



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Mythology to Film:

The importance of the Homeric poems to *O Brother Where Art Thou*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Sveindís Ýr Sveinsdóttir

Desember 2009

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Enska

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This essay is about the importance of mythology and its use in films today. It recites a little about what mythology is and the use of it both then and now. There is a small summary about Homer himself and his writings, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and how easy it is for a screen writer or a director today to change these texts to their own liking, and how the lay out of the texts makes it easy to adapt and convert to the film world of today. Then there is a focus on the Greek tragedy and its important part in keeping Homers texts alive and popular, followed by the most important adaptation of *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses* by James Joyce and the scandal around its publication. After that comes a chapter about adaptation and how it is an important part of todays films to take a novel or text and change it successfully from a text into a film. Closely followed by a chapter about mythology in movies which brings us to the most important parts in this essay, a small summary about *The Iliad* in the movie *Troy*, and the focus point how *The Odyssey* in the movie *O Brother Where Art Thou* is used to create a new approach to the old text. And how the similarities and differences between *O Brother Where Art Thou* and Homers *The Odyssey* can illustrate how an old text is still usable and important in films today.

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What is mythology?

Myth – the word comes with the concept (Puhvel 1-2)

Mythology is a word with many connotations. In *Greek Mythology* by Fritz Graf, he tells us that the term “myth” is of Greek origin and people usually know that but what they don’t know is how deeply rooted our notion of myth is in the Greek corpus.

Before the rise of ethnology, myth was studied mostly by classical scholars, and in particular by Hellenists. It is still difficult to define myth satisfactorily, for all the intense scholarly attention that the problem of definition has received in the course of two and a half centuries. ...The most banal and least controversial of these may serve as a starting point: myths are traditional tales.(Graf 1).

Further on, Graf talks about how myths are transmitted from one generation to the next, often without anyone knowing who created them. This can certainly be applied to Homer’s writings. The question whether Homer’s texts are the work of a single author, or a collective name for many writers is a debate. The ancient Greeks might have used stories containing gods to illustrate how life should be lived, and at the same time to explain certain natural events such as earthquakes, windstorms and thunderstorms. By creating these collections of myths and characters the Greeks were not only explaining strange things but also making lessons to be learned from. These stories can therefore also give us some insight in how human behavior was (and is). Some scholars say that like many modern religions that build their beliefs on morality, Greek mythology based most of its myths on morality and ethics issues and can therefore give some insight into an earlier cultural development and a glimpse into how the early human thought. (Graf 27) The unique thing about Greeks was their strong focus on the here and now, all their actions and beliefs revolved around how their behavior would affect their lives and how they could enjoy and live it to the fullest in harmony with each other and the gods. There were no special writ-

ten commandments but most of the moral and ethical ideas were based on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* allegedly written by Homer. According to Homer, each man holds his own fate in his hands, wrath will cause suffering, pain and even death. Whereas joyful and pleasant living, that was in harmony with the gods, led to prosperous life. For some Homer was not just the creator of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* but also a singer or a bard that had inherited numerous poetry and heroic tales from his past. (J.V.Luce 10) And that he may or may not have written the stories down, but at least he sang them and therefore enabled others to write about them.

There are many explanations about what myth is but that is not the main issue here, the only important thing about myth one has to keep in mind is:

We cannot bring to our study of the primary sources a virgin mind, untouched by the opinions of the many generations of writers, scholarly or otherwise, who have gone before us.(Guthrie I)

No matter how fresh and open minded people try to be, there is no escaping the immense affect Homer and his writings have had on the modernist movement and the world today, it is impossible to be unaffected by what has gone before in these matters. Lets focus on Homer and his writings, is there a grain of truth in his stories or are they pure fiction and fantasy dreamt up by one man? Why are his writings so popular even today and still used in so many films, novels and plays? In this essay I will try to explain how an old story like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, can still be successfully used in films and books and still remain so popular with the focus on the films and .

Homer

There is not much known about Homer. Some doubt whether he really existed at all. The ancient Greeks said he was a blind Greek poet from the 9th or 8th century BC and he introduced Greek myth into his poems. He was also the reputed author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the two major epics of Greek antiquity. Although today modern scholars agree that he composed but probably did not write *The Iliad* and at least inspired the composition of *The Odyssey*. Because of its varied writing styles the more popular thought and widely believed today is that these works are a collaboration work of several writers.(Encyclopedia Britannica). Let's look at what is known about *The Iliad*; it is a 15,000 line epic poem that tells of an incident that occurred during the Greek siege of Ilium in a town near Troy. The 24 chapters are not focused on the whole Trojan War year by year but around a single theme, the anger of Achilles. Because of this *The Iliad* is a fast phased action story and the focus is on its aristocratic heroes and not the general population that is involved in a war. Just the thing that film makers look for in current films, it has already been prepared for the adaptation from text to film. Homer chooses around 20 characters from both sides to focus the story on, both men and women and most of its action happens only in a mere 4 days (ideal for films). Not too many characters so it is difficult to keep track but still enough to make it usable from more than one point a view. It is easy to convert or adapt the text into a movie and the main scenes evolving around the humans are mostly in or around the Greek camp on the beach or in Ilium while the divine ones take place at Mount Olympus, making it perfect for film shooting location. Homer does not glorify anything in the descriptions on either side of the battle and does not take sides, simply describing the way both sides want to stop the war and so forth. Opening up the possibility for a director or a screen writer to choose what side to be on or not and glorify the story to their own liking. Like Ian Morris talks about in *The Use and Abuse of Homer* it is likely that Homer is telling about the world he himself lived

