"O Brother, Where Art Thou?" as a Modern Odyssey

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – prevoditeljski smjer i nakladništvo

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IZJAVA

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Abstract

The goal of this paper will be to demonstrate the ways in which the classical poem *The Odyssey* influenced its cinematographic adaptation in the form of the Coen brothers' movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* while simultaneously analysing the changes that are present in the film. The Coen brothers are postmodern(ist) artists/filmmakers, so the paper will analyse the key characteristics of the movement that are present within the movie; furthermore, it will provide a detailed look at the various mythical tales that are combined within *The Odyssey* and their equivalents in the movie, the way the characters from the former work are personified in the latter, and the structure of the works themselves, while focusing mainly on the film adaptation. Besides those points, this paper will also focus on the significant role of music, together with the time period in which the movie is set, the subtle socio-political commentary present in the film, as well as the characteristics of the road movie genre.

Keywords: postmodernism, *The Odyssey*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, music, road movie.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the similarities and differences between *The Odyssey* and its modern day adaptation in the form of the Coen brothers' movie *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* The adaptation itself is not as straightforward and clear-cut as many adaptations seem to be, but rather presents a creative reimagining of the story and the characters present in it, set in an environment which is slightly more familiar to contemporary audiences (especially American audiences) than Ancient Greece – rural Mississippi of the early 1900s.

In the first chapter, the paper looks at the features of postmodernism, both generally speaking and specifically in relation to films in order to establish that the Coens' films display features of this particular artistic movement. The second chapter contextualises the concepts of "adaptation theory" and "auteur theory" with the goal of explaining why *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* succeeds as an adaptation, even though it is not necessarily faithful to the original text. The third chapter takes a closer look at the source text – *The Odyssey*, focusing on three specific aspects that the Coens decided to adapt: the story, the structure, and the characters. Chapter four summarises the various other sources of adaptation and inspiration that the Coens used from the sphere of cinema, and especially focusing on the intertextual relationship between *O, Brother* and Preston Sturges' film *Sullivan's Travels*.

The fifth chapter analyses key features of *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* and by using a comparative approach analyses their presentation in the film versus their presentation in the original material. Moreover, this chapter details a specific characteristic of the movie, whose integration gives it "unique flavour" – that being the music. All the features analysed in this chapter turn the film into a distinctly humorous and recognisable adaptation that still maintains the level of quality of the original text, and the timeless profundity of its main theme – the journey of man.

1. Postmodernism, Postmodern Cinema and the Coens

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines postmodernism as a late twentieth century movement in Western philosophy, characterized by broad scepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason (Duignan). It is an intellectual stance that frames beauty and aesthetics as arbitrary and subjective, while rejecting the meta-narratives of modernism. The focus of its interest lies in contradiction, fragmentation and instability, together with the destruction of hierarchies and boundaries. A key feature is the mixing of different features and periods or styles of art that, during modernism, were characterized either as "high" or "low". This practice is referred to as pastiche (Hopkins 14-19) which is, as the paper will later show, a key feature of many of the Coen brothers' films. Although different theorists view postmodernism differently, or to be more precise, they focus on different issues (gender, class, language, identity, ideology…), the common denominator is that they all express scepticism toward traditional views of the world and the above mentioned issues. Aware of the complex and elusive nature of the period, Ihab Hassan refers to postmodernism as "significant revision, if not an original èpistemé, of twentieth-century Western societies" (84). From his viewpoint, postmodernism is playful and, however new, it always looks back at the old with which it is constantly engaged in conversation. He says that:

> […] as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a "white ideology" of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences. (Hassan 93-94)

Keeping in mind these basic features of postmodernism, it will be easier to understand how this movement influenced the art (architecture, music, literature…) of the period, and how its characteristics are reflected in the entirety of the artistic corpus, but more specifically, in postmodern film and the Coens' film in particular.

Postmodernist film is a classification for works that articulate the themes and ideas of postmodernism through the medium of cinema. Postmodernist film attempts to subvert the mainstream conventions of narrative structure and characterization, and tests the audience's suspension of disbelief (Hopkins 14). In many ways, it is interested in the liminal space that

would be typically ignored by modernist or narrative offerings. The idea is that meaning is often generated most productively through the spaces and transitions between worlds, moments, or images. In his book *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson writes:

> The obscurity is cleared up; the contradiction vanishes, as soon as we place ourselves along the transition, in order to distinguish states in it by making cross cuts therein in thoughts. The reason is that there is more in the transition than the series of states, that is to say, the possible cuts--more in the movement than the series of position, that is to say, the possible stops. (331)

What is meant by this is that the cuts in the film create just as much meaning as the scenes themselves.

Besides the contradictions, postmodernist film possesses three characteristics that differentiate it from modernist and traditional narrative films. Tim Woods examines these characteristics in great detail in his book *Beginning Postmodernism*. According to him, the first is the aforementioned "pastiche" which is simply defined as a work of art that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more artists. Unlike parody, pastiche celebrates the work it imitates, and is often interchanged with homage. The reason why pastiche is a key characteristic of postmodernism is because filmmakers are open to blending many disparate genres and tones within the same film. Another feature is meta-reference or self-reflexivity which is achieved by calling the viewer's attention to the fact that the movie itself is only a movie, either through characters' knowledge of their own fictional nature, intertextuality (where characters discuss other works of fiction), or having the story unfold out of chronological order, fragmenting time, so as to highlight the fact that what is on-screen is constructed. The third common element is the bridging of the gap between highbrow and lowbrow styles or activities (194-225), which finally brings the argument to Joel and Ethan Coen.

Ever since their film-making debut in 1984 with the neo-noir crime film *Blood Simple*, the Coen brothers have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity, which has by now garnered them a position among the elites of contemporary American film directors. The newest entry in their corpus, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), masterfully presents their unique way of storytelling and directing, and showcases why they have become household names in the film world, without getting involved with the popular franchises of today. They have become "a model for the triumph of the 'indie' auteur over Hollywood" (Adams 1).

