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**Trabajo Fin de Grado:** Classical Tradition and Reception Studies in Contemporary Cinema in English *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* by The Coen Brothers

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## ABSTRACT

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* by the Coen brothers starts with an English quotation from the first three lines of the *Odyssey* displayed on screen. Despite the fact that the directors of this film claimed to have read just a cartoon version of the famous epic poem, not only the overture but also the main characters as well as the situations in which they get involved recurrently evoke the main figures and plots of the ancient rhapsody attributed to Homer. It is the aim of this essay to explore both the explicit as well as the more subtle references to the *Odyssey*, focusing on the better-known characters to a non-specialised audience, such as Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, the suitors, the Cyclops or the Sirens. My analysis of the film will proceed in keeping with the trends in the so called Reception Studies. It will also try to unveil the meaning as well as the impact of this romantic road comedy version of an ancient epic poem which, undoubtedly, lends itself to a cinematographic translation and which was already layered with a good amount of love, trickery and disguise, as well as a deep sense of irony.

## RESUMEN

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* de los hermanos Coen comienza con una cita en inglés de las tres primeras líneas de la *Odisea*. A pesar de que los directores aseguran haber leído solo una versión en cómic del famoso poema épico, muchos elementos de la película, no solo la obertura si no también los personajes principales y las situaciones en las que participan son un claro reflejo de las figuras principales y argumentos de la vetusta rapsodia atribuida a Homero. En este ensayo me propongo explorar tanto las más explícitas referencias a la *Odisea*, como las más sutiles, haciendo especial énfasis en los personajes más conocidos de la obra, tales como Odiseo, Penélope, Telémaco, los pretendientes, el Cíclope o las Sirenas entre otros. Analizaré la película siguiendo las tendencias en los llamados Estudios de Recepción. También intentaré destacar el significado y el impacto de esta comedia romántica basada un poema épico que, sin duda alguna, se presta a una traducción cinematográfica repleta de amor, engaño y un gran sentido de la ironía.

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**CLASSICAL TRADITION AND RECEPTION STUDIES  
IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA IN ENGLISH  
*O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* BY THE COEN BROTHERS  
TRADICIÓN CLÁSICA Y ESTUDIOS DE RECEPCIÓN  
EN EL CINE ACTUAL EN LENGUA INGLESA  
*O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?* DE LOS HERMANOS COEN**

Héctor Daniel León Romero

**1. Introduction**

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a cinematic adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*. It includes many elements and references to the epic poem which are mixed or refigured in order to elaborate an imaginative new version of the ancient story.<sup>1</sup> However, it is noteworthy that the Coen brothers, the directors of the film, have argued that they have not read the *Odyssey* and that "the film is not a slavish version of the *Odyssey*" (Flensted-Jensen 2002: 14) Joel and Ethan Coen even explained how they decided to make their own version of the *Odyssey*: "We started with the idea of these three fugitives escaping from the chain gang and Homer suggested itself later when we realised the movie was essentially about the main character trying to get home and having this series of adventures along the way."<sup>2</sup> The Coen brothers have made other references to the *Odyssey* in their films as well as other works,<sup>3</sup> such as *Inside Llewyn Davis* where the protagonist gets involved in a sort of odyssey and this time it is a cat the one named Ulysses.

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<sup>1</sup> As R. Barton Palmer explains in *Joel and Ethan Coen*: "The Coens juxtapose Hollywood screwball comedy to classical epic (with the particular text chosen *The Odyssey*, being –this is surely no coincidence– the literary archetype celebrated by the greatest of modernism's encyclopaedic fictions, James Joyce's *Ulysses*)." Barton 2004: 156.

<sup>2</sup> Woods 2004: 14

<sup>3</sup> As an anecdote, during the 90's and early 00's they also made some spots for Honda where they announced a minivan called *Odyssey*. Cf. Adelson 1998. [27/07/2014]

*O Brother* takes place at the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s in America. It is a road movie which explains the getaway of the main character, Ulysses Everett McGill, with his two companions, whom he is chained to, Pete and Delmar. His main purpose is to get back to his family, so he lies to his mates saying they have to find some stolen money he has hidden and that he will share with them as soon as they return to his hometown. Throughout the film they encounter all sorts of different characters and go through a series of adventures which may well be taken for deliberate allusions to the monsters and mythic characters whom Odysseus and his crew met throughout their famous voyage home, e.g. the Sirens, the Cyclops or the Lotus-eaters. Elements such as the music, the irony, the populism of the 1930s<sup>4</sup> or the humour as well as the different situations the characters themselves get involved in, turn the ancient epic poem into a hilarious and ingenious comedy, or, in Simon Goldhill's words, "a successful mainstream comedy."<sup>5</sup>

It is also worth pointing out the direct references to Homer's epic poem, which are nevertheless rather few. To begin with, the film opens with the following quotation displayed on screen:

*"O Muse!  
Sing in me, and through me tell the story  
Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,  
A wanderer, harried for years on end..."*<sup>6</sup>

These are the first lines of the *Odyssey*, in translation by Robert Fitzgerald. In addition to this, Ulysses Everett, Penny and Menelaus Pappy O'Daniel are some of the characters whose names literally evoke those of Odysseus, Penelope, and Menelaus, respectively. Notwithstanding, other less explicit and subtler references not only to the

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<sup>4</sup> This populism is well described by Jonathan Romney: "One of the film's themes is the congruence of pre-war American pop with history and politics, as the errant jailbird trio encounter various real-life characters, among them gangster George "Baby Face" Nelson and blues singer Tommy Johnson, who, like the better known Robert Johnson, was reputed to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for blues prowess." Cf. Romney 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Goldhill 2007: 245. Goldhill 2007: 261 also defines this film as a "charming romantic road comedy."

<sup>6</sup> As Conard 2009: 54 says, this quotation is not exactly as the translation by Robert Fitzgerald: "The Coen brothers introduce only one minor rewording, changing Fitzgerald's "*Sing in me, Muse, and through me*" to "*O Muse, sing in me and through me.*" It must also be said that Conard rewords –paradoxically– the Coen brothers with the omission of the admiration mark just after "*O Muse.*"

*Odyssey* but also to Homer himself and to other mythic characters are recurrent in the film, as I will try to analyse in this essay.

The **methodology** used for this essay is based on the conjoined disciplines of Classical Tradition as well as Reception Studies in film industry. As Joanna Paul explained:

“The basic methodology of this strand of cinematic reception studies is generally to identify a film (or films) which have an appreciable link with the ancient world—usually through an ancient setting and/or the adaptation of an ancient text—and then explore the film’s relationship with that ancient material, not simply with the aim of listing similarities and differences between ancient and modern, but with the intention of understanding what the reception—the film—can tell us about the receiving culture’s view of antiquity and of itself.” (Paul 2008: 307)

In this paper I will first describe the main characters and elements of the film—such as Ulysses Everett, Penny and many other characters whom the protagonist meets throughout the story, *e.g.* Big Dan, who is a striking refiguration of the Cyclops Polyphemus. I will compare and contrast them with their mythic ancestors in the *Odyssey*. I will also pay attention to the main topics and narrative strategies displayed in the film in relation to the *Odyssey*. Finally I will try to explore the reasons why the Coen brothers have changed, blended or removed elements from the original poem in their film version, since as we have said, the film is not a clear adaptation of the poem and the directors claim not having read the *Odyssey*.<sup>7</sup> Whether this declaration is true or false is not so obvious, that is why many scholars “distinguish between conscious and unconscious reception of classical material” (Paul 2008: 303-14), since some of the ideas are probably used by them within a mainstream reception of the ancient material of which they might not be aware. What is interesting about the film is that, as Paul 2008: 303-14 says, *O Brother* provides an “exciting and theoretically challenging material for the reception scholar, particularly regarding the question of where and how to locate cinematic reception.”

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<sup>7</sup> According to Goldhill 2007: 261-2: “The Coen Brothers famously claimed to have read only a cartoon version of the *Odyssey*—or even not to have read it at all.” As Paul 2008: 303-14 says “the proclamation that they had never read Homer was likely to be a conscious and provocative expression of ‘authorial unreliability’, in keeping with the Coen’s postmodern style.” Moreover, we should also bear in mind that they usually lie about some elements of their films, *e.g.* they claim “that Fargo was ‘based on a true story’ which it was not.” Cf., also, Flensted-Jensen 2002: 15 as well as Toscano 2009: 51.

## 2. Main body

### 2.1. The character of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Classical tradition and reception in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Odysseus is the main character and hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. He is the king of Ithaca and the poem focuses on his return to his kingdom after the Trojan War. As the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* explains: "In Homer's *Iliad*, despite his out-of-the-way kingdom, Odysseus is already one of the most prominent of the Greek heroes. He displays martial prowess, [...] courage and resourcefulness [...] and above all wisdom and diplomacy." (Hornblower et al. 2012: 1032) Although these features are not fully seen in the *Iliad*, the epithets used in the *Odyssey* are also employed in the *Iliad* to show his heroic figure and main attributes.<sup>8</sup>

In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) shares many of the features which were so characteristic of the Homeric Odysseus, and that probably turns him into an out-of-place character during American 1930s. Moreover, they both have the same priority in regard to their adventures, *i.e.* to return to their families. It is worthy of attention that Everett's first name, Ulysses, is the Latin –and more popular– form of Odysseus.

Many of the episodes of the *Odyssey* can be compared to and contrasted with some other specific episodes in the film. However, since the film is a free cinematic version of the poem, with the purpose of becoming a comedy, the sequence of events in the film follows a different order and mixes the episodes, characters and characteristics of the *Odyssey*.

To begin with, in the first scene of the film Ulysses Everett escapes from jail with his two companions, Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) and Pete (John Turturro).<sup>9</sup> This getaway can be related to Odysseus' departure from Calypso's island from which the *Odyssey* also starts, since the jail and the island respectively are the places where the characters appear first in their stories. It is also suggested that Ulysses Everett McGill has

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<sup>8</sup> One example of this is seen in *Il.* 3. 216 when Antenor addresses Odysseus as "resourceful [polymêtis] Odysseus." This epithet is also seen in the *Odyssey*, *e.g.* *Od.* 8. 492. "that resourceful man, Odysseus."

<sup>9</sup> Delmar and Pete can be related to Odysseus' crew in the *Odyssey*. Precisely, Everett's companions do not have anything to do with the sea, they are not sailors, but a sign from the Coen brothers might be seen on Delmar's name, a pun in Spanish, where "del-" equals "of the" and "mar" equals "sea."

been in jail for a long time, while in the poem it is said that Odysseus has been in Calypso's island for eight years; although we cannot say how long Ulysses Everett was in jail we can imagine that it has not been a short time since her wife has had a new-born baby during his absence although it is not clear whether it is Everett's baby;<sup>10</sup> this means he must have been in jail not only for a few months. However, Odysseus did not escape from Calypso; instead, she was forced to let him go by Zeus, as Odysseus tells the King Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, in book VII:

*"The enchantress in her beauty fed and caressed me, promised me I should be immortal, youthful, all the days to come; but in my heart I never gave consent though seven years detained. [...] Then came the eighth year on the wheel of heaven and word to her from Zeus, or a change of heart, so that she now commanded me to sail, sending me out to sea on a craft I made with timber and tools of hers." (Od. 7. 273- 283)<sup>11</sup>*

*O Brother*, just like the *Odyssey*, has a beginning *in medias res*. Both stories start in the midpoint of the events. There is a noticeable difference, though: in the *Odyssey*, the past events are explained through flashbacks, as when Odysseus tells his story to Alcinous, while in *O Brother* the Coen brothers place their protagonist already escaping from a labour farm and prefer to skip the flashbacks. Previous events are vaguely explained by the protagonists –position rather logical due to the usual length of a film, which makes it difficult to include everything the directors would have love to.

