CULTURAL PHOENIXES: THE ARCHETYPE OF ODYSSEUS REBORN IN THE MODERN ERA

By

LAURA CRKOVSKI

Integrated Studies Project

submitted to Dr. Lisa Micheelsen

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

April, 2009
Cultural Phoenixes: The Archetype of Odysseus Reborn in the Modern Era

Introduction

In Jean Baudrillard’s famous text *Simulacra and Simulation*, he asserted that the “real” no longer exists; instead everything is a copy of a copy (Wikipedia). And while some may disagree with this notion, one cannot deny the fact that many modern writers and filmmakers draw inspiration from ancient myths, legends and texts. Hence, even things that appear new in our modern era have roots planted deeply in the past. The recycling and reinvention of myth can be symbolized by the mythological phoenix. The phoenix is an immortal bird; because the phoenix cannot die at the end of its life it would burst into flames and from those ashes begin again (The Medieval Bestiary). Thus, the phoenix represents the immortality of myth and its ability to be resurrected by modern culture. One such cultural phoenix is the archetype of Odysseus, which has been reborn in the modern era. The Odysseus archetype stems from the ancient Greek hero of the same name. His archetype incorporates attributes such as duty, honor and love, but also elements of the heroic journey or adventure. The chief texts that contribute to the Odysseus archetype are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were composed by Homer, “whom the Greeks called simply ‘the poet’” (Finley 15). This archetype has appeared time and time again in the modern era. Some examples from popular culture include Steely Dan’s “Home At Last”, The Police’s “King of Pain”, Suzanne Vega’s “Calypso”, the video game “Age of Mythology”, the films *Troy, The Odyssey*, and even cartoons such as *The Simpsons* and *Ulysses 31*. In this paper, the Odysseus archetype will be explored through an interdisciplinary lens in the film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and the television program *Lost*. Each represents the archetype of Odysseus in different genres and styles, but ultimately the core of Odysseus remains at the heart of the character. Following the section on methodology is an explanation of the archetype.
of Odysseus and the society that created it. From here, this paper will move on to address the modern interpretations in *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and *Lost*. I conclude with the examination of the modern relevance of the Odysseus archetype, which will ultimately reveal the underlying similarity between two seemingly very different cultures.

**Methodology**

In the past, the archetype of Odysseus might have only been discussed from the perspective of a Classicist. But today there has been as much advancement in the field of academia as there has been in technology. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach is vital in order to understand accurately how the archetype of Odysseus has been reclaimed for the modern era. Rather than a single disciplinary study, which only undertakes examination based on a single perspective, interdisciplinary studies can be defined as the area where many disciplines intersect. It is at this crossroad that an accurate picture of the subject being studied becomes clear. It is with the help of classical studies, film studies, cultural studies, and psychology that the goal of understanding Odysseus as an archetype is possible. While utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, this paper will also employ aspects of structuralism such as paradigmatic thinking.

In Stephen Bonnycastle’s *In Search of Authority*, he notes that a hallmark of structuralism is that it is more concerned with the relation between things than with things considered in isolation (99). This is an important aspect to consider when looking at the archetype of Odysseus, because we are not studying the character of Odysseus in isolation. Rather, we are looking at the archetype of Odysseus as he was designed for the ancient Greeks as well as how this archetype has been reclaimed by modernity. As Bonnycastle writes “it is the relations between things which establish the existence of a system, and the rules of the system determine what is likely to happen in that system” (ibid). As we will come to understand, the world that
created Odysseus used his archetype to solicit certain social and ethical values and morals among men, just as our modern society reuses his story for entertainment and didactic purposes. The second aspect to structuralism is the notion of paradigmatic thinking. Paradigmatic thinking is characterized by picking out particular experiences for emphasis, “always moving vertically, looking for parallels, similarities, and contrasts” (Bonneycastle,102). Hence, when discussing the Odyssey, paradigmatic thinking becomes a point of reference because Homer does not tell of Odysseus’ voyage in chronological order. He is very much a paradigmatic storyteller who jumps around from point to point. Thinking about things paradigmatically is also similar to an archetype itself; both revolve around models or patterns. As Bonnycastle writes, “for some people important patterns in their lives may be supplied by literature itself. This was, for instance, the intention of the ancient Greeks, who used the Iliad and the Odyssey for teaching models of desirable behavior to adolescents” (104). Paradigmatic thinking or writing is often likened to a grasshopper hopping from one desirable point to the next. It also includes the stylistic devices such as allegory and metaphor. Metaphor is particularly important for this paper, as each of our modern examples relies on metaphor in order to reinstitute the archetype of Odysseus. Bonnycastle explains that even though James Joyce’s Ulysses was set in 1904 Dublin, he is recalling classical Greece’s Odyssey (107). “Metaphor stresses the vertical axis of language, substituting one image for another because they are similar” (106). In this way, we can understand the modern interpretations of the archetype of Odysseus as metaphor; a vertical axis which aligns the past with the present.

