

Teaching “Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition” in the State Prison System

This paper concerns both pedagogy and classical receptions. It is essentially a field report from eight months of teaching a course I designed for a class consisting of thirty women incarcerated in the only women’s prison in the State of Michigan. The course pairs Morrison’s novels *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987), and *A Mercy* (2008), with the *Odyssey*, *Medea* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. As is widely known, Morrison was a Classics Minor at Howard and also wrote her M.A. thesis on tragedy in works of William Faulkner. The links between the novels and these works in the Classical tradition are obvious. *Song of Solomon* features a sorceress character with the name of Circe, who lives surrounded by dogs; *Beloved* tells the story of Margaret Garver, referencing the *Medea*, and *A Mercy* centers on a mansion built by slave labor bearing the ominous name, Milton. Morrison herself often discusses the influence of the tragic chorus on her novels, which position the protagonist’s actions against the wider scope of communal authority and knowledge.

In the class, we study the themes of wandering and homecoming, family curses, and pride and rebellion as fundamental respectively to one of the literary pairings and as fundamental to the story each of us has to tell about our own lives. The geographical location of *Song of Solomon*, an unnamed city in the Midwest (Detroit in the fifties) not only locates the students who are themselves positioned in the same geographical setting and are as well heirs to many aspects of the history *Song of Solomon* relates, but also references Morrison’s own childhood in Ohio. By sharing this connection early in the class, students interrogate the concept of home as they simultaneously use the characters

of Telemachus and Penelope to identify strengths and vulnerabilities in the places they call home.

The class is taught in the Great Books tradition and its goal is to hold out the hope that creative story telling within the context of appreciating Morrison's own transformations of the classical tradition, can allow the student to create patterns of meaning and intelligibility for their own experience of life. The final project asks the students to build the skeleton of a play or novel set in the Midwest and referencing the *Odyssey*, *Medea*, or *Paradise Lost*. By the time CAMWS meets, we will be finishing up the course. Among audience members I hope to stimulate thinking about outreach in the field of Classical receptions as a form of civic activism.