

First & Last Name

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ENGL – 2332

14 July 2008 Refer to note in Example #7 (except instead of comparing characters, this student compares films); however, note how well-written and insightful this essay is.

Everyone's Looking for Answers

“O Muse! Sing in me, and through tell me the story Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending, A wanderer, harried for years on end...” (Book I. 1 – 3). So starts both Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey* and Joel and Ethan Coen’s film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* With this unique beginning, the viewer is immediately asked to compare and contrast both stories’ characters, scenes and hidden messages to derive deeper meanings than those presented on the surface. Even though Joel Coen claims that he and his brother had little intent to retell the story of Odysseus because he had not read the poem, the constant allusion to the epic poem is there for a reason (Kerns, Ebert). In fact, during the second scene that runs simultaneously with the opening credits, “Based upon *The Odyssey* by Homer” is prominently displayed (Scott). It appears that the Coen brothers have a secret mixed into the screenplay that they are not willing to disclose openly. The great epic poem the *Odyssey* and the strange but funny film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* share a number of striking similarities, characters, and storylines, yet, when consumed in close proximity, reveal deeply conflicting messages.

There are a number of overt parallels that occur in both works that seem to fly off the screen to the student of film and Homeric Greek poetry. The Coens want to push these messages to the forefront of their movie so they’ll have a fulcrum from which to draw their contrast.

Obviously both works are stories of men traveling home and experiencing a broad and strange

variety of adventures along the way. Similarly both main characters pine for their own wife's affection upon their return home. Likewise, both works are also steeped with messages of brotherhood and civility towards others. Additionally, both works prominently display artistic style of poetry and song (Kerns). Odysseus lauds the blind minstrel, Demodokos, on Phaiakia while the Coens exhibit a broad spectrum of music by the best musicians in their genre (Kerns). With every discussion of the similarities, one must then consider how the screen writers change the outcome or adapt the character for the film.

Character development is extensive in both works. While the *Odyssey* has one main character in Odysseus, the movie has three: Ulysses Everett McGill, Delmar O'Donnell, and Pete. The main character comparison starts immediately as one compares the name Odysseus and Ulysses because Ulysses is the Roman translation of the Greek name Odysseus. Oddly, the character Pete is not given a last name, although his cousin's last name, Hogwollap, is divulged. Other characters from the works are also presented to the viewer. Penny, Everett's wife, is short for Penelope, and the Governor of Mississippi's name, Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel, is a reference to king of Sparta (Ebert). Daniel "Big Dan" Teague is a one-eyed Bible salesman that is an obvious allusion to the Kyklopes in the *Odyssey* (Turan). The similarities die here though in most cases. Most of the key characters in Homer's epic are noble and come from good families of wealth and renown. In the movie, however, almost every character comes from a life of want and mediocrity. Everett, our Odysseus character, is breaking out of prison for impersonating a lawyer using guile to entice his chain gang mates to seek a non-existent treasure. Penny does not pine away for Everett, but is trying to move herself up the social ladder by marrying a man that is "bona fide" and able to provide clarinet lessons to her seven daughters. She is enticed by just one "suitor" in stark contrast to Penelope's hundreds. The great king

Menelaus is played by a wishy-washy political opportunist with no moral underpinning to his character, seeking only to be re-elected to another term as governor.

In the *Odyssey*, the narrator describes the Sirens as “crying beauty to bewitch men coasting by; woe to the innocent who hears that sound!” (Book XII 42 – 44). These women are so dangerous that they entice the unsuspecting sojourner into a trance, and men will sit entranced until they die. Odysseus is warned by Kirke to put wax in his men’s ears so they will not hear the drone and keep the ship in motion. Oddly though Kirke wants Odysseus to hear their call, but to have himself tied to the ship’s mast to avoid certain death. In the film however, Coen places his three “heroes” in a stolen car, and they are all unexpectedly hear the song of the Sirens (Ebert). Pete hears the song and screams to stop the car rushing headlong down the hill to the river, followed closely by Delmar and Everett. All three men are seduced by the song of the Sirens and willingly give in to their songs of death. Strangely though, the screenwriter has the main character Everett using pomade or hair wax to style his hair rather than to plug his ears to protect him and his men from the Sirens. Coen further alludes to the epic by having the Sirens supposedly change Pete into a “horny toad” which is reminiscent of Kirke turning Odysseus’ men into pigs. We find out in just a few scenes that Pete was in reality turned into the authorities for a reward by the Sirens.