Along with metaphor, an axis can be established through adaptation from oral to written to visual media. The modern visual culture of the archetype of Odysseus has its roots in the world of film adaptation. Timothy Corrigan’s Film and Literature gives a theoretical background
on the history of the relationship between film and literature, which he describes as full of
ambivalence, confrontation, and mutual dependence. Corrigan explains that “these two ways of
seeing and describing the world have at different times despised each other, redeemed each
other, learned from each other, and distorted each other’s self-proclaimed integrity (1). This
introduction to film studies underscores the importance of the use of an interdisciplinary mindset,
which acknowledges how fields interact. The modern interpretations of Odysseus have come
along way from Homer’s original epic poem. The way that the information is disseminated has
changed over the centuries, as it has also changed in the past few years with increasingly
advanced technology in the film and television sector. The important thing to remember is the
fact that although the technique of storytelling has changed over time, the value of the story is
still relevant. The entertainment value that the ancient Greeks received from Homer’s *Iliad* and
*Odyssey* is the same entertainment our audiences receive today.

Stam notes Raymond Williams’ definition of culture “as a whole way of life” (224). Understanding cultural studies enables us to have a clearer idea of the impact that the archetype
of Odysseus has had on our society. It also allows us to understand a “whole way of life”, that
otherwise would remain muddled. Cultural studies is like a disciplinary omnivore: “cultural
studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of society’s arts, beliefs, institutions and
practices” (Nelson, Triechler, Grossberg 4). What is important about merging cultural studies
with an understanding of film is that cultural studies is not just concerned with “media
specificity” or film technique, although those things are important. Rather, cultural studies
concerns itself with the spread of culture over a “broad discursive continuum, where texts are
embedded in a social matrix and where they have consequences in the world” (Stam 225). Stam
explains that cultural studies calls attention to the social and institutional conditions under which
meaning is produced and received. Thus, cultural studies helps us to understand that Odysseus was created and informed by his society. Moreover, the fact that our modern world recreates and infuses our stories with the archetype of Odysseus illustrates how our culture is informed and built upon many of the same foundations as ancient Greek life. Cultural studies is significant in understanding the reasons why society created the archetype of Odysseus and the reasons why his archetype is still used by filmmakers. In *Cultural Studies*, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg explain, “in response to pressures to define cultural studies, it can be seen as a kind of process, an alchemy for producing useful knowledge about the broad domain of human culture” (2). Robert Stam notes that “as Jameson, Enzensberger, Richard Dyer, and Jane Feuer have all argued, to explain the public’s attraction to a text or medium one must look not only for the “ideological effect” that manipulates people into complicity with existing social relations, but also for the kernel of utopian fantasy reaching beyond these relations, whereby the medium constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what is desired and absent within the status quo” (310). As is evident, the kernel of utopian fantasy that exists within the archetype of Odysseus is reaching beyond the past and into the present. Cultural studies, in itself, is important in understanding how this archetype operates in modern society because it evaluates the whole picture, similar to what interdisciplinary studies allows us to achieve. Moreover, understanding the way film interacts with culture and society is also significant. Stam reiterates the notion that “films can nourish [our] dreams of upward mobility or encourage social transformation” (ibid).

In the case of Odysseus, his archetype serves as a model for the heroic man, both within the context of ancient Greece and today.

*The Archetype of Odysseus*
An archetype can be defined as “the original pattern or model from which all things of the same kind are copied or on which they are based; a model or first form; prototype” (dictionary.com). Similarly, the archetype of Odysseus can be defined as a model that originally emerged from Homer’s Odysseus. There are certain elements, in combination, that create the archetype of Odysseus. They include the character traits of intelligence and courage, a significant journey that informs the character’s existence, and a strong love for and loyalty to domestic life. Furthermore, Odysseus’ journey in the *Odyssey* is not told in chronological order. Rather audiences are given events out of order and are left to piece together the story. This storytelling device, used by Homer, is also used by many modern writers and filmmakers. Consequently, not only are certain character traits and journeys part of the archetype of Odysseus, but so is the way the story is told.