in, in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and because of that it becomes more appealing to the reader or viewer. Because of this simple focus it is quite manageable to take the story and make it interesting for all times and all ages to watch or listen to.

Which brings us to *The Odyssey* and its context, its an epic travel story and describes the return of the Greek hero Odysseus from the Trojan War. Disorder has risen in his household while he has been away and a band of suitors are devouring his property and wooing his wife Penelope, although the main focus is on Odysseus's long traveling that takes ten years. During these ten years so many interesting things happen on the way that it is almost impossible to list it all. All of this is told in the first half of them poem, like the encounter with the Cyclops, sirens and gods, the metamorphoses when his men are changed into pigs and so on. The second half of the poem begins with Odysseus arrival at his home island of Ithaca and then describes his troubles in getting his wife, belongings and life back. When he succeeds, he of course gets his revenge on the suitors and gets his wife, house and land back. It is not possible though, without a little caution, to say that he lived happily ever after since he might only live for a few years longer, due to his old age when he gets back. A tragedy in itself, that he called perhaps upon himself by straying away from his true goal of reaching home, then again, there would not have been a very interesting story to tell if his adventures did not take place. Which leads to the Greek tragedy, its connection and popularity regarding both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*.

The Greek tragedy

The Greek tragedy is such a vast thing to go over that it is almost impossible. It has had immense influence in the structure of almost all of our literature and art today. It was a theatrical culture that flourished between c. 550 and c. 22 BCE in ancient Greece and was a part of a festival called the Dionysia, honoring the god Dionysus. (Rose 5)

Ancient Greek drama comprises three principal genres: tragedy, satyr-drama and comedy. (Sommerstein 1)

As talked about in *Greek Drama and Dramatists* the Greek tragedy is divided into these three genres, although two more forms are known to have existed although there are no complete texts known to have survived. The theatre was an important factor in the life of the citizen of modern Athens and it was a mass social phenomenon, considered too important to be left solely to theatrical specialists or even confined to the theaters. (Easterling Ch1) When thinking of this in modern terms it is important to notice that the theaters today are divided into the classic theater and the movie theater but none the less they are important in most cultures and is still a mass social phenomenon. The Hellenistic culture was embedded with the use of tragedy in the theatre, politics and its teachings (Easterling 3) and it is evident in the teachings of most countries today, Homer and his teachings are at least very obvious in the Icelandic Curriculum. This influence is also apparent in films today, since the beginning of the movie making the Greek gods and texts have been a popular subject, resulting in an array of different films as well as theater works. The flourish of the Greek tragedy was halted around 240 when the last “highest ranking dramatist” Philemon died at the age of 99 but from the mid third century BC, drama again gained popularity and became a cultural treasure for educated Greeks who used it as a nostalgic recreation of the past. (Sommerstein 3) Not only watched in the theatre but also read as texts in books, it was revived through intense scholarly research and again by the popularity with the “masses.”(Sommerstein) The Greek tragedy and its popularity is important to *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* because it has kept these stories alive. If tragedy had not received so much popularity and been used so widely it might not have spread to other countries and cultures and not influenced as many other writers or scholars. At least not as easily and soon as when aided by the popularity of the drama. Without this popularity it might have cut of an important cultural heri-

tage that is a part of the teachings of so many nations today but then again like talked about in the book *Homer and the Heroic Age*, the popularity of the Greek tragedy might not have reached such heights where it not for these two major epics. Throughout all turmoil the Greeks maintained their language and art, never giving it up or the tradition of practicing heroic songs. Because of that they kept up their heritage and ensured that legends from the Bronze Age was handed down to the next generation. (J.V.Luce 12) The Greek tragedy and *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are closely bound together because the earliest Greek legends are contained in this poetry by Homer. An interesting point in *Homer and the Heroic Age* is also the distinction made between legends and folk-tales:

Myths are the primitive equivalent of science in so far as they attempt to provide an explanation of the origin and ordering of the world. Folk-tales are the primitive equivalent of plays or films in so far as their function is to provide entertainment by amusing, clever or fantastic stories. (J.V.Luce 12)

So what better way to show the combination of legend and folk-tales than in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, that is, how to combine the future and the past in such a controversially intriguing story, an old legend and a new version mixed together to create a new story. Just like the movies of today are doing all the time, combining the past, the present and the future.

