

Southern Pop Culture and the Literary Tradition in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

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Abstract: *This essay discusses the Coen brothers' movie O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000). Rather than reading the movie as a modern retelling of The Odyssey, as most critics have, it is read within a context of Southern literature and history. The essay points out the many references to Southern literature, particularly William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. These references, along with the mosaic of cultural icons from Southern history, serve to create a postmodern fantasy of the South, in which the Coen brothers play out their tale. By fusing tradition with an irreverent sense of history, the Coen brothers succeed in creating something new: a comedic fantasy of the South that stays true to its roots despite its heavy use of clichés.*

Key words: *American film – The Coen brothers – Southern literature – William Faulkner – Flannery O'Connor – Southern history – race.*

Much of the attention given to the Coen brothers' musical/road movie/comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)¹ has focused on its relation to Homer's *The Odyssey*. A sign at the end of the opening credits modestly tells us that the movie is "based upon 'The Odyssey' by Homer." The Coen Brothers have later confessed to never having read *The Odyssey*, but instead the comic book version of it.² As much attention, if not more, has focused on the movie's very popular soundtrack,

1. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000, Universal): Directors: Joel Coen [& Ethan Coen, uncredited]. Hereafter: *O Brother*.

2. Eddie Robson, *Coen Brothers* (London: Virgin Books, 2003), p. 204.

which features roots and bluegrass music from the 1930s. The soundtrack has sold more than six million copies, spent more than a year on the Billboard top 200, including several weeks at number one, it won five Grammy Awards in 2001, including Album of the Year (beating competing artists such as Bob Dylan and U2), and it has spawned a minor industry of its own: a live album and documentary called *Down from the Mountain*, a concert tour, as well as albums entitled *O Brother: The Story Continues*, *O Sister!: The Women's Bluegrass Collection* and *O Sister 2*, and so on. But so far very little has been written about the movie's connection with Southern literature, including both William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, and its use and misuse of Southern pop history. This essay is an attempt to examine the various ways in which the movie invokes both Southern literature and a Southern state of mind.

O Brother is the third instalment in the loose Southern trilogy that the Coen brothers refer to as their 'Hayseed Trilogy'; the first two movies being *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Raising Arizona* (1987) (Robson, 204). More so than the other movies, *O Brother* balances irreverently between on the one hand a deep-fried Southern kitsch and stereotype and on the other hand, a profound sense of Southern culture and literature. The result is, I will argue, that this musical comedy made by two eccentric filmmakers from Minnesota is the ultimate Southern movie of the new millennium, a glitzy postmodern depiction of a wild and wacky South that is worthy of standing alongside such classics as Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). The themes of the movie, hidden as they are under a layer of goofball humor, ultimately echo the Southern literary tradition and portray a Southern state of mind, in all its historical ambivalence, but the movie also challenges these views and plays with them in a postmodern way.

O Brother is set in the Depression-laden 1937 Mississippi Delta. It follows three chain gang escapees in a quest for a buried treasure.³ They only have 5 days before the valley where the treasure is buried will be flooded. The self-elected leader of the outfit is Ulysses Everett McGill,

3. Two movies are influences on *O Brother*, *Where Art Thou?*: Mervyn Le Roy's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Mottram, pp. 157-58.