In addition to the Sirens, the Coen brothers also borrow the Kyklopes from Homer in the form of Daniel “Big Dan” Teague. Big Dan is a large man who has a voracious appetite and is a cunning con artist. Big Dan is a walking contradiction in the film. As already mentioned, he has one good eye and wears a patch over the other. He is a KKK supporting con artist who sells Bibles to the public, seeking to take advantage of the people in this depression era set motion picture (Kerns). He was also powerful and showed this power by knocking out Everett and

Delmar with a large branch. In a similar way, Odysseus encountered the Kyklopes Polyphemos. Polyphemos is an enormous one-eyed loaner, living in a cave. When Odysseus encounters this monocular giant, the “caveman” imprisons both Odysseus and his men periodically eating two of Odysseus’ men at a time “like squirming puppies to beat their brains out, spattering the floor. Then he dismembered them and made his meal” (Book IX 240, 302 – 304). While Big Dan did not eat Pete and Everett, he beat them into submission and took their money. Dan also seems to draw parallels with the gods of the *Odyssey*. Since Dan was a Bible salesman of reprehensible behavior, his character points to the gods which yielded absolute power, yet behaved in immoral ways.

The final obvious allusion to the *Odyssey* is the situation where the zombie-like church goers were walking through the forest to the river to be baptized. This scene calls to mind the Lotus Eaters from the epic poem (Kerns). In a similar fashion, the Lotus Eaters would change their thoughts about life. They would shed the things of past importance for the opportunity to eat the fruit. Baptism is also described as a rebirth and new thinking. Both Pete and Delmar partake in the baptism and proclaim their new found forgiveness when Pete announces, “Neither God, nor man’s got nothin’ on me now.”

While many situations and people parallel the *Odyssey*, there are also more subtle parallels and allusions to the epic. The Blind Seer on the train car plays the role of the Homeric great charioteer and prophet Tiresias who tells Odysseus of the outcome of his journey home from the underworld (Kerns). In a similar way, this old black man on a railroad pump car tells Everett and his companions of their perilous adventure to come. Another Homeric character is Demodokos, the blind minstrel who appears as the blind disc jockey, Mr. French. The sound track of the movie “Man of Constant Sorrows” bodes well of both works. Homer also seems to

be obsessed with Odysseus' beauty and refers to it often in his masterpiece. In a similar way, Coen has Everett obsessed with his own good looks to the point where he uses hair nets to protect his hair while he sleeps. When George "Baby Face" Nelson is evading police, he screams out "I hate cows" then begins shooting grazing cattle to drive them into the path of the oncoming police cars. At his death march to be electrocuted, a person with a cow yells "Cow Killer! The cow killing is an allusion to Odysseus' men killing the sacred cows of the sun god in the poem.

In the *Odyssey*, Poseidon is angry at Odysseus for blinding the Kyklopes and is stirring up trouble consistently for the hero to slow his return home. Only through the help of the other gods, does Odysseus make it home to see his wife and son. In a similar fashion, the film's Odysseus, Everett, is being chased by an evil-looking law man who relentlessly pursues the three prison escapees. Tommy Johnson, the guitarist of the Soggy Bottom Boys and a black man, sells his soul to the devil whom he describes as being white with empty eyes, much like the man whose chasing the heroes. At the cabin in the woods when all troubles seem to be beyond the sojourners, they are met by this same man to meet their doom. He tells them, "You have eluded fate and you have eluded me for the last time." And when questioned about the legality of the lawman's actions, he states, "The law is a human institution." It may be that the Coen brothers are showing us Poseidon or the Devil, but it may be an allusion to death itself (Scott). In all of their wanderings and trials, both Odysseus and Ulysses are escaping death which will eventually claim them anyway.

There are yet two allusions to the Greeks and to Homer that are not spoken parts, but background items that are shown so briefly that the typical movie-goer may not recognize them. In the scene in the nice restaurant after Big Dan Teague, Everett, and Pete leave, Menelaus

“Pappy” O’Daniel is discussing his campaign with his team. In the background behind Pappy is a bust of Homer. Similarly, on two occasions, the movie’s heroes are camping within a small group of broken down and overgrown Greek columns.

While the Coens seem to be pushing us to believe that this is somehow a retelling of the Odyssey in the 21st century, it appears that they may be attempting to say something much deeper and much more intriguing to their viewers. On many occasions, *O Brother, Where Art Thou* seems to be taking jabs at the epic poem. The Coens do this very subtly throughout the film. Primarily the name of the man that is running against Pappy O’Daniel for the governor seat of Mississippi. His name is Homer Stokes. Because his name is Homer and because he represents one of the antagonists of the film, one must ask why the Coens would do this. In searching the film for more clues, when Homer divulges his membership in a “secret society” and discloses that the beloved group, the Soggy Bottom Boys, are “not white,” he is pelted with tomatoes and literally rode out of the room on a rail. Again, why would the Coen’s put such a rejection of Homer in their screenplay? When the manic-depressive George Nelson robs the bank in the city of Itta Bena, he screams that he is there to sac the city, which is an illusion to the Homeric hero Odysseus, the “sacker of cities” which further undermines Homer’s work. What’s more, the Coens change the characters and parallel events to oppose the epic poem. Menelaus O’Daniel is not the honorable man of the poem who shows great hospitality, but an opportunistic politician with no moral character. Penny, the parallel to Penelope, is also not waiting patiently for the return of her husband, but rejects him upon his return because she is engaged to a suitor who will help her improve her lot in life. The Odysseus character is not a noble warrior with great wealth, a hero of heroes, but a two-bit lawyer impersonator who is a prison escapee. As