James Joyce's *Ulysses*

O Brother Where Art Thou also has its roots in a twentieth century version of the Homeric epic, *Ulysses* by James Joyce. This adaptation of *The Odyssey* is probably one of the most famous version, it was first serialized in *The Little Review* journal from March 1918 to 1920 and published in 1922 in one volumes as *Ulysses*. Today it is considered one of the most important

works of modernist literature. *Ulysses*, tells about Leopold Bloom, living through an ordinary day in Dublin in 1904. The title corresponds to Odysseus (Latinized into Ulysses) as well as the characters; Leopold Bloom and Odysseus, Molly Bloom and Penelope and Stephen Dedalus and Telemachus. *Ulysses* is divided into 18 chapters or episodes. The “stream of consciousness” technique used in it along with the careful structure, prose full of puns, parodies and allusions as well as the rich characterizations and humor made (and makes) the book a highly regarded novel in the modernist pantheon. It also corresponds with the way many films today use story tellers or narrators to explain and keep the story alive. When first reading the book it might seem chaotic to the reader and Joyce himself once said that he’d put in so many enigmas and puzzles:

that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant” in order to maintain immortality. (Delaney)

All the chapters have a theme, technique and correspondence between its characters and those of *The Odyssey*. There have been many arguments on how it’s best to read *Ulysses*, is it a giant poem or modern fiction? Should one look at style, plot, structure, how it relates to *The Odyssey* or how it changes? Ideally it would be best to combine all of these things together and try to get the whole picture if possible, but is that plausible for the reader?

When looking at the story itself, it is easy in the beginning to follow the plot,

...what we experience when beginning *Ulysses* is a novel that promises a story, a narrator, and a plot. ...*Ulysses* begins like a narrative with confidence in the adequacy of the novel form. (Lawrence 38)

but when read on it rapidly changes to a more complex structure,

Ulysses also offers no clear principle of emphasis or proportion. ...in *Ulysses*, no one particular incident in a life is considered to be of supreme importance. Because the

characters carry within them the same problems, desires, and past, no matter when we see them, no day is essentially different from any other. (Lawrence 39)

because of the scattered way the book is written. Before the book was even published it was getting huge amount of attention because the rumors around it were so scandalous and it was literally impossible to publish it anywhere. Chapters that appeared in *The Little Review* in New York from the novel were even burned and an obscenity trial took place prohibiting the magazine from publishing any more chapters. (Lawrence 6) The book could not be sold legally in Britain or the United States but all this scandal and the publicity around it, only helped in making it more intriguing for readers instead of shying them away. Without knowledge of *The Odyssey* or some help from a companion writing to *Ulysses*, many things might go unnoticed by the everyday reader and the reading of the novel becomes too complex. It is almost necessary to have some kind of assistance when reading it, be it a book or a teacher. It is a good choice at least to acquire the description or some knowledge about the connection between chapters of *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. The first chapter *Telemachus*, is written in what Joyce called the initial style, a style that, with variants and interruptions, holds good up to about midway through the book (Killeen 18). There is freshness and clarity to the descriptions and the morning beginning is in line with that feeling. The physical image of Mulligan is instantly known to the reader and the narrative is detached and seems to be in control of the action. The uniqueness of the narrative and the single word “Chrysostomos” early on gives the reader a big hint that something more is going on than meets the eye. Once figured out that chrysostomos means golden mouth in Greek and it is a description of Mulligans mouth, there comes the question, where did this comment come from? Who said it? The only plausible answer is from Stephen’s mind and that kind of narrative was commonly used before this book. This interior monologue and the sexual frankness also caused a huge stir at the time. Suddenly something new was happening and a new, fresh method of letting

feelings and thoughts of the characters known immediately. Feelings and thoughts that instantly popped up on the page when reading. This type of writing is the most dominant in the first ten chapters, getting more complex as the novel goes on but can be seen in almost all chapters in some form. The use of Christ like words are also obvious in the first chapter and shows that Joyce is not only using *The Odyssey* but also other old literature and religious readings to build his novel on. Giving the novel new depths to plunge into, giving the reader more to wonder and learn about. The historical and cultural situations in the book are therefore very well known and clearly stated from the beginning. Giving it a new kind of usage and twists, not unlike the film *O Brother Where Art Thou*, where the old and the new is mixed together to create something new to watch. Although of course these two works are on the opposite sides of the pole, one is a deep literature novel and the other is an easy and fun entertainment film based on older texts. Perhaps that is the only way to intrigue and interest certain type of readers today, to stimulate them to learn more about something, by watching a movie and after that seek out more knowledge.

The correspondences between *The Ulysses* and *The Odyssey* are made clear with names and use of similar settings but there is also a connection made to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that is more easier to follow than the connection to *Odyssey*. With the use of the tower and the analogy between Stephen and Prince Hamlet it gives a motif for the rest of the story, hinting at the father and son relationship going on. What makes *Ulysses* difficult to read is not only the many connections to other novels, text and books but also the double writing that is going on. The narrative keeps on but it is interrupted with boldfaced phrases like "THE WEARER OF THE CROWN", disrupting the reader and scattering the story line.

