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 whose 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 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 crewed 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 seen as a parallel to the war) is a boxcar. The fact that he makes it into the boxcar, stands
and begins addressing the hobos who are there already, assuming that Delmar and Pete will follow, indicates that he is the leader and trusts the others—his crew—to follow. That Pete falls, dragging both Delmar and Everett back out of the boxcar, illustrates how it was often the downfall of one or more of Odysseus’s crewmembers that led to the loss of one or more of his ships. The very next form of transportation they pick up is a railroad handcar, propelled by a blind man, a prophet who tells them of their journey and it’s eventual outcome (as does Teiresias later in the text). Even in the theme song, “Man of Constant Sorrows” (as performed by Jordan Rivers and the Soggy Bottom Boys—and if that doesn’t sound like Odysseus and his ships crew, I’m hallucinating), one of the main verses ends with “for I’m bound to ride that northern railroad/perhaps I’ll die upon that train.” Finally, when Everett arrives in Ithaca, he finds that Penny has told the girls, and insists on perpetuating the story, that he was hit by a train (“nothin’ left but a grease spot on the L&N”), just as, in the text, Penelope continuously insists that Odysseus has died somewhere at sea.

In the same way, I tend to think that the sun-glassed lawman is intended to be Poseidon even though he is the epitome of Tommy's description of the devil, and with that dog of his, could easily be seen as Hades. However, despite the physical similarities, Hades has nothing against Odysseus and Poseidon does—in this case, that he's an escaped convict who continually evades recapture (which is very frustrating for the sheriff). Furthermore, he does which by artifice and deception, which could be construed as inflicting a kind of blindness on his victims, the people of Mississippi whom the sheriff by virtue of his position is bound to serve and protect—paralleling the literal blinding of Polyphemus, the Cyclops and Poseidon’s son.

The sheriff is Poseidon, but inverted, a supernatural being of flame rather than of water. The image of flames also fits in nicely with the common depiction of the Christian Satan and does not fit in with Hades, who rules the Underworld but not in a demonic sense. Hades is on an equal footing with the rest of the major gods, no better and no worse, and the Underworld is a place of darkness and shadows where the dead dwell, but not the fiery furnace promised to sinners in the protestant faith. In fact, with a few exceptions, no one is even tortured there—just sad. And again, Hades has no reason to pursue Odysseus.

Furthermore, nearly every time we see the sheriff, flames are reflected in his dark glasses, which, themselves, seem to have a depth beyond their physical dimensions. He sets fire to the barn at the Hogwallup farm, forcing the boys to “R-U-N-N-O-F-T” with the help of the Hogwallup boy (a possible incarnation of Athena in disguise), and then again to the barn the boys are supposed to be sleeping in later, the flames of both reflecting in his black, empty-looking sunglasses. When he walks up to the deputies who are whipping Pete, the flames of their torches reflect in his glasses, and even the dappled sunlight that reflects in his sunglasses in his final scene at the cabin looks like flames. (It’s worth noting here that he confirms his supernatural origins at this point with the comment, “The law? The law is a human institution.” One by which he obviously doesn’t feel bound). The sheriff’s destruction of the barns (in which railroad bums and hobos sleep) by fire in his pursuit of Everett and the boys lends support to our interpretation of him as Poseidon as it parallels the loss of Odysseus’s ships to the sea and Poseidon’s wrath. The quenching of this Poseidon by the in-flooding of the new lake is an ironic twist, but seems to support the flame god image in that he disappears in the waters, along
with his henchmen, leaving only his glasses, now dull grey and harmless, and his dog floating behind.