mentioned earlier, the Coens are asking their viewers to use the comparison as the linchpin to bring about a clearer point about something beyond the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* is a wonderful story of how a rich and gallant hero finally returns to his ancestral home to once again regain his position as a king over his people. *O Brother, Where Art Thou* is certainly not this kind of story. One must look at the film more deeply to see the Coens' message. Because the three heroes are the only white men pictured in the initial scenes of prisoners, it becomes apparent that perhaps the Coens seek to bring a message of how racial equality during the first half of the twentieth-century was non-existent for blacks. Everett mentions to Pete later in the movie, "he and his companions had escaped from Parchman Farm, an almost all-black prison" (Content, Kreider, White 43). Throughout the screenplay, the three heroes are treated as if they are black men and in two cases pretend to be black men. At the radio station, where they intend to "sing into the can" for money, they initially tell the blind disc jockey that they are negroes, but when rejected by the disc jockey, tell him that they are white and are allowed to sing. Later on, when remembering, the disc jockey recalls them as "black fellas." When Pete is being tortured, he is called an "unreconstructed whelp of a whore." In an odd twist of fate, at the Klan rally, the three heroes, faces blacked to rescue Pete from Parchman Farm, become the color guard for the Klan rally in an effort to save their black friend, Tommy Johnson, from a hanging. When they are revealed, oddly enough by the Kyklopes character, Big Dan (who only has one hole in his Klan hood for his one good eye), Homer Stoke, the Klan grand master, says, "The color guard is colored" and "who made them the color guard?" (Ebert). Everett at one point is even thrown out of the Woolworth which is reminiscent of the Greensboro, N.C. Woolworth which was the scene of a 1959 lunch counter civil rights incident (Content, Kreider, White 47). When the Soggy Bottom Boys are identified as "integrated" by

Pappy O'Daniel's son in disgust and fear of an integrated society, the opportunistic governor states unequivocally that people don't seem to be bothered by this fact, making the integrated group his "brain trust" in his next administration (Content, Kreider, White 47). It becomes quite obvious once these items are brought to light that the Coens are attempting to help their viewers see the inadequacies between the wealthy and the poor as well as the black and the white of The Great Depression and leading up through the civil rights movement.

By drawing on the contrasts and similarities of the two works, the screenwriters intend to carry the message that blacks and poor whites led difficult and similar existences during the depression era in several ways. First, economically in that the poor barely got by on meager income and the rich lived lives of affluence. In the movie, Big Dan, Pappy O'Daniel and his escorts, and Homer Stokes are all fat by design to draw a contrast to the slender poor (Content, Kreider, White 46). Second, the politicians were hollow and baseless wanting only to enrich themselves with campaign slogans and cute ploys. Finally, the constant social struggles of the poor portrayed them to behave less than admirably to get by in life. This social inequality is shown through the disgrace of betrayal and thievery, which are prominently displayed in the film. In fact, the movie poignantly shows Pete's cousin, Wash, turning in the heroes to "do for me and mine." In sharp contrast, however, Wash's son rejects this "treacherous logic" by rescuing the men from a burning barn (Content, Kreider, White 44). This is logic so simple an eight-year-old boy can see it.

Everett as a character puts on a persona of the intellectual, but it is very obvious that he is not. He declares himself "unaffiliated" after Delmar and Pete are baptized and Tommy Johnson sells his soul to the devil. Religion seems to be an undertone also in the Coen film and its acceptance or rejection. In the *Odyssey*, where gods randomly help or hinder humans, there

seems to be a tongue-in-cheek treatment of the gods by Homer. In the film however, religion is held, in most cases, when sincere, in high esteem. The reviewers Content, Kreider, and White say, “No other recent film has taken as seriously the presence of a merciful and sustaining God in the minds of the people – saved, sinners, and skeptics alike” (48). Those baptized at the river scene are not presented badly, but as serene and happy. Old gospel songs are presented in high quality and in modest ways. The most profound moment of religious fervor is shown when Everett drops to his knees, also dropping his false persona, begging God to allow him to once again see his daughters and escape the hangman’s noose before him. Perhaps as a conviction on the individual by the screenwriters, Everett regains his false persona immediately once delivered from death rejecting divine intervention.

The Coen brothers draw deeply on Homer to draw a sharp contrast that existed, and in fact still exists in society today, for the poor and African American. Where the film represents the thesis for depression-era racial and economic division, Homer’s *Odyssey* represents the antithesis in nearly every way. While the works of art may be very similar and have many overt and subtle parallels, they present vastly conflicting messages about mankind. Throughout the film, Everett consistently states “everyone’s looking for answers” and perhaps the Coens through their use of Homer’s *Odyssey* can help us find answers to the important question posed by the title of the film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Works Cited

Comment: MLA requirements have changed, since this essay was written.

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