The headings, however, are more disconcerting than helpful to the reader, for the spirit that motivates their creation seems arbitrary and capricious. They italicize the

most trivial of events and seem singularly inappropriate in tone and content to the “features” that follow. (Lawrence 55)

The first readers also did not have the aid of knowing the connection to *The Odyssey* since the name of the chapters were not revealed to begin with and the sudden ordering and change in the font style would seem like a bizarre narrative behavior. So what to do when seeing these sudden bold words and sentences? First, it could be ignored because the narration of the story goes on beneath these headings, furthermore it could be used to understand the strangeness of the story itself, to prepare for the “not” connection that is going on. This chapter is the only chapter that underwent big changes when revised by Joyce in 1921. The reason for changing it so much was to make it predict the antics of the later chapters and to give the reader early notice that the form of the novel was becoming obsolete. (Lawrence 57) Joyce was using the headings like a hint for the reader about the connection to the past, giving it a modern flair as well as laying down a puzzle for the reader to wonder about. In the end it doesn't matter how *Ulysses* is read or thought about, there is no arguing that it is a brilliant use of *The Odyssey* and shows how political and controversial old material can become when used in a new and different way later on. By giving another story a deeper meaning and obvious connection to the past and illuminating the “Homer-ness” in our studying and the reading creates a new sensation with greater depth than before.

From novel to film

Since the film first emerged on the scene some people have argued that it has taken over the role of the novel. Ever since filmmakers started to use the form of storytelling as its building foundation for films, the step to take famous novels already popular and use them in films was a simple step. The novel as the twentieth century most popular narrative form, with its complexity and richness was irresistible to the form of the film and filmmakers who saw the infinite poten-

tials in its usage. Although the film has not taken the novel over as many were worried about, it has without a doubt taken a big part of its popularity, today many people simply say they would prefer to wait and see the film. Should fidelity always be a major issue or does the adaptation process always mean some kind of compromise? Many changes in the novel at the end of the eighteenth century led to a greater emphasis on showing rather than telling. (Dægurlagatextar og Alþýðumenning) This emphasis changed both the way novels were written and changed later on how filmmakers made their films. These changes included making the “storyteller” or the narrative voice of the author less personal which again lead readers to “view” and experience the novel in the same way that film watchers did later on. So the reason for the popularity the film got from the beginning is because of the same technique the writers of novels had already used. Therefore they had already prepared the reader of their novels for these visual stimuli even before the filmmakers had realized their potential.

The adaptation of a novel to a film is as I mentioned here before is without a doubt a tremendous creative project that demands a certain kind of interpretation and choices but also the ability to recreate and preserve the atmosphere that has been created. According to Geoffrey Wagner there are three general forms to category how to evaluate adaptations: transposition, commentary and analogy. (Dægurlagatextar og Alþýðumenning) In transposition the novel is moved straight to the white screen by holding changes in the minimal. In commentary the novel is taken and either with or without obvious intentions of the filmmaker half changes it, interoperates it for the viewers. In analogy the film is made as a completely new adaptation of an older art in the purpose in making a new piece (work) of art. The lure of a high profit is often a big snatch for why the film maker chooses one script over another and maybe like known quantities...”they would sooner buy the rights of an expensive book than develop an original subject.” (McFarlane 7) This is one of the main reasons for why they choose one writing over another. Adapting a lit-

erary work to film is obviously a creative undertaking but it brings with it also a selective interpretation along with the film makers ability to alter or keep a former established mood. (McFarlane)

In "*O Brother*" it is obvious that the filmmakers are using adaptation by taking on an old well known story and changing it into a new popular and entertaining film. Of course there are categories under these three ways in how to analyze the films just like literature but that is not the issue here. More important is how we understand each adaptation of novel to film, each person has different views and understandings and therefore the understanding on the adaptation itself is always different. Sometimes it is said that film adaptation catches the viewers attention only if the viewer has already read the novel. Again "*O Brother*" shows us otherwise, even though the viewer does not know anything about Homers Odyssey the film itself is very entertaining and perhaps because of the starting text it has prompted people not only to enjoy the film but also prompted them afterwards to go out and read the book. Adaptations done in a successful way do not need the viewer to know everything there is to know about the former story it is based on, but it can make it richer in understanding if there is some extra knowledge. It has also been pointed out that every best-selling novel simply has to be turned into a film, and that is a valid argument in todays merged novel-film world. (McFarlane. Novel to Film) There is no need to look hard for examples like; J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* books or Stieg Larsson's *Millennium trilogy*, are but to name a few. Whatever makes film goers go to the movies or what prompt's the filmmakers to make it, it is known that many of the awards given out, go to films that have been adaptations. (McFarlane. Novel to Film) The main criticism on adaptations, are that the film was not true to the book, but is that a fair comparison? When looking at "*O Brother*" is it simply enough to say it didn't have enough "Homer" in it to be a good adaptation, that it was not faithful enough? What is a faithful film to begin with, and

should the film be exactly the same as the novel? Further more, what should the film be faithful to? The change of novel to film should be about borrowing, interchanging and transformation not simple retelling, adapting to the new media. Let's then look at mythology in movies today.