played by George Clooney in a Golden Globe-winning performance. Everett's sidekicks are the simple Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson), and the angry Pete John Turturro, a Coen regular. The three bumpkins clearly allude to both *The Wizard of Oz* and the Three Stooges, but despite their obvious Southernness, the Coen brothers draw on a cultural icon that lends the movie an extra Southern layer: Clooney displays a wonderful scruffy Clark Gable look. According to *Salon's* review of the movie, "Clooney is the handsomest rube in the history of movies. He's doing a riff here on the early Gable ... who turned his impossibly masculine sexiness into a sleek joke."⁴ *The New York Times* also picked up on the Gable-allusion and points out an interesting aspect of Clooney's performance: "Mr. Clooney not only looks like Clark Gable, with his hair slicked against his scalp and his carefully etched Art Deco mustache, but he also gives the kind of detached, matinee-idol performance that used to be Gable's trademark. Mr. Clooney's self-conscious line readings and leisurely double-takes are like a wink to the audience. We never forget that, whatever else the script may demand, we're watching a movie star. That we're watching a star of the present moment playing, in effect, a star of an earlier age only doubles the fun and adds to our sense of dislocation."⁵ The Coen brothers deliberately use this sense of dislocation to play with the viewer. The minute we lay eyes on Everett, we think of Gable, who, to most, is synonymous with Rhett Butler. So along with *The Odyssey* we have *Gone with the Wind* as a backdrop in our consciousness during the movie. The Coen brothers then playfully debunk the viewers' expectations again and again, when they place the vain Everett in comic-ridiculous poses or situations, most notably his affinity for pomade and hairnets. This tactic is characteristic for the way the Coen brothers build up the movie. Instead of a carefully researched period piece, *O Brother* is, as Eddie Robson points out, a fantasy of Mississippi in the 1930s: "an idea of what it was like, based on old novels, movies, paintings, and the like." Robson points out the visual depiction of the landscape, which is "yellowish," when in fact it should be green

4. Charles Taylor, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" *Salon* (December 22, 2000). http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2000/12/22/o_brother/index.html?CP=IMD&DN=110

5. A. O. Scott, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?: Hail, Ulysses, Escaped Convict." *The New York Times* (Dec. 22, 2000): E1.

(222). Apart from the computer-enhanced bleached cinematography, which recalls the Depression-era photographs by Eudora Welty and Walker Evans, several references to classic Southern literature soon appear.

It should be noted that this is not the first movie where the Coen brothers allude to Southern literature. At the release of *Raising Arizona*, Joel Coen admitted the literary influences: "I guess you can detect our admiration for Southern writers like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor."⁶ The escaped convicts in *Raising Arizona* (1987) are Snopeses, which is one of the best-known families in Faulkner's fictional world; in *Miller's Crossing* (1990) one of the characters is named Mink, like Faulkner's Mink Snopes; and most obviously, in the movie *Barton Fink* (1991), the character Bill Mayhew is an alcoholic Southern novelist working as a screenwriter in Hollywood and carrying on an affair with his secretary. Apart from the obvious factual resemblances to Faulkner's life in Hollywood, the role was played by the actor John Mahoney, who bears a striking resemblance to Faulkner. In other words, the Coen brothers clearly know their Faulkner, and they enjoy alluding to him in their films.

Though uncredited, Faulkner's 1939 novel *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (or *The Wild Palms*, as it was titled for a long time) serves, I believe, as one of the underlying inspirations for *O Brother*. While both book and film depict, in a sense, "innocents" who take on tasks of heroic proportions, the Coen brothers are doing an ironic spin on the Faulkner text. The part of Faulkner's novel entitled "Old Man" tells the story of a "tall convict" who battles the great Mississippi River flood of 1927 to save a pregnant woman. The convict is a silent and simple man who despises women, including his female companion, and he is determined to make it back to the safety of prison where women cannot corrupt him further. On the last page we learn why the convict has lost faith in women: his former sweetheart has given up on him and instead married a man named Vernon Waldrip. In *O Brother*, Clooney is a talkative womanizer who escapes prison to make it back to his wife, who in the meantime is seeing a man named Vernon T. Waldrip.

6. Michael Ciment & Hubert Niogret, "Interview with Joel and Ethan Coen," *Positif* (July-August, 1987). Qtd. in Robson, p. 46.

Apart from the references to *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, several other references to Faulkner appear throughout the movie. The first obvious one comes when the trio arrives at Pete's cousin's place, a ravaged farm where rotting horse meat is served for dinner. The cousin's name is Wash Hogwallop, which may be an allusion to Wash Jones, the poor white squatter who killed Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* We also learn that one of Pete's and Wash's uncles is named Ratliff. In Faulkner's world, a V. K. Ratliff appears in the Snopes Trilogy. Furthermore, Wash's departed wife is named Cora. Faulkner also has a Cora: Cora Tull narrates three of the chapters in *As I Lay Dying*, and she also figures in the Snopes Trilogy. Like Faulkner's Wash, Pete's cousin turns against his friends, when he turns in the three convicts to get the reward. The police arrive at night and set fire to the barn where the convicts are sleeping, thereby the movie alludes heavily to "Barn Burning," one of Faulkner's best known short stories.

