lens of literary myth and ritual. This led him to notice the rituals which underlie social interactions. He gives the example of the "battle royal" as "a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority" (529). Ellison sees social interactions as structured by rituals which produce and reinforce social values (Rankine 126). Writers can therefore use myths, rituals and symbols not only to depict social relations but also, potentially, to shift them (Rankine 122).

Ellison is usually taken as using Raglan's conception of myth unironically. However, his reading of Raglan raises several questions. Firstly, if myth is monolithic, universalizing and

idealizing, how does one represent difference in the collective imagination? The American writer's problem is that he or she must represent difference on a universal level, incorporating "that complexity [of American diversity] into his work in the form of symbolic action and metaphor" ("On Initiation Rites" 525). Issues of similarity and difference are also relevant to the figure of the African American leader, who must be both an outstanding individual and a representative of the group. Ellison's juxtaposition of Raglan with the crisis of African American leadership suggests that the archetype of the hero fails to empower this particular group. Ellison tries to explain this phenomenon, suggesting that African Americans are marginalized through ritualized social interactions, which feed into and are shaped by the mythic imagination or "collective unconscious" of society. Raglan's model of the hero moves to self-identification through rites of passage, whereby the hero distinguishes himself from other people (identifying a "self" through differentiation from an "other"). Must all social rituals work this way, creating identity for one group at the expense of another? Furthermore, if one is not acknowledged in social interactions and the collective imagination which structures them, is it possible to conceive a sense of self independently? Indeed, the basis of myth in the collective unconscious could infer a lack of agency and potential for change. Ellison targets the classics in order to change existing myths, exploring the writer's agency to give new meaning to old material.

Ellison invokes ideas of myth and heroism through the legend of the Founder in Chapter 2 of *Invisible Man*. The Founder's "bronze statue" (36) recalls classical art, evoking the historical role of the classics for African Americans: Douglass and other leaders presented themselves as heroes in order to represent the humanity of the group. However, the statue also recalls white Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson, who styled themselves after classical heroes (L. Wright 223) – indeed, Invisible Man also refers to the Founder's statue as "the cold Father symbol" (*IM* 36). Ellison invokes an Oedipal model of fatherhood: the statue stands at a

point where "three roads converge" (35), recalling the three-way crossroad where Oedipus kills his father (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 730). Ellison's allusion to Oedipus invokes ideas of heroism as well: Oedipus was for Raglan the archetypal hero, whose narrative fulfils the most of his mythic patterns (Raglan 213-14). The ambiguity of the statue is further explored as Invisible Man describes

> his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly into place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. (*IM* 36)

The adjective "breathtaking" connotes both awe and murder (Schaub 137); "blinding" locates the novel's themes of insight and invisibility within a tragic Oedipal framework. The "folds" of the veil also echo the blindfolds Invisible Man and the other participants of the battle royal are forced to wear in the preceding chapter (*IM* 21; Millichap 195). Likewise, the "veil" alludes to Du Bois' metaphor for the theft of self-consciousness from African Americans, who can only see themselves through the white imagination (Schaub 137). Invisible Man wonders if myths of heroic leaders and racial uplift empower African Americans or keep them kneeling through hero worship, unaware of the realities of racial discrimination.

Ellison depicts the myth of the Founder as having a ritual function. Invisible Man tells how "millionaires descended from the North on Founder's Day each spring" (*IM* 36), suggesting a yearly rite of renewal, and describes Norton as a "symbol of the Great Traditions" (37). Moreover, from his position as narrator Invisible Man remembers the chapel scene in unflattering ritual terms. The students' faces are "frozen in solemn masks" (108), their songs representing "[a]n affirmation accepted and ritualized, an allegiance recited for the peace it imparted, and then perhaps loved. Loved as the defeated come to love the symbols of their conquerors" (109). Invisible Man bitterly links myth and ritual: "Here upon this stage the black

rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God's own acting script, with millionaires . . . not only acting out the myth of their goodness . . . but themselves, these virtues concretely!" (109). The church service acts out the rags-to-riches narrative popularized by Alger; such performances dramatize and reinforce the "benevolence and authority" of the trustees (109). Invisible Man ironically juxtaposes the pagan connotations of "black rite" against the Christian setting, with the trustees setting themselves up as "God[s]." We can also read "black rite" to mean a black version of the rags-to-riches rite of passage, itself a literary formula ritualized through repetition (not least in Alger's oeuvre).

Critics have noted that Homer A. Barbee's sermon draws heavily on Raglan's archetype of the hero (Millichap 198; J. Wright 165). Joseph Millichap notes that "the founder fulfils over half of [Raglan's heroic events] – ranging from an unusual conception, a lost childhood, a fruitful leadership, a mysterious death, and a memorial sepulcher" (198). Barbee uses these mythic patterns in combination with repetition: "You know of his brilliant career"; "I'm sure you've heard it time and time again" (117). This frames his narrative as a ritual repetition of a story within the group; however, this repetition works on the level of literary memory as well, as Barbee repeats tropes from other narratives to insert the Founder's story onto the symbolic level of myth. Invisible Man describes Barbee's sermon as "renewing the dream in our hearts" (*IM* 116), and his vocabulary evokes both the American dream and Ellison's view of myth as structuring the collective unconscious. The word "renewing" suggests both repetition and rebirth; and indeed, Barbee's narrative is marked by repeated deaths and births, departures and returns, mirrored in the rise and fall of his voice (124). His sermon stages symbolic journeys between the social world above and the unconscious below. In the process it reinforces the oppositions of light and dark, knowledge and ignorance, insight and blindness, to underline the trustees' benevolence in raising the black students out of darkness.

Whilst Barbee uses the classics as part of a universal mythic matrix, his specific references ironically undermine its applicability to African American politics. Millichap argues, "As a preacher, Barbee's allegorical images of the founder's pilgrimage are Christian, but a universal pattern of the hero's life cycle emerges in Classical terms as well" (198). Barbee's founding narrative of "this godly man's labors" (*IM* 117) evokes Aeneas, whose piety (*pietas*) and hard work (*labor*) enables him to found Rome (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.10). Similarly, Barbee's description of the Founder as a "moving orator . . . [who] returns after years to this country" types him as an Odysseus (*IM* 117). However, the speech's classical references ironically fail in an African American context. Barbee holds up "this slave, this black Aristotle" as an example of "sweet patience" to the students (117). However, this ironically clashes with Aristotle's theory of natural slavery (*Politics* 1.1254b16–21) and the Southern practice of giving slaves classical names (an attempt to justify slavery through classical models). In addition, Barbee constructs the Founder as another Julius Caesar. His death is marked by the appearance of a shooting star: "there came the burst of a single jewel-like star, and I saw it . . . streak down the cheek of that coal-black sky" (*IM* 125). In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Julius Caesar is transformed into a comet as part of his apotheosis (14.749). However, Barbee's allusion is undermined by his earlier use of the Founder as a model for "[r]endering unto Caesar what was Caesar's" (*IM* 118), which implicitly admits Caesar as a symbol of white rule. Indeed, the Biblical phrase refers to Julius' successor, Augustus, whose succession is ultimately reinforced by the apotheosis myth: Ovid satirically remarks, "lest [Augustus] be created from mortal seed, [Julius] had to be made a god" (14.760-1). For Barbee's narrative is also a succession myth. The Founder's myth allows Bledsoe to be constructed as a humble successor, whose leadership becomes a keeping of his "pledge to the Founder" with conscientious stewardship" (*IM* 130). Similarly, Augustus posed as *princeps* (first citizen) rather than king in order to keep his hold

on the Senate, and Bledsoe boasts to the narrator, "I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise" (*IM* 139).

Furthermore, Ellison displaces the primacy of Homer from his narrative in this scene. Ellison emphasizes the orality of Barbee's narrative: his "playing upon the whole audience" (121) evokes musical and dramatic performance as he "act[s] out his words" (122). Ellison uses musical terminology: his hands outspread as through he were leading an orchestra into a . . . diminuendo. Then his voice . . . accelerated" (124). Barbee uses call and response, both within and without his narrative. Ellison therefore creates links between the African American and Homeric oral traditions. However, when Invisible Man asks his neighbor who Barbee is, he reacts with a comic "look of annoyance, even of outrage" reminiscent of a reaction to someone's ignorance of the canon (121); the reaction puts an ironic spin on "Reverend." The name Barbee is suggestive of "bard," as well as the "barb" in his words. His alphabetic initials suggest a command of the rudiments and origins of language. However, they also rework those of A. Herbert Bledsoe. Indeed, Invisible Man has the uncanny "notion that part of Dr Bledsoe had arisen and moved forward, leaving his other part smiling in his chair" (115). Moreover, Barbee styles himself like a blind prophet: like Oedipus or Tiresias, he "staggered under the awful burden of that knowledge and I cursed myself because I bore it" (124). However, at the end of the speech, Barbee falls, his glasses slip and Invisible Man sees "the blinking of sightless eyes" (131). Valerie Smith suggests that the delay of this information suggests the disillusionment of Invisible Man as narrator (218): he believed Barbee in the chapel, but now rejects the vision he offers. Ellison displaces Homer as the third-person narrator of his hero's journey, suggesting that monomythic narratives inevitably reinforce the power of others. Homer A. Barbee fails to empower this protagonist, who wonders at the end of the chapter, "How could I ever return home?" (*IM* 132). It is telling that Barbee's speech marks the point at which Invisible Man's

narration becomes less reflective and more focused on the present, as he embraces his role as both narrator and protagonist.

2.2. Epic: *Nostos* and *Katabasis*

Critics have long noticed links between *Invisible Man* and Homer's *Odyssey*. John Stark reads the *Odyssey* as the principal intertext for *Invisible Man* in his 1973 essay, "Ellison's Black Odyssey" (60). He suggests that Invisible Man's adventures correspond to those of Odysseus. However, "Odysseus always wins; the invisible man, although he learns in the process, always loses" (63). Ellison uses the Odyssey to show that "for the ancient Greeks, but not for contemporary Black Americans, heroic aspirations can be achieved" (Stark 60). Whilst it is true that initiation rites such as the battle royal fail to empower Invisible Man, Stark's conclusion seems problematic. Indeed, Rankine argues that Ellison uses the *Odyssey* to show the heroic aspects of Invisible Man's experience (*Ulysses in Black* 134). Ellison explicitly links *Invisible Man* to the *Odyssey* in his essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." In response to Edgar Hyman's reading of Invisible Man's grandfather as a minstrel figure, Ellison writes, "So intense is Hyman's search for archetypal forms that he doesn't see the narrator's grandfather in *Invisible Man* is no more engaged in a 'darky act' than was Ulysses in Polyphemus' cave" (109). Invisible Man's grandfather advises his son, "[A]gree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (*IM* 16). Rankine argues that this language recalls Odysseus' confrontation with Polyphemus, who swallows his men and "vomits wine and human flesh" (Homer, *Odyssey* 9. 373-4; Rankine 133). Ellison uses myth to represent the grandfather's epic heroism and African Americans who experience double-consciousness as "full human being exploring their possibilities" (Rankine 129). Conversely, "society's inability to see individuals like Invisible Man's grandfather as full human subjects parallels the Cyclops's blindness" (Rankine 133). Throughout the novel, Invisible Man's opponents are characterized in Cyclopean terms (Rankine 135), from the drunken spectators of the battle royal

(*IM* 20) to the doctors in the hospital (223) to one-eyed Brother Jack, who "squinted . . . with Cyclopean irritation" (456). Invisible Man moves from Cyclopean blindness to Odysseus-like trickery, self-identification and blinding of his opponents (Rankine 135). His character arc thus mirrors that of Odysseus. For Odysseus's identity as a hero emerges through repeated encounters with the other: "The hero struggles against everything that is not he, against his anti-self, as it were, in his process of becoming" (Rankine 50). For Rankine, *Invisible Man* maintains the structure of the *Odyssey*, whereby its hero engages in conflicts which serve as rites of passage. However, I argue that Ellison also interrogates this model of heroic identity; the Ulysses paradigm also constitutes one of the "archetypal forms" of which he is suspicious ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 109).

