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# Shadows Redeemed: Myth and Intertextuality in the Novel and Film *Room*

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Studying myths naturally sheds light on the works of reception that adapt and appropriate them, but many scholars have noted that one of the chief virtues of reception studies is discovering what a reception piece can do to illuminate the ancient world (Brockliss, Chaudhuri, Haimson Lushkov, and Wasdin 2012: 3; Hardwick 2003: 4; James 2011: 2). Lenny Abrahamson's 2015 film *Room* and Emma Donoghue's 2010 novel, from which it was adapted, are examples of works that raise new questions about the myths they consciously reference as well as ones they unintentionally echo. A critical reading of such works can often reveal surprising and enlightening parallels, connections with other myths, and new ways to consider both the reception of the myth and the myth sources. Donoghue makes explicit mention of and appropriates features from the stories of the mythological captive, Danaë, and the prisoners of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic* to tell a story of captivity and escape by a young mother and her son. Although never expressly mentioned, several features of the Demeter and Persephone myth also richly permeate the novel.[1] The themes that emerge from the appearance of these myths in the novel and the film reinforce ideas about how the women in these stories are prisoners bound to their patriarchs, marriage, childbirth, and even their children.

Although Abrahamson's film is based on Donoghue's novel, Donoghue wrote the screenplay for *Room* before the novel was even published (Guerrasio 2015). Since the two versions were so closely conceived and Donoghue was the author of both, considering both works together is useful for coming to a more complete understanding of the intertextuality that shapes them and the extent to which classical myth informs the story, a feature the author intended and the director was able to appreciate (Arthur 2015).[2] Nonetheless, even when creators deliberately invoke myths in their work, they themselves may not be aware of all the ramifications of their choices. Therefore, whether creators of reception pieces are aware of every mythological resonance or not is less important than the fact that the resonances emerge in the first place. These attest to the pervasiveness of the core idea of a myth or at least its tradition. When the appearances of a myth are not obvious or even debatable, Cyrino and Safran term such manifestations "subterranean,"[3] which are nonetheless useful, because "in such cases where the myth in question may be fragmented or transmuted, the contributor illuminates how, in the absence of overt signaling, a myth operates at a cellular level to shape aspects of the screen text" (2015: 6). Similarly, Apostol and Bakogianni point out that the scholar's recognition of such appearances is an act of reception itself (2018: 3).[4] Moreover, the appeal that these mythemes continue to hold for audiences speaks to their universality and endurance.[5]

*Room* tells the story of Ma, a young abduction victim who has been held captive for seven years by a man she calls Old Nick. During this period, she has given birth to a son named Jack. The story is told from five-year-old Jack's point of view. Jack and Ma call the 10x10-foot shed in which they are imprisoned Room, and it is the only world Jack has ever known.[6] Although confined in this way, Jack's world is a relatively rich one due mostly to Ma's elaborate narrative of their reality. The two major readings of Plato's cave present it as a site of either limited understanding or political manipulation.[7] *Room*, however, in layering Plato's allegory with the myths of Demeter and Danaë, redeems the cave by making it a domain of maternal care and imagination. The narrow parameters of Room paradoxically supply the kinds of limits that enable creativity to flourish.[8] In the film and novel, this creativity is closely tied to the relationship between mother and child and makes it possible for Ma to transform her underworld into an upper world haven fit for raising Jack. I will begin by looking at the novel and film's encounters with Plato's allegory of the cave and how its application, in turn, allegorizes Jack's view of the world as the limited perspective every child has of his or her reality. I will then enumerate and examine the many resonances in the film and novel with the myth of Demeter and Persephone in order to consider the cycles of growth and loss

that characterize the relationship between parent and child. Following this, I will consider what the myth of Danaë and Perseus reveals about the parent-child dynamic, namely that parents and children can rarely occupy the same place in time in the same frame of mind. This tension, however, is necessary for the development of the child and, in the cases of both Perseus and Jack, their transformation into heroes. Finally, I will examine the interplay of these myths along with others, such as those of Odysseus, Orpheus, and Icarus, and additional stories Donoghue weaves in, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Read together, these myths and stories advance the idea that narratives, although a kind of Platonic shadow, ultimately convey truth, promote growth, and rescue both Ma and Jack from multiple forms of captivity.

