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Changing Mythic Tropes from the *Odyssey* to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Mythic characters have been adapted to suit modern storylines for decades. Whether the new narrative features only passing references to a myth or openly declares its subject in the credits, tropes that have been around since the Classical era crop up in every narrative. While there are several films that do not outright make an acknowledgement of mythic pedigree, the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000) is declaratively based on the myth of Homer's *Odyssey*. There are several parallels between these two narratives, but the comparison becomes very intriguing when one considers how the story, told and retold over the centuries, has become a modern narrative set in the Great Depression. The revisioning of the *Odyssey* in the Deep South is a perfect example of the immortal nature of these tales, and it is so effective because there are so many ways in which the Greek civilization and the Deep South are different. Seeing how these stories parallel each other and how applicable the original myth is to this new setting just goes to show how universal mythic stories from antiquity are.

In the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Ulysses Everett McGill (called only Everett) and two compatriots he met while in jail for practicing law without a license, Pete Hogwallop and Delmar O'Donnell, escape while laboring in search of Everett's

promise of a treasure that he had hidden at a cabin in a valley which is soon to be flooded by a dammed river. They quickly meet Tommy Johnson, a banjo player, at a crossroads and form the Soggy Bottom Boys to get some money from a radio disc jockey, before splitting ways. Throughout their odyssey, they are pursued by Sheriff Cooley, and they run into a number of different obstacles, including Sirens in a river who they think turn Pete into a frog, Big Dan Teague (a one-eyed Bible salesman who takes their money and then is killed later at a KKK rally while Everett, Delmar, and Pete are rescuing Tommy, who is African American), and George Nelson, a bank robber who is running from the police. Finally, Everett gets to his hometown, and tries to win back his former wife, Penny, from her suitor after revealing to Pete and Delmar that there is no treasure. When Penny finally accepts getting remarried, she tells Everett she will only marry him if he gets an old engagement ring from their cabin. In the end of the film, the Sheriff catches Everett, Pete, and Delmar at the cabin, but the river is flooded and they are washed away before they can be killed.

Before getting into some of the more off-the-wall adaptations of plot points of the *Odyssey*, there is one example that serves as a great parallel between the Coen Bros. film and the original epic: the Sirens. Besides the obvious incongruencies due to the different settings, the appearance of the Sirens is largely the same in both narratives. Circe, warning Odysseus about them, describes them as “enchanters of all mankind,” warning him to “melt down sweet wax of honey” and stop his men’s ears so that none of them can hear their song (*Odyssey* XII.39-48). In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the characters come upon a few young women cleaning clothes (a reference to how

Odysseus happens upon Nausicaa and her handmaidens in Book VI of the *Odyssey*) in a stream while singing, and they are drawn to the song. Where the narratives diverge is in the binding of Odysseus/Everett: in the original epic, Odysseus has his crew bind him to the mast so that he can hear the Sirens' song but fills his crew's ears with wax; in the film, no such event occurs, and both of Everett's companions, Pete and Delmar, hear the music along with him. Although this is a somewhat large divergence from the original story, it makes sense: there was no way in the storyline of the film for them to know they would happen upon the women, and even then no one to warn them what the song would do. So although there was some artistic license taken, it does have a good reason, and also reflects the time period in which the story is set.

The case of Polyphemos is one of the more interesting adaptations. Considering that the film is set in reality, the Coen brothers faced a real challenge: how to make a cyclops. Answer: someone missing one eye. Big Dan Teague, a Bible salesman, plays the part of Polyphemos quite well. However, where Polyphemos was a sheep herder in the *Odyssey*, Teague is a smooth-talking Bible salesman who convinces Everett to pay for his lunch before beating him and Delmar and killing frog-Pete (more on that later). The Coen Bros. probably made this change due to the fact that livestock is not one of the South's major industries (it's does more agriculture than anything else, especially during this period) and that religion is one of the biggest facets of Southern life. This makes Teague into a more realistic figure, albeit one who is more clever than Polyphemos.