Invisible Man also uses the epic trope of *katabasis*, the hero's journey to and return from the underworld. As Rankine suggests, *Invisible Man* is structured like a *katabasis*: the protagonist retreats underground to write his story, until he is "drawn upward again" into the world of human interaction (*IM* 559; Rankine, "Classical Reception and Nothingness" 465). The *katabasis* motif might also parallel Odysseus' escape from Polyphemus' cave, though Rankine does not link these strands of his argument explicitly. Rankine reads Invisible Man's *katabasis* as a symbolic paradigm of African American identity formation (*Ulysses in Black* 88-92). The individual rejects the myths of the white establishment, including classics, for a purely black identity. However, this model of purity is also restrictive, and the person who "returns from the black (w)hole" ultimately recognizes themselves as part of a (now-expanded) American identity. His or her *katabasis* is therefore also a *nostos*, insofar as the person recognizes America as their "home" and the classics as part of their own cultural identity.

However, Rankine's analysis is complicated by the repeated moments of *katabasis* within Invisible Man's narrative. Even within his hole, Invisible Man listens to music, where "not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths" (*IM* 8). Dante is led into

Hell by Virgil; at the end of the novel, the Virgilian Sibyl leads Invisible Man into the Harlem riot. The surrealism of Invisible Man's descent – "*beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave*" (8) – also suggests a psychological descent into the unconscious. Indeed, this combination of mythic and psychological descent is characteristic of the *katabases* in *Invisible Man*, and recalls Raglan's analysis of myth in terms of Jungian archetypes. Similarly, Millichap reads multiple *katabases* in *Invisible Man*, including his subway ride into Harlem: "In the psychological terms employed by Carl Jung, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell, the fearful subway ride becomes an image of the journey into the subconscious. In literary terms, it recalls the *katabases* of Homer's Odysseus and Virgil's Aeneas" (199). The repeated *katabases* of *Invisible Man* make the trope more open-ended than in Rankine's analysis. This repetition can be read as both modernist and ritualistic, as in Homer A. Barbee's sermon. However, Ellison's improvisatory mode of reception also exemplifies the "signifyin(g)" which Henry Louis Gates Jr. sees as characteristic of black literature. Gates defines signifyin(g) as a collection of uniquely black "rhetorical tropes . . . includ[ing] making, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on" (239). Signifying frequently involves misdirection, trickery, and hidden meanings (239). It highlights the contingency of language and draws attention to the Saussurian gap between signifier and signified. As such it illustrates Gates's point that the "blackness" of a text is located in its aesthetics rather than its essence (40). Ellison's "riffing" on classical epic both invokes and destabilizes its models of identity, heroism and homecoming. In particular, Ellison uses *katabasis* to connect myth and ritual, the unconscious, heroism and difference. Nevertheless, Ellison's signifying on *katabasis* also denies closure to Invisible Man's narrative: at the end of the novel, the protagonist's successful ascent from the underworld remains in doubt. *Invisible Man* confuses the tropes of *katabasis* and anabasis, racial uplift and tragic fall, exile and homecoming, so that the reader too must "become acquainted with ambivalence" (*IM* 10).

As psychological descents, Invisible Man's *katabases* have epistemological significance. After leaving the hospital, Invisible Man realizes he is "no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such" (*IM* 241). He compares his use of ironic signifying to a psychological journey into the unconscious: "perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed" (241). His simile alludes to the slave's anamnesis in Plato's *Meno*: "Like the servant about whom I'd read in psychology class who, during a trance, had recited pages of Greek philosophy which she had overheard one day while she worked" (241). The simile distances the classics from African American experience, insofar as it places Greek philosophy in parallel with an "alien personality" (240). However, insofar as Invisible Man recollects his own feelings, he reclaims a "hitherto suppressed" claim to Greek culture alongside his ironic, signifying wordplay with the doctor (239). Invisible Man's recognition is also marked as tragic fall: "I felt that I would fall, had fallen" (240). Beside him "a young platinum blonde nibbled at a red Delicious apple" (241), suggesting a Biblical link between tragedy and knowledge (Greer and Welch 370). These themes of tragedy, recognition and blackness overlay Invisible Man's fall into Harlem: "The train plunged. I dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem" (*IM* 240). However, the success of Invisible Man's *katabasis*/fall here is ambiguous. Allison Greer and Dennis Welch argue, "the fortunate aspect of his fall - namely, a degree of self-discovery rooted in his own past and his cultural heritage - becomes . . . dubious"; he will go on to trust the Brotherhood, and fails to see the fatal "connection between the apple-nibbling woman in the subway and any of the women in the Brotherhood" (370). The plurality of Invisible Man's *katabases* undermine the finality of their tragic knowledge.

In addition, Ellison uses *katabasis* to interrogate Enlightenment conceptions of race. In seeking to organize the world, Enlightenment thinkers developed essentialist theories of racial difference through new scientific disciplines (e.g. phrenology). The classics were claimed as a

symbol of white civilization and used to underline oppositions of rational and irrational, order and chaos, and white and black. In Ellison's novel, the Brotherhood seek to change society through Enlightenment logic: "It was a world that could be controlled by science, and the Brotherhood had both science and history under control" (*IM* 368). However, the Brotherhood are also an underground organization. Their meeting-point is the "Chthonian" Hotel, named after the Greek word for underworld (*IM* 288; Millichap 202). Invisible Man enters through a door marked with a "bronze door-knocker in the shape of a large-eyed owl" (*IM* 288). The "bronze" evokes the statue of the Founder and Greek art, the owl Athena, goddess of wisdom. However, there is a strange contrast between these Enlightenment symbols and their underworld setting. Ellison again invokes a psychological descent into the unconscious as Invisible Man feels "an uncanny sense of similarity . . . that [he] had been through it all before" (288). The opposition between progress and regress breaks down as Invisible Man admits in the lift, "I was uncertain whether we had gone up or down" (288). Ellison's confusion of the tropes of anabasis and *katabasis* critiques the Brotherhood's appropriation of order and reason. Indeed, its Enlightenment rationalizing – "our scientific approach" (398) – ironically collapses into Dionysiac frenzy: "'Sacrifice, *sacrifice*, SACRIFICE!'" (457). Ellison suggests that essentialist theories of race claim a rational basis in order to justify irrational violence against black people.

Ellison's *katabases* also allude to Virgil's *Aeneid*. Charles Scruggs reads Invisible Man's encounter with Sybil as a parody of *Aeneid* 6, where Aeneas is guided through the underworld by the Cumaean Sybil (369). Aeneas meets his father Anchises, who shows him the future leaders of Rome; in his hole Invisible Man realizes the meaning of his grandfather's last words – to affirm the "principle" of American democracy despite its historical misuse (*IM* 560; Scruggs 371; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.679-901). Whereas Aeneas's *katabasis* falls midway through the *Aeneid* and prepares him for the war in Latium in its second half, Invisible Man's

story ends at the point of his leaving the underground (Scruggs 372). This adds an ambivalence to the novel's ending: we are unsure to what extent Invisible Man successfully leaves the underworld to forge a new national identity. The *Aeneid* frames Rome as teleologically and cosmically ordained (although the poem contains deviant and dissenting voices to which critics give varying amounts of weight. See Hardie 1-2; Quint 8-9). Invisible Man, however, is conscious that society is constructed, not essential: "the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived" (*IM* 560). Indeed, Invisible Man resists being read as another Aeneas: it is during his time with the Brotherhood that he desires to "pattern [his] life on that of the Founder" (299), and he later rejects this strategy of achieving authority by imitating his heroes.

Both classical and modernist texts use *katabasis* as a metapoetic trope for confronting one's literary predecessors (Pike ix, 19-21, Thurston 2). Similarly, when Invisible Man meets Brother Jack at the Chthonian, the latter claims, "[A]ll the old heroes are being called back to life" (*IM* 295). However, instead of meeting his heroes, Invisible Man is told that he himself can become the new, "resurrected" Booker T. Washington by assuming a leadership role (295). This parody of *katabasis* highlights an important problem, namely that a model of heroism dependent on the transfer of authority threatens the individuality of the heroes in question. Heroism and leadership therefore conflict with individual subjectivity. This is a serious problem for the African American leaders, who must be both outstanding individuals and representative of the group. In addition, Brother Jack's injunction that Invisible Man "put aside [his] past" and cut off contact with his family (297) suggests an Oedipal struggle for self-identification; Invisible Man will finally reject Jack's authority as the "great white father" (454). Ellison's use of *katabasis* to link literary and paternal authority recalls Harold Bloom's study *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom argues for a Freudian dynamic to the literary canon, where texts struggle to extricate themselves from the authority and influence of their predecessors (8-10). It is worth

noting that this reading of the underworld as an encounter with literary forefathers contradicts Rankine, for whom *katabasis* represents the "creative chaos of blackness" and a retreat from the Western canon ("Classical Reception and Nothingness" 474). I suggest that Ellison's text supports both readings, destabilizing these distinctions of order and chaos even as it sets them up.

Indeed, Invisible Man finds a more positive father figure in Brother Tarp's portrait of Douglass. Facing the portrait, he "feel[s] a sudden piety, remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather's voice" (*IM* 365). The portrait links Douglass (in a suggestive artistic frame) to the grandfather whose dying words haunt Invisible Man. The noun "piety" is suggestive to a classical reader, recalling Aeneas' quality of *pietas* (generally translated as "piety," but meaning more broadly memory of one's obligations to family, religion and the state). Invisible Man wonders, "What had his true name been? Whatever it was, it was as *Douglass* that he became himself, defined himself" (367). Although Invisible Man at this time identifies more with Douglass' rags-to-riches journey, Douglass provides an alternative model of identity as well. Douglass's name takes on meaning through the actions of his life – it is the creative "transformations" of his name which define him rather than its content (367). Douglass finds self-identification through language, as an "orator" (367), and leads through this act of autobiography.

Ellison's use of the *Aeneid* can also be seen in Invisible Man's encounter with Sibyl, which changes his ideas of heroism, identity and gender. Having realized the Brotherhood is exploiting him, Invisible Man decides to go to the Chthonian and seduce one of the leaders' wives for information. However, Sybil's husband has no useful knowledge and she herself "utters only drunken babble by way of prophecy" (Millichap 203). Invisible Man descends into her world of dreams and rituals, only to find himself objectified by them: "[Sybil kept] casting me in fantasies in which I was Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible" (*IM* 498).

