

# OH BROTHER, A BLUEGRASS ODYSSEY

Annie Nardone on Ancient Morality, Values,  
and Spirituality

At first glance, bluegrass music and southern, Depression-era culture seem to be a world apart from the classic Greek myth, Homer's *Odyssey*. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a film interpretation, produced in 2000 by the Coen Brothers, retelling that classic myth. This reimagining of the epic poem demonstrates that concepts of human morality and the spiritual condition have drastically changed from Odysseus's day. The film is a portrayal of our society's abandonment of imagination, morality, and spirituality esteemed in Greek culture.

Not one film detail is arbitrarily written. We get a real sense that the directors fully endorse the move away from Greek values. It would be in our best interest to note where this dark path has taken society. The storyline engages the viewer's imagination and smugly winks at the amoral and anti-religious tones. Just as importantly, the film

addresses the dichotomy of the old and new society. The old moral order is cast aside and man is now in charge of his own journey.

*O Brother* is set in the American South during the Great Depression of the 1930s and focuses on the journey of three escaped convicts, Ulysses Everett McGill, Pete, and Delmar. Naming the lead character 'Ulysses', also the Roman name for Odysseus, sets the stage for a reinventing of Homer's *Odyssey* and the story begins in a similar way. The main characters, Ulysses in *O Brother* and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* are both held in captivity. Instead of being trapped on an island with Kalypso to tend every man's desire, the three men have been incarcerated and chained together on a prison work farm. Clever Ulysses invents a scheme for escape and tells his companions about a rich treasure buried in a valley that is scheduled to be flooded. If they agree to escape with him — and they are attached to each other with leg irons — they would share the gold. Ulysses's tale is a lie. Like Odysseus, he actually wants to return to his wife and re-establish his position as 'paterfamilias', but he needs the cooperation of Pete and Delmar to escape.

After a successful prison escape, the men flee and follow the path of railroad tracks through the country. A railroad handcar approaches with a grey-

haired, blind, black man (inspired by the blind prophet and oracle Tiresias in the *Odyssey*) at the helm. In the spirit of hospitality, he invites them onboard, then unexpectedly begins to speak like a prophet while he continues the journey. He begins, “You seek a great fortune . . . you will find a fortune, but it will not be the fortune you seek. But first, first you must travel a long and difficult road. A road fraught with peril.”<sup>1</sup>

Like Odysseus, Ulysses will face many challenges. The old man warns, “I cannot tell you how long this road shall be. But fear not the obstacles in your path. For fate has vouchsafed your reward.”<sup>2</sup> Poor, blind, black men were at the bottom of the social strata during the Depression, more so than escaped white convicts; however, the film's writers put him in the position of a wise prophet who foretells the future of Ulysses. He continues, “Though the road may wind, yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye follow them, even unto your salvation.”<sup>3</sup> This scene, like the prophets’ songs in the *Odyssey*, sets the stage for the telling of the long

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<sup>1</sup> *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, directed by Joel Coen, written by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen (Touchstone Pictures and Universal Pictures, 2000), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and dangerous journey home. The difference is that this blind prophet doesn't fondly retell the glory days of old; rather, he foretells riches in the future. At this point, the terms 'reward' and 'salvation' leave the viewer wondering about the outcome of the prophecy. Will it be a Greek epic with noble and heroic success or a 21st century victory with temporary rewards.

An overarching spiritual theme runs through the film. Pagan gods like Athena and Zeus were important to the *Odyssey's* storyline because they were important to Greek culture and viewed in a positive light. *O Brother* portrays Christianity and the atheism of Ulysses to speak to a modern, American audience. In the *Odyssey*, people revere the gods of Greece. Menelaos was referred to as "the king whom Zeus loved."<sup>4</sup> The gods have respect for Odysseus and "all the gods pitied him [Odysseus]."<sup>5</sup> There is a relationship between the gods and man in the myth, sometimes tempestuous with Poseidon and often protective, like Athena. However, the Coen Brothers illustrate a decidedly different, very 21<sup>st</sup> century view on religion. Ulysses, portraying

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<sup>4</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2007), 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

the Odysseus character, and Big Dan Teague, playing the Cyclops monster, show nothing but disregard for God and religion. In fact, Big Dan is an abuser of religion, mockingly profiting from Bible sales. In Ulysses's modern view, belief in God is for ignorant, uneducated people.