One thing that stands out when viewing the corpus of their work as a whole is that all of their films have different styles, and they choose to do something different for each film. R. Barton Palmer attributes this consistency of discontinuity to the Coens' "postmodern 'anti-authorial' attitude" (54-55). Palmer is not the only one to attribute their films as postmodern; even if the brothers themselves jokingly mentioned in some interviews that they do not know what postmodernism is, their films and the entirety of their work shows otherwise. When asked about making a remake of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* Ethan responded by saying that it would be an interesting exercise in postmodern aesthetics (Allen 141). One of the key features of postmodern art is the remaking or rewriting of antecedent texts, which is, perhaps not coincidentally, one of the most prominent aspects of the Coen brothers' *oeuvre* (Adams 4). Since parodic pastiche is a widespread phenomenon in their films, and pastiche is a key feature of postmodernism, it is only logical to conclude that their films would fall under the category of postmodernism. However, since an analysis of their entire corpus would be too broad and would only superficially touch on all of the important points, a single case study would be much better suited for this paper. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, as a "turn-of-the-millennium" film, set in the 1930s, referencing a movie from the 1940s, and based on a text that has its origins in ancient Greece is a perfect example of mixing different times and periods in a unique way, which is exactly what pastiche is.

2. Theory of Adaptation and Auteur Theory

The contemporary film and TV industry seems to be enjoying its greatest revenue stream and highest level of popularity to date, with Hollywood blockbuster movies that seemingly get released every other weekend earning over one billion dollars each, and online subscription services, like Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime, that allow their clients to watch nearly every TV show ever filmed, maintaining subscriber numbers of several dozen million viewers. The interesting part of such a situation lies in the fact that the majority of popular content are adaptations of content from various other media: videogames, comic books, novels, and the like. Even though adaptations enjoy huge popularity in the mainstream, in academic criticism and journalistic reviewing adaptations are mostly regarded as secondary and derivative, with Robert Stam stating that: "The conventional language of adaptation criticism has often been profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that imply that the cinema has somehow done a disservice to literature. Terms like 'infidelity', 'betrayal', 'deformation', 'violation' […] proliferate in adaptation discourse" (3).

While a number of positive tropes can be extracted from adaptations and the discourse around them can be bolstered both by positive viewpoints and valid criticism, it seems like the majority of critics seem to focus on the negative aspects of adaptation, lamenting what was lost in the transition from novel to film. This feeling of adaptation's inferiority may simply be a product of unmet expectations on the part of a fan desiring fidelity, or as Stam suggests, there might be other reasons for it, such as anteriority and seniority (the assumption that older art equals better art); dichotomous thinking that presumes a rivalry between film and literature; iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual); logophilia (valorisation of the verbal); anti-corporeality ("seen" equals obscene), and so on (4-7). This brings up the question: If adaptations are indeed so inferior, why are they present all around us and so immensely popular? One can argue that there are two main reasons for this: humans inherently dislike change, so seeing an adaptation of something already known provides the pleasure of repetition with variation; the other reason being financial (remaking old successful properties).

The mere fact of their popularity and ubiquity brings another question to mind: What makes an adaptation successful? For a while, "fidelity criticism" spearheaded adaptation studies, dealing with how faithful the adaptation is to the original text:

> "Fidelity discourse" relies on essentialist arguments in relation to both media. First, it assumes that a novel "contains" an extractable "essence" hidden "underneath" the surface details of style. […] But, in fact, there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signs that can trigger a plethora of possible readings. […] When critics refer to the "spirit" or "essence" of a literary text what they usually mean is the critical consensus within an "interpretative community" about the meaning of the work. (Stam 15)

Adaptation studies are often regarded as comparative studies. If a person is familiar with the source text, that text will always exert some kind of influence over their reception of the adaptation. When a work is called an "adaptation" its relationship to another work (or multiple works) is made public. According to "fidelity criticism", if the adaptation does not faithfully transmit the "spirit" of the original, it is a bad adaptation. However, there are numerous examples of adaptations where that simply is not true.

According to Linda Hutcheon, the morally loaded discourse of fidelity is focused on the assumption that adapters simply aim to reproduce the text. That is wrong; adaptation is repetition, but without replication, and there are many possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: to consume or erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question, to pay tribute, and so on. In actuality, Hutcheon suggests that adaptation can be described threefold:

- as an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- as a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- and as an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (*A Theory of Adaptation* 7 - 8).

Going along with such an explanation, it is easy to see why adaptations that deviate from the source material are successful. Distancing from fidelity and obligatory faithfulness gives the filmmaker a certain freedom to incorporate his ideas into the adaptation.

This freedom further separates the adaptation from its original text, and turns it into its own original text with the filmmaker as author. The auteur theory, which holds that the director, who oversees all audio and visual elements of the motion picture, is more considered to be the "author" of the movie than is the writer of the screenplay was derived from such a standpoint. In other words, fundamental filmmaking elements such as camera placement, lighting,

blocking, filming angle, and scene length, rather than plot line, convey the message of the film. Supporters of the theory argue that the most cinematically successful films will bear the unmistakable stamp of the director (Augustyn).

Looking back at what was said about Joel and Ethan Coen in the previous chapter, it becomes obvious that they fit into this category. The distinct difference of style and embodiment of their artistic vision in each of their movies, the creative control they exert over their projects, the fact that most of their films are adaptations showcasing a unique transformation of the source material, while simultaneously paying tribute to the original text and celebrating it, explains why they are regarded as quite possibly the best "indie" filmmakers of today. In fact, what Jean-Luc Godard said about Jerry Lewis is also perfectly applicable to the Coen brothers: "the only one in Hollywood doing something different, the only one who isn't falling in with the established categories, the norms, the principles. […] the only one today who's making courageous films, […] able to do it because of his personal genius" (qtd. in Hillier 295).