She proposes he "join her in very revolting [rape] ritual" (499) and explains she has "such thoughts and dreams" because "[m]en have repressed [women] too much" (501), a framework which fails to account for the fetishization of black men. However, even though Invisible Man fails to obtain information from Sybil, he nonetheless gains a sense of individual responsibility: "What had I done to her, allowed her to do? . . . My action . . . my responsibility?" (507). Schaub suggests that Invisible Man realizes "Sybil is no oracle, source neither of information nor of revelation," and finally sees her humanity and his own responsibility even though she does not see him (145).

Suddenly protective of Sybil, Invisible Man tries to guide her home (ironically reversing their roles in the *Aeneid*). They come across an "ancient-looking building, its windows dark. Huge Greek medallions showed in spots of light upon its façade, above a dark labyrinthine pattern in the stone, and [Invisible Man] propped her against the stoop with its carved stone monster" (*IM* 510). The juxtaposition of "light" and "dark" links Enlightenment oppositions to classical architecture. The labyrinth details echo Daedalus' carvings on the Sybil's temple at Cumae (Scruggs 370; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.9-30) – although Ellison's Sybil soon escapes her classical home. The "monster" carving recalls the Minotaur, conceived through bestiality – Sybil, similarly, calls Invisible Man a "brute" (*IM* 505), and Tessa Roynon reads the building's mock-heroic design as a parody of the fear of miscegenation (93). Moreover, it is striking that Sybil herself holds overtones of the monstrous, with her "hair wild" and "right eye desperately closed" (*IM* 510). The "carved stone monster" also parallels other descriptions of women in the novel as pieces of art (19, 401). Sybil leads Invisible Man into the Harlem riot where he falls into the hole, and he describes her in dreamlike terms: "I saw her again . . . as in a dream . . . [saying] 'Catch Sybil, Sybil,' running barefoot and girdleless along the park" (511-12). Whilst "barefoot" and "girdleless" evoke classical nymphs, Sybil ironically invites Invisible Man to participate in this rape fantasy, while he tries to keep her safe. For both Sybil and Invisible Man

are objectified by the myths and dreams of the collective unconscious. Sybil's fetishization of Invisible Man is entangled with her own objectification through myths about white womanhood. Invisible Man's knowledge of his "responsibility" to Sybil emerges as he comes to realize this (strikingly contemporary) intersectional framework.

2.3. Tragedy

Ellison also engages with Greek tragedy in his examination of identity, responsibility and the individual versus the community. He uses this tragic frame in the Prologue. Here Invisible Man locates his home in the margins: "The point is I found a home – or a hole in the ground, as you will . . . I am in a state of hibernation" (5-6). Although he claims, "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action," he remains passive, waiting for "the moment for action [to] presen[t] itself" (13). He justifies his inaction with the claim that "[social] [r]esponsibility rests upon recognition" (13). However, at the end of the Prologue, he ironically suggests his social responsibility would be to kill the white stranger: "Someday that kind of foolishness [i.e. mercy] will cause us tragic trouble. All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked that responsibility; I became too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain" (14). In Chapter 2 Invisible Man wonders, "How could anyone's fate be *pleasant*? I had always thought of it as something painful. No one I knew spoke of it as pleasant -- not even Woodridge, who made us read Greek plays" (39-40). Later, he remembers Woodridge's claim, "'Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of the race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record'" (341). The Woodridge references invite us to read a tragic conception of fate as related to the development of individual and communal identity. Woodridge's Joycean idea of "conscience" links to Invisible Man's tragic sense of social responsibility. I suggest that Ellison uses tragedy to suggest not only the unfair scapegoating of

African Americans, but also the responsibility to claim one's identity despite the ambiguity of identity itself.

Firstly, Invisible Man uses tragedy to describe the marginalization of African Americans. Norton describes fate as pleasant because his "destiny" is linked to that of Invisible Man. He explains, "'I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent in helping your school. That has been my real life's work . . .my first-hand-organizing of human life'" (41-2). The juxtaposition of "first-hand" with the impersonal "organizing of human life" shows the ironies of Norton's position. In trying to control his fate and regain only its "pleasant" aspects, he gives up the personal responsibility which could render him an individual. He is dependent upon the narrator for his identity – "You are my fate" (41) – although, as Invisible Man remarks, he does not even know his name (45). Norton suggests that the Founder "had tens of thousands of lives dependent upon his ideas and his actions . . . In a way, he had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god" (44-5). Norton implies he can escape human limitations through his influence over others.

Invisible Man is forced into the role of tragic scapegoat. Thomas Bertonneau suggests that the Founder's status as a "god" (*IM* 45) and the statue's Oedipal combination of recognition and blinding implies that "Ellison intends the statue of the Founder to represent fate in the form of man-made systems, even well-intentioned ones, that subsume the men who made them and issue not in liberation but in misery." This aligns with Joseph's Millichap's reading of the church service as one which "restores the violated order of ritualized race relations and results in the narrator's expulsion as scapegoat" (195). Indeed, the Founder is also a Laius figure: by taking Norton to Trueblood and the Golden Day, Invisible Man exposes the myth of the American dream, symbolically kills his Founding Father, and must be punished. Invisible Man is expected to sacrifice himself for the college: Bledsoe uses tragic language when he writes that the protagonist "in his *fall* threatens to upset certain delicate relationships between certain

interested individuals and the school" (184). Like Oedipus, Invisible Man accepts that he is responsible: "Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment" (143-4). However, unlike Oedipus, he submits not out of recognition but denial: "I knew of no other way of living . . . though I still believed myself innocent, I saw that the only alternative to permanently facing the world of Trueblood and the Golden Day was to accept the responsibility for what happened" (143). Danielle Allen argues that Ellison uses tragedy as purification ritual to criticize American politics. Ellison sees political sacrifice as an inevitable part of democratic life, but one which should be acknowledged and reciprocated as much as possible (49). The failure to acknowledge the sacrifices of African Americans constitute a violation of democratic agreements (49).

Ellison suggests that such sacrifices serve to disguise the reality of life. Ellison asserts that Bledsoe expels Invisible Man "because he had allowed Norton to get a glimpse of the chaos of reality and the tragic nature of life" ("An Interview with John O'Brien" 53). The Trueblood episode therefore be read in tragic terms. In another interview, Ellison claims there is "a little bit of hero in this fellow [Trueblood]" ("An Interview with Arlene Crewdson and Rita Thomson" 54). Ellison suggests that Trueblood is a tragic hero: "Trueblood involved himself in incest, which is always a tragic action," and tried to be responsible about it, and it is for the reader to decide "the quality of [his] action" (54). Trueblood presents his narrative in tragic terms. His fight with Kate uses the language of pollution: he tells her to "spill no blood" and she replies, "You done *fouled*!" (*IM* 62). At first, Trueblood decides (like Invisible Man) to "take the punishment," even though he maintains he "ain't guilty" (62). However, when Kate attacks him Trueblood instinctively moves aside. Later he starts to meditate on "how I'm guilty and I ain't guilty" (65). He suggests that, like Oedipus, his guilt is ambiguous because he did not knowingly commit incest. Nevertheless, Trueblood decides to take responsibility for his actions: "I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothing I can do but let

whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too" (65). Trueblood's agency and guilt is ambiguous, but he takes responsibility for his situation anyway. The comic as well as tragic absurdity of this situation is shown as Trueblood sings the blues, which Ellison identifies with the "tragicomic attitude towards the universe" that is a component of blackness ("The World and the Jug" 177). Trueblood realizes his personal identity in combination with this tragi-comic view of his relations to others.

Trueblood's narrative is also comic in its critique of Norton's worldview, which is built on oppositions of race and gender. Norton tells Invisible Man he helped to build the college as a monument to his daughter, who was "more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream" (*IM* 42). His language evokes the idealization of women, the mythic subconscious and the American dream. However, Norton's description of his daughter as "too pure" (43) threatens to collapse this idealized national, racial and sexual purity into the taboo of incest. Indeed, Norton "found it difficult to believe her [his] own" (42) and she died in mysterious circumstances which still cause him guilt (43). Trueblood's narrative draws parallels between his situation and Norton's. His reference to Matty Lou as "the gal" recalls Norton's introduction of "[a] girl, my daughter" (42). Trueblood's hearing Matty Lou say "Daddy" reminds him of one of his past lovers doing the same, so he "knowed she must have been dreamin' 'bout somebody from the way she said it and I gits mad wonderin' if its that boy" (56). The ambiguity of "Daddy" portrays women's sexuality in Freudian terms, whilst Trueblood's shift in thought from his lover to his daughter likewise suggests that his paternal protectiveness has an incestuous quality. Trueblood then dreams of a white woman, from whom he "tries to git away" (57) – it is implied that this avoidance of miscegenation ironically leads to his committing incest. Norton is shocked that Trueblood "ha[s] looked upon chaos and [is] not destroyed" (51); unlike Oedipus, he feels "no need to cast out the offending eye" (51). His ability to commit

incest without self-blinding and scapegoating is a source of "envy and indignation" for Norton (51). Whilst Trueblood is shunned by the black community, his narrative is framed by references to his white audiences who, "[give him] more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a n***** he was" (67). This echoes Invisible Man's feeling, "I should have been sulky and mean, and that really would have been what [the white folks] wanted, even through they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did" (17). Trueblood's subtext suggests that his white listeners paradoxically enjoy his narrative and depend upon it for their own self-definition.

However, the mockery of his double-voiced narrative is lost on Invisible Man. Like Invisible Man, Trueblood is both protagonist and narrator of his story. He crafts a narrative of self-identification – "I ain't nobody but myself" (65) – which sabotages his white listeners from within racial stereotypes. Trueblood's narrative undermines Norton by showing their similarities. However, insofar as Trueblood resists Norton through subversive imitation, his resistance always risks misrecognition. In framing women as objects of the sexual gaze (Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences* 83-4), Trueblood's narrative repeats the objectification of Norton's daughter on which its "dream" is founded. Insofar as Trueblood's narrative is repetitive, doubled and open to misrecognition, it has a tragic, incestuous quality.

Other male characters in the novel link fate to power whilst advocating individual self-creation. When talking to Norton about fate, Invisible Man "thinks of the first person who'd mentioned anything like fate in [his] presence, [his] grandfather" (*IM* 40). The grandfather claims, "'Our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days"; his invocation, "'Learn it to the younguns,'" suggest that their destiny will be to participate in this war as well. On the bus North, the veteran doctor tells Invisible Man, "Play the game, but don't believe in it" (149). He says "they" won't recognize his trickery. When Crenshaw asks who "they" are, he responds, "Why, the same *they* we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances

– the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (150). Before he leaves the bus, he advises Invisible Man, "Be your own father" (152). Like the grandfather and Bledsoe, the veteran advocates strategic double consciousness and trickery as the way to navigate the world. The veteran's speech is striking for its association of tragedy with individual helplessness: the tragic framework of "the gods" and "fate" persists as long as Invisible Man allows others to control him. However, his injunction to memory and gift of "fatherly advice" clashes with the Oedipal overtones of his speech. Indeed, Mark Conner notes that it is ironically the father-figures of the novel who advise Invisible Man to "assume creation to himself and isolate himself from all others" (180). This ironic pattern implies the limits of maintaining one's inner agency hidden from the external world. Indeed, the veteran's strategy is misrecognized by both Crenshaw ("you're a nut" [*IM* 151]) and Invisible Man, who dismisses the veteran as a "comical figure" (152).

