

CHANGING THE ALLEGORICAL LANDSCAPE MASONIC AND HERMETIC ADDITIONS TO THE DANTEAN UNDERWORLD OF GLORIA NAYLOR'S *LINDEN HILLS*

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1 Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

2 Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1999), 6-7.

3 For Black Classicism see Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 9; for *katabasis* see David L. Pike, *Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives Since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Michael Thurston, *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* (Macmillan: New York, 2009).

Landscape has a strong allegorical meaning in the novel Linden Hills, published in 1985 by Gloria Naylor, an award-winning Black novelist. The novel adapts the underworld of Dante's Inferno, as noticed soon after its publication. In this article it is argued that Linden Hills does not only display these Dantean influences, but also shows significant traces of spiritual doctrines such as Freemasonry and Hermetism. In this way Naylor established a purgatorial way out of hell which is solely a place of eternal doom in Dante's Divine Comedy.

Landscape plays a vital role in the novel *Linden Hills*, published by the Black novelist Gloria Naylor (1950-2016) in 1985.¹ Naylor was an extremely well-read author, who had an academic career and won several awards and fellowships.² In her second novel, *Linden Hills*, she adopted the allegorical landscape of hell as developed by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in *Inferno*, the first part of his *Divine Comedy*, and turned it into a hill with a modern suburb full of wealthy, Black Americans. Thus, the novel is an example of Black Classicism or African American reception of the Classics; in this case, the reception of the classical motif of *katabasis*, or the underworld, descent familiar from, in particular, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.³ Naylor's 'hell' is visited by the protagonist, a young Black poet named Willie Mason, who acts as the traditional pilgrim in the underworld, much like Dante-pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*. Since the publication of her novel in 1985, its correspondences

to the landscape of Dante's *Inferno* have not gone unnoticed.⁴ However, little attention has been paid to the changes Gloria Naylor made to that Dantean landscape. In this article, I argue that Naylor incorporated architectural elements from Masonic initiation and hermetism in her Dantean underworld landscape, and that these additions suggest a purgatorial way out of hell which is in Dante's *Comedy* solely a place of eternal doom.

LINDEN HILLS: SYNOPSIS

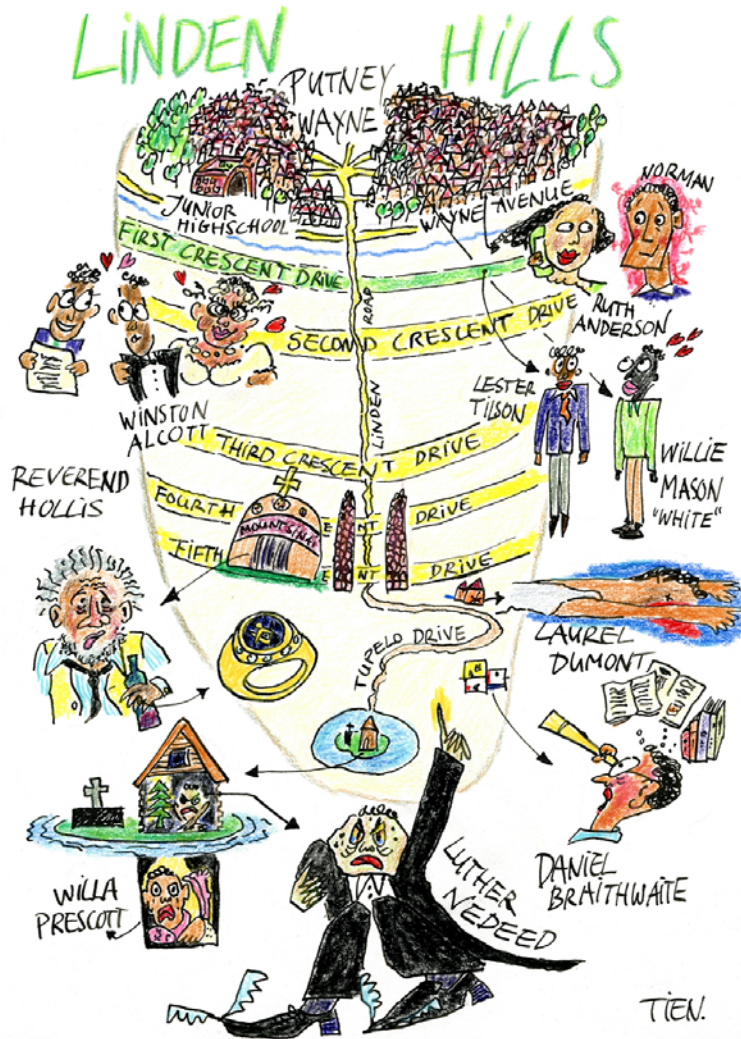
Linden Hills is a fictional Black suburb on a hill resembling the layout of Dante's *Inferno* (Fig. 1). The top of the hill is covered by a poor village called Putney Wayne. This is separated from the suburb of Linden Hills by a small stream, and by Wayne Avenue, on which the local junior high school is found. The hill itself is "a steep, rocky incline of brier bush and linden trees".⁵ The upper part consists of five horizontal roads, named First to Fifth Crescent Drive, which are intersected by one vertical lane, the Linden Road. Beneath that, two large brick pillars mark the entrance to Tupelo Drive, one long lane that winds down to the bottom of the hill and intersects an old cemetery. It ends at a pond surrounding the house and morgue of the local undertaker and president of the realty corporation, Luther Nedeed, a man with a frog-like appearance and wing-tipped shoes. He is the descendant of the Luther Nedeed who had bought the hill three generations earlier and turned it into an area for Black people. The present Luther Nedeed tends to the dead in the morgue next to his house and has the authority to decide who can or cannot own a house in the suburb, leasing the properties for a period of 1001 years. The lower on the hill, the more expensive and luxurious the housing and the richer the inhabitants.