The Coens' distinctive touch is not lacking in *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* with the transposition of the plot from Ancient Greece to rural Mississippi of the early 1900s and the overhaul of the characters from nobility and deities to everyday working people. Even so, the Coens still stayed true to what is considered the foremost theme of the original text – the journey. Their adaptation of the journey in both the external (physical) and internal (psychological) sense, as well as the translation of characters from *The Odyssey*, together with various other minor adaptations from different filmic sources, will be discussed later in the paper.

3. Homer's *The Odyssey*

The two largest and most well-known epic poems of Western civilization, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are attributed to a single man, a blind wanderer from ancient Greece by the name of Homer who recited, or more accurately "performed" both of these monumental works of art orally, relying on his memory. This feat seems humanly impossible considering that the written compositions of the two works, dating from the late eighth and early seventh century BC, are massive, with *The Iliad* consisting of nearly 15,700 lines and *The Odyssey* of a bit over 12,100 lines. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods would often bless those who lost their sight with powers akin to being prophetic, which adds a layer of mysticism to the blind poet who spun the stories of gods interfering in human lives. This sparked an immense interest from academics into not only the poems themselves, but the genius behind them as well. The study of Homer began in ancient Greece and is still relevant in contemporary academic circles, with the Homeric question being the most important topic in the field.

Specifically, the Homeric question refers to the doubts and resulting debates around the identity of Homer, his authorship over the two poems and the historical validity of the recounted events. The main subtopics of the Homeric question are:

"Who is Homer?" (Kahane 1)

"Are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of single or multiple authorship?" (Jensen 10)

"By whom, when, where, and under what circumstances were the poems composed?" (Fowler 23)

The general consensus is that both poems were composed by a single author, however, not by the same one. This is based on various differences in narrative manner, theology, geographical perspective, ethics, and so on. While *The Iliad* is a pure tale of war and heroics, almost a chess game between the Greek gods, *The Odyssey*, which will be closely analysed further on, is more focused on the main protagonist (an individual) and his return home.

3.1. *The Odyssey's* Story and Structure

The entire narrative of *The Odyssey* can be summarized in two words: "return home". It is the story of one of the Greek generals (or the ancient equivalent thereof) who returns home after a twenty year-long absence, having fought in the Trojan War for the first ten years, and journeying back for the other ten. In 12,100 lines of dactylic hexameter divided into 24 books, which are basically individual chapters, the story weaves through different perspectives, settings and times to conjure up this epic poem. With the journey, or rather, the process of traveling being its main focus, it represents the predecessor, or a kind of an ur-text of the future road novel and road movie genres.

The text can be divided into three major parts: the first part which follows Odysseus' son Telemachus and spans from Book I to Book IV (sometimes called *The Telemachy*), Odysseus' travels and the retelling of said travels which spans from Book V to Book XII, and finally Odysseus' return to Ithaca, which spans the entire second half of *The Odyssey*. The book begins with the traditional invocation of the Muse followed by a council of gods. The "council of the gods" episode is then repeated in Book V, at the beginning of Odysseus' story, which is occasionally used as an argument that supports the viewpoint according to which *The Telemachy* was not originally part of *The Odyssey*; however, it can also be seen a simple storytelling tool – it is a mnemonic aid that helps the storyteller remember and perform easier. Together with the frequent use of constant epithets (in *The Iliad* Achilles is always "swift-footed", while Odysseus is "resourceful" or "wise") the repeating parts serve a purpose of easily filling the constraints of the dactylic hexameter and relieving the stress of having to remember everything.

The first lines of the invocation, as translated by Robert Fagles, go as follows:

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns…

driven time and again of course, once he had plundered

the hallowed heights of Troy. (1-3)

In the original text in Greek, the first word is *andra*: man, which immediately shows the focus of the entire poem. As opposed to *The Iliad*, in which the first word was *menis*: rage, specifically Achilles's rage, *The Odyssey* is more subdued, almost coy:

> The *Odyssey* will sing of *andra* – man. The word is unyoked, at first, to any sort of limiting article or demonstrative, so it is ambiguous: The Greek could equally mean *the* (specific) man, *a* man, or even, more sententiously, Man. The first descriptive epithet that limits this generic, nameless man is *polytropon* … *poly-* means "much" or "many," and *tropos* means "way" or "turn." (Bloom 25)

The hero of the story remains unnamed until the twenty-fifth line – the text itself hides the protagonist in the same manner the protagonist will use his wisdom, cunning, and guile to reach his goal of returning home. Not only does the poem provide the reader with the necessary information about what the story will be, it also showcases the main character and his personality traits in a way that is quick and easy to understand.

Following the second council of the gods, the reader sees Odysseus for the first time. The mighty Greek hero, the one whose intelligence ended the Trojan War, who is beloved by (nearly all) the gods, the king of Ithaca is grieving; he is on the verge of tears on a beach of the island where the nymph Calypso is holding him prisoner. He spent seven years as a prisoner, but demonstrated immense strength of will in refusing Calypso's offer of immortality. The gift of immortality would mean forgetting his homeland, his name, his son and wife, and the reasons why he must return, so he rejects it. After leaving the island his ship gets destroyed in a storm and he finds himself on the island of the Phaecians. There, he begins recounting his troubles and travels since leaving Troy.

> He comes to the coast of the Lotophagi, then to the land of the *Cyclopes*, thence to the floating island of Aeolus, to the pirate *Laestrygones*, and to the Aeaea, the home of *Circe*. Here there is a pause in his labours; he abides with Circe a year long, then, at her bidding accomplishes his descent into *Hades* … he passes the *Sirens* and *Scylla* and reaches the isle of Thrinakia. (Harrison xvii)

At Thrinakia his men kill the cattle of the sun god and perish in a storm, leaving him the only survivor. He ends up on Calypso's island and finishes his tale by recounting how he arrived at the Phaecians court. They arrange a ship for him and he sails to Ithaca. There, disguised by Athena as a beggar, he tests the loyalty of his servants and fidelity of his wife who has been beset by suitors, before murdering all of the suitors and taking his rightful place.