Similarly, Rinehart shows the limits of double consciousness at its most extreme. Invisible Man takes on a father role when disguised as Rineheart: he is frequently addressed as "daddy" and "pops." However, Rinehart is a figure of total chaos (with Ovidian influences: his middle name is "Proteus"). Both his internal and external identities ("rind and heart") are in a state of flux. Invisible Man describes his discovery of the contingency of identity in Oedipal terms: "[his day] could not have been more shattering even if I had learned that the man I'd always called father was actually of no relation to me" (491). However, this model of "no relation[s]" is unhelpful to Invisible Man, who ends up supporting the Brotherhood nonetheless: "By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed" (534). Ellison suggests the tragic irony of double consciousness, which is inevitably complicit in that which it denies (Lyne 328).

Invisible Man's encounter with the blues singer provides another model of tragic identity. The song prompts him to make a mental journey home, remembering "far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind" (*IM* 166). He considers its meaning: "Was it about

a woman or about some strange sphinx-like animal? . . . And why describe anyone in such contradictory words? Was it a sphinx?" (170). Invisible Man's reference to the sphinx evokes Oedipus, who famously solved its riddle. However, Ellison adds a gendered twist: whereas in the Greek myth the answer to the riddle is "man" (Apollodorus 3.5.8), Invisible Man is unable to recognize a woman described with "contradictory words" except as a sphinx, with its connotations of myth, otherness and monstrosity. Furthermore, Invisible Man's repression of his past and his attempts to "travel far" and "be detached" evoke Oedipal denial. Invisible Man's odyssey ("long road back") is thus also an Oedipal denial of another "home" (*IM* 166). In addition, the "contradictory words" describing the woman recall the "incompatible notions that buzzed within [his] brain" in the Prologue (14). This suggests that Invisible Man's ability to find his home in the world will be linked to his understanding of the differences within and between himself and others.

In the Epilogue, Invisible Man continues to locate these issues of identity and responsibility within a tragic framework. Invisible Man locates his personal identity in terms of his relation to others: "the world is just . . . as before, only now I better understand my relation to the world and it to me" (556). Insofar as Invisible Man recognizes what was already there, his knowledge forms a kind of tragic anagnorisis. Invisible Man acknowledges the contingency of identity, but chooses the "imagination" of "possibilities" over the "chaos" and nihilism of Rinehart (556). In particular, he commits to the principle of difference: "Now I know that men are different and all life is divided and only in division is there true health" (556). He links this commitment to difference to the American project: "Our fate is to be one and yet many – that is not prophecy, but description" (557) Invisible Man's tragic language ("fate," "prophecy") is striking here, as he creates an Oedipal play of similarity and difference. His worldview is comically as well as tragically absurd: "one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving

towards whiteness and becoming quite dull and grey" (557). Invisible Man's vision of familial interconnectedness is reminiscent of the veteran who claims he is descended from Jefferson – on the "'field-n*****' side" (76). Invisible Man's knowledge is tragic insofar as he recognizes that which already existed: the interconnectedness of different people and different cultures. At the end of the novel, Invisible Man decides to leave his hole, "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (561). The theatrical language suggests the limits of social identity, which must inevitably fail to recognize the different facets of each human being. Invisible Man may be just a "disembodied voice" (561), unable to meet the reader in embodied social interactions (as the dual naming of novel and protagonist suggests). Nevertheless, despite being invisible, despite not knowing the limits of his agency, Invisible Man decides to embrace his personal responsibility to others.

Invisible Man's narrative repeatedly deploys and confuses the tropes of anabasis and *katabasis*, leaving and returning home, recognition and tragic fall. As a result it becomes difficult to read the narrator's final journey underground and promised return upwards as confidently predicting his success. Invisible Man's journey of self-determination and *nostos* is thus also potentially an Oedipal homecoming. His identity is both internal and external, native and foreign, homecomer and exile; nevertheless, Ellison insists that this play of unity and difference, whilst particular to African American identity, is also part of the human condition. As such he detaches humanity from universality to argue for the individuality of African Americans as well as their collective rights. There is something tragic about this model of identity. To some extent, humans are doomed to misrecognize the complexities of both others and themselves. Nevertheless, Invisible Man argues that "humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat" (557). Insofar as Ellison's novel acknowledges the spectre of the past and the interconnectedness of American ethnic groups, it moves away from Oedipal denial and encourages a fuller, through still tragi-comic, understanding of "home."

However, Invisible Man's ambivalent assertion of identity has led to criticism of the novel as overly emphasizing the white gaze, not least by Toni Morrison. The novel ends with a question – "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (560) – using call-and response to encourage the participation of the reader in creating meaning. In moving from "I" (3), the first word of the novel, to "you," Invisible Man suggests that his particular experience paradoxically allows him to represent the universal. However, the verb "speak for" questions the limits of Invisible Man's narration. Is this speaking simply the inner voice of the text being read by the reader, on whose recognition Invisible Man is dependent for existence ("Who knows")? Or does it mean to speak representing the reader, on their behalf? The twist of the latter reading depends on the "you" being a white reader, or a black reader who is ambivalent about identifying as such, like Invisible Man in Chapter 1. Morrison supports this interpretation in two of her interviews. Whilst she praises *Invisible Man*, she reads the novel as responding to the white gaze: "I didn't feel they [Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*] were telling *me* something. I thought they were saying something about *us* to *you*, to others, to white people" (Taylor-Guthrie 96). She suggests the very metaphor of invisibility infers a white reader: "invisible to whom? Not me. They are confronting the enemy; the enemy is a white guy, or the white establishment or something" (Denard 235). Indeed, Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, responds to Ellison, critically rewriting the Trueblood episode with the abused child centre stage (Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences* 81-88; Duvall 241). However, it should be noted that Ellison himself critiques Wright for attributing too much power to the white gaze ("The World and the Jug" 162). *Invisible Man* reflects on the limits of self-identification as part of its commitment to difference, which also encourages critical (re)readings such as Morrison's. Ellison's argument for unity-in-diversity both challenges the segregationist context in which he grew up (*Invisible Man* was published two years before Brown vs. Board of Education) and anticipates the problems of integration. Morrison is writing

during the Black Arts Movement, with its own issues of identity and race. My next chapter examines Morrison's attempt in *Song of Solomon* to "liberate [herself] as a writer from these racial codes" (Denard 59), and her use of the classics in order to do so.

3. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

3.1 The Uses of Tradition

In her 1988 essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison uses the classical tradition to discuss and deconstruct the Western literary canon. Morrison critiques the claim that Western culture is superior because it presents universal human values. She writes, "A large part of the satisfaction I have always received from reading Greek tragedy, for example, is its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy" (125). Morrison focuses on cultural "similarity," or sympathy, rather than origins or essence. Her invocation of both African American and African cultures further destabilizes the idea of direct cultural inheritance or correspondence. Morrison's enjoyment of Greek tragedy is shaped by her aesthetic and cultural concerns (she "feel[s] intellectually at home there" [125]). But that heritage does not define the value of Greek tragedy – as she asserts, others can enjoy it without recourse to her "home." She insists that it is the literary form of Greek tragedy which makes it valuable, rather than "the civilization which is its referent." This is because the form "makes available these varieties of provocative love." Tragedy allows for the play of difference ("varieties"), both within its structure (the dialectic of chorus and protagonist) and in its reception, since it is adaptable to different cultures.

Whilst Morrison insists of the diversity of classical receptions, she also connects Greek culture directly to African culture, bypassing white writers. Such a move is characteristic of Afrocentric classicism. Morrison refers to Bernal's *Black Athena*, which posits Greece as primarily influenced by Egyptian and Asian rather than European cultures. Afrocentric critics have used Bernal to claim classical civilization as cultural property stolen from Africa by white Europeans (e.g. George G.M. James in his *Stolen Legacy*). This makes African culture primary and superior to the West, not the reverse (I use the terms "Africa" and "African culture" not to

suggest that these are monolithic, but because their unity is important to the Afrocentric argument). Given the history of the classics in the colonization of Africa, the enslavement of African Americans, and the sidelining of African American literature and culture, such readings of Bernal are understandable. However, they raise problems for those writers who insist on the influence of African Americans on the classical and American traditions. This model of Afrocentric classicism also relies on notions of cultural purity insofar as it claims Greece as African rather than European. Indeed, Bernal actually argues for Greece as marked by cultural diversity and Morrison acknowledges this, suggesting that Bernal proposes a model of Greek culture as "absorbed by Egyptian and Semitic cultures" (130).

However, whilst Morrison finds Bernal's "weight of documentary evidence" persuasive, she is less interested in proving cultural origins than examining the construction of the tradition as deriving from white European origins. She writes, "What struck me in his analysis was the process of the fabrication of Ancient Greece and the motives for the fabrication" (131). Morrison refers to the processes of canon building whereby Greek culture became the central subject of academic study rather than Egyptian. Before this it had been theology (and Latin); afterwards, English literature (127, 130). Morrison highlights these canon shifts to destabilize the contemporary canon of Western literature. In the canon shift from Egypt to Greece, "Greece lost its own origins and became original" (130). Morrison contests the idea of origins by showing them as an ideological component of an evolving tradition. The discourse of origins in Western literature appeals to Greece for its own timelessness and universality, but it is paradoxically only able to do this by erasing Greek origins. Morrison insists that tradition is constructed in the present; it is politically and historically specific in its aims. Canon formation can be interrogated through an exposure of the processes of fabrication – "misreading" and "silence" – and its motives – "the concepts of purity and progress" (131). One can do this through readings which reveal how "informing and determining Afro-American presence in

traditional American literature" (145; Morrison offers her own reading of *Moby-Dick*). Such readings look for the writerly or readerly strategies taken to address or deny [such a presence]" (145). Another strategy is writing, like her own, which affirms African American vernacular language and cultural tradition.

Morrison's emphasis on the literary tradition rather than origins or direct cultural heritage is particularly important for American classicism. It seems significant that Morrison references both African and African American cultures in her discussion of Greek tragedy. For, as Kevin Wetmore suggests, the relation of African to Greek culture is an issue "primarily rooted in America, far more than Greece or Africa. In fact, it is in America where the relationship between ancient Greece and ancient Africa is explored, debated, and fought over the most" (3). Morrison's focus on cultural sympathy rather than origins undermines ideas of cultural purity, or the privileging of one culture over another. As she writes, "A work does not get better because it is responsive to another culture; nor does it become automatically flawed because of that responsiveness. The point is to clarify, not to enlist" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 145).

Morrison's interviews foreground a conception of the past which underlies her writing on literary traditions. The past according to Morrison should be acknowledged and worked through: "I think what I want is not to reinvent the past as idyllic or to have the past as just a terrible palm or fist that pounds everybody to death, but to have happiness or growth represented in the way in which people deal with their past . . . But denying it, avoiding it, and evading it is a sure way to have a truncated life, a life that has no possibilities" (Denard 128-9). However, a stale repetition of the past, identifying oneself with unchanging origins, is also a problem. In *Paradise*, the citizens of Ruby are preoccupied with the founding myth of their town. As such they "have nothing to pass on. And that is when you freeze history, and you simply pass it off as preformed, already made, already understood, already furnished" (Denard 164). Morrison

suggests that it is in the nature of a healthy tradition to change in the process of its being passed on. This applies to myths as well: "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel" ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 340). Morrison commits herself to myths, whilst also creating room for potential critiques and "new information" (Awkward, "Unruly and Let Loose" 487). As such Morrison insists on the present-ness of the past, "that notion of its always being now, even though it is past . . . because the past is never something you have to record, or go back to" (Denard 130). On the one hand, Morrison presents tradition as shaped by historical and political forces, which often present it as frozen and pure (as in *Paradise*). On the other, because it is in the nature of tradition to change, and the past is realized in the present, traditions hold subversive potential as well. Morrison's dual approach to tradition extends to her treatment of the classics: her novels show her double "perception both of the classical tradition's hallowed position within hegemonic culture, its role as a 'pillar of the establishment', and of that tradition's simultaneous subversive potential" (Roynon 3). Morrison's strategic ambivalence works to undermine the polarizations which trouble African American classicists: she neither denies the historical role of the classics in reinforcing cultural hegemony nor accepts its construction as white property.

