

## The World of *Room*: The Myth of Persephone and Demeter and Narrating Reality

Lenny Abrahamson's film *Room*, adapted from Emma Donoghue's novel of the same name, tells the story of Ma, a young abduction victim who has been held captive for seven years and has in the meantime given birth to a son named Jack. The story is presented from five-year-old Jack's point of view. Jack and Ma call the shed in which they live Room, and it is the only world Jack has ever known. Although confined in this way, Jack's world is a relatively rich one, due in large part to Ma's elaborate narrative of their reality. Ma also tells Jack various stories, narrative elements of which are woven into the film and novel, including *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and "Jack and the Beanstalk." The myth of Perseus and Danaë and the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic* are among the classical narratives that inform *Room*, as well of the story of Demeter and Persephone. This paper will explore how the film's strong resonance with the Demeter-Persephone myth, in particular, supports and illuminates Ma's creation of a seemingly limitless world for Jack. At one point after their escape, when Jack's grandmother comments that Room must have been very small, Jack counters, "It went every direction, all the way to the end. It never finished" (01:38:21-01:38:25). This is possible, because Ma is nearly Jack's whole source of information. They watch TV and have books, but Ma interprets all that Jack reads, hears, and sees. In fact, TV is their term for the imaginary, while what they pretend in Room serves as Jack's sole reality.

*Room* posits a pre-patriarchal scenario, albeit situated within the context of a patriarchal captivity, in which creativity and imagination flourish uniquely. Moreover, the narrow parameters of Room supply the kind of limits that paradoxically enable creativity. Ma's abduction also forces her into an underworld where death and new life come together as they do in myth: "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” (Reir 17). According to Ma’s narrative, Jack belongs wholly to her and came through the skylight of the shed; thus, she resembles the self-seeding goddesses of early matriarchies (Reir 19). From Jack’s perspective, the unnamed abductor, whom Ma calls Old Nick, is an unseen godlike and magical figure, whose chief role is to bring food and clothing. In shielding Jack from their captor, Ma is able to create a matricentric world so full and complete for a time, that even after their escape, when Jack is introduced to the outside world, he longs to be back in Room.

The matriarchal world of Room is underscored by Jack and Ma’s close attachment. Jack’s birth renders Ma a Demeter figure and Jack a new Persephone. As in ancient depictions in which Persephone and Demeter are often shown side by side or face to face and indistinguishable from one another (Foley 139), Jack and Ma are often filmed in a similar aspect, with Jack’s long hair making him a twin of his mother. Due to their isolation, Jack’s attachment to and identification with his mother are able to be prolonged, marked, in part, by his continued breastfeeding. In the novel Jack identifies with his mother so extensively that he thinks he will be like her when he grows up and that a baby will eventually zoom through the skylight into his own belly. The fact that Jack is a boy makes this identification all the more striking.

Before Ma and Jack’s escape, their existence in Room and the uninterrupted bond that they have known begins to be threatened. The pomegranate seed of the Persephone myth emerges in the form of a truck, aptly red, which Old Nick brings as a birthday gift for Jack; in the novel, Old Nick also brings a red lollipop which Jack fishes out of the trash and consumes secretly. Jack, as Persephone, must undergo a kind of death, specifically playing dead, in order to escape to the outer (upper) world. Freedom from Old Nick ultimately entails an escape into the

patriarchal world from which Ma was taken. Once there, Ma and Jack find their previous reality threatened even more, as they must negotiate imagination in a new world where reality is much more heavily prescribed.

#### Bibliography

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*Room*. Directed by Lenny Abrahamson, Telefilm Canada, 2015.