## Allegory of the Cave

Allegory is defined as "the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence," while a myth is usually a "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon" (Merriam-Webster). But these two functions are not mutually exclusive. What allegory and myth have in common is that they are vehicles for values and truths conveyed in disguise, a shadow of the truth, if you will. In the case of *Room*, features of Plato's allegory appear in illustrating Jack's shadowy and limited understanding of the world. The film, when compared to the novel, moves in a more explicit direction regarding Jack's ignorance of the Outside, thus highlighting the Platonic theme. Nonetheless, Jack has access to glimpses of truth through Ma's stories, which function as allegories.[9]

An "orthodox" or epistemological reading of the cave makes it the site of limited understanding, with the prisoners representing most people and the freed prisoner standing in as the philosopher (Hall 1980: 74). Such an experience is meant to reflect the nature of our learning and ignorance (Plato, *Republic* 514a). Plato tells the allegory through Socrates in Book VII of the *Republic*: In a cave sit prisoners who are chained up and forced to face a wall. Behind them a series of items are marched before a great fire, which results in the shadows of these objects being projected upon the wall. These shadows constitute the prisoners' reality. Socrates surmises what would happen if some of the prisoners were freed and forced to look upon the objects and fire behind them. Because they would be unaccustomed to gazing at such brightness, it would cause them pain, and they would turn back to the shadows, which they prefer. Socrates then considers what would happen should one of the prisoners be dragged up to the outside world. At first the prisoner would recoil from the light and would have to look upon shadows and reflections in order to see, but gradually he would be able to see everything. On returning to share his experience, he would find the cave darker than before and would be met with hostility by the other prisoners (Plato, *Republic* VII 514a2-517a7).

Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, Jack is limited by what Ma presents to him, as she is nearly his whole source of information. Ma and Jack watch TV and have books, but Ma interprets all that Jack reads, hears, and sees. The result is a reality completely adapted to their small space:

> "Plant is real but not trees. Spiders are real, and one time the mosquito that was sucking my blood. But squirrels and dogs are just TV except Lucky—he's my dog who might come someday. Monsters are too big to be real and the sea. TV persons are flat and made of colors, but me and you [Ma] are real. Old Nick—I don't know if he's real—maybe half."[10]
>
> (*Room* 2015: 00:10:40-00:11:24)

Just as the prisoners are forced to face the wall by shackles, Jack's viewpoint is also restricted by his physical space. When Ma, in planning their escape, tries to convince Jack of the existence of real trees and dogs and cats and grass, she explains, "We can't see [the things outside] from here because Skylight looks upwards instead of sideways" (*Room* 2015: 00:28:30-00:28:34).

Donoghue explicitly mentions Plato's cave in her novel through one TV commentator who, after Ma and Jack's escape, calls Jack's exposure to TV in captivity "[c]ulture as a shadow on the wall of Plato's cave" (Donoghue 2010: 294). TV offers an imitation of life to all viewers, but for Jack, TV is another level removed from reality. Jack resembles the prisoners in that he is not aware of the real human actors and objects behind what he sees. In fact, "TV" serves as Jack's term for the false, imaginary, and magical. For instance, when Ma asks Jack where he thinks Old Nick gets their food, Jack responds, "From TV by magic" (*Room* 2015: 00:27:13-00:27:14). Most of his reality consists of the items in Room. Jack's practice of addressing these objects as though by name—Skylight, Table, Wardrobe—is not only his anthropomorphizing of objects to create the community he lacks, but the capitalization of these objects' names in the novel also evokes the Platonic Forms.[11] Jack's things are the only real ones, while similar objects on TV are two-dimensional imitations. Thus, he is unaware that his world is but a fraction of all that exists.[12] In this limited cave of shadows, however, Ma is able to create a world so full and complete for a time, that even after their escape, Jack longs to be back in Room, much like one of Plato's freed prisoners might.

Plato's allegory itself is an example of the imitative shadows it allegorizes. Thus, it could be read as an allegory about allegory. *Room* functions in a similar way, as an allegory about narrative and parenting. When making his bid to direct the film, Abrahamson expressed that he saw Room as "an extreme case to illuminate universal truths about the parent-child relationship" (O'Falt 2016), while Donoghue has said she was "trying to capture the essential drama of parenting" ("In Donoghue's 'Room'" 2010). Just as Plato uses allegories to explain truths about the human condition, Donoghue and Abrahamson echo myths and other stories to tell this universal story of the parent-child romance. The fact that Ma goes unnamed for the first half of the film and Old Nick's real name is never revealed renders Ma and Old Nick types. Donoghue also points to the universality of Jack's experience through one of the TV commentators whom Jack overhears after his escape: "We're all Jack, in a sense" (Donoghue 2010: 293). Ma and Jack's story is, in essence, a common one—parents tell their children a certain version of reality, hiding or spinning the truth to various degrees. As children become more and more acquainted with the "real world," parents may find they need to adjust their stories and consequently re-negotiate the way they relate to their children. This may lead to the parents' mourning their children's loss of innocence and separation from them. The myth of Demeter and Persephone represents the same experience.

