

O brother, where art thou: the relationship between an epic poem and the film it ...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The Coen Brothers' 2000 adventure film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is an American adaptation of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. This recent comedy follows three escaped convicts as they search for a hidden treasure. Despite the considerable gap between the creation of these two works, the film reflects many of the common themes found in the epic poem. But, what makes the film an adaptation rather than a direct re-creation is its setting; the movie takes place within an caricatured version of the American south during the Great Depression. Therefore, solely based upon where it takes place, the movie is unable to fit in with other themes and occurrences that are present within Homer's poem. Also, due to where and when the movie takes place, customs embedded within the culture of the film give the story an ability to adapt to the occurrences in the *The Odyssey*. Versions of these events still happen in the movie; they just pertain to the culture in which it is set.

As a whole, the setting of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is the main cause of discrepancy and unity with *The Odyssey*, which definitely indicates the quality of this adaptation. The most common similarities between the Coen film and the *Odyssey* are either thematic or characteristic; since the occurrences in the plot are modified in the film adaptation, what unifies the movie with the poem is how *The Odyssey*'s original themes and characters persist. For example, in both works, said protagonist Odysseus in the *The Odyssey* and Ulysses, otherwise known as Everett, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* reflect the same characteristics. Both men are very cunning and, in some cases, are known for their ability to speak. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus encourages his crew to continue on their trek through hardships as he says,

“surely we are not unlearned in evils / This is no greater evil now that it was when the Cyclops had is cooped up in his hollow cave by force and violence /...Then do as I say, let us all be won over.” (12. 210-213) and as a result, his crew “quickly obeyed my [Odysseus’] words.” (12. 222). In Homer’s poem it is apparent that Odysseus’ speech holds power amongst the people he comes in contact with. This is also present within Coen’s film as Everett speaks far more than his two companions and always leads them through their escapades. This can also be observed through the film’s cinematography as Everett is always placed further up from than the other two escaped convicts.

From a thematic standpoint, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* ties in closely with the themes presented in *The Odyssey*; the film is just set in an entirely different era. One of the main themes that was seen in both works is family in relation to the concept of homecoming. In the film, Everett claims to have “travelled many a weary mile to be back with my [his] wife and kids” (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). While in the poem, after Odysseus returns to his family, he says that he must, “shall go to our [his] estate with its many orchards / to see my noble father who has grieved for me constantly” (23. 354-355). Even through all of their trials and tribulations, both of their families are a huge priority. Between the poem and the film, the most notable similarities between them are through their shared themes and characteristics, conceptually making them much easier to compare.

However, since the film is an adaptation, it does not follow everything that occurred in *The Odyssey* word-for-word. Due to the setting of the movie and

common standards within American filmmaking, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* separates itself from *The Odyssey*. This is not only seen with how the events in the film occur but also with the film's structure. The structure of the movie itself contrasts with Homer's epic poem as its narrative progression is linear. On the other hand, *The Odyssey* begins in medias res and is known for its ring structure. This contrast relates closely to each work's focus; in American film, stories that are well perceived by audiences progress linearly. *The Odyssey* holds a ring structure because it is a traditional epic oral poem that was mostly told rather than depicted with actors through a camera lens.

With that being said, it is vital to recognize the importance of each work's settings, which are accompanied with a set of customs that seem ordinary to the audience that experienced it. For example, *The Odyssey* relied heavily on getting assistance from Greek gods since that was the atmosphere of the society at the time. While in the film, the characters relied on asking for assistance to a singular God and receiving discreet reactions to these prayers because that was the atmosphere of the predominate religion, Christianity, in the American South in during the Great Depression. With that being said, the setting of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is what truly drives the differences between the two works; even though the actual events are very similar, the setting creates modifications so that the events can follow the society and culture that the film is meant to take place in. This can be observed in *The Odyssey*, as Odysseus and his crew disguise themselves under sheep to escape from Polyphemus the Cyclops while in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* the characters disguise themselves as members of the Klu

Klux Klan in order to free Tommy. Essentially, these modifications were necessary for the film to stay true to its setting which essentially is the main cause of the structural and narrative differences between the epic poem and the movie.

Even though there is a considerable gap between the creation of these two works, the film reflects many of the common themes found in the epic poem. However, what makes the film an adaptation rather than a direct re-creation is its setting; due to where and when the movie takes place, customs embedded within the culture of the film give the story an ability to adapt to the occurrences in The Odyssey and modify it so these events still happen in the movie. They just pertain to the culture that it is set in. The setting of O Brother, Where Art Thou? is the prime cause of discrepancy and unity with The Odyssey, which definitely indicates the sheer originality of this adaptation.