Some of Ulysses Everett's main characteristics can be already seen since his first appearance in the film, when he sneaks in a train, namely his confidence and his rhetorical skills. Everett's vocabulary is so precise and rich in Latinisms that he does not seem to belong to the epoch of the film: "*Or, if not smithies per se, were you otherwise trained in the metallurgic arts before straitened circumstances forced you into a life of aimless wanderin'?*", he says to the men in the wagon. This feature is reinforced when Everett's mates, especially Pete, become angry with him, their supposed leader, because he has fooled them during the whole story and he has got to convince them to seek help in order

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<sup>10</sup> See page 22.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also, *Od.*1. 48-62 and 81-87, as well as 5. 1-267. The numbers of the lines from the *Odyssey* correspond to the translation by Robert Fitzgerald, not to the original lines of the Greek poem. I use Fitzgerald translation because the Coen brothers opened their film with a quotation from it. Fitzgerald's translation is also included in the credits at the end of the film.



to get Penny's love back. In this case he convinces them through sadness and sorrow, trying to make them feel pity for himself:

*“So, you're against me now, too? Is that how it is, boys? The whole world... and God almighty... Now you? I guess I deserve it. Boys... I know that I made some tactical mistakes... but if you just stick with me... I got a plan. Believe me, boys... we can fix this thing... and I can get my wife back... and we can get out of here.”*

The Coen brothers have clearly taken this ability from the *Odyssey*, since one of Odysseus' most important qualities is that he is a very good orator, e.g. the scene when he tells the Phaeacians his story of wandering and suffering, and makes them feel pity for him as well as help him to come back home. Alcinous, the king of the Phaeacians, even highlights Odysseus' rhetorical skills:

*“The king said: “As to that, one word, Odysseus: from all we see, we take you for no swindler— though the dark earth be patient of so many, scattered everywhere, baiting their traps with lies of old times and of places no one knows. You speak with art, but your intent is honest.” (Od. 11. 398-404)*

This quality is also related to Odysseus' most important feature, the one why he is usually remembered, his intelligence and his ability for trickery. As W. B. Stanford says, “Odysseus famous deceptions of the Cyclops and the Suitors, his ingenious stories and skilful manoeuvres when still disguised as a beggar in Ithaca [...] marked him for posterity as the supreme man of wile in classical mythology.” (Stanford 1963: 13)

One example of the use of his intelligence can be seen in the episode of the Cyclops when he tells the monster his name is Nobody. He lies with the purpose of escaping from the cave:

*“Kyklops, you ask my honorable name? Remember the gift you promised me, and I shall tell you. My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbdy.” (Od. 9. 380-384)*

Everett is also renowned for his intelligence and especially because of his ability to trickery. This last characteristic may be the one that defines him best in the film, as we see in the fact that he lies to his companions for his own sake, *e.g.* he tells his mates there is a treasure he has buried himself in order to return to his wife Penny. He even considers himself as “the old tactician” in the film.

Another example would be when he lies to the blind old radio man telling him they are black people –since Ulysses Everett thinks that the old man requires black people songs. And changing his mind comically, treating the old man as a fool when he realizes that, in fact, he requires the opposite:

“Blind man: *You boys do Negro songs?*

Everett: *Um... well, uh, sir, we are Negroes. All except for [...] the fella that plays the guitar.*

Blind man: *Yeah, well, I don't record Negro songs. No, I'm lookin' for some old-timey material.[...] so thank you for stopping by, but...*

Everett: *Sir, uh, the Soggy Bottom Boys have been steeped in old-timey material. Heck, we're silly with it, ain't we, boys? [...] We ain't really Negroes. All except for our accompanist.”*

In another example just after their encounter with the prophet at the beginning of the film it is noticeable his knowledge of ancient wisdom:<sup>12</sup>

*“[...] the blind are reputed to possess sensitivities compensatin' for their lack of sight, even to the point of developing para-normal psychic powers. Now clearly, seein' the future would fall neatly into that ka-tagger. It's not so surprising, then, if an organism deprived of earthly vision...”*

But again, it is recognizable how his self-interest stands out over his intelligence when Delmar mentions the old man words prophesizing they would not get the treasure they seek. Everett changes his mind in a comical way once more: *“What the hell does he know? He's an ignorant old man.”*

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<sup>12</sup> The relation between blindness and prediction of the future is a recurrent element in Classical Tradition, *e.g.* in book XI of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus enters to the Hades to ask the blind prophet Tiresias about his future.

This act of lying could also be contrasted between Odysseus and Ulysses Everett because, usually, they lie for different purposes. It might be appropriate to quote the classification of lies made by the medieval schoolmen, according to Stanford, one of the most renowned specialists in the character of Odysseus and his classical tradition:

“They divided falsehoods and deceits into three main kinds. The first and most venial are told primarily for entertainment, in a joke, novel, poem, or the like. [...] Lies of the second kind are those told to avoid a greater evil. [...] The third kind of lie is condemned by all men of good will, ancient and modern –the malevolent lie, the crime described in the Decalogue as bearing false witness against one’s neighbor.” (Stanford 1963: 21-23)

Following this classification we realize that the lies Odysseus makes can be found on the second group. He has a great responsibility taking care of his whole crew and he cannot think only about himself. That is also why it takes him so long to come back to Ithaca. When he tells he is “Nobody”, he is fooling the Cyclops. As the Cyclops is drunk, he is unable to recognize the trick and later incapable of telling the other Cyclops about the crew.

On the contrary, Ulysses Everett enters on the third kind of lies sometimes, being malevolent and selfish. For instance, he tells Pete and Delmar the lie about the treasure as it was the only way out to stop her wife’s wedding.<sup>13</sup> But he does not consider the consequences this decision can have on Pete’s life for example: *“I had 2 weeks left on my sentence. I don't get out now till 1987... I'll be 84 years old. [...] You! You ruined my life!”* Luckily they get forgiven publically by the governor of the state, being this issue a complete coincidence Everett had not even thought about. It should also be added that there comes a moment when Everett cannot stand any longer Pete’s regretting having told the police about the treasure. Everett feels sorry about it and decides to tell them the truth to stop Pete’s suffering. In an act of compassion Everett admits he *“never knocked over no armored car”*, and he was *“sent up for practicing law without a license.”*

Another intrusion into this third type of lying would be, precisely, practicing law without a license: the reason why Ulysses Everett had entered prison. Here, he risked his wife and daughters only to be able to work in a qualification-required business without

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<sup>13</sup> It was the only way out because Everett, Pete and Delmar were chained.

license. We might think he may have learnt the lesson after all his journey but at the end of the film, when he is performing on the stage, it is seen he would take that risk again: *"I'm going to be a dentist. I know this guy who'll print me up a license."*

This adaptation of Odysseus' character crosses the limit of the third type of lies. The Coen brothers' appropriation of Odysseus mythic archetype is refigured in keeping with the changing times. During this epoch in America, the stereotypes of courtesy and kindness were transformed due to the struggle of one's own through capitalism in order to reach power and wealth in a society suffering from poverty. This individualism is shown in the constant search for money. Everett continuously tries to make easy money looking for legal voids and corruption gaps within the system.<sup>14</sup> Money even has the power to make Pete escape the prison for it is his opportunity to become rich. On the contrary, in Greek culture, individualism is not usually an option since people were dependents on gods' interests, forced to worship them to avoid their anger and its consequences. For example, this is seen when Odysseus follows his ego after beating the Cyclops, hence, telling him his true name. This is an act of individualism that costs him many misfortunes on behalf of Polyphemus' father, the god Poseidon.<sup>15</sup>

Ulysses Everett and Odysseus share the defect of *hybris*, *i.e.* being too proud, leading themselves to unintended consequences. Everett loves to show his superiority, *e.g.* as he says at the beginning of the film, when Pete challenges his leadership, he should be the leader: *"well, Pete, I figured it should be the one with the capacity for abstract thought."*<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in the first conversation with Big Dan, Everett does not show any modesty either, since he tells the one-eyed man: *"I believe like me you're endowed with the gift of gab"* and *"I like to think I'm a pretty astute observer of the human scene, too, Big Dan."* Similarly, Odysseus introduces himself to king Alcinous and the Phaeacians in the following self-assured terms: *"I am Laërtês' son, Odysseus. Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war: this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim."* (*Od.* 9. 18-21). Another case in point is shown when he exalts his "glorying spirit" after having beaten the Cyclops Polyphemus:

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<sup>14</sup> As the fake licenses.

<sup>15</sup> There is a dialog in the film which may remind us also of the *Odyssey*: when they first use a car is when the son of Pete's cousin rescues them from the fire in the barn. At the time they abandon the kid, he curses them: *"I curse your name!"* just like Poseidon does.

<sup>16</sup> As Hall 2008: 148 aptly puts: "Even Everett Ulysses McGill, the con-artist hero of the Coen brothers' movie 'based on the *Odyssey* by Homer', *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), argues he should lead his fellow escaped convicts, since that honour should go to 'the one with the capacity for abstract thought'."

*“Kyklops, if ever mortal man inquire how you were put to shame and blinded, tell him Odysseus, raider of cities, took your eye: Laërtês’ son, whose home’s on Ithaka!”* (Od. 9. 525-528)

These exaltations of the spirit do not end well for neither of these characters and make their journeys take longer. Naively, Ulysses Everett trusts in Big Dan (a character he has just met) instead of showing some carefulness; he gets encouraged by Big Dan’s words, ending up robbed soon after; losing their car and all the money inside. Odysseus also suffers from his own vanity due to the relationship between Poseidon and Polyphemus, who are respectively father and son. After Polyphemus prayers,<sup>17</sup> Poseidon, full of anger, decides to delay Odysseus return to Ithaca. One example of his anger towards Odysseus is seen in book XIII, when Poseidon turns the Phaeacians’ ship into stone after Odysseus has finally and safely reached Ithaca: *“Their ocean-going ship he saw already near, heading for harbor; so up behind her swam the island-shaker and struck her into stone, rooted in stone, at one blow of his palm, then took to the open sea.”* (Od. 13: 188-93)

One more way vanity affects Ulysses Everett would be his refusal to be baptized which has a refined allegory when Pete explain “the pros” of the ceremony: *“At least it would’ve washed away the stink of that Pomade.”* As a matter of fact, Everett has an obsession with his hair, which he tries to embellish with pomades<sup>18</sup> and hair nets and its condition is his first concern every time he wakes up during the film: *“How’s my hair?!”* Throughout images it is shown that this whim is used by the Sheriff Cooley’s dog to follow Everett’s tracks.<sup>19</sup> This vain obsession of Ulysses Everett with the looks of his hair is a comic translation of the *Odyssey*’s concerns for Odysseus physical appearance. More than once, Athena, his careful and protective goddess, embellishes the hero and transforms his body and hair.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *“O hear me, lord, blue girdler of the islands, if I am thine indeed, and thou art father: grant that Odysseus, raider of cities, never see his home: Laërtês’ son, I mean, who kept his hall on Ithaka.”* (Od. 9 .552-56)

<sup>18</sup> More specifically with Dapper Dan pomade: *“Well, I don’t want Fop, goddamn it! I’m a Dapper Dan man!”*

<sup>19</sup> Concretely, just after the Baptist scene we see the dog smelling Ulysses Everett’s hair pomade and a guard saying: *“All right, boys, we got the scent.”*

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Od.* 6. 229-37; 8. 19; 18. 71; 23. 155-62.