## Demeter and Persephone

The chapter titles of the novel *Room*, "Presents," "Unlying," "Dying," "After," and "Living," reflect the death-and-resurrection process that the story of Demeter and Persephone illustrates. Whereas the cave in the *Republic* is a place of ignorance and the outer world one of enlightenment, the realms are flipped in the Demeter and Persephone myth, with the underworld as the setting of new knowledge and experience. Room is the site for Ma's loss of innocence and thus an underworld, but it is an upper world sanctuary of motherly comfort for Jack. The film is set during the winter, commonly imagined as the time of Persephone's captivity.[13] Yet this is also the period of Ma's narration of Jack's world, which reflects the season of growth that happens when Demeter and Persephone are together. However, the time when Ma and Jack are in their world together undisturbed is brief and precious, in part because Old Nick interrupts their togetherness nearly every night and because their eventual escape will result in new forms of separation between them.

Unlike the allegory of the cave and the myth of Danaë, Demeter and Persephone are never explicitly mentioned in the film or novel, but many features of their myth appear and overlap with the themes of Plato's cave and Danaë's story. The two most well-known sources of the myth of Demeter and Persephone are the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. They share the following details: One day when Demeter's young daughter, Persephone, is picking flowers in a field, she is abducted by her uncle Hades, whom her father, Zeus, has arranged for her to marry. Demeter, the goddess of harvest and agriculture, in her grief causes all vegetation on the earth to die, which reduces

the sacrifices the mortals are able to make to the gods. Zeus, in an effort to placate Demeter, manages to negotiate Persephone's return, but during her time in the underworld, Persephone consumes pomegranate seeds. This obliges her to stay part of the year underground with Hades. Thereafter, the upper world thrives when Demeter and Persephone are together but goes barren when Persephone returns to the underworld. The myth is an etiology for the seasons, a metaphor for cycles of dying and rising, and a representation of a girl's initiation into marriage and womanhood.[14]

Throughout the story Ma embodies both goddesses. As a young woman named Joy, she becomes a Persephone figure as the captive of Old Nick.[15] Having given birth to Jack, Joy becomes Ma,[16] and her subsequent creation of an imaginative and flourishing world for him aligns her with the mother goddess Demeter. Jack, however, in saving Ma multiple times, takes turns assuming the role of Demeter himself. Moreover, Ma is repeatedly rendered a Persephone when she is raped almost nightly by Old Nick. On these nights Jack too undergoes a dying and rising of sorts when Ma puts him into a wardrobe during Old Nick's visits and then retrieves him after Old Nick leaves. Child becomes mother, and mother becomes child—so the cycle runs alongside the life-and-death episodes in their relationship.[17]

Critical for Ma's creation of an upper world garden in her underworld prison is the exclusion of the father.[18] In similar terms, Donoghue herself has commented on the world they have created: "Ma and Jack triumph over their captor by inventing a whole, rich world out of the bare materials he's allowed them; a magic circle of creativity and delight from which he'll always be excluded" (Donoghue 2016). Similarly, Old Nick's absence echoes that of Zeus in Persephone's story, who, although present when giving Persephone away and negotiating her return, does not interact with Persephone himself. At one point, Jack expresses an Oedipal jealousy wondering whether Old Nick is "having some" (Jack's term for breastfeeding) and worries that it might make him more real (Donoghue 2010: 47). Old Nick is another subject presented to Jack by Ma in a partial and shadowy way: "I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer" (Donoghue 2010: 18); thus, Jack reinforces the idea that narrative brings the things of the world to life. From Jack's perspective Old Nick is an unseen, godlike, and magical figure, whose chief role is to bring food, medicine, and clothing, and he is in no way regarded by Jack as a father figure. At most, Ma and Old Nick, as they bicker and nag, enact a perverse form of marriage before Jack, who views their interactions incompletely through the slats of Wardrobe. This false marriage is yet another shadow in Jack's cave.[19]

Ma's dominance over Jack's world and their subsequent twinning are underscored by how shots of them are staged. Just as ancient depictions of Persephone and Demeter show them side by side or face to face and nearly indistinguishable from one another (Foley 1993: 139), Jack and Ma are often filmed similarly positioned, with Jack's long hair making him a twin of his mother or "[t]he dead spit of me," as Ma says (Donoghue 2010: 7). Ma, Jack, and Old Nick are almost never featured in a shot together, just as Zeus does not usually appear with Demeter and Persephone in ancient depictions. This cinematic choice emphasizes Jack and Ma's intimate isolation, which allows Jack's attachment to and identification with his mother to be prolonged. This is marked in part by his continued breastfeeding, which is considerably downplayed in the film but frequently mentioned in the novel. Also, in the novel Jack identifies with his mother so extensively that he thinks he will be like her when he grows up, believing, for instance, that someday he will become a woman and have a baby in his belly as well (Donoghue 2010: 13). The fact that Jack is a boy makes this identification with his mother all the more striking. Moreover, when Jack escapes, he is mistaken for a girl, reinforcing the connection with his mother and his role as a Persephone figure.[20]