All of his hardships are told over a meal and he uses his disguise as a beggar to test the faith of those expecting his return – while the loyal swineherd offers him both food and clothing,

the suitors throw insults, jests, and even food and furniture at him, showcasing their character. Where in *The Iliad* the driving force behind the actions of most of the characters was rage, in *The Odyssey*, for the titular character the driving force is his belly. This organ becomes the "impetus for wandering" and an "emblem of human unfulfilment, an engine of motion" (Bloom 71). He says so himself in Book XV, when talking to the swineherd Eumaeus:

> Tramping about the world – there's nothing worse for a man.
>
> But the fact is that men put up with misery
>
> to stuff their cursed bellies. (385-387)

This urge, this eternal hunger is finally satisfied after he cleanses his house from the suitors. In the final scene of the poem, where the townspeople are seeking revenge, Odysseus stands to face them, alongside his father and son, with Athena proclaiming peace. Book XXIV, to which this scene belongs, is believed among some to have been added at a later time and by a different author. However, without this final book Odysseus would, in a way, betray his own character and his return journey would still be incomplete. The poem does not end with him in bed with Penelope, because for Odysseus love is not the foremost in the hierarchy of emotions, but rather a necessity for order, and the continuity of lineage. His journey is a symbolic return to humanity, which he achieves by reuniting with his wife, his family, and his orchard. He throws off the burden of being an epic hero of yore, the cloak of shadows and cunning and in the surroundings of his hearth finally becomes what the poem named him as from the beginning – *andra*, man.

3.2. The Characters in *The Odyssey*

Even though Odysseus is a character whose actions are often guided by his belly, which symbolises the eternal hunger of man, and he uses his wits to outsmart his adversaries, he, like the rest of the characters from ancient Greek poems, is simply a plaything of the gods. His defining characteristic – his intelligence, is a gift from the gods; his ten year-long wanderings on the sea are a result of his angering Poseidon, the god of the sea; and his final homecoming and the successful return are heavily helped by Athena. However, that is to be expected as the ancient Greeks believed that nothing happens without the gods willing it so.

Telemachus, who was a baby when his father left for Troy, grows into an independent young man, worthy of being his father's successor after Athena sends him to visit the heroes who have already returned from Troy. Before the journey he seems like a timid boy, simply standing on the side-lines and letting the suitors do as they please, revelling in the riches of his father's house. After his first conversation with a disguised Athena, he becomes emboldened, chiding the suitors and even rebuking his own mother (possibly for the first time) when she asks the singer to stop the song about the doom of the Achaeans after Troy. Before the moment he sets off on his journey, he is compared to how his father looked on the day he left for Troy. His young self-assertion culminates in a final poise that is near his father's in the final scene where he stands with his father and grandfather, defending the threshold of his home. While this short character summary may seem irrelevant at the moment, it will play a role further on in the paper, specifically, while contrasting the character of Telemachus with the daughters of Ulysses Everett in *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* Telemachus' actions and growth serve to show the strong loyalty, respect, and love he feels towards his father and the unity of his family. The same can be seen in Penelope.

Her son's "coming of age" has a direct influence on Penelope. While she shares some character traits with her husband (the ingenious ploy of weaving Laertes' shroud during the day and unravelling it during the night) she is indecisive about whether to remarry or not. The trigger that spurs her to action is when she finds out that the suitors are planning to kill Telemachus. She believes that the only way of saving her son is the choice of a new husband. The 20 years she has spent waiting for Odysseus have certainly taken a toll on her as well: even with the different dreams, omens, and the conversation with Odysseus who is disguised as a beggar, about Odysseus' return, she wants to let herself believe them, but she does not, whether because

of the fear of her hope shattering after they turn out to be false, or for some other reason. Yet her anxiety for Telemachus forces her to come up with the idea of the test of the bow which opens up a path of success for Odysseus and his plan: "The order of the poem is a causal order. Telemachus' independence inspires Penelope to a choice that uniquely offers Odysseus his success. Athene acts in all three events, which at the same time issue from the three human agents and reveal their natures" (Finley 3). The family is connected in their plan of reunion, even though Telemachus and Penelope are not directly aware of it. The Coens chose to adapt this "happy ending" in a different manner in their adaptation. While the destination of familial reunion is present in the epic, the film leaves it open to interpretation. The journey of arriving there is likewise different. While the relationship of Odysseus' family toward him serves to achieve this ending of unison, the relationship of Ulysses Everett's family toward him leaves it ambiguous, which the paper will analyse at a later point.

This familial triad sums up the characters that are at the core of the poem's focus. The rest of the characters can be seen as a supporting cast which slots into one of two categories: those who aid in the reunion, and those who provide obstacles to the reunion. Many of these characters are mythological entities that dwell in the world of humans: "Homeric scholars and comparative mythologists tell us that the stories with which the Odyssey [sic] is thick-strewn were not invented by Homer; that he took the folk-lore that lay ready to hand and wove its diverse legends into an epic whole" (Harrison 1). The "minor" characters which have the most influence on the action and the outcome of the story are the gods themselves. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is prominent among them with the amount of aid that she provides to Odysseus. At the other end of the scale, the god that causes Odysseus the most hardship is Poseidon, the god of the sea. Poseidon's reason for hating Odysseus is connected to another creature from myth: the Cyclops. In *The Odyssey,* Odysseus and his crew come upon an island where multiple Cyclopes dwell and they get captured by one of them – Polyphemus, Poseidon's son. With the help of his cunning intellect, Odysseus manages to blind Polyphemus and escape, which invokes Poseidon's wrath.