In addition to this, in the film it is shown how Ulysses Everett and his companions steal as a way of surviving. Everett steals a watch which belonged to Pete's cousin in order to sell it to get a car; issue that angers Pete: "*You stole from my kin!*" They become accomplices in the stealing of the bank by George Nelson and they also steal a pie and a car after George Nelson's first farewell.<sup>21</sup> In much the same way, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew were forced to steal for survival: "*The wind that carried west from Ilion brought me to Ísmaros, on the far shore, a strongpoint on the coast of the Kikonês. I stormed that place and killed the men who fought.*" (Od. 9. 41-44)



Lam. I. Ulysses Everett checking his hair soon after the scene with the "sirens."  
Source: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000.

Another important element has to do with Everett's opinion towards religion. After his rejection to be baptized, Everett, Pete and Delmar meet the guitarist Tommy Johnson who claims to have sold his soul to the devil. Everett answers with an analogy to politics: "*Well, ain't it a small world?! Spiritually speakin'. Pete and Delmar just been baptized and saved. I guess I'm the only one that remains unaffiliated.*" As against this irony, the *Odyssey* is constructed around how gods relate to humans so there is no room for atheism. Odysseus experiences continuous encounters with the goddess Athena, who tries to help him get back home. Possibly, the closest part to a criticism against the gods in the *Odyssey* may be found when Odysseus finally returns home and tells the goddess:

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<sup>21</sup> Actually, Delmar leaves some cash on the window sill to compensate for the stealing of the pie.

*“Can mortal man be sure of you on sight, even a sage, O mistress of disguises? Once you were fond of me—I am sure of that— years ago, when we Akhaians made war, in our generation, upon Troy. But after we had sacked the shrines of Priam and put to sea, God scattered the Akhaians; I never saw you after that, never knew you aboard with me, to act as shield in grievous times” (Od. 13. 369-78)*

Nevertheless, Everett starts praying for salvation when he is about to be hanged by the Sheriff at the end of the film:

*“Oh, Lord... please look down and recognize us poor sinners. Please, Lord. I just want to see my daughters again. I've been separated from my family for so long. I know I've been guilty of pride and sharp dealing. I'm sorry that I turned my back on you. Forgive me. We're helpless, Lord. For the sake of my family. For Tommy's sake. For Delmar's and Pete's. Let me see my daughters again, Lord. Help us, please.”*

Comparing these two fragments from both of the works I am working with, it is noticeable the tendency the Coen brothers have of inverting some of the characteristics typical of the *Odyssey's* hero. The religious man, Odysseus, near the end of the work shows his own doubts about gods, and the atheist, Ulysses Everett, appears to be one of the faithful. However, after this recess they continue with their own original beliefs or the lack of them in Everett's case, as we see after the flooding of the valley, when Everett neglects the belief of their luck as an act of God:

*“Everett: Delmar, don't be ignorant. I told you they was flooding this valley.  
Delmar: No! That ain't it!  
Pete: We prayed to God and he pitied us!  
Everett: Well, it never fails. Once again, you two hayseeds are showin' how much you want for intellect. There's a perfectly scientific explanation for what just happened.  
Pete: That ain't the tune you was singin' back there at the gallows!  
Everett: Well, any human being will cast about in a moment of stress. No, the fact is, they're flooding this valley so they can hydroelectric up the whole durn state. Yes, sir, the South is gonna change. Everything's gonna be put on electricity and run on a paying basis. Out with the old spiritual mumbo jumbo... the superstitions, and the backward ways.”*

Thus, the Coen brothers set a sort of antihero who shares some of Odysseus main characteristics and simultaneously diverges drastically in others. I will come back to this point in question later on.

Returning to the last citation of the film, I am going to study Everett's scientific mindset, topic closely related to religion. Mentioning the "intellect", or recurring to "a perfectly scientific explanation" gives us an idea of his position but the words right after this quotation are the ones that truly call my attention as they become very significant within the scientific topic. "*We're gonna see a brave new world where they run everybody a wire and hook us all up to a grid.*" "*Yes, sir, a veritable age of reason. Like the one they had in France.*" It is important to point out that at the time when the *Odyssey* was written, science was not settled; however, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became the main instrument around which civilization was developed. Therefore, the Coen brothers have adapted the hero's wisdom from the *Odyssey* to the available knowledge of the American society in the 1930s.

In terms of fidelity, from a contemporary point of view, Odysseus shows some slackness in the *Odyssey*; he misses home but at the same time he seems weak in relation to certain women. For instance, he is offered to stay with the beautiful nymph Calypso<sup>22</sup> forever, although he rejects the offer which would have given him the gift of immortality. Anyway, he spends 7 years with her and I wonder whether he could have used his superior intelligence to try to escape home. That being said, it must also be mentioned that Odysseus' infidelities may have been caused by the fact that Calypso and Circe were not mortals so they could use some magic and superior power which Odysseus could not control. As a matter of fact, with Nausicaa, a princess, though a simple mortal, it does not happen the same, despite her beauty and her shown-affect to Odysseus, he decides to continue his way back home to Penelope.

The most striking example has to do with Circe: he stayed in the island of the goddess Circe<sup>23</sup> for a year, forgetting about Ithaca and he only thought on returning back home when his crew insisted on it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Odysseus words towards her were: "My quiet Penelope [...] would seem a shade before your majesty."

<sup>23</sup> Daughter of Helios.

<sup>24</sup> *Od.* 10. 504-11: "So day by day we lingered, feasting long on roasts and wine, until a year grew fat. But when the passing months and wheeling seasons brought the long summery days, the pause of summer, my



Clearly, Odysseus is not literally faithful to Penelope in the *Odyssey*, a fact which differs strikingly from the film, because Ulysses Everett maintains his loyalty to Penny. It is also true it may be like this because the latter does not get many opportunities to be unfaithful. The only one would be when he asks Pete to introduce the “sirens” to them and as Pete does not know their names, Ulysses Everett introduces himself: “*Ladies, my name is Ulysses Everett McGill and, well, you three ladies are about the prettiest water lilies...*” So he has the same sort of weakness as his ancient archetype, but no opportunities nor compelling goddesses to surrender to them. This will lead us to the contrast with Penelope’s faithfulness in both works in the following section.

Regarding the subject of the heroes’ relationship with their families, it is important to mention their disparity with the suitors. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is seen as the hero everyone is waiting for and the suitors as the heartless antiheroes whose only purpose is obtaining Odysseus’ idyllic past life.<sup>25</sup> In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Ulysses Everett is the heartless person who has even been in prison and, the suitor, Vernon Waldrip, is a decent and responsible man with principles who can take care of the family, as we see when Pappy O’Daniel tries to make him join his political party: “*That is an improper suggestion. I can't switch sides in the middle of a campaign. Especially to work for a man who lacks moral fibre.*” Furthermore, another remarkable inversion would lie in the ability they have for fighting as Odysseus was able to kill all the suitors while Ulysses Everett is not even able to beat his only opponent in a fight.

Here we see again how the Coen brothers play with the ancient characters, appropriate and reelaborate them completely, making Ulysses Everett the antihero we talked about before.

Another reference to the *Odyssey* can be seen in the moments when Ulysses Everett falls asleep, since always something bad happens. In both the poem and the film the protagonists fall asleep twice and every time this happens they have to face some troubles when they wake up.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus explains in Book X that he left the island of Aeolia carrying a bag of storm winds which the king Aeolus had given him. He decides not to tell his crew what is inside it and he falls asleep exhausted. Then, the sailors decide to

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shipmates one day summoned me and said: ‘Captain, shake off this trance, and think of home— if home indeed awaits us, if we shall ever see your own well-timbered hall on Ithaka.’”

<sup>25</sup> The only exception would be Amphinomus, who is considered the most noble of the suitors. However, he is still killed by Telemachus when they slay all the suitors.

open it thinking there is gold inside it, so the winds burst out and it delays their traveling back home.<sup>26</sup>

The other scene he falls asleep is in book XII when all the predictions Circe did come true, especially the episode of the cattle of Helios, which is similar to the incident of the bag of Aeolus. Odysseus and his crew arrive at the island of Helios and are not able to leave for the big storms. Odysseus advises his crew not to eat the cattle of the god Helios: “*Old shipmates, our stores are in the ship’s hold, food and drink; the cattle here are not for our provision, or we pay delay for it. Fierce the god is who cherishes these heifers and these sheep; Helios; and no man avoids his eye.*” (Od. 12. 377-81) However, they do not listen to him and eat the animals while he is sleeping. When he finds out about this, his words show his sorrow for having fallen asleep in such a moment: “*O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, you made me sleep away this day of mischief! O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour! Here they sat, and a great work they contrived.*” (Od. 12. 438-41)

The Coen Brothers make a reelaboration of these scenes and they adapt them to others situations Everett faces during the film. The first scene is when the group fall asleep in a hayloft and when they suddenly wake up they find out that policemen are outside waiting to arrest them and they throw fire into the barn to force them to get out. However, Everett and his mates manage to escape with the help of a little boy. We can see that the Coen Brothers do not make Ulysses’ mates do anything wrong as we see in the *Odyssey*, they face the situation together, but the hero –and leader– is asleep anyway.

The other scene is when they encounter the sirens. They are seduced by their beautiful voices and attractiveness; they get drunk and fall asleep. In this scene again Ulysses Everett acts without thinking about the consequences, as the sailors of Odysseus do in the *Odyssey*. This scene is probably made to emphasize that he is not that similar to ancient Odysseus and that he actually behaves like an antihero. As we have said, they wake up to find out Pete is gone. This can be related to the killing of the many sailors of Odysseus, who die along the travel to leave him alone in the end. Since this is a comedy film, the Coen Brothers make Pete disappear and trick the audience into thinking he has been transformed into a toad, to be reunited with his mates later on.

At the end of the film, when the valley is flooded, Ulysses Everett, Pete and Delmar find themselves floating on a coffin. This scene reminds me of the moment when

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Od.* 10. 19-60.

Odysseus sticks to a piece of wood when his boat is sunk by Zeus, as he tells Alcinous in book VII: “*Zeus let fly with his bright bolt and split my ship, rolling me over in the winedark sea. There all my shipmates, friends were drowned, while I hung on the keelboard of the wreck and drifted nine full days.*” (Od. 7. 269-71)

It is also curious that both, Odysseus and Everett, disguise as old men to see their wives without calling anyone’s attention.

