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Homer Meets the Coen Brothers: Memory as Artistic Pastiche in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*?

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* presents an intriguing and unusual case for the question of whether historical accuracy is important in films that use classical antiquity as a direct setting or indirect reference point. With key elements of the film based on Homer's *Odyssey*, *O Brother* is set in the American south during the Great Depression. Those familiar with the often whimsical style of the Coen brothers probably did not know what, if any, connection this effort would have to either historical period. However, lovers of Homer have noted many clever allusions to the adventures of Odysseus in the *O Brother*, while those interested in the myth of a charming Old South appeared pleased at how the film nostalgically presented 1930s southern culture.

Classical Allusions

Homer's Odysseus becomes Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) in the Coens' reimagining of the epic Greek story. Though he is also a man who prizes his intellect as a mechanism for making his way back home, Everett soon discloses a shallow obtuseness beneath his clever and fast-talking rhetoric. Still, like Odysseus, Everett longs to get back to his beloved wife Penelope, a.k.a. Penny (Holly Hunter), who is being courted by a suitor. Unlike her ancient counterpart, Penny is not exactly the faithful wife; she divorces Everett in his absence to pursue a more profitable match. And even when the couple is reunited at the end, the last scene depicts Penny nagging her ever-apologizing husband, who is followed by seven daughters rather than one son.

Homer's blind prophet Tiresias is central in the Coens' version, too, though now he appears as an old black man (Lee Weaver) who says he works for "no man" and has "no name" (echoing Odysseus' famous lines). In riddles, this blind seer warns Everett and his companions (Pete played by John Turturro and Delmar played by Tim Blake Nelson) of the perils of the journey but predicts a successful homecoming. In *O Brother*, the Cyclops takes the guise of John Goodman's conniving, one-eyed bible salesman, who exemplifies an on-going religious subtext (again similar but

quite different from Homer). The Sirens now appear as seductive songstresses in wet dresses (played by Mia Tate, Musetta Vander, and Christy Taylor), also filling Circe's role as beautiful witch by supposedly turning Pete into a toad (and they even recall the role of Nausicaa and her maids with their clothes-washing). But Ulysses Everett McGill, unlike the ancient Odysseus, has no defense against any of their feminine wiles. Along with his companions, Everett gets "liquored up" and intends "to fornicate" because he does not have the good sense to see that the Sirens plan to turn the men over to the law for the reward money.

More subtle references to Homer's story include: the hero's journey to the underworld, which has become the fire and brimstone meeting of the KKK; the conversion of the Lotus Eaters into the glassy-eyed crowd waiting to be dunked in the river for baptism; the saving of Odysseus from the watery deep, mirrored in Everett **[End Page 49]** emerging from the floods of the Tennessee Valley Authority; the transformation of Poseidon into Sheriff Cooley (Daniel Von Barga), who also represents an unrelenting and blind revenge (note the sunglasses). And 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. The modern Ulysses also returns home in disguise, through a fake beard and blackface in the film, making Everett appear to be a down-and-out, old hillbilly like the beggar Odysseus. Once again there is a showdown among opposing forces at a banquet. The ancestral home is threatened but still intact, at least long enough to yield an object that gives legitimacy to Ulysses' relationship with his wife (the tree-bed in Homer vs. the ring in the film).

The hero is saved in both cases by a deus...

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