In addition to his strong identification with Ma, Jack also experiences a delayed psychic separation from her. He believes everything that is Ma's is his (Donoghue 2010: 10, 220). He does not like when she is awake ("on") and he is sleeping ("off") (Donoghue 2010: 5). He also becomes confused about whether people are referring to him or Ma when they say "you" (Donoghue 2010: 199). Downing insists, "Certainly before Demeter loses Persephone she has allowed her no identity of her own; the daughter exists only as an extension of the mother" (1994a: 144). This seems to be the case with Jack, who speaks only to and

through his mother during his first days after their escape. Although Jack has access to a mirror in the novel,[21] the film includes a scene that takes place in the hospital bathroom the morning after their escape in which Ma seems to introduce Jack to their reflection for the first time. This offers a literal illustration of the Lacanian mirror stage, a turning point that should initiate Jack's development into a separate self, yet Jack turns away from their reflection with indifference.[22]

The depth of intimacy seen between Ma and Jack in the hospital is what made it possible for Ma to create a convincingly expansive world for Jack in the first place. Embler reads Demeter and Persephone as "represent[ing] the vitality of creation, of all creativity" (1968: 405). Ma and Jack's interactions, likewise, exemplify ongoing and unlimited growth. Their world is even accompanied by a chthonic element in the form of Eggsnake, which Jack and Ma have made by stringing together eggshells and which inhabits the floor under the bed in Room. Eggsnake is doubly associated with new life because of the snake's connection with rejuvenation and the fertility represented by the eggs. A creative product in itself, Eggsnake also symbolizes Ma's continually renewed energy to generate Jack's endless world: "[Room] went every direction, all the way to the end. It never finished. Ma was always there" (*Room* 2015: 01:38:16-01:38:19). Out of the death of Ma's captivity comes new life both in the form of Jack and the world she creates for him. This is the first way Jack and Ma mutually save one another. This creativity, however, comes at a cost. Reir observes, "Myths and images about the act of creation always include some kind of idea about the initial seeding or sparking of new life along with an almost simultaneous knowledge of and familiarity with death" (1986: 17). In raising Jack well, Ma has cultivated a mind that has grown beyond what she is capable of controlling. This eventually compels a necessary change, which will be achieved by a symbolic death.

Before their escape, it becomes clear that Jack begins to desire some independence from Ma, to have things of his own, and to keep his discoveries secret from her, such as a mouse he begins to feed. In this respect, he resembles Persephone, who, as Suter points out, picks the narcissus by her own impulse, indicating she is ready to mature, and [her act] precipitates the action of the core story (2002: 11).[23] The pomegranate seed of the Persephone myth, a binding gift and symbol of experience,[24] emerges in the form of a red toy truck, which Old Nick brings as a birthday gift for Jack.[25] Even more aptly, in the novel Old Nick brings a red lollipop, which Jack fishes out of the trash and consumes secretly (Donoghue 2010: 77).[26] This evokes the sweet red fruit of the pomegranate that Hades gives to Persephone (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* ln. 372 in Foley 1993: 21). Jack wonders "if this is what Outside tastes like" (Donoghue 2010: 77), which in effect aligns the Outside with the underworld. Old Nick's gifts paired with Jack's increasing curiosity eventually compel Ma to find a way out of Room, and she begins to try to tell Jack the truth about their captivity.

## Danaë and Perseus

The myth of Danaë shares significant similarities with Demeter and Persephone's story: the excluded and threatened father figure who is also a patriarchal captor, a displaced and captive daughter, the bond between mother and child, and multiple rescues. When Danaë's father, Acrisius, hears an oracle predicting his death at the hands of his daughter's future child, he imprisons Danaë in a bronze underground chamber (Pseudo-Apollodorus 2.4.1). The prison has one means of access at the roof. It is through this opening that Zeus visits in the form of a shower of gold and impregnates Danaë with the future hero Perseus. After Danaë gives birth to Perseus, Acrisius puts them into a chest and casts them out to sea. They are discovered by the fisherman Dictys who takes them in. Later, when Perseus is grown, Dictys' brother, King Polydectes, falls in love with Danaë and sends Perseus to fetch Medusa's head in order to get him out of the way. Perseus returns to turn Polydectes to stone and to save his mother (Pseudo-Apollodorus 2.4.3).[27] Eventually, the prophecy that Acrisius had received proves true when Perseus accidentally kills him with a discus.