While designed for the empowerment of Black people, the inhabitants are, in fact, betraying their Blackness in order to 'make it' in the (White) world. The lower on the hill they live, the worse their betrayal. For example, Maxwell

4 See Catherine C. Ward, "Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno," in *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry L. Gates Jr and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 182-94; Nick Havely, "'Prosperous People' and 'The Real Hell' in Gloria Naylor's Linden Hills," in *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. Nick Havely (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 211-22; Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor*; Christine G. Berg, "'Light from a Hill of Carbon Paper Dolls': Gloria Naylor's 'Linden Hills' and Dante's 'Inferno,'" *Modern Language Studies* 29.2 (1999), 1-19; Claudia Drieling, *Constructs of "Home" in Gloria Naylor's Quartet* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001).

5 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 1

Fig. 1
Linden Hills
Leontine Hoogeweegen
Commissioned by Amaranth Feuth,
the Netherlands



Smyth on Third Crescent Drive, a man with an immense hunger for status, has succeeded in having a career at General Motors by suppressing his bodily needs. He hardly sleeps, sweats, or smells and in this way manages to hide his Blackness with the controlled excellence of his performance. Laurel Dumont on Tupelo Drive, furthermore, commits suicide by jumping into her empty swim-

ming pool when, after a wealthy marriage and an impressive career, she is no longer in touch with her roots and cannot enjoy her life. Luther Nedeed himself starves his own son, who bears his name, to death when he cannot face the fact that the mixed blood in his family's line has resulted in a White rather than a Black child.

Luther Nedeed's wife, Willa Prescott, is also a sinner in this 'hell'. She has lost every notion of self-respect, having served her husband like a slave for years. She now finds herself locked up in the cellar and former morgue underneath the Nedeed house, together with her dead son. Unable to convince her husband that she has not cheated on him with a White man, she despairs and loses all hope, emitting loud, wailing cries that can be heard from the very top of the hill. However, the need to cover her son's body drives Willa Prescott to action and she starts rummaging through an old trunk in the cellar. Apart from a bridal veil, with which she covers her son, she also finds diary entries in an old Bible, some cookery books, and a photo album, all belonging to her deceased mother-in-law, grandmother-in-law, and great-grandmother-in-law. Looking through these documents, she begins to understand that all the women in the Nedeed family have been treated like slaves and that the first Luther Nedeed had in fact been a slave owner, and his wife his legal property.

The novel is set in the week before Christmas, when two young, poor, Black street poets, Willie Mason and Lester Tilson, are desperate for money with which to buy Christmas presents for their parents and siblings. The boys, who became friends at school, usually call each other by their nicknames, 'Shit' for Lester and 'White' for Willie. There are several suggestions that they are sexually attracted to each other, although they desperately try to repress this. Having decided not to attend school any longer nor college, they try to live off their poetry. Willie, in particular, desires to be a poet in the tradition of the, in his opinion, illiterate, enslaved poet Jupiter Hammon.⁶ However, the boys are not getting anywhere in the world and they are certainly not earning enough

6 Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806) was the first published Black author in the US. He was born into slavery and remained enslaved throughout his life. For a brief biography, see Sondra O'Neale, "Hammon, Jupiter," in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), accessed 17 November 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195138832.001.0001/acref-9780195138832-e-255>. For the literacy of enslaved African-Americans including Jupiter Hammon, see Antonio T. Bly, "'Pretends he can read': Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America, 1730-1776," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6.2 (2008): 261-94, doi: 10.1353/eam.0.0004.

money for presents. As a result, they take up the suggestion made to them by Ruth Anderson, a mutual friend, to do some jobs for the local residents of Linden Hills in the week before Christmas. Ruth herself used to live in Linden Hills at Fifth Crescent Drive, but left after her divorce. However, she still has connections down the hill from which Willie and Lester benefit. They start at First Crescent Drive, working their way down the hill waiting tables, clearing out garages, and shovelling snow.

During their work Willie in particular carefully observes the rich inhabitants of Linden Hills, for example the local Reverend Michael T. Hollis, who oversees the church on Fifth Crescent Drive. Although a drunk who was divorced by his wife, he is a kind man, treating his congregation to Christmas presents every year. This year, it is Willie and Lester's job to help him bring the boxes from his house to the church. The boys also watch him conduct a wedding and a funeral in fierce competition with undertaker Luther Nedeed, who wears similar wing-tipped shoes and generally has the upper hand.