Mythology in movies

We "read" films as "texts". (Winkler 8)

As noted above, since movies became popular there have been numerous attempts (some very good others bad and still others exceedingly bad), to recreate the mystical idea about mythology on the white screen. As we are accustomed to think in images,

We are a civilization now accustomed to thinking in images...it is the visual work (cinema, videotape, mural, comic strip, photograph) that is now a part of our memory.

(Winkler 6)

our brains are so highly tuned and accustomed to think like this (although today it is done on the internet or on dvd's) that is getting harder all the time to "stimulate" and please our tastes. All kinds of media are available for the thirst people have for information and entertainment. The movie industry is one of the biggest moneymaker in the world and it comes as no surprise that it tries to find more sources in the old mythologies. They have the technique to show us these strange monsters in very plausible scenarios. All those attempts to put mythology into movies has led to imagery in films that is sometimes very easy to spot and sometimes down right impossible. There are also many myths to keep tap on and therefore sometimes it is lost on the viewer, unless one knows what to look for. Many popular films have some basis of mythology in them

[...] genre cinema such as the western, gangster, war or science fiction film, which at first sight has nothing in common with the ancient world, may still adapt plots or patterns familiar from antiquity, particularly those relating to heroic myth (Winkler 3)

To mention just a few movies that have some basis of mythology in them without having the list too long: *Blade Runner*, *Neuromancer*, *The Fifth Element*, *Aliens*, *Back to the Future*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Shane*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Narrow Margin*, *Murder at 1600*, *Lion King* (cartoon), *The Little Mermaid* (cartoon), *Hercules* (cartoon and movie), *The War of the Roses*, *As Good as It Gets*, *Excalibur*, *The Dark Crystal*, *Merlin*, *The Star Wars* and so on. The list might seem both obvious and surprising and some become popular and some not. What is it that makes some of them so fascinating while others don't quite make the cut? It can't be just because of the actors, animation or directing, the story plot itself is usually the most important thing if a movie is to have the chance to survive its initial popularity. The standard hunk, newest stars and technology is often not enough to keep the viewer interested while time goes on. A good example of a film that still holds part of its glamour and the huge influence that it had at its time is *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Some films keep their lure when time goes by like *O Brother* when some reach the level of a cult status like *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. When *O Brother* was screened there was a sudden boom in a certain type of music which had a huge comeback and this older type of movie styles became very popular again, all because of this one movie. There was a craze for a certain kind of bluegrass music and like said here before, many people probably picked up a modified version of Homer's writings simply because of the reference at the start of the movie. *O Brother* became very popular not only among those who like classical mythology but also among the most common viewers.

The Coen brothers, who are known to use mythology and different kinds of unusual stories in their movies, launched this movie to a surprisingly huge success. Suddenly everybody was talking about them and Homer. A combination not many would have predicted to be a successful one, an ancient story line and men known for their modern artist strangeness, or perhaps that was what made it so popular. By starting the movie right away by invoking the Muses and

saying it is based on the *Odyssey* was a good way to let the viewer know what this film is all about. But what is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* about? It was directed by the Coen brothers in the year 2000 and as mentioned here above, is loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey* and states as much in the beginning. It shows the tone and imagery of the depression-era realism in America and is entwined with a comedic element. The main plot of the movie evolves around the adventures of Everett Ulysses McGill and his companions Delmar and Pete. It takes place in Mississippi in the 1930s and Everett who has been put in prison because of a robbery, breaks out of prison. As he tries to travel back to his home and wife to save the marriage and the loot he had stashed in his house before it is all lost in a flood, we follow the course of his strange trip. We have all kinds of strange characters that these three meet on the way; Sirens, Cyclops, famous American gangster (Baby-Face Nelson), campaigning Governor and his opponent, a KKK mob and a blind prophet, and of course Everett's family. In with this all is thrown a lovely mix of bluegrass and jazz music. This mixture created a movie that is full of adventure, comedy and visual as well as musical eye candy. Even though the Coen brothers state the connection to *The Odyssey* in the beginning of the movie, what is it doing to help the audience in understanding, liking or disliking it?