Early on in *O Brother*, Ulysses, Pete, and Delmar are sitting at camp in an old graveyard when they hear gospel music sung by a Baptist congregation. The crowd, dressed in white clothing, slowly walks around the three men on their way to the river for baptism while singing the gospel hymn "Down to the River to Pray," seemingly unaware of the convicts who sit at their fire. Pete and Delmar are swept up in the emotion of the moment, feeling that Christian forgiveness and redemption surrounds them. Ulysses is unmoved as he watches the baptism of each member of the congregation and comments, "Well, I guess hard times flush the chumps. Everybody's lookin' for answers."<sup>6</sup> It is the Great Depression after all, and many of these people have nothing left but their faith. Delmar and Pete are mesmerized by the beautiful siren-call hymn that beckons them to go to the river for baptism. Delmar emerges from the river, declaring himself redeemed

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<sup>6</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

and his sins forgiven as he yells to Ulysses, “Heaven everlasting is my reward!”<sup>7</sup> Pete runs forward for baptism as well. But the steadfastly atheist Ulysses remains on the shore. The important point to note is that Pete and Delmar, who readily participate in the Christian ceremony without hesitation, are portrayed as the ignorant and easily swayed men in the trio. Ulysses, hero and the brains behind the journey, is cast as the intelligent man who sneers at religion. When Pete tells him that he should have joined them, Ulysses snorts, “Joining you two ignorant fools in a ridiculous superstition? Thank you, anyway! Baptism. You two are dumber than a bag of hammers. Well, I guess you’re just my cross to bear.”<sup>8</sup> The so-called ignorant, freshly faithful Pete and Delmar are a burden for the intelligent, admirable Ulysses.

Ulysses, always the logical one, is purely irritated by this interruption. He has no time for religion, relying on logic for all of his purposes. But in a contradicting comment, he had just told Pete, “It’s a fool who looks for logic in the chambers of the human heart.”<sup>9</sup> Odysseus’s heart drives him to

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<sup>7</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Penelope, but Ulysses uses logic and resourcefulness, like the Greeks, to get home. However, resourcefulness cloaks his amorality. By the end of the film, the proud Ulysses is faced with hanging by the Hades-symbol lawman who finally caught up with him. He drops to his knees, prays, and is miraculously saved by the flood. Baptism by total immersion! However, he pops up out of the water and denies that God had anything to do with his rescue. Life is random chance and religion is nothing more than a convenient conjuring in a perilous event.

Another religious reference, as well as a nod to southern folk legend, is the story of blues guitarist, Robert Johnson, who allegedly sold his soul to the devil for the ability to play the guitar and achieve fame. This real-life legend is portrayed in *O Brother* as Tommy Johnson, who reveals that he also sold his soul to the devil in exchange for guitar genius. The trio find Tommy standing at the Crossroads where he met the devil at midnight before. He tells Ulysses that he sold his soul to the devil and Ulysses replies, "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."<sup>10</sup> Ulysses

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<sup>10</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

stays the atheistic course, deriding baptism and finding humor in selling your soul. But no matter. Tommy said he traded his soul because, “I wasn’t usin’ it.”<sup>11</sup> Deals with the Underworld were not something to be desired in Greek culture, but in *O Brother*, it’s just another religious choice, especially if it was beneficial. Tommy describes Satan as, “. . . white. As white as you folks. And he like travelin’ around with a mean ol’ hound,”<sup>12</sup> The film’s ruthless sheriff and his bloodhound represent Hades and Cerberus, reminders of death who pursue Ulysses.