The nymph Calypso and the witch-goddess Circe share a trait in the fact that Odysseus stays with them for a longer period of time, but he remains loyal to his wife despite the offers of immortality and a lavish life that result from committing adultery. The rest of the characters that try to hinder his return are not developed as individual personas: the Lotophagi (or lotus-eaters) who eat lotus plants which contain an apathy-causing narcotic; the Laestrygones (or Laestrygonians) who are man-eating giants; Scylla and Charybdis which are always mentioned

in tandem; the Sirens whose songs lead sailors to their doom; even the cattle of the sun god, whose slaughter by the hand of Odysseus' crew causes the deaths of all but the captain. The suitors fall somewhere between the collective and individual: while they are mostly referred to as an entity, they have figureheads who rise above the others in malice – Antinous (the most arrogant one, also the first to die), Eurymachus (a charismatic manipulator), and Amphinomus (the only decent suitor).

Interestingly, the characters that aid Odysseus in his return are not mythological beings, but rather humans. Alcinous, the king of the Phaecians, prepares the ship that takes Odysseus to Ithaca, and gives him lavish gifts. The ones that help him on Ithaca are his own son and the loyal swineherd Eumaeus. During his trip to Hades he meets the shades of dead Greek heroes like Achilles and Agamemnon, but the one that is most helpful and shows him how to return home is the blind prophet Tiresias. Humans (admittedly, larger than life, but still not demigods) like Menelaus and Nestor also contribute to the development of his son, without whom the return would never have been completed successfully.

Such a division of minor characters brings forth certain interesting conclusions. The largest hindrances for Odysseus' return stem from the mythological world, while he receives the greatest aid from the realm of living (and in the particular case of Tiresias – dead) mortals. One possible interpretation of this fact is the (foreshadowing of a) gradual switch of the ancient world from a culture based in myths and heroic deeds, to a culture which focuses on the man (human being), his actions, flaws, virtues, and his development as the centre of existence.

4. Predecessors From the Sphere of Cinema

After analysing the period/artistic movement to which the movie that is the subject of this paper belongs to (or at least the period whose characteristics are prevalent in it) and the text which serves as the basis for the adaptation, the paper will look more closely into the title of the movie. The title of the movie is in itself an adaptation, or more accurately, a case of intertextual borrowing from the 1941 American comedy film written and directed by Preston Sturges – *Sullivan's Travels.*

The film *Sullivan's Travels* is a metafictional commentary on making films as it satirises the relationship between the desire to make a significant film and the obligation to make a financially successful one. Tired of directing silly comedy movies, the protagonist of *Sullivan's Travels* John "Sully" Sullivan decides to make a film of "social importance" entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in order to realise the potentiality of film as an artistic medium that can be used to showcase reality. In order to do that, he decides to dress up like a drifter and spend some time living among the less fortunate members of the American society, which is still reeling from the effects of the Great Depression. During his escapade, he loses his memories, attacks a police officer, ends up as a convict in a chain-gang, and during a screening of a Disney movie at which the entire audience is roaring with laughter, he reaches enlightenment: "…he realises that his audiences, who must endure an otherwise harsh and impoverished existence, benefit more from the diversions of comedic entertainment than from the sobering lessons of social realism" (Adams 139).

Parts of the narrative premise of the Coen brothers' movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* are borrowed from *Sullivan's Travels* – the escape from a chain gang, the focus on those who – as Sully says – "know trouble", spending time on the road while being poor and homeless (or as close to it as it gets), and so on, but also from *The Odyssey*, as Sturges' film echoes its plot, just as the Coens' does. Besides the obvious connection between the title of the Coen brothers' movie and the title of the fictional movie within Sturges' movie, there are other elements which are similar in many aspects, some obvious, some more obscure. The brothers themselves said: "'There are things in [*O Brother*] that are very reminiscent of *Sullivan's Travels*', admits Joel. 'But, I would say "reminiscent of" instead of "rip-off"' (Allen 136).

One example of such similarities is the rescue of the three convicts by Cousin Hogwallop's son from Sheriff Cooley, by driving a car through a burning barn. This incident is "reminiscent of" Sully's escape from the entourage sent by the studio to follow him, by hitching a ride in a jalopy driven by a thirteen-year-old boy. Of course, Odysseus has been in similar life-threatening situations and escaped various perils in similar fashion, both with his crew and on his own. Another incident of similarity involves the crucial scene of *Sullivan's Travels* – when the chain-gang attends the screening of a Walt Disney cartoon as guests of an integrated church congregation. As mentioned before, Sully realises the quasi-therapeutic effect of comedy while watching the on-screen antics. In *O Brother*, Ulysses Everett and Delmar go to the cinema to watch a comedy during which a chain-gang, Pete (who they thought was turned into a toad) among them, is led in to watch the movie as well. However, in this case the comedy is not focused on the screen within the screen (the movie being shown within the movie), but rather it is designed to elicit a reaction from the real world audience as they laugh at Ulysses Everett and Delmar's incredulousness and bewilderment at seeing their friend. The protagonist's name, Ulysses Everett, represents an unequivocal connection with *The Odyssey*, as Ulysses is Odysseus' Latinised name. A more obscure parallel between the movies is one that is not directly, physically shown, but can be implied from the development of the story on-screen and it has to do with their song "A Man of Constant Sorrow".

> Although Everett and Delmar do not experience Sully's revelatory insight about the healing power of comedy, the popular success of their record proves that music, like comedy, has the power to unify, transcending racial and cultural barriers and uniting people in the spirit of democratic freedom. (Adams 140)

Moreover, the song may have a therapeutic effect on the listeners, just like the comedy films do.

While *Sullivan's Travels* is the foremost cinematographic influence on *O Brother*, in the spirit of postmodern filmmaking, the Coens included various references to other historic pieces of cinema. Boss Cooley, the relentless sheriff who pursues the three convicts, got the inspiration for his mirrored sunglasses from Boss Godfrey, a cruel lawman featured in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967). "Baby Face" Nelson's line "I'm on top of the world!" references Cody Jarrett's famous last words from the noir-film *White Heat* (1949). His melancholy departure in the middle of the night mirrors the final scene of *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), in which the protagonist drifts off into the night, having to endlessly flee from the authorities (Adams 138-

139). All of these films, including *The Odyssey*, reflect in various ways the existential troubles of their protagonists as they try to find their way into safety, but whereas *The Odyssey* lacks an ironic approach to its protagonist, the irony of the circumstances in which contemporary protagonists find themselves is obvious.

5. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is a 2000 crime comedy film starring George Clooney, John Turturro, and Tim Blake Nelson, with John Goodman, Holly Hunter, and Charles Durning in supporting roles. The film is written, produced, and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. The film is set in 1937 rural Mississippi during the Great Depression. Basing the story on a loose adaptation of the events in Homer's *The Odyssey*, with elements of folk mythology from the American South, the Coen brothers created a satirical and enjoyable piece of film entertainment for contemporary audiences. As mentioned before, the title is a reference to the 1941 movie *Sullivan's Travels*, which also deals with the effects of the Great Depression on the residents of the US. The music used in the movie plays a major and important role by itself – the majority of the music used in the film is period folk music, with individual songs representing the wide array of musical styles typical of the old American South: gospel, delta blues, country, swing, and bluegrass.

The film received mostly positive reviews, being nominated for two Academy Awards (Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Cinematography), with the soundtrack winning a Grammy Award for Album of the Year in 2001. As Daniel Menaker mentioned for the November 2000 issue of the *New York Times*, the popularity of the Soggy Bottom Boys, the band that the three protagonists form in the movie, resulted in the fact that after the release of the film, many of the artists who contributed to the movie's soundtrack joined together to perform the music from the film in a *Down from the Mountain* concert tour ("ARTS IN AMERICA").

In a collection of various interviews that they gave over the years, the Coen brothers mention that they never explicitly planned on filming an adaptation of *The Odyssey*; the basic framework of the narrative simply had a few similarities to the events in Homer's epic, so they decided to add more and more. Neither of them had actually ever read the epic, but they were familiar of its content through various adaptations (like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and numerous references in popular culture (Allen 100-114). The elements of *The Odyssey* are so ingrained in contemporary storytelling that bits and pieces of it can occur accidentally, which only serves to highlight the status of *The Odyssey* as the source text for these types of narratives. *O Brother,* in and of itself is far more than a sprinkle of references – it is a unique re-telling and re-imagining of the story told so long ago, in *The Odyssey.*

5.1. The Structure of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Identically to *The Odyssey*, the movie begins with an invocation of the Muse, not spoken by a character, but simply shown as plain text on screen. The audience is then greeted by a chorus of prisoners in a chain-gang, singing while hitting rocks with hammers. During their song, the audience sees the three protagonists: Ulysses Everett McGill, Pete Hogwallop, and Delmar O'Donnell who are in the middle of their escape attempt. The presentation of their getaway highlights the comedic tone of the rest of the movie: the three are running through an open field, chained together, throwing themselves down into the greenery every now and then to stay hidden from sight; the audience has a choice: either to laugh at the protagonists' belief that no one sees them while they are running through an open field, or laugh at the law enforcement officers for not spotting the escapees.

The overall structure of the story is fairly simple, and divided into three acts (resembling the tripartite structure of *The Odyssey*); in the first act the audience is familiarised with the protagonists and their major character traits (Ulysses Everett being a wordsmith loyal to a particular brand of pomade, Delmar being mostly the comedic relief because of his supposed "slowness", and Pete being the one who believes in kin and money). In the second act the protagonists meet a colourful assemblage of characters as they both experience various events as bystanders and participate in some as active accomplices, all the while journeying to Ulysses Everett's hometown of Ithaca where he hid a treasure – the supposed reason for their escape. In the third and final act, which is mostly set in Ulysses Everett's hometown, the story culminates when Everett reveals that there is no treasure and he lied simply so he could stop his wife from re-marrying, which is an obvious echo of Penelope's story. In the end, they get pardoned for their crimes because of their popularity as the Soggy Bottom Boys, and a flood saves them from being hanged to death, a resolution closely resembling Homer's deus ex machina in which the goddess Athena intervenes in order to prevent the suitor's parents from killing Odysseus as an act of revenge for slaying Penelope's suitors.

The movie has an episodic structure: the protagonists stumble and find their way from one adventure into another and there is a clear-cut distinction between the end of one event from the beginning of the following one in the fact that the Coens use simple hard cuts to switch from scene to scene. In the world of the movie, between the scenes themselves, some time passes, so the viewer is left with the feeling that they are watching a new chapter of the story,

much like starting to read a new chapter of a book. Of course, the Coens did this on purpose, referencing *The Odyssey* and its structure consisting of 24 chapters. However, the cuts do not simply serve the function of showing the passage of time; there is even a short montage showcasing the plethora of ways in which the protagonists find food, shelter and transport to arrive at the end of their journey. Their actions, both on-camera and the implied ones off-camera, serve to endear the protagonists to the audience, and the cuts imply the deepening of their mutual relationship during their journey and the struggles they overcome.

Although, to the extent of my knowledge, there are no academic articles or similar sources dealing with the structural similarities between the source text and the movie, this paper will attempt to show that their structure is almost identical. The movie is divided into multiple major set pieces and scenes, which are further broken up by quick cuts. However, while watching the movie, one might notice that the number of parts (while taking some liberties with the division) actually corresponds to the number of chapters in *The Odyssey*, meaning that there are 24 major parts (some consisting of multiple scenes) in the movie. Thus, the division of the scenes would be as follows:

1. The three protagonists escape and meet the blind railway handcar driver who gives them a lift
2. They go to Cousin Hogwallop's house where they remove the chains; the Cousin tries to turn them in to the police, but they escape with the help of his son
3. Pete and Delmar get baptised with the congregation at the river
4. They meet Tommy Johnson, the guitar player, and record a song at the radio station
5. During the night the police find their car and Tommy flees
6. They meet George "Baby Face" Nelson
7. Together with Nelson, they rob a bank, but during the night Nelson gets depressed and leaves
8. A montage with cross cuts between the protagonist's journey, and their rising popularity as the Soggy Bottom Boys
9. The episode with the women ("sirens") washing clothes at the river
10. Everett and Delmar waking up, thinking Pete was turned into a toad
11. Meeting Big Dan Teague at the restaurant
12. Having lunch outside with Teague, who robs them
13. The sheriff is about to hang Pete, but he betrays the others to save himself

14. Everett and Delmar arrive at Everett's hometown in which Homer Stokes, a candidate for the position of governor, is holding an assembly; Everett sees his daughters
15. Everett talks with his wife at the store and meets her new "suitor", Vernon T. Waldrip
16. Everett and Delmar at the movie theatre, when the chain-gang with Pete arrives
17. "Intermission" with Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel, the incumbent governor, and his campaign advisors as they discuss how they can win against Stokes
18. Breaking Pete out, and Everett admits there is no treasure
19. They stumble across a Ku Klux Klan rally and save Tommy
20. Next, they infiltrate Stokes' gala dinner disguised in beards to help Everett win his wife back; they are revealed as the Soggy Bottom Boys and pardoned
21. Outside they see George Nelson being escorted to his execution and Everett's wife tells him to find her wedding ring in their old cottage
22. They are captured by sheriff Cooley and nearly hanged, but a flood saves them
23. While hanging on to furniture, they discuss the "new age" of electricity and see the prophesied cow on the roof of a cotton house
24. The final scene, where Everett's wife tells him she will not remarry him without her ring, which is now at the bottom of a flooded valley

As was mentioned previously, the splitting of the movie into these specific parts is purely subjective and may in some cases feel forced, but there is no doubt that the film adapts this structural aspect of Homer's epic. In fact, according to Simon Goldhill, the "splitting" itself is further present in various other features of the movie, catering to different audiences – only a film buff would recognize the title of the movie as an allusion to Sturges' film, just like only a Homer buff would recognize that the title of the song performed by the Soggy Bottom Boys, "Man of Constant Sorrow", is something Odysseus says, and may be seen as a key feature of his character. The movie invokes this fragmented comprehension, a kind of hyper-knowingness and exclusivity, offering the audience an experience as if they were part of some elaborate inside joke. The Coens' idea was to be blunt about the similarities: "'Have you got it yet?' becomes the key question of this comedy of allusion" (264).

While searching for other connections between *The Odyssey* and *O, Brother*, besides the obvious ones pertaining to the characters which will be analysed in the next part of this paper, one might notice that the number "24" appears once again, though in a different function than structural: the reason why the three protagonists escape is to find the treasure Ulysses Everett hid, it being 2,4 million dollars. Of course, both the audience and Delmar and Pete later

find out that the money is a lie, there is no treasure and it was all simply an elaborate ruse thought up by Everett so they would escape. However, it is undeniable that this, in actuality non-existent MacGuffin, sets the plot in motion by giving them a reason to escape. The oddly specific amount of the fabricated treasure and knowledge of the Coens' skilful integration and adaptation of various elements from the texts they use as sources dismisses the 2,4 million dollars as coincidence and subtly nods at being recognised as another element of their pastiche toward *The Odyssey*. Their inclusion of money as an element that has a major impact on both the characters and the story in general should not be surprising, since money plays a crucial role, with it being the main theme of many movies throughout their filmography. In the case of *O, Brother*, money is simply the starting stepping stone that transitions into Ulysess Everett's journey of self-discovery.

5.2. The Characters in *O, Brother* and Their Equivalents in *The Odyssey*

The film introduces the audience to a plethora of characters from all spheres of life in the rural Mississippi of the 1930s. Ranging from the protagonists who are escaped convicts, over sheriffs equated with the devil and a Bible salesman who is part of the KKK, to the incumbent state governor and his opponent in the elections who happens to be the KKK Grand Wizard, all of the characters are portrayed superbly by the actors, and even though the action may come across as a bit silly and over the top at times, it exquisitely showcases the racial tensions and everyday life of the period. However, the Coens had a bit of help when writing the characters: just as they used the structure of *The Odyssey* as a reference point for the structure of the movie, so did the characters from *The Odyssey* come to life in *O, Brother*, though in a slightly different light.

Even though the protagonists from both works share the same name, *O, Brother* slightly modified and modernised it, to better fit the period. So instead of Odysseus, the audience follows Ulysses Everett McGill. One of the biggest distinctions between the two is their nobility – while McGill is an escaped criminal, Odysseus was a war hero and king, returning home from a long absence. Ulysses Everett is not a good person in many ways; he is self-absorbed, arrogant, a liar, and has little to no interest in anyone's well-being, except for his own. At the beginning he does not even care for his companions, Delmar and Pete, but since they were chained together, they had to escape together. The tendency to lower the reputation of the main protagonist in literature has been elaborately theorized by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism.* A satirical treatment of the protagonist (Frye refers to the tragic hero as the epitome of a literary protagonist) implies looking at the humanity of the protagonist, stressing the social and psychological explanations for his fate, but also ironically parodying the situation. In the most extreme phase, human life is represented in terms of bondage created through "prisons, madhouses, lynching mobs, and places of execution, and it differs from a pure inferno mainly in the fact that in human experience suffering has an end in death" (236-37). While the Coen brothers' approach to the topic is more postmodern than archetypal, and the end of the story is not as tragic as implied by Frye, still their representation of Ulysses/Odysseus as an escaped convict and small-time criminal matches to a certain extent Frye's progression as Ulysses departs from its source, the heroic Odysseus.