There are two main texts in which Odysseus is characterized: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both of which are traditionally attributed to Homer. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not only great sources of the archetype of Odysseus, but as Cedric Whitman notes “in the long run [...] they both contributed their share to the perfecting of what we call the classical spirit” (309). Whitman explains that both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* embody “the polarities of that spirit” for they remain “for us the archetypes of the Classical, the Hellenic” (ibid), although, according to Stephen Harris and Gloria Platzner, Homer is “a poet about whom we know virtually nothing beyond the speculation that he may have lived on an island off the coast of Asia Minor between 800 and 700 BCE” (363). Regardless of the author’s identity both works exhibit “what scholars agree are signs of oral composition,” similar styles and “to a lesser extent structure” (ibid). It is important to remember that in Homer’s world, epic poems like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would have been performed orally and most likely each time they were performed they would be created anew as
no written text had been established yet (Schein 2). Schein notes that “at the same time, the poems he sang were formulaic: the language, meter and style, as well as the kinds of events and even many of the specific events in the story, were traditional and common to all poets” (ibid). As such, part of the formula was to use a combination of proper names and epithets, such as grey-eyed glaukopis, which is often translated into English as 'grey eyed' likely in fact means 'owl-faced Athena, or swift-footed Achilles. According to Schein, Odysseus has often been assigned the adjectives or adjectival appositional phrases: “brilliant, resourceful, sacker of cities, long-suffering” and wily (6). These epithets, while working with the formulaic structure of the epic poem, also reveal aspects of the archetype of Odysseus. The epithets tell us that Odysseus was characterized as being resourceful, intelligent, devious, and indeed this is true. As Harris and Platzner note, Odysseus was “the most gifted speaker among the Greeks, [... using] his characteristic diplomacy and common sense to his advantage” (368), for it was Odysseus who persuaded the Greeks not to “retreat their ships, stepping into the gap when Agamemnon’s leadership momentarily falter[ed], and preserving discipline and morale” (ibid). By doing so, he is able to ensure safety for himself and his troops. In this sense, Odysseus is the opposite of heroes like Achilles and Heracles who are known for their brute force and strength, and perhaps that is what makes his archetype compelling to audiences as well as everlasting. Odysseus gives audiences a multi-faceted perspective of a mortal hero, which allows for layers and depth of character to develop, especially over the ages. Furthermore, the relationship between hero and the divine also plays a role in the archetype of Odysseus. The reason for Odysseus’ ten-year journey home stems from the wrath incurred by the god Poseidon. Odysseus blinded the sea-god’s son Polyphemos, in an attempt to escape from his cave. But Odysseus is also a favourite of Athena, goddess of wisdom, and intelligent warfare. According to Schein, the “relationship
between success and a divinity, especially Athena, is marked throughout the *Iliad*. Athena favoured “the naturally successful, and the natural winners”, which undoubtedly expresses the heart of Odysseus (57).

Odysseus was created by Homer, but one can imagine that Homer would have drawn inspiration from the culture and society around him. Homer composed his epic works somewhere around the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.E. (Pomeroy 44), yet most of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* take place in what was, by this time, the distant past. Sarah Pomeroy comments that Homer uses a technique known as “epic distancing” to give the “aura of a long-ago heroic society” while still infusing social institutions, ideologies, interests and passions that would have conformed to the audience’s “real-life experiences” (ibid). Pomeroy remarks that “the norms and values of Homeric society are internally consistent and coherent enough to be given a place in the not-so-long-ago past, which we may assign roughly to the end of the Greek Dark Age” (ibid). Pomeroy notes that Homer’s Greece “is divided geographically into independent regions of various sizes, each on constituting a *demos* (the geographical territory and the people who reside within it). “A typical *demos* would contain several settlements- towns and villages- along with their adjoining farmlands and pastures” where they would have a leader given the title of *basileus*, which is usually translated as “king” (ibid). Hence, Odysseus is commonly known as the king of Ithaca, but as Pomeroy writes, the title *king* is somewhat misleading because such people are not monarchs who hold absolute sway over people. Pomeroy explains that the word *chief* is a more accurate translation of the word *basileus* because the *basileus* was a leader who held a great deal of power and authority, yet his power would be limited in coercing others (ibid). As such, people did not live in isolation; rather they lived in small village communities.
Pomeroy notes that Homeric males followed a code of behaviour that is typical of warrior societies (ibid). A good man is expected to “honor the gods, keep promises and oaths, and be loyal to friends and fellow warriors.” Pomeroy continues to write that “he should exhibit self-control, be hospitable, and respect women and elders” while showing “pity to strangers and beggars” (49). However, these qualities are desirable, not required. Pomeroy explains that a man who is merciless and cruel could still be considered good (ibid). In *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, James M. Redfield writes that the warrior is placed on the edge of culture, in a position where he can view it as a whole (102). Redfield explains that “culture has created a human world within which men can live”, but the warrior knows that world is insubstantial. “Culture,” he continues, “which appears to us in our social lives so solid and enduring, reveals itself on the battlefield for what it is. The values conferred on life by culture are the only values we have, but they are a secondary product, sustained only by men’s common assertion for them” (103). Thus for the warrior, “culture appears as a translucent screen against the terror of nature” where the heroic vision is of “meaning uncertainty rescued from meaninglessness” (ibid). Odysseus is very much a product of this warrior society. He is often placed on the outside, although he struggles to return to the inside. He values his domestic world, but also acknowledges his heroic responsibilities and works to fulfill those obligations. And it is Odysseus’s acceptance of duty which made him a role model for Greek boys.