Apart from Faulkner, the Coen brothers also make room for a delightful allusion to Flannery O'Connor: Later in the movie, after Pete has been "loved ... up an' turned ... into a horney-toad" by three alluring sirens, Everett and Delmar meet a hearty one-eyed man, Big Dan Teague (John Goodman). Sure, he is the Cyclops out of Homer's poem, but Big Dan Teague is also a salesman, more specifically a Bible salesman. Big Dan offers to explain to them "how vast amounts of money can be made in the service of God Almighty." He invites Everett and Delmar out in the country for an idyllic picnic. Everett is looking forward to "some civilized conversation," but after the lunch, Big Dan shocks both the viewer and his two new acquaintances when he knocks them out flat with a large tree limb. "It's all about the money, boys!" he shouts before emptying their pockets for cash and taking off.

The Bible salesman turned corrupt is, of course, one of Flannery O'Connor's most memorable characters, from her story "Good Country People." Manley Pointer is the young Bible salesman who tricks the atheistic Hulga, who, like Everett, is too wrapped up in her own intellectual cleverness to see clearly. He takes her on a picnic and in a barn he steals her wooden leg. Before he leaves the shocked Hulga, he informs her that he has also stolen a woman's glass eye. "'Aren't you,' she murmured, 'aren't you just good country people?'" Before leaving her Manley tells Hulga, "You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was

born!"⁷ The reader is both surprised and gets to laugh at Hulga's utter confusion at Manley's declaration. The viewer has a similar reaction when it comes to Everett and Big Dan Teague. Everett has just bragged to Big Dan that "I like to think that I'm a pretty astute observer of the human race." However, his claim is soon belied. After Big Dan has knocked out Delmar, Everett still does not realize the gravity of the situation and keeps munching on his corn cone with a puzzled smile and asks, "What's goin' on, Big Dan?" (58), before he himself is knocked out. We are surprised, but we also cannot help but laugh at Everett's display of ignorance. In both cases, the corrupt Bible salesman gets the last laugh.

So to what use are all these references to Southern literature? As James Mottram points out, the Coen brothers "delight in red-herrings" (160). But beyond the playful namedropping, the references serve to ground the story further in its Southern setting, to lend it that unmistakable Southern feel, in the same way that the popular soundtrack grounds the movie in a certain time and place and lends it an unmistakable Southern identity. The Coen brothers may not have intimate first-hand knowledge of the South, but their knowledge of the literature of the region allows them to create a movie that is still distinctly Southern without becoming a pastiche. As A. O. Scott noted in his review, "the world on screen is one we intuitively recognize, even as its geography seems decidedly askew ... the brothers have made the American South into a gauzy dreamland. Their approach is a kind of down-home magic realism ..." (E1). Part of the recognition lies in the familiarity of the literary landscape they draw upon. If the characters seem eccentric and freakish they are so precisely because Southern writers like Faulkner and O'Connor had a penchant for writing about grotesque people. The Mississippi of the 1930s that the Coen brothers bring to life is indeed a fantasy, but it is one grounded in the reality of masterful writers.

Apart from the obvious and less obvious references to Southern literature, *O Brother* also brims with references to Southern pop culture or what could be called Southern pop history. These references are much more culturally accessible than the literary ones and therefore have been subject to more criticism. We meet a black blues musician, a fat-bellied

7. Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," *The Complete Stories* (New York 1971), pp. 290-91.

greedy politician, a bank robber, a religious congregation, and, of course, the KKK. In his *Village Voice* review, J. Hoberman acidly sums up these references as “a tepid gumbo of deep South clichés.”⁸ Hoberman may have a point, but he also misses one: Rather than just putting these clichés on parade in order to exploit the colorful and exotic myths behind them, the Coen brothers use them to display their postmodern play with history and also to build up the storyline. The clichés also serve to root the movie firmly in place, in this case, the Deep South. The sense of place adds to the southern state of mind that the movie strives for. Let us take a closer look at the elements that make up the “tepid gumbo.”