Willie also listens for the occasional strange cries on the hill, looking out for the one person who never appears, Luther Nedeed's wife. He finally sees her when the two boys are helping Luther Nedeed decorate his Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. That evening, Willa finally finds her resolve. No longer prepared to live like a slave, she decides to reclaim her life as wife and lady of the house. Almost hallucinating from hunger, she walks up the steps towards the cellar door with her son's body in her arms, when Willie, carrying a large box full of Christmas decorations, accidentally unlatches the cellar door. Willa enters the house and faces Willie in the mirror near the kitchen door. Her husband Luther Nedeed, much embarrassed, quickly sees the two boys out. During the confrontation between husband and wife, the wedding veil on the son's body catches fire from the candles in the Christmas tree, and the entire wooden house goes up in flames. Willie and Lester watch the spectacle from outside, horrified, but unable to help, since a strong wind fans the flames. Afterwards,

fire-fighters carry out the bodies of Willa Prescott, Luther Nedeed, and their son as one big, burned lump. Willie and Lester climb the fence at the bottom of the hill near an apple orchard and leave the area hand in hand.

DANTESQUE LANDSCAPE

The area of Linden Hills bears some striking resemblances to hell as immortalized by the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri in the first part of his *Divine Comedy, Inferno*. Dante has deeply influenced English literature, especially since the days of Modernism and, in particular, through the works of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot; he has remained an inspiration for authors ever since.⁷

In an interview, Naylor herself explained why she used *Inferno* for this novel:

I used Dante's *Inferno* because I thought it was the perfect work for symbolizing when up is down, because Dante gives you that mere image of Florentine society and then slowly begins to move from the lesser sins to the greater sin. So that's what I did in *Linden Hills*. When you move down the hill you encounter what I consider to be a greater alienation, the repercussions from upward mobility.⁸

In order to analyse Naylor's adaptation of the traditional underworld landscape, I will first discuss the most conspicuous references to Dante's *Inferno*, focusing on the layout of the hill. As is visible in the illustration by Leontine Hoogeweegen (Fig. 1), the plateau at the top is Willie's place of residence, the poorer village of Putney Wayne. As the place of outsiders, it evokes the wood in which Dante the Pilgrim meets Virgil (Fig. 2).⁹ The stream below Putney Wayne is suggestive of Dante's River Acheron. The entrance to the local junior high school, situated on Wayne Avenue and overlooking Linden Hills, is marked by an inscription parodying the text on Dante's hell gate. The change in the opening line: "I am the way out of the city of woe", from Dante's "I am the way into the city of woe", demonstrates the ignorance of the sinners of Naylor's hell.¹⁰

7 Thurston, *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry*, 15-16.

8 Angels Carabí, "Interview with Gloria Naylor," *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 1 (1991), 33.

9 *Inferno* 1.

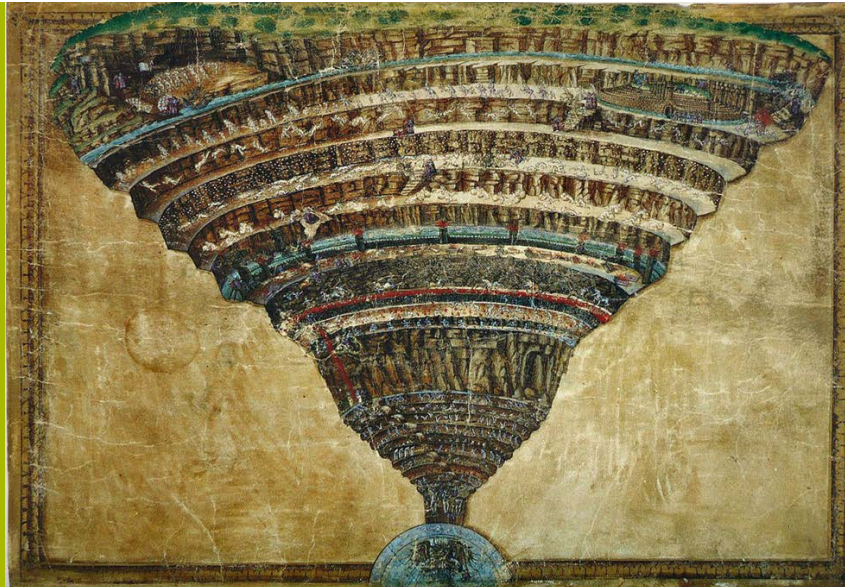
Fig. 2. Chart of Hell

Sandro Botticelli

33 × 47.5cm, Silver point, ink,
coloured with tempera

c.1480-c.1495. Vat. Lat. 1896.

*Botticelli: de Laurent le Magnifique
à Savonarole: catalogue de
l'exposition à Paris, Musée du
Luxembourg, du 1er octobre 2003
au 22 février 2004 et à Florence,
Palazzo Strozzi, du 10 mars au 11
juillet 2004 (Milan: Skira editore,
Paris: Musée du Luxembourg, 2003).*



The hill below Putney Wayne is, much like Dante's hell, not easy to oversee or access. The linden trees, however, have a pleasant aspect to them, and people desperately want to live "in the soft shadows of those heart-shaped trees".¹¹ The upper part of the hill with its five circular drives evokes the circles of Dante's upper hell with its inhabitants driven to lesser sins, such as lust and gluttony. The cemetery at the bottom of Linden Road and Tupelo Drive are Naylor's variation on Dante's lower hell or City of Dis, the place for those driven to the graver sins of violence, fraud, and treachery.

10 "Per me si va ne la città dolente,"
Inferno 3.1. Translation: John Ciardi,
The Inferno: A New Translation
(New York: Mentor, 1954), 18.

11 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 15.

12 *Inferno* 34,28-29.