In order to understand the archetype of Odysseus, one must first understand that the journeys taken by Odysseus are what truly inform his personality and ultimately shape his archetype. Odysseus’s adventures are too numerous to list, but the one thing that remains constant within each journey is that no matter what obstacle he faced, Odysseus remained calm, cool and collected. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell notes that the “first
stage of the mythological journey- which we have designated the “call to adventure”- signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (58). When Odysseus is first called to the Trojan war, he does not want to go. His life is comfortable, and unlike other men who were preoccupied with heroic duty and military warfare, Odysseus was happy in his domestic life. Even when Agamemnon’s ambassadors arrived, Odysseus pretended to be insane. It was not until they put his son Telemachus in front of the plow he was driving that he acted to save his son and thus prove his sanity (Platzner and Harris 362). In W.H.D. Rouse’s *Gods, Heroes and Men of Ancient Greece: Mythology’s Great Tales of Valor and Romance*, he notes that Odysseus loved his wife Penelope so much that “all he wanted was to go home again and be at peace” (172). But as Platzner and Harris note, once Odysseus is committed to the war effort he becomes the most loyal officer and the prime strategist and morale builder of the Greek troops (362). However, the bond between Odysseus and his wife Penelope remains remarkably strong even though they are separated for quite some time. Furthermore, Odysseus really only has one goal in his life and that is to return home to his true love, wife, and counterpart, Penelope. These adventures were entertaining and informative tales for the Greek people as they demonstrated the values of perseverance, dedication, intelligence, as well as rules of social customs and moral obligations. After the Trojan war has ended, which is won only when Odysseus has the brilliant and cunning idea of building the Trojan horse, Odysseus’s new objective becomes returning home. There really is no other hero who fully values his wife and child quite like Odysseus. In the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus encounters Achilles’ ghost in the underworld, Achilles says “I would rather be a hired hand back up on earth,/slaving away for some poor dirt farmer,/than lord it over all these withered dead” (Book 11 ln 344-6). Schein interprets this as meaning that “mortal life on earth is
what counts” (48). Schein further notes that “there is no immortality after death for Achilles or any other Homeric hero, except through being immortalized for his achievements in epic verse” (ibid). While this may be true, it appears as if Odysseus already understands this, whether it is consciously or subconsciously. His actions have always indicated loyalty and dedication to his domestic life. Hence, a strong passion towards a wife or lover is imperative of this archetype.

As is evident, there are many aspects which create the archetype of Odysseus. Firstly, the archetype recognizes heroic qualities such as strength, as well as intelligence, resourcefulness, trickery and deception. The archetype also recognizes the importance of domestic life and heroic responsibility. Odysseus never loses sight of his goal to be reunited with Penelope, who truly is his counterpart, as she is ever bit as resourceful as he is. But he obliges with his heroic duty of serving in the Trojan war and does his best to ensure a Greek victory. And as we shall now see by looking at *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and *Lost*, the archetype of Odysseus is very much alive in our modern world.

**Odysseus Reborn in the Modern Era**

*O Brother Where Art Thou?*

In 2001, Joel and Ethan Coen’s *O Brother Where Art Thou?* was released in theatres. The Coens have acknowledged that the film is based on Homer’s *Odyssey*, although they both admit they have never read it. Since the film is based upon the *Odyssey*, the archetype of Odysseus is also present within the film, although this is not always the case, as we will see in our television example, *Lost*. *O Brother Where Art Thou?* follows the journey of three Mississippi convicts who escape from a chain-gang breaking rocks on a dusty Mississippi road. Ulysses Everett McGill, played by George Clooney, is the protagonist and it is in his character that the archetype of Odysseus is seen. As Stephen Vater puts it, Everett and Odysseus “share
similar personalities along with a run in to similar circumstances”. Everett brings his two convicts pals along for the journey; they are Delmar O’Donnell and Pete, played by Tim Blake Nelson and John Tuturro. Part of the comedic humor in this film is due to the coupling of classical literature with quirky, off the wall characters. Each character has roots in the *Odyssey*, yet the Coens comically play up certain attributes, which speaks to the transcendental power of Homer’s work. One of the main differences in modern revivals is the fact that the *Odyssey* was originally designed as an epic poem, whereas *O Brother Where Art Thou?* is a comedy. This genre crossing speaks not only to the skill of the Coens as writers and directors, but also to the everlasting power of Homer’s work. Homer’s poetry has stood the test of time and has proved capable of genre swapping without losing the heart and soul of Odysseus.