Donoghue's deliberate appropriation of the Danaë myth is clear from the beginning of the novel. Room, with its skylight offering the only view of the outside, evokes Danaë's prison chamber. The epigraph of Donoghue's novel also consists of an excerpt from Simonides' "Danaë":

> My child
> Such trouble I have
> And you sleep, your heart is placid;
> you dream in the joyless wood;
> in the night nailed in bronze,
> in the blue dark you lie still and shine.
>
> Simonides (c. 556-468 BCE),
> "Danaë" (tr. Richard Lattimore)[28]

Although Ma and Jack's time in captivity is a period of creative flourishing and love, they do not occupy Room in the same state of mind. The tension that this generates is captured by Simonides' poem. Because Ma inhabits both upper and under worlds simultaneously, her time with Jack in Room is not entirely free of care. This results in a dynamic between them not unlike that between the enlightened prisoner and the other prisoners in the cave.

Jack's warm attachment to Room is possible, because, as discussed above, Ma manages to shield him from the brutal reality of their situation by hiding him in Wardrobe when Old Nick visits. This recalls other mythological mothers, such as Rhea, Thetis, and Alcimede who hide, disguise, or send away their sons for their protection, in some cases against hostile fathers. The chest in which Acrisius sends Danaë and Perseus out to sea, although a second prison, is also a means of escape. This chest is represented by Wardrobe as well as Jack's actual means of escape, the rug that Ma rolls him in when they pretend he is dead—a ruse that forces Old Nick to carry Jack out of Room.

After Ma and Jack's escape, the TV commentators that Jack overhears offer up his story's connection with Perseus' heroism: "I would have thought the more relevant archetype here is Perseus—born to a walled-up virgin, set adrift in a wooden box, the victim who returns as a hero" (Donoghue 2010: 294). Jack does, in fact, fulfill the role of Perseus in many ways. His hesitation, however, aligns well with Pirani's reading of Perseus' heroism: "Perseus becomes a reluctant destroyer of the corrupt patriarch and an ally of the benign feminine; but he also slays the poisonous feminine, the Medusa, and from her body is born Pegasus, symbol of liberated spiritual imagination" (1988: xii). We have already seen that Jack's birth sparks prolific life for Ma's imagination. The need to protect Jack also reduces Ma's destructive and resistant Medusa aspect. As Ma reveals to an interviewer, after Jack's birth she became "polite" to Old Nick (Donoghue 2010: 233). By giving her a reason to live, Jack's birth was the first way he saved Ma. He will save her for a second time when they escape from Room, and he will do so armed with other products of her creativity, namely her narratives.

As in Demeter's story, the shadowy yet threatening patriarchal figure is present in Perseus and Danaë's story in the form of Acrisius and Polydectes. Zeus, although he is responsible for the abduction of Persephone, also plays a critical role in her return to her mother. Likewise, in Danaë's story, Zeus will be doubly responsible for Danaë's release. According to Pirani, Zeus represents the "biological imperative" (1988: 13). He not only fathers Perseus, which causes Acrisius to cast mother and child into the sea, but it is by his will that Danaë and Perseus arrive safely to land (Pseudo-Hyginus 63). Old Nick fulfills the latter function by carrying Jack out of Room. Nonetheless, Zeus is mostly absent as a father figure for Perseus, as he is for Persephone. This theme of the shadowy or absent father persists once Ma and Jack are on the outside. There Ma's father cannot bring himself to look at or speak to Jack, who reminds him of what Old Nick did to his daughter.

The Danaë myth is appropriated not only to narrate Jack's development into a hero but also Ma's transformation. During an interview following Ma's escape, Ma shapes her own story, as she has Jack's

world, by dismissing Old Nick as Jack's father, insisting, "Jack is nobody's but mine" (*Room* 2015: 01:30:33-01:30:35). The novel begins with Ma telling Jack that he zoomed down into her belly through the skylight of the shed; thus, Ma resembles the self-seeding goddesses of early matriarchies (Reir 1986: 19). In this way, Ma's story is about both the birth of Jack and a birth of self, about which Pirani writes, "It is possible to see Danaë's insemination as autonomous. There is a mythic tradition of 'self-impregnation,' where the woman desires and values herself such that she gives birth to her new self" (1988: 14). As for the role of the male in this process, Downing writes, "The male as rapist, the male as chance agent of self-discovery—both are true" (1994: 225). Downing is referring to Hades, but her reading applies to Zeus of Danaë's story as well. Without Danaë's transformation into a mother, she could not have been cast out and saved. Likewise, it is Ma's motherhood, her raising up of Jack, and the stories that she has told him that will rescue them both during and after their captivity.

## Narrative to the Rescue

When the myths of Persephone and of Danaë are mapped on top of the allegory of the cave, the cave is recast and valorized as the domain of imagination and the source of Ma's flourishing narratives. Just as the maternal world of creativity and growth continues to call Persephone back from the underworld and she is satisfied to occupy both worlds, Jack will move back and forth between the safety of his mother's embrace and new discoveries on the Outside. Even before Jack and Ma's escape, their existence in Room and the uninterrupted bond that they share is threatened by Jack's curiosity. The very impulse, however, that causes Jack to desire to be separate from Ma is what Ma needs from him in order to escape.