Another parallelism could be found in what they had to do to show who they really were to their wives. In the case of Odysseus, he had to use his bow as no one else could and fire it through seven axes’ holes in an archery competition while Ulysses Everett had to sing the song he and his mates made famous all over the state of Mississippi (although they did not know it was famous) to make Penny, as Pernille Flensted-Jensen says: “*realize that he may not be completely incompetent after all.*”<sup>27</sup> They come back together after proving themselves unique.<sup>28</sup>



Lam. II Ulysses Everett during his audition, dressed as an old man with a fake beard.  
Source: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000.

This song I have just mentioned is named “Man of Constant Sorrow”, title that describes Odysseus and is a definition commonly used in the *Odyssey* to depict Odysseus.<sup>29</sup> The song describes the character who has “bid farewell to old Kentucky, the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 14.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, Odysseus final test was to recognize their bed. See page 19.

place where I was born and raised”, who has likewise “been in trouble”, “for six long years”, and who is “bound to rumble” and has an “old lover” who never expects to see again. These are clear allusions to Ithaca, Penelope and Odysseus himself and his journey full of adventures.<sup>30</sup>

Concerning patriarchy, Ulysses Everett has the idea that patriarchy is very important in the society as it was in ancient times, so he considers himself the important figure of his family who must never be replaced. However, he bumps into reality and sees that Penny has already replaced him and that he is not that important. This becomes clearer in the scene when he meets his daughters for the first time in the film, when we find him alarmed because his daughters have adopted Penny’s maiden name, so he says: “*I am the damn paterfamilias!*” One of the girls responds to this by saying “*But you ain’t bona fide!*” This feeling of having his pride affected is reinforced in the scene of the cinema, when he is talking with Delmar and he insults Penny and all women in general. The conversation finishes with Delmar’s opinion: “*Everett, I never figured you for a paterfamilias.*” And the corresponding answer by a proud Ulysses: “*Ohh, yes. I have spread my seed.*”

## 2.2. The characters of Penelope, Telemachus and the suitors in the *Odyssey*.

### Classical tradition and reception in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Wife of a man who has spent 20 years away home, **Penelope** is a woman with an outstanding beauty. She is a loving mother and an exceptionally faithful wife, who spends most part of the *Odyssey* suffering for her beloved husband Odysseus –who has not come back yet from the Trojan war– and her dear son –whom she thinks to be dead after he leaves Ithaca in search of his father. As she says in book XVIII, she even wants to die in order to end with her sorrow for Odysseus and to reunite with him:

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<sup>29</sup> According to Goldhill 2007: 265, “The song is called “I am a man of constant sorrow.” All Homerists will instantly recognize this title as *mala d’ eimi polutunos*, one of those phrases Odysseus uses almost as a marker of his identity when in disguise before Penelope.”

<sup>30</sup> As Hall 2008: 59-60 says: “One explanation of Homer’s name is that it derives from a Babylonian noun meaning ‘a person who sings’, and in the story of the Sirens, the narrative celebrates the power of the singing voice to enchant the listener. [...] The recurring bluegrass song ‘Man of Constant Sorrow’, which the film suggests was invented impromptu by Ulysses Everett McGill, was actually first recorded by the Virginian Stanley Brothers in 1950, and brought to the world on Bob Dylan’s debut album (1962). The Coen brothers drew an inspirational connection between this old folk song, from the oral culture of the American Deep South, and Odysseus’ formulaic epithet *polutlas*, ‘much-enduring’.”

*“Ah, soft that drowse I lay embraced in, pain forgot! If only Artemis the Pure would give me death as mild, and soon! No heart-ache more, no wearing out my lifetime with desire and sorrow, mindful of my lord, good man in all ways that he was, best of the Akhaians!” (Od. 18. 226-32)*

However, Penelope is not only a faithful wife, she is also, and remarkably so, an intelligent woman, whose cunning equals her husband's. Hers is the idea of the famous deceit of the weaving and unweaving of the shroud of Laertes, and she will put Odysseus a final test concerning their marital symbol of loyalty and partnership: the secret of their irreplaceable bed.

In the film, Odysseus wife is called Penny, a shortened version of Penelope. Penny (Holly Hunter) is a woman who fights for her children and, since her husband is in prison, she decides to make up the story that he is dead and so marry another man, Vernon Waldrip. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope likewise has suitors, not one but plenty of them, nonetheless she makes them wait for years in the secret expectation that her beloved husband will come back in the meantime.

Penny's priority is a husband with a job who takes care of the family and gives them financial support. That is why, when Ulysses Everett comes back, she tells him: *“Vernon here's got a job. Vernon's got prospects. He's bona fide. What are you?”*, to what he can only refute her by using the patriarchal topic: *“I'll tell you what I am... I am the paterfamilias, and you can't marry him!”* –the way it used to work back then in the ancient Greece. Penny's reply to Everett's prohibition of marriage results powerful and forceful: *“I can, I am, and I will, tomorrow. I got to think about the little Wharvey gals. They look to me for answers. Vernon can support 'em and buy 'em lessons on the clarinet.”* Times have changed and in *O Brother* we find a new version of a Penelope who does not care about old conventions and who is not willing to wait for her adored. Nevertheless, we see a Penny who is not capable of living in economic terms by herself as an independent woman, she still requires a husband.

Both women consider their husbands to be dead but in two different ways: Penelope dreads that Odysseus may never come back after twenty long years of absence. On the contrary, Penny makes up Ulysses Everett is dead because she is embarrassed he has been in jail and she divorced him out of shame. She believes that “being hit by a train” is the only good thing Ulysses Everett could have done for her daughters. In fact, even when

she has Ulysses Everett in front of her, she keeps telling her children that he is not their father. We cannot imagine the ancient Penelope with this attitude repudiating her own husband. This attitude can also be seen through a closer comparison with the *Odyssey*, when Penelope does not recognize Odysseus until he has showed his mastery with the bow and has not completed the final test of the bed, which is the ultimate trial of Penelope. When Odysseus has killed all the suitors, she still does not believe he is her husband so she will recognize him by their secret symbol, the marital bed. So, she discovers he is actually Odysseus when he explains in detail how he made their bed.<sup>31</sup> In the film, it looks as if Penny does not recognize him either as we see when she says: “*He’s not my husband. Just a drifter, I guess. Just some no-account drifter.*” This may be because he has not shown his mastery yet as well as his “bona fide”, as she likes to say. It is not until Ulysses Everett starts singing “Man of Constant Sorrow” that we see she starts getting interested again on her husband. It is funny how quickly she decides to come back with him and forget about her fiancé –the suitor– as if it were an act of gods (or money) just after he has completed a deed no one else could.

Still, after this decision to remarry Ulysses she will prepare yet another trial: He must recover their original engagement ring or there will be no wedding. Ulysses insists on the fact that it is only a symbol but it seems that the ring is very significant for Penny. This can be related to what has already been mentioned about Odysseus’ and Penelope’s bed. The difference is that the film ends with Penny being stubborn about the ring and giving Ulysses orders to find it, while in the *Odyssey* Penelope recognizes her husband after the trial of the bed and the description clearly shows the happiness she feels for being reunited with him: “*Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her. With eyes brimming tears she ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him.*” (*Od.* 23. 207-10).

In relation to the end of *O Brother* in comparison to the *Odyssey*’s, we can see how *O Brother* ends in suspense with Ulysses Everett as “an uxorious Odysseus”<sup>32</sup> completely controlled by Penny and who will have to face new adventures to please her wife’s desires

The unfaithfulness in the *Odyssey* must be observed closely because Homer does not seem to share the same morals for men and women. Homer diminishes the importance of men unfaithfulness, not condemning the sexual intercourse of Odysseus with Circe and

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Od.* 23. 180-206.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Conard 2009: 51.

Calypso. At the same time, Homer reproaches women who are unfaithful to their husbands, as we see when Telemachus meets Athena disguised as Mentos and asks him if he is Odysseus' son: "*Friend, let me put it in the plainest way. My mother says I am his son; I know not surely. Who has known his own engendering?*" (Od. 1. 251-53)

However, the topic of unfaithfulness is criticized by Calypso in the *Odyssey*, who could be taken for a protofeminist worthy of consideration. She argues that male gods can have sexual relationships with mortals while female goddesses cannot do it: "*Oh you vile gods, in jealousy supernal! You hate it when we choose to lie with men immortal flesh by some dear mortal side.*" (Od. 5. 124-26). The double moral of unfaithfulness does not only occur amongst gods, but also amongst mortals. We see how Odysseus, who loves his wife, lays with different goddesses like Circe or Calypso, while Penelope remains faithful to her husband for twenty years. Definitely, she would have been criticized if she had been unfaithful, unlike Odysseus.<sup>33</sup>

Once this is clear, I am going to compare this same topic in both works taking into account the difference between deep desires and acts. Odysseus, Ulysses Everett and especially Penelope keep faithful in their heart of hearts. The contrast would be Penny, who is willing to forget about Ulysses Everett even after his return and decides to come back with him when she discovers he is a famous singer now and his death sentence has been forgiven by the authorities.

In terms of pure acts and regarding the most faithful characters, this would be therefore the most accurate range: Penelope would be the only one who keeps entirely faithful to her beloved. Ulysses Everett will be the following one, as we see only one moment of weakness concerning the sirens in his homecoming. The next one is Odysseus, who "shared bed" with several goddesses during his journey but who is always desperately seeking to come back to his beloved mortal and aging wife. The last one is Penny who is completely determined to marry the suitor and does not want to see Ulysses again. When Ulysses recovers the ring, it turns out it is not Penny's ring so the trial is not over and she does not seem to care about the fact that the "*ring is at the bottom of a pretty durn big lake*" as Ulysses Everett says. He finishes this last conversation of the film with this clear echo of the *Odyssey*, talking about one of the main subjects of the ancient epic poem, heroism:

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<sup>33</sup> In the *Odyssey*, the antithesis of Penelope's faithfulness to her husband is Clytemnestra, who is bitterly criticized at several moments in stark contrast to Penelope.

*“Finding one little ring in the middle of all that water is one hell of a heroic task!”<sup>34</sup>*

Regarding faithfulness and marriage, in the film Penny decides to use her maiden name, Wharvey, since she considers she is not married anymore to Ulysses. In a society like the American at the 1930s, women had their maiden name from their family and when they got married they had to adopt their husband’s name. This custom continues nowadays in some cultures. Penny decides to be independent –although only until she marries Vernon– and even makes her daughters use the name of Wharvey. This is seen when the girls meet their father:

*“Girls: Mama’s got us back to Wharvey. That’s her maiden name. You got a maiden name, daddy?  
Everett: Daddy don’t have a maiden name...  
Girls: That’s your misfortune”*

Finally, it is also worth pointing out that in the film, Ulysses Everett calls Penny a “succubus” which metaphorically can be related to her unfaithfulness, since it means “a demon in female form, said to have sexual intercourse with men in their sleep.”<sup>35</sup>

Concerning the hero’s offspring, according to ancient mythology, **Telemachus** is Odysseus’ and Penelope’s son as well as the future king of Ithaca. In the *Odyssey* he plays an important role since the beginning of the poem; he travels to get news from his father to be sure that he is alive and in the end he helps Odysseus to kill all the suitors as well as the unfaithful servants.

