A Universal Approach to Classical Mythology: 
Rita Dove’s *The Darker Face of the Earth* and *Mother Love*

Of all the writers in this study, Rita Dove has been the most direct about her appropriation of Greco-Roman mythology for two of her major works, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994) and *Mother Love* (1995). Both texts adopt thematic and structural elements from Greek mythology. In *The Darker Face of the Earth*, Dove recasts the Oedipus myth into a story about slavery and lost love, and in *Mother Love* the Persephone and Demeter myth is reworked into a narrative about creating and losing identities. A comparative reading of Dove’s classical revisions against Brooks’ and Morrison’s indicates that while the latter two authors’ renditions of the Demeter and Persephone myth feature female protagonists who are victims of brutal physical and emotional male assault, Dove depicts an alternative image of the mythic heroine. In *Mother Love*, Dove portrays Persephone as an empowered woman free from male oppression. Where Brooks’ and Morrison’s adaptations of the myth center on sexual politics, Dove’s shifts the focus from male–female conflict to a discussion of the mother–daughter relationship. Dove demonstrates that tension between mothers and daughters is two-fold: in the interest of protecting their children from the world, mothers often stifle their daughters’ ability to experience both the hardships and pleasures of life. Consequently, daughters resent their mothers’ attempts to shelter them and at
their first opportunity go out into the world and leave their mothers traumatized by their departure.

In addition to emphasizing the complexity of the mother–daughter experience, Dove’s reprisal of the Demeter-Persephone myth also differs from other versions because she incorporates semi-autobiographical details into the narrative. Dove’s mythic reconstruction reveals her own epic journey across the world as well as her transition from daughter to wife and mother. The poem, as the dedication indicates, is written FOR Dove’s mother and TO her daughter. In addition to conveying to her own mother her struggle for independence, Dove also prepares her daughter, Aviva, for her own potential future mother–daughter battle.

What has been most compelling about Brooks’ and Morrison’s revisions of Greek mythical narratives is that incorporating the Black female experience into the narrative has been integral to their stories. In contrast, even though in Dove’s narrative Persephone and Demeter are at times portrayed as identifiably Black characters, the duo’s racial heritage is secondary to the construction of the narrative. While racial themes are present in the text, Dove focuses less on race and more on the universality of the mother–daughter conflict. Dove’s universal aesthetic is reflective of her non-racialized and non-gender specified definition of self. Although Dove is often categorized as a Black writer, and her works are viewed as part of the African American literary tradition, throughout her career Dove has struggled to forge a personal and artistic identity independent of race and gender. In numerous interviews, Dove explains that she does not write specifically Black poems or female poems because these identifying markers result in dictating how poets should write and what they should write about. Rather than writing Black poems or women-centered poems, Dove seeks to create poems about the human experience relatable to all readers. While Dove might believe her poems evade categorization, texts like *The Darker Face of the Earth* and *Mother Love* emphasize issues of race and gender.

Dove’s African American ancestry has made it challenging for her to write from a raceless perspective. Dove recalls that in the 1970s when she first began writing, most Black writers adopted the