When Ma, as the enlightened philosopher, tries to convince Jack of the reality of their situation, the thoroughness of the world she has created initially thwarts her ability to convince him of any other possibilities. Despite Jack's emerging curiosity, he rejects Ma's story ("I want a different story" [*Room* 2015: 00:30:09]) and begins to regress ("I want to be four again" [*Room* 2015: 00:29:58]), indicating that he, like Persephone, is at a truly liminal stage. Jack's refusal to believe Ma's accounts of the outside world matches the incredulity of Plato's prisoners when the freed prisoner comes back to tell of what he has seen in the outer world. In the novel, after Ma tells Jack the truth about Old Nick, the moment Jack realizes that they must leave Room coincides with the power coming back on, which had been cut by Old Nick. Jack begins "blinking and covering [his] eyes, everything's dazzling because Lamp's come back on" (Donoghue 2010: 97). The scene evokes the fire and sunlight that are blinding to the prisoners accustomed to a darker view.

In the chapter titled "Unlying," Ma begins to undo or re-appropriate her previous narratives in order to prepare Jack for their escape. She does so with stories that Jack is already familiar with, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, since it is initially easier for Jack to look upon reflections and shadows, as it is for Plato's freed prisoner (Plato, *Republic* VII, 516a). Incidentally, Alice has been identified as a Persephone figure by Davenport (1997: 147). Previously, Ma read *Alice and Wonderland* to Jack as entertainment. Now, by drawing an analogy between Alice and herself, she is using the same story to enlighten him. Alice's story, as allegory, is, as Lear might call it, "therapeutic" (2006: 38). Ma is doing what Plato's allegory of the cave was intended to do, which, as Lear argues, is two things: first, it describes the "fundamental condition" of those to whom it is being told; and second, it is "designed to instill dissatisfaction with the current level of experience" (2006: 34).

Jack does not yet fully understand that "[s]tories are a different kind of true" (Donoghue 2010: 71). Before children recognize allegory as allegory, in a state Lear terms their "lack of orientation" (Lear 2006: 28), an allegory can inculcate ideas in them: "[E]ven though people eventually acquire the capacity to recognize allegory, the fact that there was a youthful period in which they lacked this capacity casts a shadow over an entire life" (Lear 28). The shadow Ma casts on Jack ends up saving them. In raising Jack on stories, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Ma unwittingly prepares Jack to become a hero. After reframing *Alice in Wonderland*, Ma then uses *Dora the Explorer* and *Bob the Builder* to

instruct Jack about what to do once he escapes. Her voice will continue to be with Jack when he is on the Outside alone: "I'll be talking in your head every minute, I promise. Remember when Alice was falling down, down, down, she was talking to Dinah her cat in her head all the time?" (Donoghue 2010: 108).

Just as Ma uses many stories to prepare Jack for escape, features of several myths figure into Donoghue's narrative of Ma and Jack's risky plan. The overlap of the themes of these myths reveals subtle connections between them. When Jack refuses to comply with Ma's plan at first, she slips into a depressive episode and spends the whole day in bed. This recalls Demeter's period of grief following the loss of Persephone. As Jack and Ma prepare to escape, Jack pretends to be Icarus while playing (Donoghue 2010: 104), which foreshadows his separation from his mother and symbolic death. Icarus also evokes the presence of his father, Daedalus, who uses his ingenuity to escape the island of Crete (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.183-235). The same creativity that Ma's captivity has sparked will now serve her escape plan. Ma's situation resembles Odysseus' dilemma in the Cyclops' cave.[29] Just as Polyphemus is the only one strong enough to move the stone that blocks the cave's entrance (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.304-5), only Old Nick knows the code to the door of the shed. If we read the Cyclops episode with the Persephone and Danaë stories, we see the Cyclops, like Demeter and Zeus, is a divine force that is necessary for escape. Likewise, the Cyclops' cave may be read as an underworld, where Odysseus undergoes a form of death in becoming "No one" (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.366).[30]

In the chapter titled "Dying," Ma contrives to have Jack play dead, so that Old Nick will be forced to carry him out of Room.[31] In this way, Jack, as a Persephone figure, undergoes a kind of death before being carried to the Outside by a Hades figure. Again, this marks Outside as an underworld for Jack. When he is first taken out of the shed, the shot from his perspective is blurry, which demonstrates the effects that living in a confined and enclosed space have had on Jack's vision and recalls the impaired vision of Plato's freed prisoner. Thus, the Outside is also a place of overwhelming enlightenment. As Old Nick carries Jack out of Room, Old Nick shouts at Ma to look away, which evokes Orpheus' attempt to lead Eurydice out of the underworld. Like Orpheus, Ma is not permitted to look back if she wants Jack to escape (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.50-52); also like Orpheus, she will find that there is no escaping death even on the Outside.