The Iliad in the movie Troy

Like *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad* has also been adapted into various films and even TV series. *Troy* was released in the year 2000 and is titled as an epic film concerning the Trojan war and loosely based on Homer's *Iliad*. Although in this case the film was adapted by changing many of the myths and supernatural things into more down to earth and realistic story. There was a mix of both famous actors of the time and more unknown actors casted to play in it, like Brad Pitt, Orlando Bloom, Diane Kruger and Peter O'Toole. There are many similarities with the adaptation

of *Troy* and *O Brother* because the directors took quite a liberty in interpretation in both of them. In Homer's *Iliad* the god's play a bigger role whereas in the film they do not affect what took place. Troy lives in the film when he dies in the poem, and vice versa Ajax and Agamemnon died in Homer's *Iliad* but survived in the film. Although Thetis, Achilles mother plays big roles in both versions and Helen is abducted by Paris in both versions, many of the essential things in *The Iliad* are changed in *Troy*. The time line in *Troy* is changed just like in *O Brother*, and the whole war is shortened down from 10 years to mere weeks. This shorter timeline is probably done in both films to keep the audience entertained and captivated by making the pace of the story faster and therefore making it more compact and entertaining. The difference between *Troy* and *O Brother* was simply the way it was received by the audience, but *Troy* did not get as good reviews as *O Brother*. The thin line between success and failure is hard to keep on and perhaps the changes were to much or to little. The comparison between these two adaptations can perhaps be said to be a success and a failure. Where *Troy* despite it's actors, director and big budget flunked somewhat in popularity maybe because the changes to the original source were to much, while *O Brother*, although having casted famous actors as well and the Coen brothers are well known, succeeded because of their and the films unique eccentricity which managed to enthrall the audience.



The *Odyssey* in the movie *O Brother Were Art Thou?*

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...(Homer)

Let's then start with the most obvious thing, the text at the beginning of the movie stating the connection to Homer's *Odyssey*. By having this text shown at the very beginning the Coen brothers are obviously telling the audience to keep their eye's open for the connections between these two work of arts. Giving credit to Homer's work, stating that they have created a new work of art based on his work and not a new version of it. Setting the mind of the viewer and mixing together the literature world and the movie world, allowing us to as said here before, to read the film as a text. If the viewer for some reason or another does not know anything about Homer, all hope is not lost since the film is very entertaining non the less and keeps a fast paced process.

How about the main characters then? Right in the beginning we see the flight of Everett from his "captives" while he tries to break away from the prison while all the other convicts are out doing labour work. His two companions are forced to go with him because they are chained to him, which makes one wonder about Odysseus men. Were they forced to go with him or did they go with him of their own free will? And what about the rest of the crew? By keeping *Odyssey* in mind, it makes you think about Odysseus' crew who were killed. Here they are merely left behind in the prison, their story is at least not followed any more. Homer's Odysseus and Everett have many character traits in common, they are both resourceful and patient and are quite capable to take care of themselves. One of Odysseus qualities and important attribute is resourcefulness, patience and a flair for the theatric. A good example of that is when he dresses himself as a beggar when he finally reached his home, simply to wait for the perfect dramatic moment to reveal himself and take revenge. If the name Odysseus is rendered in Latin it comes out; Ulysses and the full name of Everett is Ulysses Everett McGill. Everett is a well mannered, stable individual that seeks the love of his family but is also a typical American stereotyped character when

it comes to seeking a quick fortune the illegal way and is sent to prison for it (or so he says himself). Stating that he was sent to prison for robbing an armored car and not for practicing law without permission is a little more adventurous description of what happened. Later he apologizes to his companions by stating that they would never have come with him, had they known he was in prison for the smaller crime of malpractice.

EVERETT: Uh, the fact of the matter is - well, damnit, there ain't no treasure! ...Fact of the matter - there never was!

DELMAR: So - where's all the money from your armored-car job?

EVERETT: I never knocked over any armored-car. I was sent up for practicing law without a licence... Damnit, I just hadda bust out! My wife wrote me she was gettin' married! I gotta stop it! (O Brother Where Art Thou)

Being well aware that Everett was lying to his "crew" to get them going on the journey it makes one wonder about Odysseys crew as well, where they tricked somehow in the beginning to take the journey? Were they sweet talked into going with him?

As shown here above, the main reason Everett is so desperate to escape from the prison is because he has had word that his wife Penelope has threatened to divorce him and marry again. Sounds familiar? Odysseus had the same problem with his wife although, Odysseus Penelope remained faithful to her husband while Everett's Penelope is more of a question mark. She even told her daughters that Everett got hit by a train so she could marry another man more bona fide or suited for the role. Maybe it shows the different views of the past and future, in the past it was obligatory for the woman to be loyal to her husband (although the same rules did not apply for the husband) whereas today, this is not the same strict rule. Of course people are supposed to be truthful to their spouse but today the responsibility is not only on the women but on the men as well. Then there is the sweet mouth, both have the ability in talking utter nonsense to people and

still charm them in all ways. When Delmar is very concerned because Pete got squished, Everett tries to cheer him up by saying:

EVERETT: Maybe it's for the best he was squished. Why, he...was barely a sentient being and as soon as we get ourselves cleaned up and we get a little smellum in our hair we're gonna feel 100% better about ourselves. (O Brother Where Art Thou)

With that he succeeds in sweet talking Delmar into going with him to get the treasure, (even though they have lost Pete and that the treasure does not exist) marks his superiority and simply gets everything he wants. Then he comments that it feels like a year since they busted out of the farm and the heat must be getting to him, when he gets a glimpse of Pete working with the convicts they are passing. Not willing to believe his own eyes and confirming that he does believe that Pete got turned into a toad, no matter how often he has questioned the fact before. Keeping consistent with himself and holding fast to his beliefs. Indeed it feels like much more time has passed to the viewer as well because so much has happened and is still happening.