The first indication that this film tells a story parallel to the *Odyssey* is at the beginning of the film. The film opens with this quote from the *Odyssey*: “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...”. Thus right from the beginning of the film the stage is set for a journey that parallels Odysseus’s epic adventure. Joel Coen has been quoted as saying “It just sort of occurred to us after we’d gotten into it somewhat that it was a story about someone going home, and sort of episodic in nature, and it kind of evolved into that. It’s very loosely and very sort of unseriously based on the *Odyssey*” (wikipedia). Even though the film borrows from the *Odyssey* the Coens proudly admit they've never read it (Tatara). Paul Tatara from CNN Entertainment notes that viewers who have never read the *Odyssey* are in the same boat as the Coens and will have no problem viewing the film. Interestingly, the notion of not needing to have read the *Odyssey* in order to understand the parallels in this film gives credence to universality of the archetype of Odysseus. The story of Odysseus, and his character archetype have worked their way into the
deep unconsciousness of humanity. If this was not the case then all parallels would be lost on modern audiences, which they are clearly not.

The story of *O Brother* is episodic in nature, but differs from the *Odyssey* in that it is a constant “and then” story. This storytelling technique also harkens back to the era of silent films and tableaus, as each part of the journey has a certain rise and fall to the action, and in theory could stand on its own. However, the *Odyssey* tells Odysseus’ journey in a more artful way, whereas *O Brother Where Art Thou?* throws Everett, Delmar and Pete into situations, one after another. As the trio embark on their journey they are met by a blind prophet, an allusion to Tiresias, who warns that the “treasure [they] seek is not the treasure [they will] find”, which turns out to be true. Everett promised Delmar and Pete a large golden treasure at the end of the journey, but this was never the case. Everett only needed Delmar and Pete to go with him because they were handcuffed together, and he needed help making his way home to Penny. Along the way, the trio meet up with a Cyclops, Lotus Eaters, Sirens, and Laestrygoneans. The Cyclops, or Polyphemos is the son of Poseidon. Odysseus and his men become trapped in the cave of Polyphemos and in order to free himself and his men, Odysseus devises a clever ruse. Odysseus and his men work to sharpen a stick and create a large spear, which is then heated over fire. Odysseus introduces himself to Polyphemos as “noman” so that when he wounds him, the Cyclops is forced to yell for help calling “noman is wounding me”. Once morning arrives, Odysseus’ men are able to escape as the Cyclops removes the boulder from the door in order to seek help. The Cyclops in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, is a little different from Homer’s. In the film, the Cyclops is played by John Goodman and is a one-eyed, bible salesman that ends up conning Everett and Delmar. Everett tries to sweet talk his way out of the situation, but he unfortunately does not have the same foresight as Odysseus because he ends up getting knocked
out. What that lacks in likeness to Odysseus, it makes up for in great humor with audiences. The Lotus Eaters scene also provides comedy for audiences. As a stream of Baptists make their way through the forest down to the creek, humming gospel, Everett, Delmar, and Pete watch them. Pete and Delmar are enchanted by them, following each movement in awe, whereas Everett follows but is never fully immersed. Delmar and Pete are so moved that they want to wash away their sins, and be baptized. Everett, however, does not. Much like Odysseus, he is able to keep his focus and not give in to the crowd. And then the boys happen upon a couple of Sirens bathing by the river. Once again this scene provides comedy once the Everett and Delmar awaken to find a missing Pete. This scene also alludes to Circe who turned Odysseus’ men into swine. Delmar believes that the Sirens have turned Pete into a toad. Later audiences learn the Sirens turned him into the authorities for the reward. And finally the Laestrygonians, who appear in the form of the Ku Klux Klan. In order to save their friend Tommy, they must disguise themselves as part of the KKK. In this scene, audiences again find humor as the trio haphazardly disrupts the rally, and escapes with Tommy.