Jack regards the Outside differently than Ma: "In Room I was safe and Outside is the scary" (Donoghue 2010: 219). Just as Jack's escape is an imitation of death, it is also an imitation of abduction, underscoring the idea that Jack is forcibly moved to an underworld. Downing writes, "[T]o rule in the underworld seems to require having been taken there. Not to have always been there. Not to have gone there deliberately: it is not the place where one begins but where one ends" (Downing 1999: 192). Indeed, Outside for Jack is an ending place, since once he is "abducted" into it, he will always be obligated to return to it. His initial resistance to Ma's plan to introduce him to a whole new world is natural. Downing realizes "being taken to those depths is always an abduction. For we—or, at least, I—never feel quite whole enough to go *there* on our own. We are always still virginal before the really transformative (killing) experiences" (1994: 227). Again, like the prisoner of the cave, Jack must be dragged out into the light. Moreover, Room, with its one exit, resembles a womb, which gives birth to Jack into a world of experience. Jack is aware of this transition and associates this turning point with new knowledge: "When I was small, I only knew small things. But now I'm five, I know everything" (*Room* 2015: 01:09:20-01:09:26).[32]

If the proliferation of Ma's narrative and imagination in Room represents the upper world for Jack, it stands to reason that Ma, like Demeter, must suffer once Jack enters what is an underworld for him. After their escape Ma does not engage with Jack the same way or play imaginative games with him. She no longer exhibits the strength that bore her up during her captivity but instead fully succumbs to the depression that Jack sees glimpses of in Room (he calls them her "Gone" days). In this way, Ma undergoes another sort of death and separation from Jack. Of course, Jack, having been protected by Ma all his life has not truly experienced captivity as she has. In speaking of the Demeter-Persephone myth in conjunction with Narcissus, Embler writes, "Again we remember that Persephone was saved by love for

her mother and for the otherness of the world above. Or, to say it differently, if one is trapped in the underground of himself, he can be saved only by another who is not trapped" (1968: 399).

One of the first things Jack's grandmother does when bringing Ma and Jack home is to suggest cutting Jack's hair, which is, nonetheless, left long at first. After Ma is hospitalized following a suicide attempt, Jack saves her for a third time by sending her his hair, which contains his "strong," a Samsonesque understanding presumably imparted to him by Ma. In this way Ma's narratives function as a form of salvation once more, with the strength of Jack's hair and all that it symbolizes confirmed by Ma's recovery. The cutting of Jack's hair, however, marks his assimilation to the Outside and erases yet another connection to his mother and their previous life in Room.[33] Cutting of hair is also associated with death, as in the case of Dido (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4:704) and Alcestis (Euripides, *Alcestis* 72-76), another parallel that makes the Outside an underworld for Jack.[34] Furthermore, Ma's milk dries up during her hospitalization, severing yet another tie between mother and child.

Even when Jack has been on the Outside for a while, he misses Room. He plays in Ma's closet, as he once slept in Wardrobe, and uses Legos to build what appears to be a shed. Towards the end of the film he is shown dismantling the Lego shed, an indication that he is ready to let that part of his childhood go. Jack's separation from Room is finalized when he goes back to visit. As an escapee of the cave now, his perspective has changed:

> Jack: "Is this Room?"
> Ma: "Yeah."
> Jack: "Has it gotten shrinked? Where is everything?"
> Ma: "Taken for evidence. Proof that we were here."
> Jack: "It's because Door's open."
> Ma: "What?"
> Jack: "It can't really be Room if Door's open."
> Ma: "Do you want me to close it?"
> Jack: "Nah."
>
> (*Room* 2015: 01:49:32-01:50:34)

Jack's response suggests the impossibility of returning to the previous state of inexperience and innocence. The scene ends with Jack's bidding the objects in Room goodbye. In the film, this scene of closure is still set in the winter rather than in the early bud of spring as we might expect. This is not necessarily inappropriate, given that Ma and Jack have essentially left one underworld for another.[35]

When the myth of Persephone is layered over the allegory of the cave, underworld and upper world become indistinguishable elements of the parent-child dynamic. Demeter and Persephone can never return to their pre-rapture relationship, just as the freed prisoner can no longer be satisfied with shadows. Ma and Jack's story repeatedly demonstrates that there is no escaping experience or the cycles of loss and renewal and that the worlds they occupy simultaneously may be experienced very differently—what is captivity for one may be an Eden for the other. At times Ma and Jack must be separated, but the separation scenes are always followed by joyful reunions, as each death sparks new life. Thus, Ma and Jack's experiences are not Sisyphean cycles fruitlessly circling back on themselves. Rather, just as the Demeter-Persephone cycle ensures the perpetuation of the human race, Ma can depend on the foundation her narratives have built insofar as they continue to thrive and compel new life in her relationship with Jack and in his growth and development. In this way, after Ma and Jack's escape, the shadows of the cave continue to offer messages of light, not the least of which is the saving power of narrative.