Though Ulysses and Odysseus' merits are boosted about let's not forget about these characters' flaws, which binds them together as well if not more than their merits. They are both full of pride, almost too much of it. Pride is what prolonged Odysseus back to Ithaca and what got Everett in prison. It is good to have some pride but both of them have too much of it for their own good. The tendency to brag is very strong in both of them as well. When Odysseus and his men have just escaped from the Cyclops Island, he has to shout out to the Cyclops Polyphemus who it was, that blinded him and got away from him. Making the Cyclops hurl stones after the ship and putting Odysseus and all his men in danger again. He also has to shout out his name (after giving him the false name: No-name before), so that Polyphemus knows who actually hurt him and humiliated him. Because of this pride, Odysseus angered Polyphemus's father Poseidon and lengthened the journey home again. Which brings us to Everett, when he attracts the attention of Big

Dan (the Cyclops representative), he is dining with his companions in a very fancy restaurant, being an escaped convict and eating in high style at a popular restaurant is bragging big time! Having the frog in the box on the table is as well a statement of its own, here we are (the animals) eating at this fancy restaurant just like the rest of you. When Big Dan noticed the other two it is interesting to see that it is not just hearing them talk that gets Big Dan's attention but almost the smell as well. He sits there savoring the flavor of a scam before he goes after them and although in *The Odyssey* the Cyclops gets the lower hand in *O Brother* he gets revenge, as Big Dan tricks Everett and leaves him without a car and a big headache. The jealousy is also clear in both Everett and *Odyssey*, they have both left their wife's with little to defend themselves with and expect everything to be the same when they come back. It is interesting to watch and listen to Everett talk to his girls again on the stage after they have stopped singing.

EVERETT: I am the only daddy you got. I am the dam pater familias.

DAUGHTER: But you're not bona fide. (O Brother Where Art Thou)

This conversation is interesting to listen to because Everett does know he left his wife alone with the girls and it is almost futile to argue about it. He and his girls know that his wife is the one in charge and the head of the family. No matter how hard he tries to maintain the fact that he is supposed to be the one in charge. The fighting scene in the store also shows how proud and stubborn Everett can be when it comes to his family. Just like *Odyssey* when he is fighting for his family, although *Odyssey* is perhaps a tad more violent in his approach. The fight for Everett is dragged on, just like *Odyssey's* and the ending is the same. They succeed in getting their family and dignity back in the end.

The most obvious connection to Homer along with the starting text is easy to spot when Everett and his companions meet the blind man on the railroad tracks when looking at the script:

DELMAR. You work for the railroad, grandpa?

OLD MAN. I work for no man.

PETE. Got a name, do ya?

OLD MAN. I have no name.

EVERETT. Well, that right there may be why you've had difficulty finding gainful employment. Ya see, in the mart of competitive commerce, the-

OLD MAN. You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains...

The men fall silent.

OLD MAN. And you will find a fortune - though it will not be the fortune you seek...

(IMSDb)

Giving a character in the movie a “no name” is a clever reference and a connection between the two stories. Here we also have a character that helps open up the story line and close it in the end as well. The Coen brothers mix together in a skillful way the all knowing story teller, foreseeing the future, the smooth talking tongue of Everett and a reference to a story from Odyssey but with a new twist. The use of “No name” as a hint to the viewer to when Odysseus escaped from the Cyclops. Thereby further stating the obvious connection to Greek mythology and Homers Odyssey, that is if the viewer has already been familiarized with the text of Homer. If not it still works as a foreseeing story teller and an interesting addition to the flora of odd characters, giving a certain flair to the start (and end) of the movie.

Odysseus is one of the first Greek mythic heroes renowned for his brain as well as his muscle. He is a top soldier with an inquiring mind, outstanding prowess and bravery enough for 10 people, in short, a powerful mythic hero that can do anything. Everett is certainly athletic as he shows when he can run so far shackled and very resourceful in getting himself out of (and into) trouble as well as being at least a little educated when considered the way he talks. While Odysseus is more of a god like hero, Everett is more human, allowing the viewer to relate more

to him. His adventures are perhaps great but he does not always succeed, like when he is dragged from the train after Delmar and Pete cannot make it into the train after him. Being shackled together, of course the other two drag Everett off the train. Athletic or not, the egotist in Everett comes back to kick him in the butt.