In much the same way, I think Tommy represents Telemachus. Leaving aside the clear blues references—selling his soul at the crossroads at midnight, etc.—one can draw several rough parallels between the two characters. For instance, the conniving of the suitors to kill Telemachus in *The Odyssey* parallels the episode in *Oh, Brother* wherein Tommy is about to be hanged by the KKK. Here, also, is an excellent example of a direct reference to *The Wizard of Oz*. The chanting of the clan, which looks and sounds like that of the wicked witch’s castle guards, attracts the attention of Everett, Pete, and Delmar who are camping nearby. The three of them looking over the knoll, the firelight on their faces (“Noose.” Pete says, and “sweet Jesus, we gotta save ‘im,” echoing almost exactly the trembling words of Dorothy’s fearful yet determined champions.), replicates the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Cowardly Lion looking over the hill at the castle guards, their faces illuminated by the lights from the witch’s castle. Then there’s the shot of the KKK color guard’s feet disappearing into the bushes just as the feet of the witch’s guards do and the scene in which the three of them hurry to catch up to Tommy and the other clan members, still adjusting their robes and not quite in step. (For the life of me, I can't help but see the cowardly lion's tail protruding from beneath one of the color guard's robes every time I see that scene.) To carry the analogy a bit farther, these three illustrate the characteristics of Dorothy’s champions to a tee. Pete has the brash, bluff and bluster character of the cowardly lion. Delmar (who has never been with a woman) is sweet and simple, the obvious incarnation of the Tinman. And it’s clear from the outset that Everett, as either Odysseus or the Scarecrow, is definitely the brains of “this outfit.” This idea isn’t such a stretch when you think about it: Dorothy, like the heroes of *The Odyssey* and *Oh, Brother*, is trying to find her way home, she is helped and hindered in her journey by supernatural beings, and she too has her three faithful ones to help her.

Another connection to *The Odyssey*, suggested by one of my students, is that the fiery cross at the Klan meeting might symbolize the fire-hardened stake Ulysses uses to put out Polyphemus’s eye. However, while I think the sharp-pointed flag pole might be symbolic of the stake with which the Cyclops is blinded, the fiery cross as it falls onto Big Dan is the vehicle of their victory and escape, much as the bucket of water that melted the witch was the vehicle of victory for Dorothy and her friends—another fire-for-water inversion. (It’s also worth noting that in each case it is the Odysseus character who introduces the element by which they and their companions are freed: Dorothy, by throwing the water, and Everett, by cutting the guy wire to the fiery cross.)

The idea of Tommy as Telemachus tickles me, and even better, it follows pretty well from the text: Tommy’s life is threatened by the KKK, the grand dragon of which is Homer Stokes—he who is connected to "the suitor" and is therefore guilty by association. Their attempt to hang Tommy parallels the way the suitors lay in wait for Telemachus, plotting to kill him when he sails into the harbor. Also, Tommy is one of the four there in Ithaca at the end when they and Ulysses Everett metaphorically "slay" the competition with their song and their popularity, getting rid of Stokes, who is ridden out of town on a rail, and Waldrip (the suitor) at the same time. (Pete and Delmar have at that point metamorphosed into the swineherd and the goatherd who aid Odysseus and Telemachus in killing the suitors). It’s no coincidence, either, that the four of them are thereafter pardoned by Pappy O’Daniel, governor of “the great state of Mississippi.”
Pappy O'Daniel and his entourage, though they seem to be on the periphery of the main action, are omnipresent throughout the film. Pappy’s given name is Menelaus, but that may be more coincidental than a deliberate reference to the original Menelaus. Menelaus wouldn't be that uncommon a name in the depression era south. It might just as easily have been Nestor (I've heard both before), or one of the less common names in the bible, like Enos or Jethro, and knowing it was a name in the text, the Coens may have picked it just for that connection. However, Pappy is the Governor of Mississippi and as such, parallels the Menelaus in the text, who is the King of Lacedaemon. More than that, though, I think Pappy, his son, and his sycophantic sidekicks are humorous depictions of Zeus and some of the other gods. If you think about it, that’s not as crazy as it may sound. Look at the way Pappy's always going off about something (and the fact that his nickname is “Pappy,” for that matter). Nearly every time we see him, he’s "thundering" at the others, and the kid and the other two are always flattering or placating him and arguing among themselves. He also lives, apparently, in a huge plantation-style mansion, with white pillars lining the veranda where they sit about fanning themselves and taking their ease—as Pappy continues to berate them of course. (There’s a very funny exchange between his two campaign managers at this point about whether Pappy’s opponent is planning on paddling or kicking a little metaphoric “behind.”) Finally, Pappy broadcasts on the radio—The Pappy O’Daniel Flour Hour—speaking to the people from the air and via electricity. “Mass communicatin’!” as he says, his arms raised to the heavens—and from the very same radio station where Everett and the boys are helped along by Mr. Lund (another possible incarnation of Athena in disguise). Mr. Lund, the owner of this same station, records the song that will herald their eventual salvation and sends them off with sixty dollars more in their pockets. And it is Pappy who, upon hearing the song and seeing its unprecedented popularity with the voters, grants the “boys” an official pardon.