The naming of characters is inherently important not only in literature but also within film, as names give audiences insight into a character’s heart and soul. In *O Brother Where Art Thou?* Ulysses Everett McGill, although he goes by Everett, shares his name with the Roman equivalent of Odysseus. Thus, right off the bat we know that Everett is a representation of Odysseus. Another interesting consideration is the fact that as Adele Haft notes Odysseus’ name is derived from “to hate or display anger/wrath at someone” (97). Haft continues to assert that the *Odyssey* depicts Odysseus as the “Man of Wrath- as he is the recipient of wrath of both gods and men” (ibid). Furthermore, Odysseus has become synonymous with grief, and sorrow as he longs to reunite with Penelope and return home. Similarly, Everett is the recipient of the law’s
wrath, but even further Everett becomes famous with the Soggy Bottom Boys for singing a song called “Man of Constant Sorrow,” which undoubtedly characterizes the core of Odysseus as well as Everett. But what landed Everett in the chain gang in the first place? Everett was convicted of practicing law without a license, which is not only an extraordinarily funny crime in the context of the film, but within the context of Odysseus as well. If there was one crime that Odysseus would commit it would perhaps be something along those lines. We know that Odysseus was a sack-er-of-cities, deceptive and used trickery to his advantage but the underlying characteristic of those traits is intelligence. Moreover, the Greeks admired those aspects of Odysseus because they helped win wars, but in a modern context, and a comedic one at that, a crime of practicing law without a license seems somewhat fitting. As Paul Tartara notes, Everett is no rocket scientist “regardless of his propensity for six-syllable words”. Tartara continues to write that this is a “common Coen brothers dialogue trick, one that works more often than it fails. Just like the characters in "Raising Arizona," these guys are beyond idiotic, but still speak as if they read Plato in the outhouse and have a thesaurus tattooed on the underside of their eyelids.” The Coen’s show that even though they are paralleling the Odyssey, an epic adventure, it can be done in a comedic way that is relatable for 21st century audiences. In The Critical Eye’s review, they wrote, “once the dust has settled by movie's end, you realize how remarkable the Coens’ achievement is. They've taken an epic and, miraculously, found the humor in it. By the same token, they've taken the absurd character of Everett and made us realize that underneath his buffoonery, he is every bit as noble as Homer's Odysseus”. Although, Everett has his own personality traits, the archetype of Odysseus does make up a good chunk of his character, which the Coens use to their comedic advantage.
Many other characters in the film have names that correspond to characters from the
*Odyssey*. The characters of Menelaus Pappy O’Daniel and Homer Stokes take their names from
the King of Sparta and the *Odyssey’s* creator respectively. Furthermore, Everett’s wife’s name is
Penny, and she is his motivation for escaping from prison. Everett, like Odysseus, is determined
to return to his love and stop her from marrying a suitor. When Odysseus returned to Ithaca he
was forced to remain disguised, similarly Everett had to remain in disguise when he was on stage
performing “Man of Constant Sorrow” at the Pappy O’Daniel dinner party. This act of disguise
allows Everett to get close enough to Penny without revealing himself to the authorities. It is also
at this event where Pappy O’Daniel pardons the Soggy Bottom Boys and Everett is free to return
home, where he is reunited with his wife Penny. Ultimately, the film ends with the reunion of
Everett and Penny, once again illustrating that the archetype of Odysseus is strongly represented
in every aspect of *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

**LOST**

As we have seen so far, the archetype of Odysseus is alive and kicking in modern cinema.
His presence can also be felt in television. On September 22, 2004 the pilot episode of *Lost*
premiered on ABC and immediately became a cult classic with an average of 16 million viewers
per episode in the first season, and subsequently became a critical success winning many awards
(*Lost Wiki*). Since then four full seasons of the show have aired, with the fifth season currently
being shown. *Lost* follows the lives of plane crash survivors on a mysterious island in the middle
of the pacific. The series has worked itself into popular culture and developed a huge following
of devoted *Losties*. Part of the reason why the show is so successful is because of its ability to
fuse mythology, literature, philosophy, science, and religion with fantastic writing and acting.
Storytelling on *Lost* is in itself an art form, taking many pages from the *Odyssey* as events are
told in a non-linear fashion. On any other show this may make things confusing for viewers, but in the world of *Lost* all becomes clear, leaving viewers spellbound until the next episode.

Although many characters in the show embody some of Odysseus’ heroic character traits, it is Desmond David Hume, played by Henry Ian Cusick, who is a manifestation of the Odysseus archetype. Desmond shares many similarities with Odysseus, most notably the two are shipwrecked on deserted islands after trying to pursue honor, and both desire nothing more than to return home to their loves named Penelope. Viewers first meet Desmond in the second season of *Lost*, where he has been living in the Swan station, also referred to as “the hatch” which John Locke and Boone discover during season one. But it is not until the season finale that viewers get a glimpse of who Desmond is and his story. And just like Odysseus’ it does not begin at the beginning. As *Lost* is a show that thematically centers around metaphysics and time travel it is only fitting that time is non-linear. Desmond’s story is told in the same fashion as Odysseus’s story, which starts in the middle and only reveals all of itself over the course of the narrative. As Sander Lee notes in his article “Meaning and Freedom on the Island” Desmond’s “story starts in the middle of the plot and only slowly is his whole story revealed to us through flashbacks” (72) which viewers would then piece together. For many television programs and films this technique would drive viewers away who do not wish to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Yet for *Lost* this is what keeps viewers on their toes and watching.

The journey that both Desmond and Odysseus are on is a cosmic journey, which in many ways is paralleled with how the story is told. Nanno Marinatos writes in “The Cosmic Journey of Odysseus” that the adventures that are had by Odysseus reflect a type of tale, which had become common in the East Mediterranean tradition (382). Marinatos continues to say that this “tale entailed the hero’s journey to the end of the universe” (ibid). And certainly Desmond as well as
Odysseus has traveled to the ends of the universe. Desmond’s journey begins when he decides that he must win a sailing race around the world to regain his honor. Joseph Campbell discusses the hero’s call to adventure, and notes that “a blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood” (51). It is this blunder, which plays a weighty role in the world of *Lost*. For Desmond, his blunder leaves him shipwrecked on the island and thus starts his adventure. But as viewers will later learn it was no mere-chance that Desmond shipwrecked on the island, similarly it was Freud who believed that “blunders are not the merest chance” (ibid). So like Odysseus, whose blunder (killing the sea god’s son) started him on his journey, the notion of Desmond looking for a way to validate himself marks the starting point of his great journey.