Ironically, in *O Brother*, instead of one son, Ulysses Everett has seven daughters who play a secondary role in the film. For a man as concerned as he is with patriarchal

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<sup>34</sup> As Conard 2009: 51 says “Penny refuses to acknowledge the symbolic value of the object and tells him that this particular ring, because it is not the original ring, lacks the magical charm that will restore their marriage. The ring, like her husband is not bona fide.”

<sup>35</sup> “Succubus.” Dictionary.com. This insult seems an ironic reference to the female monsters whom Odysseus encounters along his voyage home, like Scylla or Charybdis.



traditions, the lack of male offspring and the fact of having so many female descendant is more than ironic. Moreover, there are some other comparisons that should be made between the *Odyssey* and the film. For instance, in the *Odyssey* the first encounter that Odysseus has with a member of his family is with Telemachus, after the former comes back to Ithaca disguised as a beggar.<sup>36</sup> The same happens in the film with Ulysses Everett, who first meets three of his daughters before he meets his wife. Telemachus does not recognize his father due to Odysseus' appearance and his invented story, while the girls in the film recognize their father but just in part.<sup>37</sup> Comically, the girls still believe their father to be dead although he is in front of them. After an affectionate welcoming, the girls start doubting:

“Girls: *Daddy? He ain't our daddy.*

Everett: *Well, I ain't. What's this Wharvey gals? Your name's McGill.*

Girls: *No sir. Not since you got hit by that train.*

Everett: *What are you talking about? I wasn't hit by any train.”*

The most outstanding reelaboration in the Coen brothers' version is the girls' position towards the suitor. Telemachus is completely against his mother's suitors because he considers they are not appropriate for Penelope and because he believes his father is alive. On the contrary, in the film, the “Wharvey gals” give their consent to the suitor, whom they call “Uncle Vernon” until the next day, when, in their words, “*he's gonna be daddy.*”

Another parallelism with the *Odyssey* would be seen in the number of daughters, which could be considered a reference to book X when it is said: “*Twelve children had old Aiolos at home – six daughters and six lusty sons.*” (*Od.* 10. 6-7). In the film, Ulysses Everett believes to have only six daughters until he discovers he has a new one. We cannot be sure if the last one is Ulysses' or Vernon's. According to Flensted-Jensen, Vernon

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<sup>36</sup> Actually, the first person Odysseus meets in Ithaca is his faithful servant Eumaeus, but the importance of the meeting of father and son is highlighted from the beginning since Telemachus also first meets Eumaeus the moment he arrives into Ithaca and therefore meets his father right there.. By the way, it is worth saying that the character of Eumaeus may have an analogue in the film as displayed in the character of Pete's cousin, also a farmer. According to Hall 2008: 139, “the Eumaeus figure (Mr Hogwallop).”

<sup>37</sup> Anyway, Telemachus could hardly recognize Odysseus since the hero left Ithaca when his son was only a baby and they have not seen each other ever since.

Waldrip, the suitor, is the father of the baby.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that it is Vernon's baby. Another possibility would be that Ulysses Everett left Penny pregnant just before going to jail and that is why he had no news about it.

To conclude, the film ends with the girls singing a Christian song called "Angel band" in which clear references from the song to the *Odyssey* are strongly made in verses such as "My race is nearly run, my strongest trials are now past, my triumph has begun", which could refer to Odysseus successful *nostos*, or travelling back home. "My immortal home" is the last verse and can also refer to Odysseus' thoughts about his home: despite all the places he has been in, Ithaca will always be his home no matter what, even after being twenty years far away from it.

In the *Odyssey*, the **suitors** are young men from Ithaca and many other places who court Penelope. However, most of the suitors are evil and treat Telemachus and Odysseus the beggar with disrespect. Telemachus tells Athena in book I what the suitors' purpose is: "*Meanwhile they eat their way through all we have, and when they will, they can demolish me.*"<sup>39</sup> (*Od.* 1. 289-90). In *O Brother*, there is only one suitor, Vernon Waldrip, and he is the opposite to his peers from the *Odyssey*. He is a worthy and responsible man who wishes to take care of Penny's family. There are also many explicit references which make clear that he is Penny's suitor *e.g.* the daughters say "*he is a suitor*" several times during their encounter with their father, Ulysses Everett.

As we have previously said, in the film, Ulysses Everett is seen as the antihero, the one who has been in prison and does not care about others, while Vernon Waldrip is seen as a hero. The Coen Brothers make this foreignization of both of these characters probably to emphasize the radical difference between them and, in this case, the suitor is not evil. This attribute is exemplified in the few scenes he appears, as when he protects Penny from Ulysses' insults. When the latter calls her "*unconstant succubus*", Vernon says "*You can't swear at my fiancée!*" Another scene that shows he is a responsible and respectable man is when Homer Stokes tries to make him change political sides and he refuses to do so.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 21.

<sup>39</sup> They even try to kill Telemachus in vain.

<sup>40</sup> See page 15.



Lam. III. Vernon Waldrip, the suitor, defending his fiancée.  
Source: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000.

Another reference to the *Odyssey* is seen in the fight between Ulysses and Vernon, which can be considered a cinematic translation of the slayer of the suitors. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus brutally kills all the suitors as well as the unfaithful servants with the help of Telemachus and the goddess Athena, as it is explained in book XXIV by one of the suitors, Amphimedon, in the underworld:

*“There facing us he crouched and shot his bolts of groaning at us, brought us down like sheep. Then some god, his familiar, went into action with him round the hall, after us in a massacre. Men lay groaning, mortally wounded, and the floor smoked with blood.”* (Od. 24. 189-94)

On the contrary, in the film, Vernon knocks Ulysses out after the latter insults Penny. This comical scene shows Ulysses has neither the strength nor the heroic attitude of the epic Odysseus, while Vernon gets rid of him easily. Nevertheless, Penny decides to stay with Ulysses, probably in order to make the story more ironic and comical, since the antihero is the one who wins the lady over in the end.

### 2.3. Other characters from the *Odyssey*: The Lotus-eaters, the Cyclops, Teiresias, the Sirens, Poseidon, the Cattle of Helios and others. Classical tradition and reception in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The **Lotus-eaters** were a race of people who lived on an island Odysseus encountered on his journey. In book 9, Odysseus himself describes them to the king of the Phaeacians, Alcinous, when he explains all he has been through:

*“Upon the tenth we came to the coastline of the Lotos Eaters, who live upon that flower. We landed there to take on water. All ships’ companies mustered alongside for the mid-day meal. Then I sent out two picked men and a runner to learn what race of men that land sustained. They fell in, soon enough, with Lotos Eaters, who showed no will to do us harm, only offering the sweet Lotos to our friends— but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotos, never cared to report, nor to return: they longed to stay forever, browsing on the native bloom, forgetful of their homeland. I drove them, all three wailing, to the ships, tied them down under their rowing benches, and called the rest: ‘All hands aboard; come, clear the beach and no one taste the Lotos, or you lose your hope of home.’” (Od. 9. 88-106)*

The lotus fruit seems like an intoxicating plant which, if eaten, makes oneself forget about the past and become addicted to the aforementioned plant. In *O Brother* there is an analogy between the Lotus-eaters and the Baptists whom Ulysses Everett and his companions find in the middle of the forest at the beginning of the film. These people seem absorbed by –or intoxicated with– religion and do not even stop to talk with Everett, Pete and Delmar. Delmar is the first of the crew that falls under the influence of religion and Pete follows him when he observes his surprising optimism due to the clearance of his sins.<sup>41</sup>

In Christianity, the baptism is a symbol for "washing away sins", which is in some way what Odysseus crew try to do, forgetting about their past and starting a new life far from home.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Fensted-Jensen 2002: 18.

In the film, Ulysses is the only one who knows religion will only ease his mind instead of giving him solutions for his objectives and that is why he does not get baptized, the same as Odysseus, who does not eat the Lotus fruit. Ulysses later explains to Pete the absolution the preacher had promised them was not valid for the law, showing again his superior intelligence compared to his crew.

Ironically, had Ulysses Everett been baptized, the smell of his pomade would have disappeared thanks to the water and the dogs would have not been able to track them. In this case the Baptists could be seen as helpful and provident characters similar to the god Hermes as well as the goddess Athena in the *Odyssey*, always trying to guide Odysseus on the good way.

The **Cyclops Polyphemus** is Poseidon's son. He lives with many other Cyclops in a utopian land and their most distinctive feature is that they only have one eye. Odysseus describes him as: "*A prodigious man [...] remote from all companions, knowing none but savage ways, a brute so huge, he seemed no man at all of those who eat good wheaten bread; but he seemed rather a shaggy mountain reared in solitude.*" (Od. 9. 195-201). This description is not far from his characterization in the film: Daniel Teague, also known as Big Dan Teague or Big Dan (John Goodman). The first time he appears in the film he is groaning as if he were a beast. Physically he is also heavy built and has an eye covered with an eye patch.<sup>42</sup>

Another reference to this well-known episode in the *Odyssey* has to do with the hospitality which Odysseus and his crew received from the Cyclops Polyphemus when they arrived to his cave. The Cyclops is rude with them and instead of offering some food to them, he takes their own lives and wine for meal. Likewise, in the film Big Dan asks Ulysses and his men to pay for his meal in the restaurant. Furthermore, the Cyclops eats a lot and he is anthropophagus. This is seen when he brutally eats two of Odysseus' men. Similarly, in the film Daniel Teague had already eaten before the invitation but still he keeps on eating, as he says: "*I'm a man of large appetites, and even with lunch under my belt, I was feeling a mite peckish.*"

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<sup>42</sup> There is a panoramic view during the fight between the three of them where it is seen the insignificance of Ulysses Everett and Delmar compared to Big Dan.

Moreover, on the one hand, the Cyclops is a shepherd dedicated to his sheep, rams and goats. On the other hand, Big Dan Teague is a kind of modern shepherd (referring to the religious sense of the word) whose job consists on selling Bibles: “*People are lookin’ for answers and Big Dan sells the only book that’s got ‘em.*”

In the *Odyssey* the Cyclops kills several of Odysseus’ men and in a similar way Big Dan Teague squashes the toad, believed to be Pete<sup>43</sup>, thus killing part of Ulysses Everett’s crew. Another interesting allusion to the *Odyssey* can be found in the Ku Klux Klan scene when they dress as members of the mentioned organization to save their friend Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King), the guitarist, who had been captured by the Ku Klux Klan. This scene may represent the moment Odysseus and his crew hide under Polyphemus’ sheep in order to escape from the Cyclops cavern.

One of the most remembered episodes from the *Odyssey* is the blinding of the Cyclops. Odysseus gets the Cyclops drunk with wine and then attacks him in the eye with a wooden burning spear. In a comic way, in the film, Big Dan is the one that takes a wooden stick and knocks them out. Nevertheless, later on, there are several more references to the famous blinding of the Cyclops: In the Ku Klux Klan meeting, Big Dan recognizes Ulysses Everett and his companions by their smell, and uncovers them. In the runaway, Delmar throws a flag as a spear and in a thrilling scene Big Dan stops it a few centimetres to his face. What he cannot stop is the big burning cross which Ulysses makes fall right over him, completing in this way the analogy with the blinding episode in the epic poem. Another similar scene related to this blinding is seen when Homer Stokes angers the audience and a horde enters carrying a big trunk towards Homer in a new awe-inspiring scene.<sup>44</sup>

**Teiresias** is a blind Theban prophet whose wisdom knows no limits. Odysseus goes to the palace of Hades and Persephone in the Underworld, as Circe tells him to do in order to know what to do next and to find the way back home to Ithaca.