The pond surrounding Nedeed's house and morgue, which is frozen in winter (the season in which the novel is set), evokes the ice of Dante's Cocytus, the dwelling place of Satan.¹² Thus, Luther Nedeed can be identified as the devil. Gloria Naylor admitted herself that his name is an anagram for "de Eden", the one driven from paradise: "In Linden Hills, Luther Nedeed spelled backward is Luther de Eden. He is the devil".¹³ Luther Nedeed's devilish nature also

becomes apparent from the many references to him in connection to the Book of Revelation. This book of the Bible, also called the Apocalypse of John, contains an apocalyptic vision referring to a devilish beast that will reign for a 1000 years. The 1001-year lease of the houses in Linden Hills seems to refer to this 1000-year reign. The bestial notion is furthermore enhanced by the frog-like appearance of the men in the Nedeed family.¹⁴

Moreover, Willie Mason functions as a young version of Dante-pilgrim, the outsider observing the inhabitants of the hill. His nickname, 'White', may refer to the political rivalry between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in Dante's Florence, where the Guelphs were divided in factions of the so-called Blacks and Whites, Dante finding himself among the latter.¹⁵ Willie's friend Lester Tilson, more familiar with the area, plays the part of guide in the underworld, aptly living on First Crescent Drive. This place is reminiscent of Dante's Limbo, the area for the unbaptized and, in particular, for Dante-pilgrim's guide, the Roman poet Virgil. Moreover, Willie is secretly in love with Ruth, who resembles Dante's Beatrice, the unreachable beloved who called him into the underworld.¹⁶

While the many details reminiscent of Dante's *Comedy* suggest a carefully designed correlation between *Linden Hills* and *Inferno*, some conspicuous aspects of the layout of Naylor's hill do not seem to have a Dantean counterpart, or are markedly different from *Inferno*. While Naylor carefully creates an upper and a lower section of hell and playfully uses a frozen pond to refer to Dante's Cocytus, she seems to have deviated from Dante's number of circles. While *Inferno* has nine circles, the text of *Linden Hills* only mentions "eight circular drives".¹⁷ Only few critics have discussed this and suggested an explanation. It has, for example, been proposed that Naylor omitted Dante's sixth circle, that of the heretics, because Christianity is not part of the book's theme, and because the inhabitants of Linden Hills do not sin against God, but against themselves.¹⁸ To this argument, one could easily object that the sinners of

13 Drieling, *Constructs*, 267.

14 It is beyond the purpose of this article to discuss the likeness of Luther Nedeed to his namesakes Martin Luther King, who famously had a dream for Black society, and to Martin Luther, the Church reformer. For some correspondences, see Drieling, *Constructs*, 188 and Havelly, "'Prosperous People' and 'The Real Hell'", 215.

15 Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor*, 67.

16 For further correspondences between the inhabitants of Linden Hills and Dante's sinners cf. footnote 3.

17 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 13.

18 Ward, "Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno," footnote 4.

Linden Hills are, figuratively speaking, heretics against the self and that heresy is, in fact, the major sin of the novel. Margaret Whitt observed four layers in Naylor's lower hell, bringing the total number up to nine, but unfortunately left the exact number unexplained.¹⁹ Although it would be absurd to press a novel for hypertextual correctness, changing the revered and eye-catching number of nine circles in this highly intertextual underworld landscape is somewhat conspicuous. Perhaps analysing Dante's *Inferno* as a hypotextual influence is not enough to interpret the layout of Naylor's hell.

MASONIC ADDITIONS

The clue for the meaning of the missing circle is to be found in Willie's surname, Mason, and the Masonic interpretation of two architectural additions made by Naylor to Dante's geography. So far, the surname Mason has only been interpreted by critics as a sign that the character is a builder who "accepts responsibility".²⁰ However, the name could just as well be a marker for Masonic symbolism in the novel. There is an explicit reference to Freemasonry in a conversation in the car between Willie and the local Reverend Michael T. Hollis about the Reverend's ring:

"That's a nice ring you have on." He tried to cut off the spiritual in Hollis's third round, almost shouting as he pointed to the opal stone with a diamond-studded insignia. "I recognize the symbol. My father used to belong to the Masonic lodge."²¹

19 Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor*, 61-62.

20 Ward, "Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno," 183. cf. Drieling, *Constructs*, 218.

21 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 172.

The ring and dialogue clearly identify both Willie's father and the Reverend as Masons.

Freemasonry is an umbrella term referring to a vast number of hierarchical organizations or lodges worldwide which adopt particular symbolism and rituals, including rites of initiation. Masons sometimes wear a special ring which

helps them recognize one another as Masons, as is the case with Reverend Hollis in *Linden Hills*.²² Willie's surname, and the fact that he is working during his journey through Linden Hills, suggest his portrayal as a so-called journeyman, a mason travelling as a handyman in the medieval guild system.²³ Having completed his apprenticeship under a master mason, a journeyman would travel and work for several different masters before gaining the rank of master mason himself and setting up a workshop of his own.²⁴ Freemasons were originally freestone masons, a class of the most highly trained masons who were not just craftsmen, but whose organizations were given to contemplation and were, from the start, speculative and spiritual.²⁵ The three ranks of entered apprentice, fellow craftsmen (sometimes called journeyman), and master mason thus coincide with the three levels of initiation in Freemasonry.²⁶ In this light, one could argue that Willie, having already learned the poetic trade, is no longer an apprentice, but is not yet ready to establish himself as a master poet in society. His days travelling and working as a journeyman provide him with the necessary insight and experience he to become a mature and independent poet.