As Marinatos notes “in the *Odyssey* we read that Calypso’s island “lies far away in the sea”” (397), and even the name Calypso, derived from apocalypse, means to conceal or cover. So just as Odysseus was stranded on an island so is Desmond. Although he is not being kept against his will by a beautiful sea nymph, but rather a strange and mysterious force. The island itself remains hidden from most people, it is only those who are summoned to it who can find its secret location. In the season two finale “Live Together, Die Alone” Desmond and Locke are inside the Swan station. They believe that pushing the button every 108 minutes has been a ruse, an experiment that the DHARMA Initiative was conducting. But in their haste to let the clock run out, Desmond discovers that indeed they do need to push the button to control some sort of electromagnetic field. Charles Taliaferro and Dan Katrul note “this takes a dramatic turn when the numbers are allowed to reach zero, as this threatens to bring about an apocalyptic end to the island itself” (83). They continue “but this is quite telling and true to the story of Odysseus”. As noted above Calypso is derived from apocalypse. And as Taliaferro and Katrul argue the act of
defiance of not pushing the button can be interpreted as meaning the removal of Calypso (removing the mere appearances of what you want to get what really matters) (ibid). It is Desmond’s quick thinking and courage that allow him to recognize their mistake and turn the fail safe key in order to save the island. Notably, it is also at this time of uncovering that the location of the island becomes visible to the outside world. Penny Whidmore’s team of scientists are able to locate the island because of this electromagnetic anomaly. And it is also within this moment that a new dimension of suspense, mystery and excitement is created for fans.

Unlike Odysseus, Desmond has no men whom Circe can turn into swine. But the character of Circe is still a part of Lost. When we look past the literalness of what Circe meant for Odysseus, and interpret her presence in a different light one can understand the many parallels she shares with Eloise Hawking. Eloise Hawking, played by Finnoula Flanagan, is an ex-Oxford University physicist, and expert on the island. Although her full role and identity remain somewhat mysterious, we know that she fits the criteria of Circe as described by Marinatos. Marinatos writes that Circe’s domain is a divided location “like the land of the Aethiopeans” (399). She notes that as D. Frame has suggested “Circe’s role in the Odyssey is both to usher the hero into the underworld and to receive him back again from it. When Odysseus and his men return to life and light, she is naturally equated with dawn” (ibid). As such Hawking ushers Desmond into the island. In “Flashes Before Your Eyes” Desmond experiences a lapse in time after he turns the fail-safe key. He awakes in Glasgow to his past life with Penny, still fully cognizant of what has occurred on the island, yet unaware how he has transcended space and time to return to what he believes is the past- similar to Odysseus’ journey to the underworld. It is Hawking who is there to receive him, at the antique store where he goes to purchase an engagement ring for Penny. As she explains to Desmond the workings of the
universe she tells him that it is his duty to push the button in the hatch and that it shall be the only great thing he ever does. Of course this plays on Desmond’s emotions, as he wants, more than anything, to be seen as a courageous man worthy of Penny’s love. Although he has returned to Penny, his story yet again parallels Odysseus because his journey is not over and before long the flashes end and he is back (in the present) on the island.

Season five has not given Desmond fans much to talk about. But what has been suggested thus far is that Desmond’s journey is far from over. During Daniel Faraday’s own time travel, he makes contact with Desmond and tells him that he must find Daniel’s mother, Eloise Hawking. Desmond goes on a journey to find her, and when he finally does she is with Ben, Jack, Kate, and Sun explaining how to get back to the island. Understandably, the last thing Desmond wants to do is go back to the island. He has been reunited with his love Penelope and as we later learn has had a son. But even as he expresses his disbelief at the others returning, Hawking notes that “the island is not done with you yet” (5.03 Jughead). It has not yet been revealed what the island needs now from Desmond but one may assume the call to adventure is coming. Platzner and Harris note that even after the *Odyssey*, Odysseus’ adventures are not over. He once again gets his call to adventure and continues to travel and pursue heroic deeds (462-3). Thus, a parallel once again is established as both adventurers must begin their journeys anew, as destiny has much more in store.