Our three unlikely heroes team up with a black blues musician Tommy Johnson, whom they pick up at a dusty crossroads in the middle of nowhere. Tommy has just sold his soul to the devil who in return “taught him to play the guitar real good.” Here the Coen brothers mix two legends in blues music: Blues musicians Tommy and Robert Johnson. Both men cultivated the rumor that they had sold their soul to the devil at the crossroads in return for their musical talent (Mottram, 154). We also meet the historical figure George ‘Babyface’ Nelson, who was “one of the toughest, and definitely the most heartless, of the Depression-era gangsters.”⁹ He became Public Enemy number one when Dillinger was shot in 1934. In the movie, our trio catches a ride with Babyface, who is on the run from the police. At the end of the movie, he is carried off to the electric chair in Mississippi. In real life, however, he was shot and killed in a gunfight outside Chicago in September 1934. The Coen Brothers’ Babyface speaks with a Southern drawl, so they have clearly rewritten history to suit their needs. The same loose use of historical figures is used with the character of Governor Menelaus ‘Pass the Biscuit,’ Pappy O’Daniel. The original W. Lee ‘Pappy’ O’Daniel was a Texas flour salesman who became a regional radio personality and then used that as a platform to launch himself into Texas politics, and became governor and later senator (Mottram, 155). So the Coen brothers have moved O’Daniels from Texas to Mississippi to add local color to the movie.

8. J. Hoberman, “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” *The Village Voice* (December 20-26, 2000). [Online]. http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0051_hoberman.20830_20.html

9. Joseph Geringer, “Baby Face Nelson: Childlike Mug, Psychopathic Soul,” *Crimelibrary*. <http://www.crimelibrary.com/americana/babyface/>

The movie also shows a darker side of the South's history featuring the Ku Klux Klan. In the movie's most unforgettable scene, most of the movie's elements of Southern pop history blend together: Tommy Johnson/race, corrupt politicians, and the KKK. Our heroes stumble upon a Klan meeting, where the KKK members chant and perform a choreographed dance around their black victim. As Mottram has pointed out, the scene is both a humorous reference to *The Wizard of Oz*, but also bears a frightening resemblance to the Nuremberg rallies. Joel Coen said of the scene that "we wanted that horrific image to be amusing, at the same time as being horrifying or spooky" (Mottram, 162). No doubt the Coen brothers are treading dangerous ground here, making an otherwise horrific situation into slapstick comedy, showing irreverence for the hallowed and controversial history of the South. Joel Coen insists that the movie does not comment on race or politics, claiming that "the political undercurrent of the movie functions primarily for dramatic purposes, because the politics are frankly pretty primitive. The bad guys are racial bigots and KKK Grand Dragons."¹⁰ Yet, the obvious ridicule of the KKK members and their rally is in itself a powerful rejection, however primitive. Mottram notes that the "bright, breezy musical comedy" is "underpinned by a simmering politically and socially conscious landscape" (157). While nowhere as intricate as the work of Faulkner or O'Connor and their worldviews, Coen's KKK images take shape as a playful disrespect for history.

A. O. Scott comments on the primitive use of good and bad, stating that the movie "offers a fairy-tale view of an America in which the real brutalities of poverty and racism are magically dissolved by the power of song." However, Scott notes, "Because the Coens are smart enough to know that such a place has ever existed only in fable and song, their vision takes on an unexpected poignancy. Rather than wallow in nostalgia for the past, they dare to reinvent it, to make it something strange, beautiful and new." It is exactly this newness, this playful and at times irreverent mosaic of Southern literature and history that makes *O Brother the Southern* movie of the new millennium. James Mottram argues that the Coen brothers deliberately sets out "to explore the use of myth in Western culture," by presenting the viewer with "a distortion of the past" (157).