The biggest divergence in the story of Polyphemos, however, is that his blinding does not occur in the same scene; in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus must blind Polyphemos to escape, but the film does not feature an escape in this scene. Instead, the metaphorical blinding of Big Dan Teague occurs later in the film at a Klan rally when the Klansmen are about to kill Tommy Johnson. The Coen Bros. use Tommy's short interlude with Everett in order to make him one of the "crew," in order to stay with the plot of the *Odyssey*. In the original book, Polyphemos was about to dine on Odysseus's men; by introducing Tommy and making him a member of Everett's group, this effect is replicated, and Everett's infiltration of the Klan rally is more understandable: he is trying to save a member of his crew. The instrument that is used to blind Teague is also different: in the *Odyssey*, a sharpened olive branch is used; in the film, a giant flaming cross falls down on Teague, appearing to penetrate his eye and presumably killing him. The choice of instrument is very important, as it reflects on the values of the societies in which the stories are set: the olive branch used by Odysseus represents his character and ingenuity, despite lacking some of the traditional Greek heroic characteristics, where the cross represents the supreme importance of religion on Southern society.

While both the examples of the Sirens and Big Dan Teague provide good evidence for examining how the tropes of the *Odyssey* have been adapted, the best comes from looking at the influence of Poseidon and how that is reflected in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* There is, obviously, no godly interaction in the film; even if there were, it would be with the Christian God, and not one of the many gods in the Greek pantheon due to the religious beliefs held by the Southerners. In attempting to adapt Homer's

storyline, the Coen Bros. had to substantially reduce the role of Poseidon in the film. The original narrative has Poseidon angry at Odysseus for the blinding of Polyphemos, since the Cyclopes are children of Poseidon, and in Book X, Poseidon blows Odysseus off course just as "the land of [their] fathers [Ithaca]" is in sight, and Odysseus's crew open the bag of wind that Aiolos bestowed upon Odysseys (*Odyssey* X.29). The wrath of Poseidon is a major part of the *Odyssey*, representative of the ways in which humans and gods interact within the Greek mythos, and the results of the blinding of Polyphemus become a major part of the narrative, since Aiolos sends Odysseus away after he washes back up on the island because Odysseus is "'hateful to the immortals'" (*Odyssey* X.75).

The Coen Bros. are now faced with a serious dilemma: how do they include the wrath of Poseidon while acknowledging the deeply religious South and maintaining the Christian spirit of the characters and the setting? They skirt this issue in a very innovative way, somewhat reminiscent of the *deus ex machina* of the Greek and Roman plays: throughout the story, the viewer is reminded that the valley in which Everett's cabin sits will be flooded when they dam a nearby river. The importance of the cabin is maintained throughout the film, and can be thought of as a parallel to Ithaca for Odysseus and his crew. In the beginning, it is the location of the treasure for which Everett, Pete, and Delmar broke out of prison; after they find out the treasure is nonexistent but Everett convinces Penny to remarry him, it is where the engagement ring is hidden. Just as the cabin is in sight, Everett and his men are caught by the men hunting them, and then the valley floods, freeing them. This flood is how the Coen Bros.

bring in the influence of Poseidon: while it does rescue them from their captors, the flood also washes away the ring, a profound allegory for Poseidon's wrath in the original epic. The water, Poseidon's domain, is what ends up taking away Everett's chance of finding the ring, and it it can be construed that if they had not taken the time to "blind" Teague, they may have arrived at the cabin in time to avoid the flood. This interlude and the death of Teague have now cost them the ring, and brought down Poseidon's wrath.

Stories from antiquity have stayed with us, reshaped by the times and context in which they are retold, but still maintaining roots that show up everywhere. While the Great Depression setting of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* heavily influences the ways in which the story is able to be told, limiting it to the Christianity and relative modernity of the South in the 1930s, it manages to keep so many of the original aspects of the *Odyssey* that it is a perfect allegory for how humanity has retold is best stories over its long existence. The three examples of the Sirens, a relatively straightforward transference, the blinding of Polyphemus, a bit more complicated in making real and modern, and the wrath of Poseidon, a literal event in the original narrative that was made metaphorical in the film, provide perfect test-cases to show how it is possible to adapt ancient storylines into modern tales.

Works Cited

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