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<sup>43</sup> Later it is shown the toad was not Pete.

<sup>44</sup> On the analogy between Big Dan and the Cyclops Polyphemus, see Flensted-Jensen 2002: 20 and Goldhill 2007: 266-7.

*“My Lord Odysseus, you seek a happy way home. But a god is going to make your journey hard. For I cannot think that you will escape the attention of the Earthshaker, who still nurses resentment against you in his heart, enraged that you blinded his beloved son. Even so, you and your friends may yet reach Ithaca, though not without suffering, if only you have the strength of will to control your men’s appetites and your own from the moment when your good ship leaves the deep blue sea and approaches the isle of Thrinacie.”*

There is a version of Teiresias in *O Brother*: the first character whom Ulysses Everett and his men meet in the film is a blind black old man (Lee Weaver) on a railroad handcar who claims to “*work for no man*” and to “*have no name.*”<sup>45</sup> Odysseus, pretentious as always, decides to give him an advice: “*Well, that right there may be the reason you’ve had difficulty finding gainful employment. You see, in the mart of competitive commerce...*” This vain piece of advice is ignored by the old man, who continues with the important part, an omen of their future:

*“You seek a great fortune... you three who are now in chains. You will find a fortune though it will not be the fortune you seek. But first... first you must travel... a long and difficult road... a road fraught with peril. Mm-hmm. You shall see thangs... wonderful to tell. You shall see a... a cow... on the roof of a cotton house. Ha. And, oh, so many startlements. I cannot tell you how long this road shall be... but fear not the obstacles in your path... for fate has... vouchsafed your reward. Though the road may wind... yea, your hearts grow weary... still shall ye follow them... even unto your salvation.”*

Both of the predictions quoted become true. Yet it is also the case, Teiresias in the *Odyssey* foreshadows in a more detailed way what they have to do, giving not only general advices and predictions but also specific ones *e.g.* he also tells Odysseus not to hurt the pasture in the isle of Thrinacia if he does not want his ship and company to be destroyed; his crew killed some animals and his prediction became true. In *O Brother* the old man goes too specific and foretells they will “see a cow on the roof of a cotton house”, omen that becomes true just after the flooding of the valley at the end of the film, yet not necessary for them to know (the Coen brothers again, playing with the *Odyssey* and, in

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<sup>45</sup> According to Toscano 2009:49, there is an echo here to “Odysseus’ famous lines” to the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, when he says his name is Nobody, which equals to having no name.

this case, with the figure of the prophet).

Notwithstanding, this scene, at the beginning of the film pokes fun with the very beginning of the *Odyssey*, in whose proem the ideas of “travel”, as well as “a long and difficult road... a road fraught with peril”, are emphasized.<sup>46</sup>

That is not the only time the seer appears in the film. In the last scene of *O Brother* we can see him on his railroad handcar singing the same song the girls sing, “Angels band.” In this way the Coen brothers come full circle with the topic of the prediction, making the spectator aware of the prophet having been always right, just like in the *Odyssey*.

The **Sirens** are mythological creatures who appear during Odysseus’ travelling back home. In book XII of the *Odyssey*, Circe explains what happens when men encounter the Sirens so she advises him to plug the ears of his crew with beeswax and for him to be tied up to the mast if he wants to hear their song:

*“Square in your ship’s path are Seirênês, crying beauty to bewitch men coasting by; woe to the innocent who hears that sound! He will not see his lady nor his children in joy, crowding about him, home from sea; the Seirênês will sing his mind away on their sweet meadow lolling. There are bones of dead men rotting in a pile beside them and flayed skins shrivel around the spot.” (Od. 12. 42-49)*

In the film, the Sirens (Mia Tate, Musetta Vander, and Christy Taylor) appear after Everett and his mates steal a car and are driving away. Suddenly, they hear some voices singing and approach them. They are three beautiful and attractive women washing clothes in a river; they seduce them. When they wake up the next morning, the women are gone and Everett and Delmar are shocked to see that Pete has disappeared and only his clothes are left with a toad inside, which Delmar interprets in the sense that Pete has been bewitched and transformed into a toad, as he says: *“Can’t you see it Everett! Them sirens did this to Pete. They loved him up and turned him into a horny toad!”* As Flensted-Jensen explains, this scene includes another episode of the *Odyssey*, when Circe transforms Odysseus’ crew into pigs: “Two elements from the *Odyssey* have of course

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<sup>46</sup> On the figure of Tiresias in *O Brother*, see Flensted-Jensen 2002: 17-8.



been amalgated into one, for in the *Odyssey* Odysseus' men are turned into swine by Kirke, not by the sirens, but with the same result: once you have been led into the siren's trap, you are lost."<sup>47</sup> In relation to this, it is also interesting to point out that in the film, the sirens get the men drunk to sleep. This is probably a reference to book X of the *Odyssey* when Circe invites the sailors to a meal and she drugs them to turn them later into pigs.<sup>48</sup>



Lam. IV. The *O Brother's* "sirens" seducing Ulysses Everett, Pete and Delmar.  
Source: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000.

Moreover, this scene of the film can be considered to have even more references to other episodes of the *Odyssey*. An example is the arrival of Odysseus to the island of the Phaeacians, when the princess Nausicaa is washing clothes with her maids and playing in the shore when they encounter Odysseus.<sup>49</sup> The episode was full of eroticism since Nausicaa was described as a young maiden longing for a husband. The act of washing clothes is a clear allusion from *O Brother* to the *Odyssey*. Furthermore, in the poem, Odysseus uses his persuasive speech to convince Nausicaa to help him since he is naked and could be considered as a threat by the girls if he threw himself at her knees:

*"In his swift reckoning, he thought it best to trust in words to please her—and keep away; he might anger the girl, touching her knees. So he began to speak: 'Mistress: please: are you divine, or mortal? If one of those who*

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<sup>47</sup> Flensted-Jensen 2002: 19.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Od.* 10. 248-56, as well as Toscano 2009: 49.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Od.* 6. 97-109, as well as Toscano 2009: 49.

*dwell in the wide heaven, you are most near to Artemis, I should say— great Zeus’s daughter—in your grace and presence. If you are one of earth’s inhabitants, how blest your father, and your gentle mother, blest all your kin.”*  
(*Od.* 6. 155-165)

On the contrary, in the film *Ulysses Everett* tries to seduce the women with his oratory skills but since they are sirens, they do not fall in love with him as Nausicaa does. “*Ladies, my name is Ulysses Everett McGill and, well, you three ladies are about the three prettiest water lilies...*”

It is also worth pointing out that the seduction and sensuality of the sirens comes from their singing. In both of the works I am studying here, the sirens are able to sing in such an alluring and seductive way that no one can resist their musical spell. In the *Odyssey* they promise Odysseus to sing about his heroic exploits while in the film they sing a lullaby with very intimate verses, such as: “*Go to sleep little baby. You and me and the devil makes three. Don’t need no other lovin’ baby.*” Contrary to the *Odyssey*, not only is Ulysses Everett spellbound by the sirens’ singing but also his comrades, Pete and Delmar.

**Poseidon** is one of the gods that intervenes in the *Odyssey*. He is the god of the sea, brother of Zeus and father of the Cyclops Polyphemus. His son is the main reason why he holds a grudge against Odysseus, since the latter attacked the Cyclops and blinded him. He follows Odysseus throughout his journey and is the responsible of Odysseus’ delay in his traveling back home. In book I it is made clear that Poseidon is the only god who hates Odysseus: “*Yet all the gods had pitied Lord Odysseus all but Poseidon, raging cold and rough against the brave king till he came ashore at last on his own land.*” (*Od.*1. 29-32)

In the film, Poseidon is represented by the sheriff Cooley (Daniel Von Borgen), who follows Ulysses Everett and his mates throughout the film. He is one of the few characters related to gods in the *Odyssey* that appear in the film, since there are not many references to other gods such as Athena, Zeus or Hermes. As it is seen in Allen’s *The Coen Brothers: Interviews* the Coen brothers explained:

“Joel: Whenever it’s convenient we trot out the *Odyssey*.

Ethan: But I don’t want any of those *Odyssey* fans to go to the movie expecting, y’know...

Joel: ‘Where’s Laertes?’ [laughter]

Ethan: 'Where's his dog?' [more laughter]" (Allen 2006: 136)

In *O Brother*, the reason why the sheriff follows Everett is probably due to his getaway from prison. Moreover, he can be considered to have more power than the rest of characters as much as Poseidon has over mortals; the sheriff's power is his status as the head of the policemen, which is reinforced in the end when he decides to punish the men even after they have been pardoned by the governor:

"Everett: *You can't do this. We just got pardoned by the governor himself!*  
Delmar: *It went out on the radio!*  
Cooley: *Is that right? ... Well, we ain't got a radio.*"

His following words are again another reference to Poseidon's almighty power, since Everett says that their arrest is not allowed by the law, to what the sheriff responds "*The law. Well the law is a human institution.*" This quote explains that he considers himself to be above the law, like a god. Probably the Coen Brothers make him say this to make a clear reference to Poseidon.<sup>50</sup> Then, as Flensted-Jensen says: "The three friends are saved only by a veritable *deus ex machina*, a flood, –the result of the blasting of a nearby dam– and Everett almost drowns, as Odysseus nearly does several times."<sup>51</sup> Ironically, it is water, Poseidon's characteristic element as god of the seas, what saves this new Ulysses instead of drowning him and finishing with him, as he tried to do in the *Odyssey*.

Finally, it is interesting that the sheriff has a hunting dog which could be considered as a reference to Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Hades.

**Menelaus Pappy O'Daniel** is a politician who shares his first name, Menelaus, with a character of the Homeric epic tradition, who declared war to Troy. King of the Spartans, husband of Helen of Troy and brother of Agamemnon, Menelaus is one of the most important figures in the Trojan War. The Coen brothers may have named Menelaus Pappy O'Daniel this way since he is the governor of the state of Mississippi. This figure can be seen as the most important person in charge of the territory in *O Brother*; thus, we

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Toscano 2009: 50, for whom "just as Poseidon ignores Zeus' decree that Odysseus shall return home, the trooper also does not care about anyone else's authority –in this case the indifference concerns the governor's pardon at the end."

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Flensted-Jensen 2002: 22.

have a reference to the king of Sparta, Menelaus. It is funny how he is named this way since he is the opposite of a leader like Menelaus; his main goal in the film is to beat his challenger in the election, Homer Stokes, not to please his people.