In the same way, I think the "little Warvey gals" are Penelope's waiting women, and it’s appropriate that they are the first to inform Everett about “Mama’s new beau” (“He’s a suitor,” one little girl repeats.). I also find it interesting that they, and Penny, insist on using the term “bona fide” to describe the suitor and the big ring he gave Mama. The use of this and other Latin terms like "amor fidelius" (in Wash Hogwallup’s pocket watch) and "pater familias" serve to tie the film version to the original text. But clearly the term “bona fide” has more import than that simple connection.

Meaning “in good faith” or “without fraud,” the term “bona fide” has a multitude of possible applications: the fundamentalist Christian faith so clearly permeating this society at this time, the good faith being tested between Ulysses Everett and Penny, her faith in him (or lack thereof)—and I love Penny's insistence that he "got hit by a train" (is dead), even to his face, as a counterpoint to Penelope's insistence that Odysseus must be dead somewhere at sea even after he reveals himself to her. Then there's Ulysses Everett’s faith (or lack thereof) in Penny (and doesn't he call her and all women "faithless" in the movie theatre?—and by the way, I think the movie theater might be a representation of the underworld, the prisoners being marched in are the dead men [being virtually dead to the outside world—like Ulysses Everett, who got hit by that train], and the fact that he's discussing the faithlessness of women with Delmar in there is a kind of sideways reference to Agamemnon and his story of Clytemnestra's betrayal). Even Penny's assertion that he isn't her husband and must be "just some drifter, I guess" as Waldrip is beating him up parallels Penelope's belief that Odysseus is just a ragged
beggar and the suitors insulting and throwing things at him when he first shows up at the palace.

But the final test of the “good faith” or trust between them comes at the town hall rally, when Everett, in the beard and mustache, tries to talk to Penny to convince her to take him back, that he is “a changed man.” He pulls down his beard and says, “It’s me.” Instead of just saying “go away,” she at first replies, “No” as if refusing to believe it is him—just as Penelope does when Odysseus first reveals himself to her. Everett does the quick pull with the beard again and winks at her when he resumes singing—after he’s “slain” the competition, both Stokes and Waldrip—and Penny is clearly fetched by it this time, coloring up and turning her head away with a barely suppressed smile. Penny is won over, again, only after Stokes and Waldrip are beaten—paralleling the way Penelope only believes Odysseus is who he says he is after she sees that the suitors are dead (both take a kind of perverse pride in their husbands’ defeat of their most ardent suitors.).

The fact that Everett is so optimistic and upbeat in his resourcefulness is the final link (and again an inside-out link) between The Odyssey and Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou. In the original text, Odysseus is renowned for his resourcefulness but in temperament he is sad and self-pitying, bemoaning his trials and at one point, near the end, saying “For I am a man of many sorrows.” Our Ulysses Everett, on the other hand, has only one moment of dejection (also near the end and just before he wins back his wife), when Delmar, for the first time, takes Pete’s side. “So, now, you’re against me, too,” Everett says, sighing. “Is that the way it is, boys? First the state of Mississippi, then God Almighty, now you.” Yet even in his dejection, in admitting that he has made some “strategical mistakes” (unlike Odysseus who never makes “strategical” mistakes), he illustrates his resourcefulness and reasserts his leadership by convincing them that if they’ll “stick with [him] just a little longer” everything will work out. Immediately thereafter, he and the boys do indeed win the day by conquering the competition, gaining Pappy’s (Zeus’s) favor, and winning back his wife.

As a last test to prove that he is “who [she] want[s] him to be,” Everett must go and get Penny’s ring from the old cabin so they can be married, a parallel of Penelope’s test of Odysseus, in which he must identify their marriage bed. The fact that Everett comes back with the wrong ring gives the Coen brothers the opportunity to complete the parallels and confirm the inversion: While Odysseus must set out again and travel inland until he comes to a place where the people know nothing about the sea and mistake his oar for a winnowing fan, Ulysses Everett must somehow travel through all that water in the lake to find the real wedding ring. In neither The Odyssey nor Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou do we actually see Odysseus/Ulysses Everett set out upon their new quests, but we are assured that they will, for a hero’s adventures are never truly at an end.

The final link between the two is forged when, as Oh, Brother comes to an end, Everett and Penny walk together, across the railroad tracks and out of the final frame, trailing the “little McGill gals” who are serenely singing “Angel Band.” Penny has insisted that Everett go back and find her original ring or “there ain’t gonna be no weddin’.” With some satisfaction (and amusement) we hear Everett say, “finding one little ring in the middle of all that water is one hell of a heroic task.”

That it is, but we know he’ll try—and we’re pretty sure that our Ulysses Everett, well, he’ll find a way.