In addition to Willie's surname and the Reverend's ring, there are two architectural elements in Naylor's landscape that do not correspond to the landscape of *Inferno* and which may benefit from a Masonic interpretation. The first is the cellar and former morgue underneath Nedeed's house. In *Inferno*, Dante-pilgrim and Virgil descend through the ice of the Cocytus and the middle of the Earth to come out at the other side of the globe and climb the mountain of purgatory. Hence, there is no cave-like area for sinners underneath the figure of Satan. Second, the two large brick pillars marking the entrance to Naylor's Tupelo Drive are very different from the River Styx, which is marked by a large tower and the closed gate to lower hell in the *Inferno*.²⁷ Following the Masonic clue of Willie's surname, it might be worthwhile to look for a cellar and two brick pillars in Masonic rites and symbolism.

22 Danny Kaplan, "The Architecture of Collective Intimacy: Masonic Friendships as a Model for Collective Attachments," *American Anthropologist* 116.1 (2014), doi: 10.1111/aman.12070.

23 Margaret Jacob and Matthew Crow, "Freemasonry and the Enlightenment," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 100.

24 David Stevenson, "The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland," in *Handbook*, eds. Bogdan and Snoek, 53-54.

25 Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek, "Introduction," in *Handbook*, eds. Bogdan and Snoek, 14.

26 *Ibid.*, 2; Jan A. M. Snoek, "Masonic Rituals of Initiation," in *Handbook*, eds. Bogdan and Snoek, 321.

27 *Inferno*, 8 *passim*.

The cellar seems to evoke the Masonic Dark Room or Chamber of Reflection, in which initiates or neophytes pass some time alone, preparing for their initiation.²⁸ It is a separate, cave-like room, the darkness of which is connected with the early spiritual stage of *nigredo* or blackness. On occasion, the Masonic Dark Room has been interpreted as the entrance to Hades or the underworld.²⁹ Thus, the neophyte descends into the darkness of earth or underworld, as it were, before entering a new stage of Masonic enlightenment. In this light, the cellar in which Willa Prescott finds herself at the bottom of Naylor's Dantean hell could perhaps be understood as the deepest pit of hell and as a Chamber of Reflection at the same time. If so, Linden Hills would indeed consist of nine hellish circles rather than the eight circles of the drives alone.

28 François Rognon, "Freemasonry and War," in *Handbook*, eds. Bogdan and Snoek, 480; Mark Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie van het symbolische bij C.G. Jung: Onderzoek van het statuut daarvan in een bekend westers esoterisch genootschap: de Vrijmetselarij* (Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam, 1999), 180.

29 Snoek, "Masonic Rituals of Initiation," 323.

30 Henrik Bogdan, "Freemasonry and Western Esotericism" in *Handbook*, eds. Bogdan and Snoek, 289-91.

31 "Visit the earth's interior and by rectification you will find the hidden stone". See Snoek, "Masonic Rituals of Initiation," 322-23; Mark Stavish, "The Chamber of Reflection," (2002), accessed 9 December 2016, <http://www.hermeticinstitute.org/docs/chamber.pdf>.

Apart from the position and the darkness of the room underneath the house at the bottom of Naylor's hell, its contents may also evoke a Masonic interpretation. The Masonic Chamber of Reflection is usually filled with alchemical symbols, due to the strong influence of alchemy on Freemasonry.³⁰ Often mentioned are a skull, bread and water, a candle, an hourglass, a mirror, salt, sulphur, mercury or a picture of a cockerel symbolizing it, and the acronym V.I.T.R.I.O.L. (*'Visita interiora terrae rectificandoque invenies occultum lapidem'*).³¹ The body of Willa's dead son indeed evokes the skull, water is kept by Willa in an aluminium pot which she then uses as a mirror, the hourglass is replaced by a clock on the wall, there is a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and during the first few days, Willa had had some cereal and milk. At this stage, however, the presence of the elements salt, sulphur, and mercury remains unclear. The most meaningful symbol so far seems to be the water acting as a mirror, since it is the physical reflection of Willa's face in the water which prompts her process of mental reflection. The imagery of the Masonic neophyte in the Chamber of Reflection thus suggests that Willa is not simply her husband's prisoner and slave, but is developing some form of enlightenment. Thus, Masonic imagery has not only completed the number of nine drives, a detail that is in itself of limited value, but has moreover opened up

the possibility of a spiritual interpretation of the novel as a whole.

Like the cellar underneath the Nedeed house, the brick pillars at the entrance to Tupelo Drive also carry symbolic, Masonic meaning. They evoke the two pillars of Solomon's Temple, Jachin and Boaz, which are also common symbols in Masonic initiation.³² Rebuilding Solomon's Temple is a Masonic metaphor for obtaining spiritual growth. Thus, both architectural additions to Dante's hell evoke the possibility of Masonic initiation. As a result, Naylor's lower hell full of doomed inhabitants is paradoxically also marked as an area for spiritual enlightenment.

Apart from the symbolism in the novel mentioned above, there seems to be no evidence that Gloria Naylor was familiar with Freemasonry or that she was a Mason herself. This may be due to the secretive nature of the lodges.³³ Perhaps Naylor was simply aware of nineteenth-century Masonic interpretations of Dante, in which his *Inferno* is equated with the profane world, purgatory with the state of Masonic initiation, and heaven with the realm of the perfect.³⁴ Willa's cellar underneath the hell of *Linden Hills* would then resemble purgatory and the consuming fire would then perhaps send Willa, Luther, and their son to heaven, while Willie and Lester leave the area by climbing the fence near the somewhat paradisiac apple orchard below.