3.2. Epic: Monomyth, *Katabasis* and Heroism

Like *Invisible Man*, *Song of Solomon* is frequently read as an archetypal heroic narrative. Leslie Harris argues that Morrison uses the narrative of the hero and his quest to structure her novel. Similarly, Dorothy Lee reads *Song of Solomon* as presenting Milkman's initiation into heroic masculinity. Significantly, both critics stress the universality of Milkman's journey: his quest is "common to mythic heroes as disparate as Moses, Achilles and Beowulf" (Harris 70) and follows the "universal monomyth of the life journey" (Lee 65). There is some grounding

for these readings. Milkman conforms to many of the patterns of the Rankian mythic hero. He is the son of distinguished parents; there are difficulties around his conception; he survives attempted abortions; he discovers his ancestry, takes revenge on his father, achieves status within his community, and so on (Brenner 13-14). Morrison herself in her foreword to the 2005 edition of *Song of Solomon* describes her interest to depicting a "very saga-like" journey. She describes the novel as "[o]ld-school heroic, but with other meanings" (xii). Whilst later scholarship has examined these "other meanings" in more detail, archetypal-heroic readings are still a popular approach to the novel (Furman 5; Ramirez Lopez; Rankine 106-7). It is worth noting that these archetypal readings frequently privilege Morrison's classical sources. Lee uses the presence of Circe to argue that Milkman "undergoes archetypal trials" (68); Harris compares Milkman to Aeneas and Ulysses and argues that the opening of the novel "consciously evokes the classical myth of Icarus" (74-5). It is also characteristic of these readings to see Milkman's initiation into heroism as complete by the novel, and his final flight as a symbol of closure.

Song of Solomon also lends itself to Homeric readings. Rankine argues that, "[o]utside Ellison's writings, the Ulysses theme in African American literature is most profound in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" (*Ulysses in Black* 103). Milkman leaves home in search of gold and glory; he returns with a greater understanding of himself and others. Harris asserts that the novel shares classical epic's concern with its mythic past: "Like Aeneas, like Ulysses, Milkman needs to look into his family's and his people's past before he can move into the future" (74). However, Morrison's novel resists being read as a master narrative modelled on linear classical epic. Her use of *katabasis* and burial points to the divergent moments of Homer, where Odysseus must move forward by going back, and remember the past and his obligations to others. Indeed, Pilate is killed in the act of burying her father's bones; with Milkman himself a potential "ghost" (*SoS* 363), the question of burial remains open at the end of the novel.

Milkman's journey into the cave has been read as a *katabasis* by several critics (Fletcher 405; Harris 74). It is most obviously signaled as such by the presence of the character Circe, who directs Milkman to the cave. Judith Fletcher suggests that Circe helps Milkman enact a *katabasis* which is also a ritual of renewal – he is, after all, surnamed "Dead" (414). Lee suggests he reaches the cave in a series of symbolic, "archetypal trials" as he climbs over a stile, crosses a river, and so on. However, instead of descending into the "pit" (*SoS* 274), Milkman has to "climb" to the "black hole in the rock" (273); as Fletcher notes, Morrison's use of ascent rather than descent subverts our expectations (414). Whilst Homer's Odysseus consults the dead for information on how to get home, Milkman hopes to find the gold which will allow him to leave home with impunity. Odysseus discovers his companion Elpenor has been left unburied; Milkman only pretends to be seeking his grandfather's bones for burial (*SoS* 270). Morrison's cave is both a palimpsest-like space, with traces of old sleeping-places, fires and an old tin cup (273-4) and, for the expectant Milkman, a void: "There were no fat pigeon-breasted bags of gold. There was nothing. Nothing at all" (274). The nonlinear temporality of the cave is also suggested by the breaking of Milkman's watch on his approach (Fletcher 406; *SoS* 271). The strange relation of the cave to time marks it as a symbolic underworld space whilst also challenging a linear heroic narrative. Indeed, the emptiness of the cave suggests Morrison's skepticism towards *katabasis* as a metapoetic encounter with canonical writers.

Rather Morrison locates katabatic themes of fatherhood, death and burial within a communal and nonlinear narrative structure. The story of the cave is narrated by multiple characters, out of linear order, through both direct and free indirect discourse. Macon narrates his murder of the white man to Milkman in Chapter 7; Circe tells Milkman that Jake's body was placed in the cave in Chapter 10 (266). In Chapter 5, Pilate tells Ruth that she saw her father's ghost telling her, "You can't just fly off and leave a body" (163); in Chapter 9, she tells Macon that she returned to the cave to collect the white man's bones (228). Milkman finally

tells Pilate that her sack contains her father's bones in Chapter 15. The story also involves multiple encounters by different characters with different kinds of father figures. Marianne Hirsch reads Macon's indiscriminate murder of the "white patriarch" as reminiscent of Oedipus killing Laius (83). Macon Sr.'s ghost leads his children into the cave, speaks to them when they find the gold and prompts Pilate to return (*SoS* 163). Macon Sr. also marks the cave through his physical remains, placed there by the Butlers, collected by Pilate and eventually buried by Pilate and Milkman. Milkman himself visits the cave on the wishes of his father, who thinks the gold is still there.

The multiple narrators, flashbacks and retellings of the story locate Milkman's adventure within the oral tradition and disrupt a linear master narrative focused on a single protagonist. This makes an interesting contrast to Ellison. Whereas Ellison's signifying on *katabasis* reads more as jazz-like variations on a theme, Morrison constructs her katabatic narrative out of her characters' different voices and experiences. Indeed, not only Milkman's but also Macon Sr.'s and Pilate's relation to the cave can be read in epic terms. Pilate stands vigil in the cave and emerges with new self-sufficiency. She departs on her own journey, including a relationship with an "island man" reminiscent of Calypso (163). Her brother emerges with a fear of becoming an Odysseus figure, "the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer" (34). Morrison multiplies her odysseys, undermining Milkman's linear, individualistic drive to "win" through heroic adventure (273). Indeed, epic/archetypal readings of the novel fail to emphasize that Milkman returns to Virginia at the end of the novel, rather than making a single, linear odyssey.

Circe herself is an ambivalent figure. Fletcher finds several allusions to Homer's Circe (407): the smoke which rises from her house (*SoS* 183), her Weimeraners with human eyes (261), her ability to sexually arouse Milkman (261) and her role as informant and guide (265-7). The animals on Lincoln's farm, who have human names (including Ulysses S. Grant), also

recall Circe's victims in the *Odyssey* (*SoS* 61). Circe is both a relic of the epic tradition and a transformative character who destabilizes the boundary between life and death. Reverend Cooper claims she was more than a hundred years old when she died, fifty years ago (254). Circe's age can be read as a tongue-in-cheek reference to her ancient mythic status. When Milkman meets her he is confused: "Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive . . . She had to be dead . . . Because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl" (262). Circe's contradictions – she is alive and dead, terrifying and alluring – suggest Morrison's reworking of the misogynist figure of the "witch" (260). Linda Krumbolz argues that Circe's liminality reflects the life-giving communion with the dead which characterizes some African rituals. She therefore links ancestor communion to reader response: "the solution of whether Circe is alive or dead is less important than a reassessment of the certainty with which we define and divide the living and the dead" (569). Krumbolz suggests that Circe functions, like Milkman at the end of the novel, as "our textual ancestor to carry within us, to stimulate our imaginations" (569).

Milkman's confusion over Circe's identity also highlights Morrison's engagement with classical epic. The encounter is marked by misrecognition, both by Milkman and Circe herself: "'Where is he? *My* Macon?'" (*SoS* 262). Just as Milkman shares his father's name but is distinct from him, so Morrison opens up a gap between Circe and her name: "'Yes; Circe . . . My name is Circe" (262). The fragmented syntax splits Circe the character from her Homeric name. This has a similar effect to the classical names of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, whereby "readers are constantly reminded not to project Homeric expectations onto the character's lives through a narrative strategy of misrecognition" (Greenwood 585). Circe both is and is not her Homeric counterpart, and this ambiguity destabilizes readings of *Song of Solomon* in terms of a one-to-one correspondence with the *Odyssey*. Indeed, Circe is mentioned at several points by different characters before she appears, creating a cycle of stories and personal myths within the novel's

structure and contesting the fixity of her classical representation. Furthermore, even if we read her encounter with Milkman as a nod to Odysseus' misrecognition on his arrival in Ithaca, Circe's relationship with Homer becomes more, not less, complicated (Circe is misrecognized as her Homeric counterpart in Homeric terms?). Indeed, Morrison also uses Homeric misrecognition to subvert Milkman's pretensions in Shalimar: "here, in his 'home,' he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed" (*SoS* 292). Whereas Odysseus is denied hospitality in his own kingdom, Morrison depicts Milkman's expectation of a hero's welcome in his ancestral home (his "original home") as a symptom of his entitlement. Morrison's most obvious allusions to the *Odyssey* thus complicate her novel's relationship to it, even as they seem to signpost an explanation of black culture in classical terms.

Morrison uses the name Circe not to elevate Milkman's odyssey through reference to classical culture, but to acknowledge it as part of a tradition. Milkman includes Circe as one of the "[n]ames that bear witness" (355). He wonders, "How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country" (354). The phrase "dead lives" evokes both Circe's textual/ancestral liminality and his own family name. Morrison thus uses old names in order to transform them, reviving the hidden histories and experiences of black people that shape the American landscape. This is suggestive of what she calls her archaeology of the "civilization that has existed under the white civilization" (Taylor-Guthrie 12) – a civilization which is nonetheless inextricably linked to the dominant culture. Morrison's use of classical names recalls the *Odyssey*, where "names possess a transformative power . . . Odysseus does indeed become No Man, the name he uses to trick the Cyclops, when he arrives home as a nameless beggar" (Fletcher 405; the transformative function of names also evokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to which I return). However, Morrison invokes not only Greek and Roman culture, but their historical applications. Like Barbee's reference to "black Aristotle," Morrison's classical names evoke Southern slavery practices; in a private conversation with

Roynon, Morrison said she "took [these names] from the registers of slave ships" (187). The historical link between classical naming and slavery is further evoked by Circe's proximity to the Butler mansion.