On the other hand, Homer Stokes' first name is also a nod to the author of the *Odyssey*. I cannot find any similarities between these two characters. I personally think that with this nod, the Coen brothers just wanted to mention him, but this is not the only reference to Homer in the film: **the blind old man** (Stephen Root) who works in the radio station may represent Homer, who was also thought to be blind. The blind radio man is the first person to record Ulysses Everett and his band, just like Homer, the blind bard, is the first one to “record” Odysseus story in literature. He also says he is interested in “some old-timey material” to record instead of “negro songs.” In addition to this, his cousin's niece is called Eudora, one of the Hyades in Greek mythology. All these little references are difficult to be put together by chance.

Another clear reference to Homer can be seen in *O Brother*, in the scene in the restaurant when Menelaus Pappy O'Daniel is talking with his companions; a bust of the ancient poet Homer can be seen in the background of the scene, just behind Pappy O'Daniel.



Lam. V. There is a bust of Homer behind Menelaus Pappy O'Daniel.  
Source: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000.

One more character who is not taken from the *Odyssey* but who is used to introduce some other scenes from the Greek classic is **Baby Face Nelson**. This character was a real bank robber and murderer of the 1930s. In the film, he has a hate towards cows, he hates cows “worse than coppers” so he prefers to shoot a cattle he encounters instead

of the “coppers” when he is being chased by the police. This is a reelaboration of the killing of the cattle of Helios<sup>52</sup> in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus crew killed the cattle of Helios even after Odysseus himself had made them promise not to do it; he had been advised by Circe and Teiresias they would get into trouble if they did so. When Helios realized what has happened, he asked Zeus for revenge, in book XII:

*“O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever, punish Odysseus’ men! So overweening, now they have killed my peaceful kine,<sup>53</sup> my joy at morning when I climbed the sky of stars, and evening, when I bore westward from heaven. Restitution or penalty they shall pay —and pay in full [...]” (Od. 12. 446-52)*

Ulysses Everett, Pete and Delmar encounter Baby Face Nelson again when he is being headed to the electric chair by an execution parade near the end of the film. One woman in the parade shouts: “*Cow killer!*” Calling also for revenge, although this was the least of his crimes. When Baby Face sees our protagonists, he tells them what is going to happen to him: “*Looks like the chair for George Nelson. Yup, gonna electrify me. I’m going to go off like a Roman candle. [...] ...gonna suck all the power right out of the state. Gonna shoot sparks out the top of my head and lightning from my fingertips!*” This is an analogy of what happens to Odysseus’ crew after having killed the cattle; they get killed by one of Zeus’ thunders:

*“With crack on crack of thunder, Zeus let fly a bolt against the ship, a direct hit, so that she bucked, in reeking fumes of sulphur, and all the men were flung into the sea. They came up ’round the wreck, bobbing a while like petrels on the waves. No more seafaring homeward for these, no sweet day of return; the god had turned his face from them.” (Od. 12. 487-95)*

One more reference to the *Odyssey* could be found when he picks them up in the car chased by the police in direction to Itta Bena.<sup>54</sup> Baby Face Nelson asks Everett in a

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<sup>52</sup> Helios is also known as the sun god.

<sup>53</sup> “Kine” is an archaic term for “cows.”

<sup>54</sup> Itta Bena is a real city in Leflore County, Mississippi, United States whose name may look familiar to Ithaca, Odysseus hometown.

metaphorical way to: “*Grab the tiller, will you, buddy?*” Meaning to take control of the car while he shoots the police cars. After the previous analogy between the electric chair and the destruction of Odysseus’ boat by Zeus’ thunderbolts, it does not seem crazy to suggest that the Coen brothers used this metaphor on purpose, to make another reference to the *Odyssey*.<sup>55</sup>

In order to refigure the characters from the *Odyssey* the Coen brothers have not copied the entire characters but they have modified and selected the details they were more interested in and, in many cases, they have changed the other characteristics to show in a more comical way how some of the characters from the *Odyssey* would be in the America of the 1930s.

They do not only use those mythological characters who are so well known nowadays, such as the Sirens, the Cyclops, or the Prophet, but also new myths of the epoch such as the guitarist who sells his soul to the devil, the fugitive who robbes banks or the politician who uses the radio to gain more electors. These are not exactly mythological characters but we can find them surrounded by some kind of myth. The combination of these characters has created a sort of new blended mythology between the *Odyssey* and the 1930s in America.

### 3. Conclusion

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* shows the fascinating and inspiring power of the *Odyssey* as a poem of adventures and love. The *nostos* plot is essential for the cinematic text, as well as the love story. Ulysses Everett escapes from prison to return back home to his wife, Penny. Despite all the divergences, the variants and the original innovations of the film by the Coen brothers, the *Odyssey*’s background gives the cinematic text an epic tone and a recognizable dynamism in the adventures the characters experience during their homecoming.

It has to be said that the Coen brothers have been joking about *O Brother*’s relation to the *Odyssey* since the beginning, contradicting themselves; sometimes saying they have

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<sup>55</sup> There is a scene when Ulysses Everett, Pete and Delmar are sitting with Baby Face Nelson next to a fire after the robbery, where they are not only surrounded by Greek columns but Ulysses Everett is even sitting on one of these columns.

not read the *Odyssey*,<sup>56</sup> sometimes saying they have read it but only in a comic version<sup>57</sup> and other times saying they just do not want *Odyssey*'s fans to bother them about the fidelity of the film to the Greek classic.<sup>58</sup> As usual in the Coen brothers' films we cannot assure their quotes about the film are true, but placing "Based upon "The Odyssey" by Homer" in big letters in the initial credits along with the first lines of the *Odyssey* gives us a clue that the Greek classic is of great importance to them.

The mixture between 20<sup>th</sup>-century facts and classic fiction is considered by Mark T. Conard as "a model of postmodernism"<sup>59</sup> which puts the spotlight on the merging points amid both.<sup>60</sup> As Joel Coen says in the introduction of *O Brother*'s press kit: "This interpretation is a very American story, as all our stories are. It's so specific to a region and a time. But on the other hand, it's based on a story that's familiar to everyone."<sup>61</sup> This refiguration of a classic like the *Odyssey* keeps gaining my attention due to the style in which the Coen brothers have "framed" the story: a comedy. It is a suitable resolution if we consider the main advantage a comedy offers to the film, the possibility of making extraordinary like the ones in the *Odyssey* look less peculiar or eccentric as we see in the use of formal words and Latinisms by Ulysses Everett.

One more fundamental pillar the Coen brothers have used in the film is the music. Although we cannot say *O Brother* is a musical as the characters do not start singing and dancing instead of having a conversation. As Laura Krossner rightly says in her thesis about the music in the Coen brothers' filmography: "The music is there because the film is about music, not because the film is a musical."<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the *Odyssey* is also full of music: Calypso, Circe and the Sirens sing, as well as the poets Demodocus and Phemius.

The film is loosely based on the Greek classic. This is clear as they could not place in the film every character and situation which appeared on the *Odyssey* and it was not

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Romney 2000.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. CBSNews.com Staff 2001.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Allen 2006: 136.

<sup>59</sup> Conard 2009: 197.

<sup>60</sup> According to Conard 2009: 50 this "overarching narrative framework" is "the most significant borrowing from *The Odyssey*" in *O Brother*. He is referring to the *nostos* "the structural pattern of Homer's poem" which "is one of loss and recovery, of wandering and return."

<sup>61</sup> *O Brother's* Press Kit 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Krossner 2009: 23.

their objective neither.<sup>63</sup> The most remarkable analogies of the film in relation to the *Odyssey* are the following ones:

Ulysses Everett McGill is the protagonist of the film. The Coen brothers use Odysseus' situation, attributes and main purpose –to return to his family– to form the character of Ulysses Everett. The qualities both characters share are courage, confidence, resourcefulness, wisdom, rhetorical skills, diplomacy, intelligence and trickery, however, they also add some new characteristics which are not the usual ones of a hero like Odysseus, i.e. Ulysses Everett is selfish, unheroically proud, and sometimes malevolent; furthermore, he is not a good fighter, an attribute which was very distinctive of Odysseus as an epic hero. These new features turn him into what we might call an antihero. Throughout the film it is recurrent that Ulysses' most valuable possession is his family, but he often lets his instincts risk that bond with his people, even at the end of the film when he is supposed to have learnt from his mistakes, we still perceive these risks when he tells Penny while he is trying to win her back that he knows a guy who will print him a license to be a dentist –paralleling the cause of his imprisonment, to practice law without a license.

Penny is Ulysses Everett's wife, a woman who had been left with six girls to take care of when her husband was incarcerated. She is a strong woman who chooses not to wait for Ulysses and decides to marry the so-called suitor, Vernon Waldrip. In comparison with the *Odyssey*, Penelope is the prototype of loyal wife, who is able to wait for Odysseus for 20 years, but also because she has the means, as she is the wife of the Ithaca's king, Odysseus. Penny does not have Penelope's means but the moment Ulysses Everett gets pardoned by the governor himself and is offered a job, she forgets about the suitor and decides to remarry Ulysses. Thus, she shows her true love towards him

The suitor in *O Brother*, Vernon Waldrip, is the antithesis of the suitors in the *Odyssey*. The 108 suitors supposed to court Penelope, spent their days eating Odysseus food and taking advantage of the hospitality so cherished in the ancient Greece, while Vernon is a suitor with morals, who has a job and who also would have taken care of the family, and not the other way around. Vernon is also a good fighter and is able to beat

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<sup>63</sup> As Ethan Coen says in *Romney 2000*: "There's little point [...] kicking yourself if you can't place all the allusions. The Sirens are easy enough, a trio of singing Amazons doing their laundry in the Mississippi. And the Cyclops is John Goodman in an eye patch. Scylla and Charybdis I was less certain about. [...] "It's very, you, usually know selectively based on the *Odyssey*.""



Ulysses in a comical scene, not like in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus kills all the suitors in a final bloodbath near the end of the *Odyssey*, after his comeback.

Telemachus, Odysseus son, is refigured in a funny way in *O Brother* by seven little girls. The character of Telemachus loses importance in the film as the girls only appear in a few scenes. The future king of Ithaca is a young man who does not lose faith on his father's homecoming and who hates the suitors as they are consuming their livelihoods, while Ulysses Everett's girls do not have any preferences; they seem to appreciate the suitor as we see when they call him "uncle Vernon" and they also seem to love Odysseus. This indifference towards their future father reflects a sort of parody of Ulysses Everett's patriarchal pretensions.

The secondary characters in the film can be also compared to the characters Odysseus encounters in his return to Ithaca. The *O Brother's* Baptists are a group of religious people who seem to bear a relation with the Lotus-eaters in the *Odyssey*, who are islanders that seem to forget about their future and goals in life when they eat the lotus fruit. They both are testimonies of the Marxist's claim that religion is the opium of the people. Big Dan Teague is a big man with an eye patch who parallels the Cyclops Polyphemus; both make Ulysses Everett and Odysseus respectively along with their "crew" get into trouble. The film's prophet is a blind black old man our protagonists meet at the beginning of the story and is associated to Teiresias in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus finds the wise Teiresias in the palace of Hades in the Underworld, where he tells Odysseus what he has to do to come back home safe. The prophet in the film tells them about their future but he does not tell them how to avoid the dangers on their way. The women in the river who sing echo the mythological Sirens, and they are actually so named by one of the Odysseus companions, Delmar. Their chants are incredibly attractive to anyone who listens to it both in the *Odyssey* and in *O Brother*. In the film they also seem to transform one of Ulysses Everett's companions, Pete, into a toad. Although, finally, it is seen this did not happen for real, the situation could be compared to what Circe made to Odysseus' crew in the *Odyssey*; she turned them into swine. The sheriff Cooley and his patrol spend the whole film looking for Ulysses Everett and his companions. The police, led by the sheriff Cooley, are Ulysses Everett's main obstacle in his comeback home, just like Poseidon in the *Odyssey*, who also tries to stop Odysseus because he had left Poseidon's son, the Cyclops Polyphemus, completely blind.