Masonic symbolism is not only evoked by Willie's surname, the Reverend's ring, the cellar, and the pillars, but also by Naylor's sophisticated use of colour. In particular, the colours black and white seem connected to the elements earth and water, essential in alchemy and Freemasonry. As observed above, Willa's descent suggests Masonic *nigredo*, meaning blackness or putrefaction. In Masonic initiation, the putrefaction of the cave is to be washed away by water in a so-called first journey.³⁵ After Willa has climbed the steps and is released by Willie, she starts to clean the kitchen.³⁶ This *ablutio*, or cleansing, results in *albedo*, whiteness. Perhaps we may assume that Willie, as an initiate,

32 Bogdan and Snoek, "Introduction," 2; Josef Ben Levi, "The Pillars Jachin and Boaz in Freemasonry in Martin Robeson Delaney's *Symbol of the Garden of Hesperides*," *Academia* (2012): 3. accessed 29 January 2017, http://www.academia.edu/5642397/The_Pillars_Jachin_and_Boaz_in_Freemasonry_on_Martin_Robeson_Delaney/.

33 Jacob and Crow, "Freemasonry and the Enlightenment," 101.

34 Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: MQUP, 1993), 112; René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, trans. of *L'Ésotérisme de Danté* (1925) (New York: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 2001).

35 Mark Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie*, 204.

36 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 298.

has already gained this state of whiteness. Apart from the reference to Dante's White Guelphs, the nickname White would then also refer to Willie's mental state. It is through the loss of her White son and the help of 'White' Willie that Willa reaches her own state of *albedo*.

Moreover, the fire of the Nedeed house evokes the so-called second ritual Masonic journey which is characterized by a sacrificial fire or *rubedo*, redness. This is often characterized as an erotic sacrifice of the son in which the feminine and the son go up in flames.³⁷ Willa's sacrifice of herself and the bodies of her son and husband in a pietà-like posture may evoke such a sacrifice. The fact that the name Luther Nedeed had been shared by fathers and sons for several generations suggests that father and son are in fact one. Carl Jung (1875-1961), who adopted many elements from alchemy and Freemasonry in his work on psychology, compared the Masonic sacrifice with that of Christ.³⁸ Independently from Jung's theory, Willa has been interpreted as a female messiah as well.³⁹ Finally, the strong wind during the fire may suggest a fourth stage of Masonic initiation, that of air, the highest of the four Masonic elements;⁴⁰ it may symbolize Willie's inner change and Willa's obtained freedom.

There are more details in the novel that evoke a spiritual interpretation, for example, the wing-tipped shoes worn by Luther Nedeed and the Reverend Hollis.⁴¹ As the devil of Linden Hills, Luther Nedeed might be interpreted as the winged archangel Lucifer, the one fallen from heaven. Since the connection through the similarity of their shoes seems to qualify Hollis and Nedeed as a pair, and since they constantly argue about their respective authority in matters of life and death, it seems that the 'wings' on their shoes mark them as the quarrelling winged archangels Michael and Lucifer. Although Nedeed seems to have the upper hand, the reference to the archangels suggests that he will eventually lose his battle. Thus this pairing is another indication that the 1001-year lease of the houses in the area will outdate the reign of the devil.

37 Mark Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie*, 209.

38 See Carl G. Jung, *Mysterium coniunctionis: Untersuchungen über die Trennung und Zusammensetzung der seelischen Gegensätze in der Alchemie* (Zurich and Stuttgart: Rascher Verlag, 1968), vol. 2, 88.

39 Christopher N. Okonkwo, "Suicide or Self Sacrifice: Exhuming Willa's Body in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*," *African American Review* 35.1 (2001), 118-28, doi: 10.2307/2903339.

40 Mark Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie*, 216-17.

41 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 12; cf. 162.

The winged shoes are, however, not only suggestive of archangels, but also evoke the pre-Christian figure Hermes, and, in particular, Hermes Trismegistus, a mystical figure closely connected to Freemasonry and alchemy.⁴² It seems that he originated in Egypt as the Egyptian god Thot, who was equated by the Greeks with their own Hermes, the winged messenger of the gods.⁴³ The Greek god Hermes is known in several slightly different roles, for example, as *mystagogos*, accompanying the Eleusinian mysteries, or as *psychopompos*, accompanying the dead and transgressing heaven, Earth, and the underworld.⁴⁴ During the centuries, the Egyptian spiritual figure of Hermes Trismegistus was identified as a god or as a man, whether as the grandson of the god Hermes, the figure of Moses, or a contemporary of Moses.⁴⁵ His second name, Trismegistus, means “the thrice great”. It is also variously interpreted as “extremely great” or as “having appeared three times in Egypt”.⁴⁶ This threefold aspect evokes the notion of trinity present in the Egyptian sense of androgyny of the divine according to which the universe is a triad of the so-called unoriginate, the self-originate, and the originate. This triad can also be described as the Father, the Son, and Matter.⁴⁷ Hermes Trismegistus was furthermore seen as a law-giver, who wrote down his teachings in stone stela, much like Moses, and as a creator.⁴⁸ His esoteric teachings include the notion of initiation in nine spheres.⁴⁹ Under the influence of Judaism, Hermes Trismegistus also became a Messianic figure.⁵⁰ There are several clues in *Linden Hills* which evoke some of these Hermetic qualities and which in this way influence the interpretation of the novel.