However, Morrison does not accept her characters' classical names as symbolic only of oppression. She insists, "Slaves were called Cato. I don't use that. At least, I use the names that black people are willing to accept for themselves" (Denard 112). Indeed, *Beloved*, Morrison's 1987 novel about slavery, is the only one in her oeuvre without classically named characters. Morrison frames her interest in black people's names within African American history and culture (Denard 111). Slaves such as Douglass recognized the power of names to define and control, and renamed themselves; Malcolm X changed his name to acknowledge his lost African name. When Guitar tells Milkman that he is part of the Seven Days, Milkman mocks him by comparing him to "that red-headed Negro named X," asking, "'Why don't you join him and call yourself Guitar X?'" (*SoS* 176). Guitar replies that he accepts his surname as part of his personal history: "It's part of who I am. Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that" (177). Guitar's response acknowledges that, whilst naming can be oppressive, a "[s]lave name" does not necessarily indicate "slave status" (177).

Lucinda MacKethan compares Guitar's response to Ellison's analysis of names in his 1964 essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" (205). Ellison writes of the Nation of Islam, "They would declare new identities, . . . destroy the verbal evidence of a willed and ritualized discontinuity of blood and human intercourse" (194). Ellison's problem with new names is that they erase the historical denial of African American identity. Ellison adds, "[O]nly a few [of us] seek to deal with our names in this manner. We take what we have and make of them what we can" (194). He continues, "Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own." Both Ellison and Morrison relate names to ideas of fate, tradition, community and identity. It is characteristic of names to be given by others – both by the African American community (Not

Doctor Street, Milkman) and whites (Macon Dead). However, names also symbolize the potential to define one's own identity, insofar as one chooses how to relate oneself and one's life to the tradition represented by that name. When Pilate is born, the nurse is horrified when her father names her after the "Christ-killing" figure in the Bible, who washes his hands of responsibility (*SoS* 25). Macon Senior chooses her name because it looks "protective" (25); when he discovers its Biblical referent, he keeps it as a symbol of defiance (26). Pilate herself lives as both a traveler and a guide to others, so that her name also comes to mean "Pilot" (25, 307). As MacKethan asserts, "The name must bear witness to her life, not her life to the name" (206). Morrison's names, classical and otherwise, thus indicate both the determining and potentially subversive force of tradition.

Morrison portrays heroic selfhood as emerging in relation to the community. When Milkman contemplates stealing the gold, "[h]e felt a sense of self inside him emerge . . . A self that could join in the chorus at Railroad Tommy's with more than laughter" (*SoS* 201). Morrison suggests that it Milkman's ability to narrate his heroics to others – "He could tell this" (201) – which allows him to form a distinct identity. Milkman bases his sense of self on his ability to join the collective "chorus," in contrast to the model of heroism through individual achievement which structures the American Dream (Roynon 137). The chorus is also a positive force lacked by Hagar, who "needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mama, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her" (*SoS* 332; Roynon 141). Morrison links the presence of a chorus to the ability to form healthy relationships; without one, Hagar becomes fatally dependent on Milkman's love. However, Morrison does not unreservedly affirm the chorus, which can also denote negative groups, from the "chorus" of gang rapists in *Love* (115) to the "choir" of Ruby patriarchs in *Paradise* (280; Roynon 141). The discussion with the Danville men similarly reinforces both Milkman's desire for the gold and his ego: "He glittered in the

light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride" (*SoS* 257). As Roynon notes, Milkman's pride recalls the hubris of the tragic hero before his downfall (139). Whilst Morrison shows the importance of the community for affirming a distinct sense of self, she also critiques this process, insofar as Milkman's identity forms out of his sense of superiority to others.

Morrison explores the process of mythologizing heroes when Milkman discusses his family with the men in Danville. The men "remembered both Macon Deads as extraordinary men . . . [the second Macon Dead] outran, outplowed, outshot, outpicked, outrode them all" (*SoS* 255). On the one hand, Morrison's language of competitive excellence recalls models of classical heroism, whereby the hero proves his individual excellence against a group: so Achilles claims for himself the title "best of the Achaeans" (Homer, *Iliad* 1.91). However, Morrison also grounds Macon's heroics within a group narrative. Macon Junior's excellence is affirmed communally ("they agreed") and reinforces the men's sense of self ("their contemporary"). Moreover, the men's remembering of Macon Senior make him an absent presence in their lives: "The good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same – and head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death . . . was the beginning of their own dying" (*SoS* 256). Morrison highlights that their mythologizing is only possible because Macon is dead; in his absence, he becomes a screen for their projections. Indeed, when the men discuss Macon Junior, Milkman "could not recognize that stern, greedy, unloving man in the boy they talked about" (255). Morrison ironically juxtaposes the symbolic father figure represented by the men's myths, who takes on power in his absence, to the reality of Macon's emotionally distant parenting.

Morrison thus locates heroic myths within the specific communities and family histories of her novel. Morrison frames the men's American "dream" and myth of individual achievement – [here] is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it" – within a tradition of call-and-response: the farm "spoke to them like a sermon" (256). Jake uses his property, Lincoln's

Haven, to resist racism and empower his community: "never mind you born a slave . . . If I got a home you got one too! Grab this land! . . . buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on" (256). However, Morrison also emphasizes the family aspect of the myth, which is reinterpreted and passed down by Jake's son and grandson. The farm's invocation to "own" the land is reminiscent of Macon Junior's invocation to Milkman: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things" (64). Gary Storhoff argues that Macon's materialism can be read not as an opposition to his father's legacy, but an interpretation of it (292). In the absence of his father, the traumatized Macon Junior tries to "re-create the land that was to have been his" (*SoS* 61). In mythmaking this promised land, Macon creates a twisted narrative of the farm focused on pure materialism (Stohoff 292). Milkman is thus influenced by his father's interpretation of heroism: he focuses on his father's economic success, "bragg[ing]" about his material "assets" (*SoS* 257). Morrison locates her characters' aspirations to individual heroism within their specific histories and encounters with others, rather than portraying it as a universal ideal.

3.3. Tragedy

Morrison also considers heroic individualism in her portrayal of the Seven Days. These men reject strategies of racial uplift and integration (Story 155-6), instead creating an African American collective in opposition to the dominant culture. Indeed, Milkman's first encounter with Hospital and Railroad Tommy is reminiscent of Invisible Man's confrontation with the veterans at the Golden Day. Ellison's veterans are traumatized less by their wartime experiences than by their return home, where they remain invisible despite their national service. Invisible Man is susceptible to myths of heroic achievement, racial uplift and white benevolence – "oh, those multimillionaires!" (*IM* 37) – and the veteran doctor at the Golden Day mocks this belief: "'The campus, what a destiny!'" (93). Hospital Tommy's name echoes Ellison's doctor; he addresses Guitar as a university student like Invisible Man: "Have all the halls of academe crumbled?" (*SoS* 67). Similarly, Railroad Tommy (whose name evokes the "railroad crossing"

beside the Golden Day [*IM* 70]) echoes the doctor as he critiques the boys' sense of entitlement. He tells them that, as African Americans, they will achieve neither material riches – "no private coach with four red velvet chairs"- nor political power – "no governor's mansion" – nor recognition for military service – "four stars on your shirt, or even three" (*SoS* 69). Morrison aligns the Seven Days with the nihilism and despair of Ellison's veterans: the name "Seven Days" recalls the "Golden Day," and Guitar claims that the organization was founded as a result of racial hate crimes against veterans by white Americans (171). However, Morrison focuses more on identity formation within African American communities. Whilst Invisible Man seeks to impress the white trustees, and enters the Golden Day as a last resort, Milkman longs to be part of the black group: he and Guitar enter Tommy's' barbershop because Feather refuses to let Milkman in his bar (66-67). Moreover, the Seven Days do not reject social roles as such but attempt to define an African American collective identity in opposition to white Americans.

Morrison locates Guitar's worldview within a tragic framework. Guitar does not believe in the justice of the law: "If there was anything like or near justice or courts when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn't have to be no Seven Days" (176). He portrays the law as irrationally motivated against black people, just as whites' racist violence shows them to be "crazy," "ignorant" and "unnatural" (172). Guitar thus critiques Enlightenment conceptions of law and democracy: "They killed us first and then tried to get some scientific proof about why we should die" (173). He suggests that apparent rationality of the law is a façade for its irrational racism. In a persuasive reading, Roynon highlights the correspondences between Guitar's language and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: "Guitar speaks the language of Aeschylus's Clytemnestra in his articulation of white violence as a contamination that (in the absence of meaningful legal process) can only be purged by revenge" (145). Morrison portrays white violence as a pollutant: Guitar's assertion that "the earth is soggy with black people's blood" (174) recalls the Chorus of the *Libation Bearers*: "What can wash off the blood once spilled on the ground?" (Aeschylus

47). In applying to the law the tragic motifs of pollution, irrationality and revenge, Morrison suggests that "despite the enlightened aspirations it professes, in the guise of 'law' or in the name of 'democracy' the dominant culture wreaks a vengeance that is as irrational as Pentheus's attempt to deploy force against Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, and as primitive as the *Agamemnon*'s 'ancient spirit of revenge'" (Roynon 145). Guitar's language collapses the opposition between the irrational Furies and lawful Eumenides which ends the *Oresteia*, critiquing the conceptions of law and justice on which Enlightened America is built (Roynon 144).

However, Guitar's response to racial injustice tragically enmeshes him in the violence he seeks to oppose. Having given up on racial equality, Guitar adopts an "oppositionally defined identity" (Lubiano 109). His model of justice is an eye for an eye: "the only thing left to do is balance [racial violence]; keep things on an even keel . . . I help keep the numbers the same" (*SoS* 170). Roynon suggests that his language recalls both the law courts of the *Oresteia* and its chorus, whose language of balance disguises its irrational desire for revenge (145). Guitar himself repeats this claim of rationality when he protests, "I am reasonable" (*SoS* 174). In his assertion that "[t]he disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (173), Guitar combines the language of Enlightenment science ("chromosomes") with that of tragic pollution ("blood"). Morrison further invokes Nietzchean oppositions of Apolline order and Dionysiac chaos by associating Guitar with Apollo. This is shown through his love of hunting and his name (suggestive of the lyre); the Seven Days recalls Apollo's birth on the seventh day of the month and his role in bringing the sun to start the day (Lee 66). Nevertheless, in juxtaposing rational African Americans and irrational whites, Guitar perpetuates those same racist Enlightenment oppositions. Guitar's unitary view of identity tragically replicates racism, as Milkman suggests: "'You hear what you said? *Negroes*. Not Milkman. Not 'No, I can't touch you, Milkman,' but 'We don't off Negroes.'" (Farrell 144; *SoS* 177). The Seven Days may also allude to Ellison's Brotherhood, who similarly use Enlightenment rationalism to disguise an

irrational, Dionysiac drive towards violence; however, Morrison decentres white racism by locating these concerns within the relationships of her black characters.

In contrast to Guitar's tragically unitary view of identity, Milkman faces an Oedipal struggle to separate himself from others. Indeed, *Song of Solomon* is frequently read in Oedipal terms. Eleanor Branch sees Milkman's narrative as "centred on the resolution of Oedipal issues" (70; see also Hirsch 82-84, Mobley 54-7, and Tidey 57-59). Morrison evokes Oedipus most obviously through the novel's incestuous relationships: Ruth's relationship with her father (*SoS* 83) and breastfeeding of Milkman (88), Milkman's relationship with his cousin Hagar. Milkman himself repeats Oedipal dynamics in his overly distant relationship with his father – whom he compares to a "stranger" (84) – and symbiotic relationship with his mother: "Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual" (85). Milkman affects a "limp" aged fourteen, believing that "one of his legs was shorter than the other" (71). Milkman's limp makes him feel "secretly connected to the later President Roosevelt," whom he prefers to his own father. Macon "had no imperfection and age seemed to strengthen him. Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg, that he could never emulate him. So he differed from him as much as he dared" (72). This can be read as a parody of Oedipus – whereas Oedipus' limp is a secret sign of his father's attempted infanticide, Milkman enjoys a secret connection to FDR rather than his own father. Milkman's Oedipal denial is reduced to his hairstyle and clothes, though "he couldn't help sharing with Macon his love of good shoes and fine thin socks" (72).