Later in the film, the Coens bring in the character of the Cyclops. The Greek Cyclops is a one-eyed giant who keeps to himself and tends sheep. Odysseus and his men discover his cave and notice that it’s loaded with food and livestock. Unfortunately, they become trapped in the cave with Polyphemus the Cyclops and find themselves, in a rude turn from hospitality, as dinner for the monster. The Cyclops in *O Brother*, Big Dan Teague, discovers Ulysses and Delmar in a fancy restaurant and senses an opportunity to devour their fortune.

Big Dan is huge in stature, clad in seersucker and suspenders, and wears a patch on one eye — a

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<sup>11</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

southern version of the Cyclops. As he sits in repose in his restaurant lair, he overhears the boys order an expensive dinner. Seeing an opportunity, Dan comes over to introduce himself and passes himself off as an itinerant Bible salesman proclaiming that he “sells truth, every blessed word of it . . . and there is damn good money in it during these times of woe and want.”<sup>13</sup> He is a fraud and tells Ulysses that there is money to be made in the “service of God.”<sup>14</sup> Riches trump truth. Dan uses hospitality against them by inviting them to a picnic, then robbing them. Again, the film portrays Christians as ignorant and gullible because they believe in God. The directors could have chosen insurance or even “snake oil” sales as Big Dan’s profession, but they chose Bible sales. Dan’s sleazy character takes advantage of people of faith — Teague is just another kind of man eater.

The wives in the two tales share similarities; however, one chooses virtue and the other chooses vice while awaiting the return of their husbands. Penelope, Odysseus’s wife, waits twenty years for the return of her husband. She has remained faithful, pure, and true, spurning all suitors, even

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<sup>13</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

when she wasn't sure that Odysseus would ever return. Penelope was a perfect example of the love and fidelity of a Greek wife and a woman to be admired in Greek culture. She's devoted to Odysseus and admires him, and always speaks respectfully of him.

In sharp contrast, Ulysses' wife Penny gave up on her husband's return long ago. She's not really sure she even wants him back because he doesn't have any "prospects" (a job) and he's not "bonafide" (wealthy and settled), which means he's not valuable in her eyes.<sup>15</sup> Ulysses and Penny also have several young daughters, and an established home before he is imprisoned. Separated by circumstances and not officially divorced, Penny has already accepted a marriage proposal from a suitor who has been pursuing her. Marriage has gone from something esteemed to meaningless. Unhappy in the waiting and prepared to take charge of her own destiny, she is tired of waiting for her husband to return home. Penny replaces Ulysses with a new prospect, regardless of her married status with children. In the end, Penny continues to make demands on Ulysses to prove his love for her. To his credit, Ulysses loves his children and it bothers him

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<sup>15</sup> Coen, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

to think of a suitor taking his place. Penny is manipulative and throws down an impossible challenge. If he really loved her, he would find her engagement ring at the bottom of the flooded valley. She refuses to recommit to him until he finds her ring. Loyalty means nothing.

The film updates the themes of the *Odyssey* with imaginative parallels that resonate with our American culture. The Greeks held ideals of bravery, loyalty, religion, love, and fidelity, as did Everett and Ulysses. Our culture, as represented in the film, rolls its eyes at virtue and subtly disrespects people of faith. Without a moral or ethical standard, the character's rules of life become relative and focused on the self. Loyalty, honor, and love are no longer admired. Our modern culture has no need of God, and without virtue and truth, relationships crumble. Societal qualities that were once esteemed — honor, marriage, hospitality, and home — are no longer desired. Odysseus, the Greek hero, believes in gods and calls on them for help. The only god for the anti-hero Ulysses is himself, and he chooses to symbolically thumb his nose at God. People of faith are considered crazy and are belittled. At the end of the film, amoral and atheist Ulysses has completed his journey but still has no closure. Odysseus made

it back to Penelope and restored his home; Ulysses is left to continually pursue Penny.

In *O Brother*, we see that moderns have walked away from the morality, values, and spirituality which gave rise to civilization. Looking through the lens of the *Odyssey*, we see an epic dressed up in a new postmodern suit of clothes, but we find ourselves with a shabbily dressed anti-hero and a selfish tale to tell.

# Bibliography

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