As suggested by their shoes, Luther Nedeed and the Reverend Hollis may both have certain Hermetic characteristics. Indeed, they both act as *psychopompoi*, tending to and burying the dead. Since the Nedeeds are the founders of Linden Hills, Luther also seems to evoke Hermes the creator, while Hollis is, as a reverend, suggestive of the Moses-like giver of laws. Nedeed and Hollis furthermore share a sense of trinity. They each have a house number consisting of triple numbers, 999 and 000, respectively. Hollis even explicitly interprets his

42 Jacob and Crow, “Freemasonry and the Enlightenment,” 101; Roelof van den Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2006), 17.

43 Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 1-4.

44 Gerhard Baudy and Anne Ley, “Hermes,” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, eds. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, Christine F. Salazar, Manfred Landfester, and Francis G. Gentry, doi: 10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e510080.

45 Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 2-7.

46 Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 4-5.

47 Roelof van den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 60-61. cf. Broek, *Hermes Trismegistus*, 38.

48 *Ibid.*, 2 and 26.

49 *Ibid.*, 15.

50 *Ibid.*, 10.

house number as the three o's of the symbol of the Holy Trinity.⁵¹ Subsequently, Naylor portrays Hollis as a rather unsuccessful hermetic teacher or seer in the underworld, a holy man who has physical eyesight instead of the required spiritual understanding, and, who, during Christmas, behaves like Santa handing out presents, rather than as a Moses giving laws and acting against the sins of his flock. Secondly, Nedeed also forms a trinity with his family in death, when his body is united with the bodies of his wife and son. The notion of the trinity is not only common in Christianity and hermetism, but also plays a prominent part in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example, in its use of *terza rima*, its division in three *cantiche*, and in the three faces of Satan.

Moreover, the presence of Hermetic symbolism suggests that the nine circles of hell are also nine spheres of initiation, and the pillars at the entrance of Linden Hills evoke both the pillars of Freemasonry and the stelae of Hermes Trismegistus.⁵² It seems that Naylor's architectural additions to the Dantean underworld landscape and the numerous symbols from Freemasonry and hermetism, some even coinciding with Dantean/Christian symbolism, add a purgatorial escape to Dante's hell, and, as such, an option of spiritual growth for those who will see it.

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Spiritual growth does not appear to be an entirely individual matter in *Linden Hills*. It is obtained by Willie and Willa in a subtle, and to some extent subconscious, interaction. While Willa begins her reflection in the cellar, Willie descends the hill searching for her. The turn of events in the novel takes place when Willa is walking up the steps and Willie unlatches the cellar door. The interaction between Willa and Willie is marked by the pairing of their names, a literary device familiar from the quests of the spouses Christian and Christiana in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In this seventeenth-century allegory, the pilgrim, Christian, travels from the City of Destruction to the so-called

51 Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 169; for the symbol see Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols*, transl. Lance W. Garner (New York and London: Continuum, 2000 [1992]), 309.

52 See Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*, 36-37.

Celestial City. In the second part of the book, his wife Christiana does the same. Linden Hills seems to be a conflation of Dante's hell for the doomed and Bunyan's City of Destruction from which it is imperative to flee. The pairing of Willa and Willie is much more powerful, however, since it is their interaction that causes the end of the reign of the Nedeeds, while Christian and Christiana travel separately. The importance of Willa and Willie's interaction is underlined by the meaning of the root of their names, the human will. This suggests that Willa and Willie are the two characters in the suburb who share a Dantean sense of free will and manage to act upon it.⁵³

Moreover, the pairing of names suggests that Willie and Willa are soulmates. The attraction of soulmates is well known from the classical love couple Cupid and Psyche ('soul' in Greek, which is called *anima* in Latin) in Apuleius' mystical novel *Lucius*, or the *Golden Ass*, and from Aristophanes' speech about love as the desire for one's better half in Plato's *Symposium*.⁵⁴ Maxine Lavon Montgomery aptly notes that "Willie, who is closely aligned with the long-suppressed feminine principle, is Willa's alter-ego".⁵⁵ In fact, Willie and Willa evoke the concepts of *anima* and *animus* which were adopted from alchemy by the influential psychiatrist Jung, and have since become widely known.⁵⁶

According to Jung, the *anima* is the inner feminine in men, while the *animus* is the inner masculine in women.⁵⁷ In this light, Willa's ascent and Willie's descent suggest a Masonic/hermetic attempt at a union of the male and female counterparts, a *hieros gamos*. According to Jung's interpretation of Freemasonry, this *hieros gamos*, the holy, incestuous union of brother and sister, well known from ancient initiation rites, takes place in a cave.⁵⁸ Indeed, Willie comes very close to the cave or cellar in which Willa is locked up. However, their union, in fact, takes place in the mirror, when Willie sees his feminine counterpart instead of himself.

Naylor probably chose the mirror over the cellar, because it is a traditional

53 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* II.2.7, and *Purgatorio* 16.67-73 and 18.74.