Morrison further subverts Oedipal paradigms when Milkman confronts his father. Ruth provokes Macon by suggestively identifying herself as her "daddy's daughter" (76) – suggesting the ambiguity of "Daddy" used by Trueblood – and, when Macon hits her, Milkman attacks him with the Oedipal threat of murder: "I'll kill you" (77). Milkman and Macon's contradictory feelings of rivalry and sympathy evoke Oedipus' anagnorisis: "Just as the father

brimmed with contradictory feelings as a crept along the wall – humiliation, anger, and a grudging feeling of pride in his son – so the son felt his own contradictions" (77). Morrison's simile is interesting: Milkman's response to his father's vulnerability is like the "[s]orrow in discovering that the pyramid was not a five-thousand-year wonder of the civilized world, mysteriously and permanently constructed by generation after generation of hardy men who had died in order to perfect it, but that it had been made in the back room at Sears, by a clever window dresser, of papier-mâché, guaranteed to last a mere lifetime" (77). As Marilyn Sanders Mobley perceives, "[in]n the process of winning a temporary victory over his father, [Milkman] loses his ideal image of him" (54). It is striking that the loss of Macon's symbolic power is described in Egyptian, not Greek terms, connecting ideas of familial and cultural origins and contesting the primacy of Greek civilization. The phallic power of the pyramid and its eternal cycle of male generations is substituted for the art of the (feminine?) shop attendant; it is also revealing that Milkman idealizes the deaths of hardy men who were probably slaves.

Indeed, Morrison links Oedipal dynamics to systems of oppression. As Lena notes, the power which is transferred from father to son is the power to control the female members of the family: "You think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her . . . It's a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what to do" (*SoS* 235). Milkman's Oedipal error is fatalistic only insofar as he repeats his father's abuse: "You are exactly like him" (235). Morrison uses incestuous overtones to critique both Macon's objectification of his daughters – "First he displayed us, then he splayed us" (236) – and Milkman's narcissism: "He had never really been able to distinguish [his sisters] (or their roles) from his mother" (78). Lena questions the basis of Milkman's authority: "Where do you get the right to decide our lives?" (235). She reduces the phallus to "that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (235). When Corinthians comes back from meeting Henry Porter, she hears Milkman and Macon talking about the gold and "wonder[s] if this part of the night . . .

had always belonged to men. If perhaps it was a secret hour in which men rose like giants from dragon's teeth" (221). Roynon notes the link to Cadmus' sowing of the dragon teeth when he founds Thebes: "the reference gives heroic stature to the Dead family, and suggests the possibility of their undergoing a tragic fate" (153). In particular, Morrison's allusion highlights the myth's themes of male autochthony, civil war and incest. Morrison genders the Oedipus myth to critique its normalization of male power over women within the family, which she suggests is itself dysfunctional. Moreover, by connecting the Deads to the House of Cadmus as a whole, and applying incestuous relations to multiple characters, Morrison decenters Oedipus and examines broader family dynamics of othering and enmeshment.

Indeed, *Song of Solomon* transforms Oedipal family relationships. As Storhoff suggests, the problem with Freudian readings is that they do not account for family history lasting multiple generations or, because of their focus on the unconscious, individual moral agency (290). Storhoff argues that Milkman must learn to transcend family patterns of "enmeshment" – the process whereby parents attempt to resolve their own childhood problems in the lives of their children (290). Milkman is able to assert emotional independence from his parents on leaving home; however, he must also release them from his "infantile desire for [his parents'] perfection" (Storhoff 300-1). The dual separation allows him to view his parents and their past with real empathy. It is significant that Milkman's limp is not resolved when he strikes his father, but after the hunt in Shalimar. In the woods, conscious of his separation from others, Milkman becomes aware of his selfishness: "Apparently, he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted" (*SoS* 300). Milkman listens to the sounds of the hunt; he perceives them in terms of a pre-symbolic connection between humans and nature: "Language in a time when men and animals did talk to one another" (301). This sense of connection allows him to escape an assassination attempt by Guitar (302). Finally, Milkman is able to integrate into the group of Shalimar men, laughing about his fear just as the

men in Tommy's barbershop do about Emmett Till (93). In feeling his connection to others, his body and the earth, Milkman feels "like his legs were stalks" (304). Krumholz notes that this moment recalls Macon's wish for an "ancestor . . . [with] legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real" (Krumholz 557; *SoS* 24). Krumholz suggests that, whilst Macon focuses on the documentary loss of his ancestral name, "Milkman becomes the 'true' ancestor" of whom his father dreams by "reimagin[ing] himself and generat[ing] his own meaning" (557). Milkman paradoxically becomes his father's own ancestor and displaces the Oedipal struggle over origins. In reviving his father's dream on his own terms, Milkman finds his own identity not through Oedipal violence (which is doomed to recur) but healthy re-relation and connection. Morrison thus invokes Oedipal relationships only to displace them, rooting Milkman's identity formation within complex intergenerational and cultural relationships.

3.4. Flight

These ideas of family, community and identity are shown in Morrison's treatment of the flying trope. As with the motifs of odyssey and *katabasis*, Morrison multiplies the moments of flying in her novel. The flight of Robert Smith recalls that of Icarus: Smith has crafted his own "blue silk wings" (*SoS* 11). However, rather than enacting a secret escape, Smith announces his suicide with a public note: "I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings" (9). The individualistic overtones of "my own wings" are undermined by Smith's request for forgiveness and his claim, "I loved you all." The wings therefore become a euphemism for suicide (framed as leaving the community) rather than a celebration of escape. Indeed, Smith's declaration of love recalls Guitar – "Everything I do, I do for love" – who indeed tells Milkman that suicide is a form of commitment to the Seven Days: "if it ever gets too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do *that* rather than crack and tell somebody" (175). As such the text supports Morrison's assertion that Smith's death is a kind of "contract with his people"; he is, after all, the "Mutual Life Insurance Agent" (9). Nevertheless, Smith's flight suggests the

problems of an overly communal identity. Since Smith is unable to share his experiences with others, flight is his only relief from the pressure of the Seven Days, who demand overwhelming commitment to the group.

Milkman initially perceives the gold as a means to fly away from his responsibilities to others. Before looking for the gold, Guitar and Milkman see a "pure white peacock" (196); Guitar explains the bird cannot fly because of its tail, a kind of "jewelry" which weighs it down "like vanity" (196). He claims, "Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (196). Guitar mocks the peacock's materialism, but the men begin to "fantasize about what the gold could buy . . . Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes, and the command of a large crew" (196). Milkman's desire for wealth and authority recalls his father – ironically, since he dreams of flying as an escape from parental enmeshment. Indeed, the peacock also recalls the young Macon's desire for the gold: "Life, safety and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock"(188). Morrison uses the language of flying to frame Milkman's rejection of serious relationships: "[H]is attempts to ignore [his parents' relationship], *transcend* it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was *light-hearted*" (197). This rejection is understandable in the light of Milkman's experiences with his parents, who refuse to see him as a separate person. Nevertheless, it also ironically limits Milkman's attempts to fly: his narcissism is also a form of spiritual "vanity" which "weighs [him] down" (196). Morrison's critique is also gendered: the men laugh at the peacock, which Guitar calls a "White faggot" (196), but the scene reveals their own projections – Milkman's narcissism, Guitar's racial and homophobic othering, and their mutual concern with being accepted by the male group.

The legend of Solomon is another variation on the flying trope. Morrison locates Solomon's flight within the oral tradition – the song about Solomon's children is an oral history, sung and acted out by Pilate and the children in Shalimar. Milkman initially interprets his flight

as metaphorical: "Solomon was the one who left, who 'flew away' – meaning died or ran off" (329). When he learns from Susan Byrd that the flying literally refers to "flying Africans," Milkman celebrates Solomon's ability to "fly his own self" (353). Milkman focuses on Solomon's individual heroism – his interpretation highlights Solomon's name as an echo of "solo man" – and his own status by extension: "My great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him" (353). However, Milkman views Solomon's heroism in terms of his separation from others, his ability to "leave behind . . . Everybody" (353). Morrison combines the language of flight and odyssey in celebrating Solomon's "sail[ing] on off like a black eagle" (353). Indeed, in several interviews Morrison links flight to "the Ulysses theme, the leaving home" which she sees as characteristic of black masculinity in literature (Taylor-Guthrie 26). Her classical reference lends a heroism to what is usually a sociological critique of the absent black father: "He [the black male character] can leave home. Ulysses left home, and you all said he was a hero. But when a black character leaves home you say he is irresponsible. He might be on an adventure" (Taylor-Guthrie 122). Nevertheless, Morrison insists on the duality of heroism, in terms of both flight and odyssey: it is, after all, the children who are left behind who create these stories (Taylor-Guthrie 122). The novel's epigraph – "The fathers may soar / And children may know their names" – highlights this ambivalence. There is an ambiguity to "may," which connotes both the possibility and desire of transcendental flight. Flight is gendered, restricted to fathers. Whilst there is no possessive directly linking the children to the fathers, the third person possessive can denote both the fathers' and the children's names. This suggests that the children's knowledge of their ancestral names is a substitute for the fathers themselves – the mythologisation of the father's status ("name") is created out of his absence.

Milkman's final flight combines elements of these other kinds of flying: "he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms

of his brother" (*SoS* 362-3). Milkman leaps towards Guitar rather than away from him, affirming rather than rejecting his relations to others (Farrell 147). The verb "give" suggests a reciprocity reminiscent of Smith. Milkman also affirms his connection to his grandfather: "he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (*SoS* 363). Like Solomon, Milkman becomes a mythic absent presence. In the phrase "would give up his ghost," the future past highlights the potentiality of his death, whilst "ghost" suggests the absent presence of the "textual ancestor" represented by Circe – hence the narrator's assertion that it does not matter whether Milkman actually dies (Krumbolz 569). Indeed, this also supports Ashley Tidey's analysis of flying as representing spiritual freedom in the African flying myths. Tidey links flying to a ritual connection to cultural and family history: "Inasmuch as flying is a metaphor in this folktale [the flying myth] for death as a freeing of the spirit to 'go back' – back to Africa and one's roots – the folktale resonates with the African cultural tradition of connection to ancestors as a way of 'revitalizing' the spirit and collective life of a community" (60). Milkman's possible death is less important than the spiritual rebirth and connection with the dead that his flight represents.

