

The Common Man's *Odyssey: Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou*, brings freshness  
(and a wider audience) to Homer's Epic

"For I am a man of many sorrows."  
-- *The Odyssey*, Homer

Based upon the few reviews I've read of *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou* it seems apparent that this is one of those films that people can't ignore. The people who like it, like it a lot; the people who don't, really don't--but even they don't seem quite able to dismiss it entirely. Personally, I loved it.

Written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou* tells the tale of Ulysses Everett McGill, a depression era Odysseus trying to make his way home through the bible belt south that is Mississippi. His objective? To get home to his ex-wife, Penny, before she marries someone else. Sound familiar? As an English teacher and lover of Literature, it certainly did to me—but even I had to watch it twice to make the connection. I was so swept away by the soundtrack, I guess I wasn't paying much attention the first time through.

The soundtrack (and the movie) is very nostalgic for me: we were raised as Baptists, in Illinois and Indiana (which is as close as you can get to being in the south without really living there), and my daddy played the guitar. In fact, one of my clearest early memories is of him playing and singing "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" (I used to think the cigarettes on the cigarette trees were candy cigarettes like the ones you could buy at the five and dime) and a sad one about a Railroad engineer who's daughter was deathly ill. Dad wasn't a railroad worker or a hobo, but was in fact descended of them in his profession; he was a semi truck driver, and he and my mother, self-proclaimed gypsies. Many of the songs on the sound track, "I'll fly away" for instance, I learned in one of the several Baptist (and Baptist off-shoot) churches we attended wherever we lived, and having been a church member since well before the institution of the baptismal pool, I've actually been witness to baptism in the waters of the closest river. (Of course, those who were saved during the winter months were content to wait until the weather warmed up a bit to put the official seal of baptism on their salvation.)

And it isn't just the music; I have pictures, in photo albums and in my memory, of my great aunts and my grandmother in cloche hats and calf length cotton dresses, and of great uncles and my granddad in engineer's overalls. When it comes to costuming, the Coen brothers' choices for this film are as accurate in region as their choice in music and as evocative of the period as the sepia toned scenes. But what has all this to do with *The Odyssey*? Well, what the music, the costuming, and the setting have to do with *The Odyssey* is simple: they make Homer's epic into a story that's nostalgic for a significant portion of the over-thirty-five crowd. They also manage to come up with a mix of music, situations, and characters that turn *The Odyssey* into an engaging, appealing, and easily accessible tale for just about everyone else.

That the film is but loosely based on *The Odyssey* is evident in the out-of-sequence events, the multiple characters compressed into a very few major players, and the thinly-veiled and tongue-firmly-in-cheek references to other epic films (particularly *The Wizard of Oz*). I've been told that the Coen brothers had the music for *Oh, Brother*

first, and that it, among other things, inspired their remake of Homer's epic. However, they claim never to have read *The Odyssey* itself. That would certainly explain the inconsistencies between the text and film. I think it's entirely possible for them to have created the loose adaptations of some of the events depicted (albeit out of sequence) in the film without actually having read the text; the mythos of the classical age permeates western culture, even in this age of electronic-technology-driven entertainment and education. Everyone knows what it means to embark upon an odyssey of some kind, for instance, or what it means to be tempted by the siren song of something or other.

However, I tend to think George Clooney's interpretation of Odysseus is just a bit too spot on without someone having referred to the text at some point. Perhaps one or both of them read it or heard the story in their youth and have since forgotten; or perhaps they just like the idea of adding to the mystery of their own "mythos" as geniuses of the medium. In any case, claiming that kind of casual knowledge base would still the hue and cry of the purists among us by allowing them to thereafter dismiss the film (and the Coen brothers) in terms of its artistic contribution to the literary film genre—and, simultaneously, make it unnecessary for the Coen brothers to have to defend their interpretation.

An excellent case can be made for this film as a work of art, however, and perhaps even a true-to-the-spirit-of-the-original adaptation of the text. One can easily identify deliberate parallels between the film and the text, as well as and the points at which nearly every song in the soundtrack binds the film more securely to the text. Unfortunately, to identify every connection I see would be well out of the scope of this article, making it significantly longer than even I would be interested in reading. So for the present, I think I'll content myself with making a few global observations. For example, we can all agree that Everett is intended to be Odysseus and Penny is Penelope, but whom do Pete and Delmar represent? Not to mention Tommy, Pappy O'Daniel and his entourage, Homer Stokes and his constituency (we know Waldrip represents the suitors). And if the sheriff is the devil (as we gather from Tommy's description), where's Poseidon, and Athena, for that matter? The answers to those questions are relatively easy once one adjusts one's view a bit and looks at the epic from a slightly sideways and sometimes inside-out perspective—kind of like the Coen brothers seem to have done.

From that unique perspective, let me posit a few theories, the main one being what I call my overall *The-Odyssey-inside-out* theory. But we'll get back to that. Theory #1: The railroad is the sea for this particular Ulysses. #2: The Sheriff is Poseidon inverted, a god of flames rather than water. #3: Tommy is Telemachus. #4: Pete and Delmar are both Odysseus's crew and later the swineherd and goatherd, and #5 Pappy O'Daniel is Zeus. At this point, someone out there is undoubtedly shaking his or her head and trying to remember the number for the local asylum. Well, before you call the men in the proverbial white coats, let me explain.

At the particular place and time in which *Oh, Brother* is set, the railroad has largely replaced water travel in the transport of people and goods; the railroad can go places no river goes, and members of the transient population (hobos) use it as a means of free travel. Ages ago, ships crews traveled the seas in exchange for working aboard ship, but this is the depression era—jobs on the railroad aren't as plentiful as berths on shipboard in earlier times. The very first form of transportation Everett (short for Ulysses Everett) chooses after he, Pete, and Delmar escape from the chain gang (which can be