In conclusion, the Coen brothers compete with Homer in narrating a story of adventures and love as new poets in a new land, the America of the 1930s. Their irony,

sense of humour and musicality make this film an extraordinary example for contemporaneous reception of an epic and in valuable text like the *Odyssey*.

### 3. Conclusiones

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* es una prueba más del poder fascinador e inspirador de la *Odisea* como relato de aventuras y amor. El tema del *nostos* es primordial en el texto fílmico, así como el motivo amoroso. Ulysses Everett escapa de prisión para volver a su casa con su mujer, Penny. A pesar de las múltiples divergencias, variantes y originales innovaciones de la película, el trasfondo de la *Odisea* brinda al texto fílmico un tono épico y un dinamismo reconocible en las aventuras que viven los personajes en su regreso a casa.

También hay que decir que los hermanos Coen han estado bromeando sobre esta relación entre *O Brother* y la *Odisea* desde el principio, llegando a contradecirse varias veces; algunas de ellas negando haberse leído la *Odisea*,<sup>64</sup> otras declarando haber leído solo una supuesta versión en cómic<sup>65</sup> y otras tantas afirmando que sencillamente no quieren tener a los mayores fans de la *Odisea* agobiándoles sobre nimiedades acerca de la fidelidad de la película con respecto al original griego.<sup>66</sup> Como de costumbre en las películas de los hermanos Coen, no podemos afirmar que todas sus citas sobre la película sean ciertas, pero el hecho de poner en los créditos iniciales: “*Basada en la Odisea de Homero*” con letras grandes junto con las primeras líneas de la *Odisea* nos da una pista acerca de la importancia que tiene este clásico griego para los Coen.

Mark T. Conard considera esta combinación de hechos del siglo XX y la ficción clásica griega como “un modelo de postmodernismo”<sup>67</sup> que pone el foco en los puntos de unión que hay entre ambos.<sup>68</sup> Como bien dice Joel Coen en la introducción del dossier de

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Romney 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. CBSNews.com Staff 2001.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Allen 2006: 136.

<sup>67</sup> Conard 2009: 197.

<sup>68</sup> Según Conard 2009: 50, este “overarching narrative framework” es “the most significant borrowing from *The Odyssey*” en *O Brother*. Se refiere al *nostos* “the structural pattern of Homer’s poem” que “is one of loss and recovery, of wandering and return.”

prensa de *O Brother*: “Esta interpretación es una historia muy americana, al igual que todas nuestras historias. Es bastante específica con respecto a la región y a la época pero, por otra parte, está basada en una historia que le es familiar a todo el mundo.”<sup>69</sup> Esta reinterpretación de un clásico como la *Odisea* llama aún más la atención debido al estilo en el que los hermanos Coen han enmarcado esta historia: la comedia. La elección del género de la comedia resulta idónea si consideramos que la gran ventaja que este estilo ofrece a la película es la posibilidad de que acciones extraordinarias como las de la *Odisea* no parezcan tan fuera de lugar o tan excéntricas; esto lo podemos apreciar, por ejemplo, en el uso de lenguaje formal y de latinismos por parte de Ulysses Everett.

Otro pilar fundamental que los hermanos Coen han usado en la película es la música, aunque no podemos calificar *O Brother* como un musical, ya que los personajes no empiezan a cantar y bailar sin venir a cuento. Como Laura Krossner bien señala en su tesis sobre la música en la filmografía de los hermanos Coen: “La música está ahí porque la película trata sobre música, no porque la película sea un musical.”<sup>70</sup> Del mismo modo, la *Odisea* está repleta de música: tanto Calipso, como Circe y las Sirenas, cantan, al igual que los poetas Demódoco y Femio.

La película está libremente basada en la Grecia y la *Odisea* clásicas. Esto se ve claramente debido a la imposibilidad de los directores de situar cada personaje y episodio de la *Odisea* en el formato estándar de una película además de no ser este su objetivo.<sup>71</sup> Las analogías más destacadas de la película en relación con la *Odisea* son las siguientes:

Ulysses Everett McGill es el protagonista de la película. Los hermanos Coen usan la situación en la que se ve envuelto Odiseo, sus características personales y su objetivo principal –volver con su familia– para conformar el personaje de Ulysses Everett. Las cualidades que ambos personajes comparten son el valor, la confianza, el ingenio, la sabiduría, la habilidad para la retórica, la diplomacia, la inteligencia y la capacidad para el engaño; sin embargo, los hermanos Coen le añaden una serie de nuevas cualidades que para nada concuerdan con las de un héroe como Odiseo, por ejemplo, Ulysses Everett es egoísta, demasiado orgulloso e incluso malévolo en algunos puntos; asimismo, no llega a

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<sup>69</sup> *O Brother's* Press Kit 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Krossner 2009: 23.

<sup>71</sup> Como dice Ethan Coen en Romney 2000: “There's little point [...] kicking yourself if you can't place all the allusions. The Sirens are easy enough, a trio of singing Amazons doing their laundry in the Mississippi. And the Cyclops is John Goodman in an eye patch. Scylla and Charybdis I was less certain about. [...] “It's very, you, usually know selectively based on the *Odyssey*.””

ser un buen luchador, atributo claramente distintivo de Odiseo como héroe épico. Estas nuevas características lo convierten en una suerte de antihéroe. Durante el transcurso de la película vemos que la posesión más importante de Ulysses es su familia, aunque muchas veces deja que sus instintos pongan en riesgo este vínculo con la susodicha. Un claro ejemplo de esto se ve al final de la película, momento en el que se supone que ya debe haber aprendido de sus errores, pero no es así puesto que arriesga de nuevo esa unión al contarle a Penny, mientras la intenta conquistar de nuevo, que tiene un conocido que le facilitará una licencia falsa para ser poder ejercer como dentista –paradójicamente, esta fue la causa de su encarcelamiento, ejercer la abogacía sin licencia.

Penny es la esposa de Ulysses Everett, una mujer que, tras el confinamiento de su marido, debe encargarse por sí sola de sus seis hijas. Es una mujer fuerte que toma la decisión de no esperar a Ulysses y casarse con su pretendiente, Vernon Waldrip. En comparación con la *Odisea*, Penélope personifica el prototipo de mujer fiel que es capaz de esperar a su marido durante veinte años, pero también hay que decir que esto es así porque cuenta con los medios económicos necesarios al ser la mujer del rey de Ítaca, Odiseo. Penny no cuenta con estos mismos recursos, pero en el momento en el que el gobernador absuelve a Ulysses Everett y le ofrece un trabajo, esta se olvida del pretendiente y decide volver a casarse con Ulysses, demostrando así su verdadero amor.

El pretendiente en *O Brother*, Vernon Waldrip, representa la antítesis de los pretendientes en la *Odisea*. Los 108 pretendientes que supuestamente cortejaron a Penélope, se pasaban los días comiendo de la comida de *Odiseo* y aprovechándose de la hospitalidad que tanto se estimaba en la antigua Grecia. Por el contrario, Vernon es un pretendiente con principios que tiene un trabajo y que es capaz de hacerse cargo de la familia. Vernon es además un gran luchador que consigue vencer a Ulysses de manera contundente en una escena bastante cómica, no como en la *Odisea* donde Odiseo mata a todos los pretendientes en un baño de sangre hacia el final de la obra, después de su vuelta a casa.

Telémaco, el único hijo de Odiseo, en *O Brother* es representado de forma humorística mediante las siete hijas pequeñas de Ulysses. El personaje de Telémaco pierde mucha de su importancia en la película ya que las niñas son secundarias y no aparecen en muchas escenas. El futuro rey de Ítaca es un joven que no pierde la esperanza con respecto a la vuelta a casa de su padre y que odia a los pretendientes de su madre ya que se están aprovechando de su sustento. No pasa igual con las hijas de Ulysses Everett, ya que estas no tienen preferencias entre Ulysses y Vernon; se puede ver cómo aprecian al pretendiente

cuando lo llaman “*tito Vernon*” pero a su vez también parecen tener mucho cariño a Ulysses. Esta indiferencia sobre su futuro padre refleja una especie de parodia con respecto a las pretensiones patriarcales de Ulysses Everett.

Los personajes secundarios de la película también pueden compararse con los personajes que Odiseo encuentra durante su largo viaje de regreso a Ítaca. Los Baptistas de *O Brother* pertenecen a un grupo religioso que parece tener relación con los lotófagos en la *Odisea*, habitantes de una isla adictos a la fruta del loto, la cual les hacía olvidar no solo su futuro sino también sus compromisos. Ambos son testimonios de la idea del Marxismo que señala que la religión es el opio del pueblo. Big Dan Teague es un gran hombre con un parche en el ojo que evoca al cíclope Polifemo, gigante de un solo ojo; ambos ponen a Ulysses Everett y a Odiseo, así como a sus respectivos compañeros, en peligro. El profeta de la película es un anciano afroamericano ciego al que los protagonistas conocen al comienzo de la historia; este personaje puede relacionarse con la figura de Tiresias en la *Odisea*. Odiseo se encuentra con el sabio Tiresias en el reino de Hades, en el Inframundo, donde este último le explica a Odiseo qué debe hacer para volver a casa sano y salvo. El profeta en la película predice el futuro de los protagonistas pero no les indica cómo evitar los peligros de su viaje. Por otra parte, las mujeres del río que cantan pueden considerarse un reflejo de las Sirenas; de hecho, son llamadas de esta manera por Delmar, uno de los compañeros de Ulysses. Sus cantos son extraordinariamente seductores para cualquiera que los escuche, tanto en la *Odisea* como en *O Brother*. En la película, también se emula la transformación de uno de los compañeros de Ulysses Everett, Pete, en un sapo; aunque más tarde se descubre que este hecho no ocurre en realidad, este episodio puede compararse con lo que Circe le hace a los compañeros de Odiseo en la *Odisea*, a los que transforma en cerdos. El sheriff Cooley y su patrulla dedican la mayor parte de la película a buscar a Ulysses Everett y a sus compañeros. La policía, bajo la dirección del sheriff Cooley, se convierte en el mayor obstáculo de Ulysses Everett en su vuelta a casa, de la misma manera que lo es Poseidón en la *Odisea*, quien también intenta atacar muchas veces a Odiseo ya que este dejó completamente ciego a su hijo, el cíclope Polifemo.

En conclusión, los hermanos Coen compiten con Homero al narrar una historia de aventuras y amor como unos nuevos poetas en una nueva tierra, la América de los años 30. Su ironía, sentido del humor y musicalidad hacen de esta película un extraordinario ejemplo de recepción contemporánea de un texto épico como la *Odisea* de enorme valor.

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