Introduction

Michiko Okuno, Ph. D.

In 1993, Toni Morrison (1931– ) won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and in 2006, her fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987), was selected by *The New York Times* as the “Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years.”\(^1\) The splendor of Morrison’s achievements demonstrates her standing as one of the finest writers in the history of American literature. However, as Konomi Ara emphasizes, Morrison’s abstruse style, including her use of metaphor, has not been meticulously analyzed. The challenge of grasping the meanings of her specific words and metaphors lies in the future.\(^2\) In addition, her experimental narrative techniques have not yet been fully elucidated by scholars, and a great number of themes found in her texts have yet to be explored. Because of these gaps in scholarship, the number of Morrison researchers is increasing, a fact confirmed by *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, which notes that “in 2002 the MLA Bibliography listed well over one thousand books and articles on Toni Morrison and her work.”\(^3\)

Some scholars discuss Morrison’s texts by relating them to the work of other notable writers. In *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia explains that the author’s practice of borrowing bits and pieces of literary works “is not unique to Morrison. … Collectivism is the way in which African people and African literature survive and develop.” Mbalia further explains that Morrison borrows “not ideas en masse but choice words, names, or concepts. … from … Ralph Ellison, Alex Haley … and Middleton Harris.”\(^4\) Although Mbalia points out the influence those writers have had on Morrison, William Faulkner (1897–1962) may be viewed as the most influential of all, as Morrison’s master’s thesis was titled

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“Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated.” In that document, Morrison analyzes Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936) along with Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). David E. Magill elucidates: “Perhaps the most important theme they [Morrison and Faulkner] share focuses on the effects of race on individual and communal identity.” He notes that both authors also make use of “multiple narrators, disjunctive time sequences, and nonlinear storytelling.” In their *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith B. Wittenberg emphasize that both Morrison and Faulkner treat “difference” as rich subject matter for their books; the critics go on to borrow a phrase from John N. Duvall, noting that Morrison and Faulkner share the common trait of “decided ambivalence” in their writings.

With respect to characteristics shared by Morrison and Woolf, Judith Espinola explains, “Both novelists share an interest in characters who feel isolated from society, a desire to experiment with language and narrative form and a feminist worldview.” Tetsushi Shibata posits that *Mrs. Dalloway* is based not only on *The Odyssey*, but is a parody of both James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and John Keats’ *Adonais*; he also asserts that the inspiration for Woolf’s masterpieces has its origin in Greek classics.

Morrison’s texts have also been interpreted in light of classical works. Edmund Napieralski, in his article “Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (1994), emphasizes the influence of Sophocles (c. 496–406/5 B.C.) on Morrison. He describes a number of similarities between characters in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and the presence in both works of the themes of incest and barrenness. In *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*, Missy Dehn Kubitschek connects Circe, an extraordinarily old woman in *Song of Solomon* (1977), with Circe the witch in *The

http://www2.tbb.t-com.ne.jp/aamokuno/
Odyssey. In *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*, John N. Duvall relates Tar Baby (1981) to the Book of Genesis. However, it seems that the analysis of these critics results in only a partial interpretation of Morrison’s novels, as the case can be made that she draws extensively upon the classical works of, among others, Sophocles, Euripides (c. 484–c. 406 B.C.), Plato (c. 427–c. 347 B.C.), and Ovid (43 BC–c. 17 AD).

Morrison’s predilection for classic literature can be explained by her educational background. She began studying Latin when she was in junior high school and she minored in classics at Howard University. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, she said, “I always know the ending; that’s where I start. … That’s where the meaning rests; that’s where the novel rests. I suppose there is a strong influence of Greek tragedy, particularly the chorus, commenting on the action.” Furthermore, Morrison explained to Thomas LeClair in a 1981 interview that “I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There’s a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction. Maybe it’s a consequence of my being a classics minor.” Morrison’s words indicate that she is well versed not only in Greek tragedy but, as I will demonstrate through this study, in the classical works of other genres as well.

Morrison’s remarks in an interview with LeClair shed light on her frequent use of the classics in her own writing:

I like to work with, to fret, the cliché, which is a cliché because the experience expressed in it is important: a young man seeks his fortune; a pair of friends, one good, one bad; the perfectly innocent victim. We know thousands of these in literature. I like to dust off these clichés, dust off the language, make them mean whatever they may have meant originally. My

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14 Taylor-Guthrie 101.
genuine criticism of most contemporary books is that they’re not about anything. Most of the books that are about something—the books that mean something—treat old ideas, old situations. (author’s italics)\textsuperscript{15}

If we consider “literature” to be classical literature, then her contention that she likes “to dust off these clichés, dust off the language, make them mean whatever they may have meant originally” affirms her use of classical literature and supports my approach to discussing her novels in relation to classical works.

Morrison’s inclination to borrow ideas from the classics seems to be intimately related to African-American mythology. In a conversation with Charles Ruas in 1981, she explained,

The mythology has existed in other forms in black culture—in the music, gospels, spirituals, jazz. It existed … in a kind of village lore. … The consequences of the political thrust to share in the economy and power of the country were to disperse that [the mythology]. … [S]omething else has to take its place. And that something else I think I can do best in novels. … The novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is.\textsuperscript{16}

Morrison’s comments appear to be in line with the theories of Craig Hansen Werner, who asserts that African-American writers create “counter-myths” to the “racial myths” of the United States. In his \textit{Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse}, Werner emphasizes that “Afro-Americans have for centuries encountered racial myths that deny the reality of their experience.” He continues by stating, “Afro-American writers [seek] to create effective counter myths. … For black audiences, this generates a counter myth that asserts an alternative to the historical

\textsuperscript{15} Taylor-Guthrie 121–22.  
\textsuperscript{16} Taylor-Guthrie 112–13.
understanding of the dominant myth.”¹⁷ In other words, American history is rich in racial myths. My supposition is that Morrison not only rectifies the history of the US in her novels but also, by using classical literature as inspiration, presents those novels as a mythology for African-Americans in the absence of their own ethnic myths.