54 Karl-Ludwig Elvers, Wolfgang Will and Maaïke Zimmerman, "Ap(p)uleius," *Brill's New Pauly*, eds. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, Christine F. Salazar, Manfred Landfester, and Francis G. Gentry, doi: 10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e129350; Plato, *Symposium* 189d-192e.

55 Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 24.

56 For Jung's interpretation of alchemy and Freemasonry, see Mark Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie*; for the influence of Jung's key concepts, see Andrew Samuels, "Introduction: Jung and the Post-Jungians," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, eds. P. Young-Eisendrath and T. Dawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), doi:10.1017/CCOL0521473098.

57 Jung, *Mysterium coniunctionis*, vol. 2, 240.

58 Journée, *Analytisch-psychologische conceptualisatie*, 181-84 and 219.

metaphor of self-reflection and identity.⁵⁹ The mirror of the soul plays a prominent role throughout the novel in the sayings of Lester Tilson's deceased grandmother, and as such figures in the paratext preceding the first chapter:

Grandma Tilson, I'm afraid of hell.
 Ain't nothing to fear, there's hell on earth.
 I mean the real hell where you can go when you die.
 You ain't gotta die to go to the real hell.
 No?
 Uh uh, you just gotta sell that silver mirror God
 propped up in your soul.
 Sell it to who – the devil?
 Naw, just to the highest bidder, child. The
 highest bidder.⁶⁰

59 Havely, "'Prosperous People' and 'The Real Hell'", 217.

60 Naylor, *Linden Hills*.

61 For Carl Jung, Hermes/Mercury, and therefore also the element mercury, was a unifier of opposites himself, since mercury is a metal as well as a liquid, and healing as well as poisonous. See Paul Bishop, *The Dionysian Self: C.G. Jung's Reception of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 225.

62 Alexandra Lember, *The Heritage of Hermes: Alchemy in Contemporary British Literature* (Berlin: Galda and Wilch, 2004), 77.

In addition to her connection with Willie, Willa also brings about a union within the Nedeed family, albeit in death. This union also evokes the *hieros gamos*, the holy marriage, or the *mysterium coniunctionis*, the mystic union. In alchemy, man and woman are seen as each other's opposites, and the union of Luther Nedeed and Willa Prescott could also be qualified as the alchemical *coniunctio oppositorum*, or union of opposites. These opposites are represented in alchemy as sulphur and mercury, mercury referring to the god Mercury, the Roman version of the Greek god Hermes.⁶¹ Sulphur usually represents the fixed and masculine while mercury aligns with the nature of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and moreover symbolizes the volatile, which is identified as feminine.⁶² Thus, one would expect Luther Nedeed and Willa Prescott to display some characteristics of sulphur and mercury respectively. However, in *Linden Hills*, the distribution of gender seems to be reversed: his wing-tipped shoes and his presence all over Linden Hills characterize Nedeed as a volatile Hermes, or the feminine element mercury, while Willa, locked up in the cellar, is the fixed and traditionally masculine element sulphur. This identification of

alchemical elements and their exchange illustrates the fact that, even before their union in death, the figures of Willa Prescott, Luther Nedeed, and their son are intertwined. In this way, the elements mercury and sulphur are present in Willa's Chamber of Reflection all along. It seems that as a result of Willa's willpower, the fallen archangel is finally returning to heaven and the area of Linden Hills is freed from his sins.

Thus, at the end of the novel Willa Prescott and Luther Nedeed are dissolved into fire and air. This matches the identification, in some alchemical texts, of mercury and sulphur with the concepts of spirit and soul. The body is represented by the element salt, which is cleansed by contact with the other two.⁶³ Salt is the only remaining alchemical element still missing from Willa's cellar. Nonetheless, a reference to it is hidden in the name of Willie's favourite poet Jupiter Hammon. A technical term for salt, sal ammoniac, was derived from the quantities in which this salt was found near the temple of Jupiter Ammon in Egypt.⁶⁴ Thus, it seems that Willie is the one who represents this element. Indeed, while Willa and Nedeed are killed, Willie is the one to escape from Linden Hills alive. As a true pilgrim, his experiences with Luther Nedeed and Willa Prescott leave him cleansed and ready for a new life.

CONCLUSION

Naylor turned Dante's allegorical underworld landscape into a modern 'hell' of self-betrayal. Her architectural adaptations of Dante's underworld landscape have, however, changed this traditional place for the doomed into a modern purgatory. Naylor's ultimate spiritual addition to Dante's 'hell' seems to be the Masonic and Hermetic union of opposites of the male and the female, visible in the unions of Willa and Willie, and Willa and Nedeed, which in turn results in the union of Willie and Lester, who walk away hand in hand. This Masonic and Hermetic union of opposites also suggests that the many other opposites in the novel are also united or discarded. Black and White, up and down, and rich

63 Catherine Beyer, "Alchemical Sulfur, Mercury and Salt," ThoughtCo, Lifelong Learning. Last modified October 15, 2016, accessed 4 April 2017, <http://www.thoughtco.com/alchemical-sulfur-mercury-and-salt-96036>.

64 Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages: An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic, and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010. First published 1928), 415.

and poor: all opposites have lost their influence in Linden Hills. The Masonic and hermetic union Naylor has added to Dante's hell thus marks the end of the symbolic 1000-year reign of the devil of ambition, leaving the suburb of Linden Hills ready for a new, communal start. In this way, the message of Naylor's allegory is hopeful: her alterations to the traditional landscape of hell reflect possibilities of inner growth and social change.

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