Again the tendency to brag, even when Everett and Odysseus have a very narrow escape. Like mentioned before, Odysseus cannot resist to tell the Cyclops Polythemus who it really was that tricked him and Everett is known for embellishing his stories, but perhaps it is their flaws more than their merits that make them so interesting to watch.

Both Odysseus and Everett enjoy the love and attention of women and they both meet sirens who try to trick them with their songs but both of them withstand it, if narrowly.

Just after that we see when Delmar and Everett think that the sirens have changed Pete into a frog, just like when Odysseus men are changed into swine's by Circe.

So the basic time- and story-line are the same and the most obvious is the travel story itself. Both stories are about men who must embark on a journey that is likely not to be successful but because of their bravery and wit they do succeed.

Although both men enjoy the attention of women, the small difference between Odysseus and Everett is how they react to them. When Odysseus was on Circe it was like he had forgotten his wife that was still waiting patiently for him at home and he stayed one year longer than he had to. The same was on Calypso, where he even stayed on for seven years! Even though Everett does get swept of his feet for a little while when the women are singing to him, his mind is always on his wife Penny and he does not sleep with any of them, but maybe that is more due to the alcohol than his upstanding honor.



Summary

O Brother Where Art Thou? is certainly fast paced and entertaining and was a smash hit when it screened, to many people's surprise. The unique blend of old and new obviously hit a spot that the viewer found intriguing. While the film makers do not all find the smash hit of Homer's text, finding the thin line between failure and success can be quite a challenge, it is certain that they will not stop trying to find the next big hit. The use of Homer's texts as an entertainment medium for people through the ages have never ceased to excite, entertain and mesmerize people and they do so in *O Brother*. While many critics did not like *Troy*, it did get several nominees and many viewers loved it. It was quite a hit with certain audiences and perhaps the annoyance about this film was its lure mainly to the younger audience, but it won for instance the Teen Choice Awards in 2005. Brad Pitt probably played a big role in that outcome.

The merge of the old and the new is a fun way to bring the old text to life for new audiences. The Greek mythology is all about entertaining, fast pacing story put forward to keep the audience immersed in the story. Myth itself is so immersed in our life's that it cannot be separated from it. The stories that come up all around the world are sometimes unique but they are all connected because they were all invented by humans.

The embellishment of stories are nothing new under the sun and mythology simply takes it up to another level, the hydras and strange beast must have had some basis in reality but are simply made bigger for entertainment or because of simple belief is for everyone to figure out on their own. Deep down inside we are all similar and the lure of entertainment has followed the human

race for a long time, the invention of the movies was just the next step in the evolution of story telling, like the embellishment of heroic stories before that.

Whether Homer existed or not is not an issue either, it is the use of his stories and imagination that is important. The grain of truth in his stories, how small they might be are there because they are human and tell of something most men and women want to achieve during their lifetime. That if their journey is destined to be difficult at least it should be magical and rewarding in the end (preferably on the way). His writings were so popular because of the entertainment value and because of the simple connection to humanity and the need to have heroes. The use of heroic, fast pacing story is almost a sure way to create a hit, be it a movie, novel or even poem. The influence that Homer's texts have had on anybody who has studied anything today is so great that it cannot be measured. Studied any texts? Homer's text and the bible are probably the top two on the reading list, no matter where the studying takes place. The uniqueness of Homers texts to be one of the few texts that still exist after such a long time must affect us as well. Who is to say that Homer was the first one to write about the long journey or the certain character type of Odyssey? His stories are probably built upon years and years of rumors and stories passed on from person to person orally. That he was the one to put them down on paper simply gives him the credit for the whole thing. He can be described as the first movie director then, that saw the lure of a good story and published it. The epic travel story and its ending today have a "homer-ness" in it, simply because of the fact that Homer was the first to put it down on paper. The further use of his texts were aided when the Greek tragedy started to be popular, they were filled with interesting points and easy to convert into a dramatic play. Aiding one another in popularity and preservation. The Greek tragedy is also a focus point for the combination of legend and folk tales, where it mixes them together for further use, just like the film or movie does today. The highest use of Homer's text might be in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, that is for every reader to

decide but there is no denying that it is a unique way to create something new from an older text, an adaptation just like from novel to film. The act of taking a novel and changing it into a film is without a doubt tremendous work and Joyce's *Ulysses* was obviously a hard labored work for him. Not just because of the time it took him to write it but also because of the new way of using *Odyssey*. The use of mythologies in movies was the simple next step of taking the reader or viewer into the world of films. The Greek drama and theater aided the viewer to accept the film as the next step in the evolution of story making. Novels were bound to be adapted into something new as technology progressed and the higher standard set by every reader or viewer is a hard thing to keep up with. Just like the list enlisted here before on movies that have some mythology in them or are based on mythology, it could have been as long as a novel. There are always some connections to mythology and it is a hard to create something completely new without it being based on something already created before. *O Brother Where Art Thou?* is therefore nothing new under the sun per say, but it is a refreshing new twist on *Odyssey* and the classical epic journey.

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