10. Interview with Jonathan Romney: "Double Vision," *The Guardian* (May 19, 2000) F2.

The movie also deals with the dilemma that is the Southern state of mind. It encompasses both the nostalgia for the Old South and the scepticism for the New South. The Old and the New South are best illustrated in our three heroes. Even though Everett is the leader of the trio, we recognize that he is too full of himself (“the one with the capacity for abstract thought”), too articulate for his own good, and our sympathies lie with the dim-witted Delmar and Pete. When our heroes stumble upon a singing congregation performing baptisms in a river, it is not only an enchanting scene, but it further adds to the contrast between the gullible Pete and Delmar, who both get in line to get their sins washed away, and the atheistic Everett, who laughs at them and refuses to “join you two ignorant fools in a ridiculous superstition.” On one hand the movie sets up a dichotomy within the trio of the old and new South. Similarly the reason the trio is fighting time to get to the treasure is the planned flooding of the valley by The Tennessee Valley Authority. The flooding, which will destroy thousands of homes, is in Everett’s words in order to “hydro-electric up the whole durned state. Yessir, the South is gonna change. Everything’s gonna be put on electricity and run on a payin’ basis. Out with the old spiritual mumbo-jumbo, the superstitions and the backward ways. We’re gonna see a brave new world where they run everyone a wire and hook us all up to a grid. Yessir, a veritable age of reason – like the one they had in France – and not a moment too soon” (106). Of the three Everett again comes across as the enlightened one.

On the other hand there is a clear dichotomy of old and new between our three heroes and their surroundings. Everett, Delmar, and Pete live a simple hobo-like existence, as praised in the hobo hymn “Big Rock Candy Mountain” at the beginning of the movie. As a direct contrast to this carefree existence, the trio encounters Governor O’Daniel on his campaign. He is on his way to the radio station to broadcast his message. So instead of spending time to shake hands with potential voters, O’Daniel brushes them off: “We ain’t one-at-a-timin’ here, we *mass* communicatin’!” In this case the trio is up against an industrialized and commercialized South. So the Coen brothers are playing with the dichotomy between the nostalgia of the Old South and the inevitability of the New South. It is the same dilemma that is causing Governor O’Daniel distress. His opponent Homer Stokes (Faulkner has a Stokes in “A Justice”) seems to be winning the race for Governor on a campaign that includes a midget

and a broom to wipe the state clean. O'Daniel complains to his men: "people think this Stokes got fresh ideas, he's oh coorant and we the past" (77). But in the end, the movie is on the side of O'Daniel, as it turns out that Homer Stokes is the Grand Wizard of the KKK.

All these ambivalences – old and new, religion and atheism, black and white – sum up the historical dilemmas that have haunted and continue to haunt the Southern state of mind. But ultimately, it seems, the movie is about family, one of the corner stones in Southern culture. First of all, as Eddie Robson points out, the trio represents "a nuclear family," with Everett as the controlling father, Pete as the passive and suffering mother and Delmar as the gullible child (219). And secondly, the motivating factor in the plot turns out to be family. Just like the movie has debunked Southern history and pop culture, so the story debunks its own plotline, when it turns out that there is no buried treasure – Everett made it up in order to escape prison and stop his wife from getting married. So the entire odyssey has been in order to get back to the family. Again, one can bring in *Gone with the Wind*, in which Scarlett goes through all the hardship to get back to her family. And again, the Coen brothers play with the viewers' preconceived notions. In *Gone with the Wind*, Rhett Butler refuses to get tied down in marriage: "I'm going to Charleston, back where I belong ... I'm through with everything here. I want peace. I want to see if somewhere there isn't something left in life of charm and grace." Rhett leaves the nagging women and the movie with the immortal words "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."

In *O Brother*, the Gable-look-alike Everett wins back his wife Penny and also longs for some peace: "I'm awful pleased my adventuring days is at an end Time for this old boy to enjoy some repose." But Penny won't let Everett rest until he finds their wedding rings, which by now are at the bottom of the new lake, making it, in Everett's words "one hell of a heroic task." His dream of peace and freedom looks somewhat bleak at the end of the movie. In keeping with the movie's Southern state of mind, family becomes a double edged sword as well. The seven girls are tied to their mother by a string, and one gets the feeling that there is no escape for Everett either. So ends *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which, apart from being a modern retelling of *the Odyssey*, is also a profoundly Southern movie. By using specific references to Southern literature, and by using Southern clichés in a new and unique way, the Coen brothers succeed in

staying true to the complex Southern state of mind: they tell an original story that stays true to the Old South while being irreverently New.

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