**Modern Relevance**

The rebirth of Odysseus, and the recycling of all myths for that matter speak loudly about our society. In a world that at first glance seems so inherently different from the past, the use of ancient myths in modern culture tells us that our worlds are not that different. Our cultures value many of the same things such as honor, duty, responsibility, and love. Many of our modern films
and television programs use the archetype of Odysseus over and over again, creating new angles for entertainment purposes, while the core message remains the same. The archetype of Odysseus serves as an example for what men should be like, not only in the ancient world, but our modern world as well. Scott A. Belsky writes in his article “The Poet Who Sings Through Us: Homer’s Influence in Contemporary Western Culture”, “there are those who fear that ancient Greece and particularly Homer are losing their influence on contemporary cultural though due to the increased push for diversity in literary studies” (216). Now while this may prove true to some extent in academia, it has become evident through the course of this paper that ancient myths do still hold a special place in the hearts of modern storytellers. Belsky continues to note that such “fears seem premature” because “Homer pervades culture both within and outside of the university; and despite the dirges for the old bard, his clarion song continues to resonate and reverberate at the centre of the western world” (216-7). Indeed, Rouse notes that in Odysseus’ homeland of Ithaca “the people are kind, and still very proud of their great man [... even though] three thousand years” have passed” (172). And that is the effect of Homer’s great epic and the admirable archetype of wily Odysseus. The character traits that Odysseus represents such as intelligence and bravery are still admired and respected in people today. For the people of Ithaca, Odysseus is not just a hero, but a home-town hero. Unquestionably, the effect that Homer has had on the world has transcended time and geographical confines.

Additionally, the resurgence of the archetype of Odysseus says much about how our society interprets roles, even in casting. In Ancient Greek myth, Achilles and Heracles were admired for their heroic skills, chiefly courage and physical strength. Although Odysseus is brave and courageous, he is not as physical as Achilles or Heracles. In fact, Odysseus is often described as being middle aged, whereas Achilles is young and at his prime. Odysseus has an
established life; he is married, has a child and is also basileus of Ithaca. So, unquestionably he is older than the average hero, and perhaps a little less agile. But rather than being useless to Greek army, he is their star player. Odysseus relies on his skills of intelligence, trickery and deception, which enable him to create the Trojan horse that wins the war. The fact that Odysseus was middle aged is interesting when looking at how his archetype has resurged in modern times. In Hollywood, there is usually a stigma attached to middle-age female actresses, however, this stigma does not apply to middle-age male actors. Just like Odysseus is able to transcend physical restrictions, so do these actors who are seen as seasoned performers, many of whom still retain their star power and sex appeal. They may not be as agile or physical as their younger comrades, but they are seen as wiser. Thus, middle-aged actors use this to their advantage, just like Odysseus. Throughout the course of this paper, we have seen modern examples of the archetype of Odysseus. The archetype of Odysseus, reborn in the modern era, tells us that the our perceptions about masculinity have their roots in the ancient world. Odysseus as a hero archetype told men how to behave in Ancient Greece; and today this archetype is still exuding morals and values. Odysseus is a figure which all men can look up to, the archetype teaches responsibility, the value of intelligence, wit, and domestic life and love. If we look at our modern examples from O Brother Where Art Thou? and Lost, it becomes evident that although the archetype is updated and the story is changed, the core of what Odysseus represented is still able to shine through. Thus, even though hundreds- even thousands of years separate our societies, they are not as different as one might think.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this paper, it has become evident that the Odysseus archetype is present in many modern films, television programs, songs and stories. In O Brother Where Art
Thou?, we saw how this archetype can be transposed to meet the demands of modern comedies. This film also serves as an interesting example of how successful a film can be at keeping the core of Odysseus alive, while interpreting his tale in completely different circumstances. As such, the tale is able to fully satisfy the needs of modern day audiences, while fully utilizing the archetype of Odysseus. Similarly, the writers of Lost have used the archetype of Odysseus to add another mythological dimension to their already fantastic show. Whereas O Brother Where Art Thou changes genres, but relates many aspects or dimensions of the original tale, Lost is able to subvert this by having the character of Desmond personify the archetype of Odysseus but not necessarily all of the similarities of his journey like in O Brother. Lost is able to fuse this ancient mythology with other mythologies, ultimately synthesizing each to the point that they are at once recognizable, and then completely different and relatable only in the modern era. It is with an interdisciplinary approach that all of the intricacies of each film, and the archetype of Odysseus as a whole can be understood. Thus, revealing that even though Odysseus may be thousands of years old, his story carries as much weight in the modern world, as it did in the ancient. Certainly, the archetype of Odysseus is a cultural phoenix that will continue to rise from the ashes and inspire future tales of heroic adventure, love and duty.
Works Cited and Consulted


---. “Flashes Before Your Eyes” 3x08. ABC. 14 Feb 2007.


---. “Jughead” 5x03. ABC. 28 Jan 2009.


O’ Brother Where Art Thou. Dir. Joel & Ethan Cohen. Touchstone Pictures. 22 Dec
2000. 