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[1] Brie Larson, the actress who plays Ma, has said in interviews that she recognized *Room* as a Demeter and Persephone story. See Radish (2015) and Larsen (2015).

[2] Donoghue acknowledges that one of the reasons she chose Abrahamson to be the director is because he picked up on the reference to Plato’s cave (Kamble 2015). For the letter Abrahamson wrote to Donoghue in order to persuade her to let him direct the film, see O’Falt (2016).

[3] Similarly, Apostol and Bakogianni categorize such obscured appearances of myth as “masked” (2018: 2). See also Daughtery (2018: 19-20).

[4] Additionally, see Apostol and Bakogianni for how scholars of classical reception, as subjects participating in the reception of the classics, are shaping future receptions (2018: 3).

[5] The appeal of *Room* to audiences has been clear. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and the film was nominated for multiple Academy Awards.

[6] The shed is 11x11 feet in Donoghue’s novel (2010: 234).

[7] For details on these two competing readings, see Hall (1980: 74).

[8] May tells us, “Creativity arises out of the tension between spontaneity and limitations” (1975: 115).

[9] Similarly, regarding Plato's Noble Falsehood, Lear has pointed out it may be "designed to make children loyal to the established political order," but "it is also concerned with orienting children towards the truth" (2006: 34).

[10] At times, my decision to use quotes from the movie rather than the novel is a practical one. The film, by necessity, had to be more concise in conveying the ideas of the novel. Thus, Jack's voiceovers in the film offer a tighter overview of his thoughts on his world compared with his more extensive narration in the novel. For Donoghue's comments on the necessity of this kind of compression when adapting the novel, see Kamble (2015).

[11] The convention in English is to capitalize an item when discussing it as a Platonic Form.

[12] This is the case in the film, in which Ma does not mention the reality of the Outside until she tries to convince Jack to help them escape. In the novel she tells Jack about things on the Outside even before her escape plans.

[13] In a four-season climate the barrenness of land would take place in the winter, but in other climates it could arguably be the dry summer season. See Greene (106).

[14] See Foley (1993: 79-137) and Lincoln (1979).

[15] In the novel, Jack tells us he has named Old Nick based on a cartoon character who comes in the night "with a beard and horns and stuff"; see Donoghue (2010: 12). The use of Old Nick as a nickname for Satan functions as an additional tie between Old Nick and Hades, who is later tied to Satan. See Wray and Mobley (89).

[16] Just as Joy becomes Ma in the underworld, Persephone also experiences a name change from Kore to Persephone. See Bruce (1979: 228-29).

[17] For a discussion on how this "intermingling" of mother and daughter create a sense of continuity that extends into future generations, see Jung (1967: 162).

[18] See Downing for Demeter's exclusion of Zeus in her raising of Persephone (1994b: 140-41).

[19] Ma likens herself to a Stepford Wife; see Donoghue (2010: 233).

[20] In the novel Ma gives birth to a girl before Jack, but she is stillborn; see Donoghue (2010: 204-5). This element of the plot is completely cut from the film.

[21] Jack tells us, "Boys are TV but they kind of look like me, the me in the Mirror that isn't real either, just a picture"; see Donoghue (2010: 54).

[22] See Woodward (44).

[23] Proserpina (Persephone) picks the pomegranate and eats the seeds of her own accord in Ovid's version (5.536-37). In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hades stealthily gives her the fruit to eat (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* ln.372 in Foley [1993: 21]).

[24] See Foley (1993: 56).

[25] It so happens that Old Nick also drives a red truck in the film.

[26] In the film Old Nick shakes candy outside of Wardrobe to lure Jack out. Later, when Jack is at his grandmother's house, his first playmate holds up a red ball to invite him to play.

[27] In Pseudo-Hyginus' *Fabulae* Polydectes marries Danaë and helps Perseus reconcile with his grandfather (*Fabulae* 63).

[28] Originally in Lattimore (1960: 53-54).

[29] In the novel the initial idea to "do a cunning trick" is Jack's; see Donoghue (2010: 106).

[30] As part of Odysseus' famous ruse, he tells the Cyclops his name is Οὖτις, "No one."

[31] Jack's escape echoes that of Edmond in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, who also experiences a rebirth and new identity. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of the few books Ma and Jack have in Room.

[32] In the novel Jack has this thought while still in Room, but in the film he speaks this line after he escapes.

[33] See Smith (1993).

[34] I owe this observation to Jaclyn Neel.

[35] In the novel Ma and Jack's escape takes place in the spring. It is possible shooting the film in the winter was one of the constraints of the filmmaking process. For Abrahamson's decision to shoot chronologically, thereby putting the outdoor scenes in the middle of a Vancouver winter, see Ford (2015).