However, Morrison continues to encode a gendered critique of the flying myth at the end of the novel. Wahneema Lubiano suggests that Milkman's flight is potentially a negative repetition of Solomon's escape (112); indeed, "wheeled" (*SoS* 362) evokes circularity as well as transcendence. Moreover, Lubiano notes that Milkman's flight is enacted over the dead body of Pilate, "whose lack of navel has already established her as a myth or a different reality's possibility" (112). For Pilate also becomes a mythic ancestor figure. As she dies she asks Milkman to "Sing" (*SoS* 361), recalling her father's ghost – indeed, Jakes makes a possible reappearance as Pilate "gaze[s] at something behind [Milkman's] shoulder" (362). Milkman alters the song of Solomon to "Sugargirl don't leave me here" (361), regendering it with himself as the abandoned lover, and changing the nature of the abandonment to death. In so doing

Milkman lends a heroism to Pilate's death. They are circled by two birds, one of which "dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away" (362). The bird's theft of Pilate's earring seems symbolic; and indeed, Milkman reads it as signifying a kind of metamorphosis: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (362). The birds might be read as Pilate and her father Jake, both of whose bodies now lie in the grave.

Morrison's use of metamorphosis mobilizes the ambiguities of Ovidian epic. Andrew Feldherr identifies two competing narrative structures within Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which hinge on how we read the transformations in the poem. Firstly, metamorphosis can be read in terms of stability (170). Here the essence of a person is preserved in their new form; metamorphosis creates an aetiology which explains the present in terms of the past (e.g. myrrh comes from the tears of Myrrha). However, if we read the metamorphosis with a focus on the person who is changed, it becomes a break, a "shutting down of an individual consciousness"; the poem becomes disjointed and episodic, instead of epic and linear (174). Feldherr argues that both narrative forms are coded into the poem, which encourages ambivalence: "Ovid often positions metamorphoses at the end of episodes . . . [where] the structure of the work as a whole is most up for grabs. In deciding whether each metamorphosis marks an ending, or merely a transition, readers are continually confronted with the question of what kind of work they are reading" (169). Similarly, Morrison positions Pilate's death at the end of her novel. The (absent) presence of Jake also reminds us of his invocation, "You can't just fly off and leave a body," which this in turn evokes Ovid's subject of "forms changed into new bodies" (*in nova . . . mutatas . . . formas / corpora* [*Metamorphoses* 1.1-2]). Morrison seems to question the possibility of transcendental flight whilst remaining oneself – whether Pilate can indeed fly without leaving the ground.

Morrison plays with Ovidian metamorphosis through language. Ovid frequently uses the technique of *nomen omen* (names as a sign of who someone really is). For example, Lycaon

becomes a wolf: *lykos* means wolf in Greek, and the transformation also literalizes his bestial personality. As Feldherr notes, the technique makes metamorphosis a "clarification," both of Lycaon as a person and of language, since "verbal signs now more clearly represent the world" (170). Similarly, Pilate's transformation into a bird literalizes the meaning of her name as "pilot." However, just as Lycaon requires a translation of Latin into Greek for the metamorphosis to work (*lupus* to *lykos*), so the transformation of "Pilate" to "pilot" opens up the signifying possibilities of language even as they seem to lock into place. The bird flies off with Pilate's earring, which represents not only her name but its multiple meanings and histories: it contains the piece of paper with her father's writing; it is made from Sing's box and a brooch stolen by Circe. Pilate's name may live on through the bird, but its personal, historical meanings, actualized through her life, do not. It is also possible that Milkman reads the earring itself as a stand-in for Pilate; but again, the importance of Pilate herself in creating its meanings suggests that this also misses the point. As such Morrison both represents Milkman's epic journey (which itself transforms the epic tradition) and highlights what is omitted and lost in the production of such mythic narratives.

Indeed, Morrison frames Milkman's heroic journey in terms of narcissism. Early in the novel, Milkman examines his reflection in the mirror: "it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self" (*SoS* 79). His third-person externalization of his "self" recalls the paradoxical language which characterizes Ovid's Narcissus (*Metamorphoses* 3.440-70). Morrison extends these themes of the gaze, blindness and heroic masculinity to Milkman's epiphany during the hunt. Milkman's sense of isolated heroism is an illusion: "Maybe the glow of hero worship (twice removed) that had bathed him in Danville had also blinded him" (*SoS* 299). Milkman realizes that his status is dependent on others – the community and his relations. Abandoned in the woods, "his self – the cocoon that was 'personality' – gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now,

and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared" (300). Morrison's language of light, blindness and invisibility recalls *Invisible Man*. However, Milkman is invisible to himself rather than others. His absence of a self-image allows him to think more clearly, "unobstructed . . . by the sight of himself" (300). The passage recalls Morrison's commitment to "write without the white gaze," in contrast to Ellison (Denard 235). Morrison is interested in the gaze and its relation to subjectivity, as well as race and gender, but she locates her treatment of these themes within African American families and communities.

For example, Hagar's rejection of her hair and "groundhog appearance" critiques racism without centering the white gaze: she is rejected by Milkman, not white people. Hagar seems to recover when she "[sees] a tiny part of her face reflected in the mirror" (*SoS* 333). She immediately sets out to transform her appearance with make-up and clothes (335), but these are destroyed when she is caught in the rain. As Michael Awkward notes, Hagar "sets out enthusiastically to achieve the bourgeois society's ideal of beauty" and fades away when she realizes that will never fulfil this ideal ("Unruly and Let Loose" 493-4). Her obsession with obtaining Milkman's love is quite "logical": whereas Milkman escapes bourgeois standards by embarking on an epic journey, Hagar is limited to "oppressive domestic plots," where she cannot escape the role of the "abandoned female lover in the Western epic" (493). Hagar's collapse thus explores the gendered limits of heroic subjectivity: Chapter 13 "interrupts Milkman's monomythic quest . . . in order to expose phallocentric myth's failure to inscribe usefully transcendent possibilities for the female" (494).

Indeed, Ryna provides a mythic template of the abandoned woman, although her ambiguous status as Solomon's "wife" refers to the family's enslavement rather than her lover's lack of commitment. The phallic and yonic formations of Solomon's "big double-headed rock" and Ryna's "ravine" gender their mythic roles (*SoS* 348). When Milkman hears the "sound of the sobbing woman" on his hunting trip, Calvin explains it as "Echo. . . Ryna's Gulch" (297).

Here Roynon identifies an explicit allusion to the Echo and Narcissus episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which both "indicates [Ryna and Hagar's] lamentable lack of subjectivity without a male partner" and "illuminates Milkman's narcissism" (155). Hagar recalls Echo in the repetitive language of her final scenes: "No wonder . . . No wonder" (*SoS* 333). However, Hagar is also implicated in the language of mirrors and the gaze. She responds to her refection in the "compact mirror" (333), and "it [is] in [Pilate and Reba's] eyes that she saw what she had not seen in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress" (340). Morrison thus links the apparent narcissism of Hagar's concern to internalized racism and misogyny. Moreover, by linking Hagar to Narcissus as well as Echo, Morrison reminds the reader of Milkman's role in Hagar's collapse. She also maintains the Ovidian mirroring between Narcissus and Echo – rejection of others is in a way similar to rejection of self, and healthy identity requires a working through of both.

Morrison's use of Ovid also supports the ambivalence of the novel's ending. Milkman's words echo: "'Guitar!' he shouted. / Tar tar tar, said the hills. . . . 'Here I am!'/ Am am am, said the rocks" (362). As Roynon notes, these repetitions question the extent to which Milkman moves beyond his narcissism (155). In addition, critics have read Milkman's conflict with Guitar as the hero's archetypal victory over an enemy, who is also his double (Harris 74, Lee 69). The allusion to Narcissus undermines the success of this form of heroic identity, and indeed Guitar and Milkman mirror each other across the ravine and collapse indeterminably into each other's "killing arms" (*SoS* 363). The ending also extends Morrison's gendered critique of myth - the echoes evoke absent female presences – and her interest in language. Morrison both explores the transformative potential of signifying language and leaves open the possibility of narcissistic echo: the song Milkman sings to Pilate is perhaps not a transformation of myth but a repetition of "worn old words" (362).

4. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that both *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* make significant use of Greek and Latin literature and can therefore be considered evidence of black classicism. Still, Ellison and Morrison do not use the classics as an end in themselves. The classics do not serve to elevate the novels within the epic tradition or canon of Western literature. Rather Ellison and Morrison use classical allusions to question the notions of origins, authority, cultural purity and hierarchy which the classics have been used to assert. Ellison and Morrison play with archetypal ideas of myth only to undermine their universal relevance. Their classical allusions do not explain black culture in white Western terms but multiply the ambivalent relations between these categories. In addition, these authors use the classics within a historically and politically specific context. They highlight that the classical tradition is not a timeless representation of universal human values but a indeed tradition, appropriated and transformed to historically and politically specific ends. The novels critique the use of classics in the construction of a white America, from the Founding Fathers to Enlightenment racial discourse, slavery, education and the legal system. They question the relevance of classical ideas for African American politics and culture, for example in the context of heroic individualism and leadership. At the same time, Ellison and Morrison shortcut white America's claim on the classical tradition by directly linking features of classical and African American culture, such as the call-and-response of the tragic chorus and its protagonist. They show both that classics is a historically conservative tradition and that it holds subversive potential.

Whilst I have argued that *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* differ in style and focus (with Morrison often reacting against Ellison), the commitment to difference is ultimately a key similarity between them. They show that cultural identity, in the words of Stuart Hall, is "not an essence, but a positioning" (226); nor is there only one way to be black. As Morrison asserts, "One of the modern qualities of being an African American is the flux, is the fluidity, is the

contradictions, is being Miles Davis *and* Louis Armstrong *and* Bessie Smith *and* Kathleen Battle" (Denard 61). Ellison and Morrison dramatize the problems and contradictions of identity rather than offering solutions. Their novels display a classicism informed by African American experience; at the same time, they challenge the very idea of a "black classicism" whereby classical and African American cultures can be safely opposed, and the concerns of black classicism isolated from a classicism proper. As I hope to have shown, Ellison and Morrison deconstruct cultural oppositions even as they explore them. In examining the relationship between classical and African American culture, Ellison and Morrison contest the boundaries of American and African American identity, classicism and black classicism, challenging notions of cultural purity and yet showing the importance of cultural identity and cultural difference. "Black classicism" might seem a specialized area of classical scholarship, but it questions the foundation of classics – what we consider the classics to be and why we should study it.

Indeed, *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* can be used to reflect on the emerging discipline of black classicism. On the one hand, this area of research acknowledges the impact and perspective of black writers on the classical tradition. On the other, black classicists continue to be underrepresented in academia (Peralta). Black classicism, like classical reception, could be seen as an attempt to keep classics relevant. Even adding black writers to the canon of classical reception risks reinforcing the canon, especially since studies have concentrated on a handful of black writers (mainly Countee Cullen, Rita Dove, Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott, in addition to Ellison and Morrison). Further research would therefore benefit from a focus on new authors. There has been a concentration on theatre studies but little attention has been paid to black classics in film. Prominent examples include Marcel Camus' 1959 *Orpheu Negro* and Spike Lee's 2017 *Chi-Raq* (an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*), but it would be worth tracking down other texts. Further attention could be paid to classicism

in black art (beyond Romare Bearden's *Black Odyssey*) and music (R&B artist Adonis the Greek, Texan rapper Plato III; the use of Ancient Egypt in Beyoncé's 2018 Coachella performance). This would be informative to literary texts as well – consider the use of art and music in Ellison and Morrison's novels. The moniker of "black classicism" also risks erasing cultural and geographical differences between authors: further comparison of authors across these categories would be useful (Greenwood 606-7). Nevertheless, *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* themselves explore the problems of similarity and difference which characterize "black classicism," and their novels offer a critical toolkit for reading the classics and its receptions.

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