Moreover, Delmar and Pete can be viewed as being representations of two different camps in Odysseus' collective crew: Pete embodying the mutineers, and Delmar embodying the fools. During the movie, Pete tries to usurp the leadership of the group from Ulysses Everett twice, and Delmar's actions and statements of foolishness are too many to count. Even so, the two of them are determined to live a better life after their escape. They ache for redemption, wishing to rid themselves of their former lives and cleansing their sins, which happens during the baptism episode. After that they start to live meaningful lives, and as Delmar explains when they meet George Nelson: "Well, it's funny you should ask. I was bad 'till yesterday, but me and Pete here've been saved" (00:33:17 – 00:33:25). Everett on the other hand, does not believe in such things: "Baptism! You two are just dumber than a bag of hammers!" (00:21:01 – 00:21:06).

The ideas of "right" and "wrong" are painted pretty straightforward as white and black, at least at the beginning of the movie. While Everett may be the main protagonist and the audience feels a strong affection toward him, it is clear that he is not a good person. Early on he is willing to steal; he is egocentric, and willing to lie to everyone just to get his way. The prime example of this side of his character is the scene where he takes advantage of the blind studio owner by saying that they are "negroes" and claiming there are more members of the band than there really are, simply to get more money (00:23:50 – 00:26:47). Interestingly, Odysseus is also represented as someone who knows how to get his way and who can be devious if need be (which is especially shown in *The Iliad* in the episode with the Trojan horse), but he is still represented and read as a positive hero. Going back to the incident with the blind studio owner, it not only represents Ulysses Everett's dishonesty, but also establishes "sight" as a reoccurring motive in the movie, and one that is closely connected to the ideas of right and wrong, and morality in general. In this particular case it is used to show someone who can be easily taken advantage of, which Everett does without hesitation. Sometimes, unfortunately for the trio, the opposite also comes to pass.

Such an example is evident in the episode where Everett and Delmar deal with Big Dan Teague, who with his eye-patch is a clear equivalent of the Cyclops Polyphemus. While conversing with him, Everett is unable to see past Teague's lies and manipulation. He sees himself and Teague as one and the same, two fast-talkers who try to come out on top of every situation, which clouds his judgement and is therefore unable to grasp the full extent of what is happening when Teague robs them. However, what might be considered Everett's worst trait is

his egocentrism and lack of care for others. When Pete "supposedly" gets turned into a toad – he does not care; when Teague squishes the toad, killing it – he still does not care.

The tipping point where he starts journeying toward redemption happens a bit over halfway into the movie, when he sees his wife and daughters. Through this encounter he is able to see his own flaws and realises that he is not as good a person as he could be. From that point onward he does his best to become a good person, doing things he would have not done without proper character development: rescuing Pete, being honest about the treasure, saving Tommy, even going to Find Penny's wedding ring – he is putting his life on the line for others. Even if he is still slightly snarky at the end of the movie, he starts caring for others, even going back on his snide remarks about Christianity to Pete and Delmar, when they are threatened to be hanged by the sheriff. Everett falls to his knees and prays: "I'm sorry that I turned my back on you, Lord. Forgive me. […] Let me see my daughters again" (01:37:02 – 01:37:22). They are saved by a roaring wall of water, not a real deus ex machina, since it was foreshadowed and mentioned by Everett himself (he explained the rush to escape and find the treasure by saying that the valley was going to be flooded), but rather a *eucatastrophe*. Eucatastrophe is a term coined by J. R. R. Tolkien and it denotes a sudden turn of events at the end of a story which ensures that the protagonist does not meet some terrible, impending, and very plausible and probable doom (Mazur 174). Eucatastrophe is a broader term than deus ex machina, as it may but does not have to include it, like in this case.

However, the Coens do not wish to represent things (life, people) as simple. It is not enough for the protagonist to redeem himself in the end. The movie also introduces the concept of moral relativism. While Everett is clearly not a good person, he is also not a fundamentally bad one either. His deeds are in a manner of speaking normalised when he comes face to face with true evil: the bank-robber George Nelson and the KKK rally. This helps put things into perspective; although he is amoral, in his heart he is good. Just like in the rest of the Coen brothers' movies, there is a constant judge of morality. The bad people are punished for their crimes, while the good ones are saved. At the beginning of the movie the protagonist trio run into a "blind prophet" (the equivalent of Tiresias). In his case, his blindness provides him with a greater understanding of life. The small, minute details of the tangible world mean next to nothing to him, compared to the spiritual world. He foresees a prophecy: "You will find a fortune. Though it will not be the fortune you seek" (00:07:12 – 00:07:17). By the end of the movie, Everett finds his fortune which is presented through his redemption – he is able to do what is right, starts caring for those around him, and emerges a changed man. In this way, it is

clear that the film does not fully adopt Frye's archetypal representation of characters in satires, but that it allows for redemption.

Other characters in the film also represent adaptations of the characters from *The Odyssey*. For example, Tommy can be seen as an adaptation of the loyal swineherd Eumaeus. He joins the protagonists as a member of their band, and through the fact that he "sold his soul to the devil" for his musical abilities, he becomes connected to the supernatural and conveys the appearance of Satan to both the protagonist trio and the audience. His run in with the devil is just one of many instances of "magic" or "uncanny powers" present in the film.

Pertaining to Ulysses Everett's family, the parallels are crystal clear: Penny is obviously the equivalent of Penelope, while hers and Everett's daughters are supposed to be Telemachus. Like Telemachus, Everett's daughters believe that their father is dead, the difference being that Telemachus still clings onto some hope of his father being alive, while Penny blatantly lied to her daughters about Everett being dead, showing her disappointment in him as a person (at least before his change). Much like in the poem, where Penelope seeks confirmation of Odysseus' identity by questioning him about their bed, Penny gives Everett the task of finding her old wedding ring before they can get back together. While Odysseus is successful in recounting the history of their bed, Everett fails at retrieving the wedding ring, which is now at the bed of a massive lake and Penny remains insistent on him finding it, leaving the ending ambiguous and open to interpretation. The Coens nearly go out of their way to highlight the contrast between Odysseus' family in the epic and Everett's family, shown on the screen: from the simple differences like the satire shown in Penny's outrageous lie that their father was run over by a train and the girls' gullible belief, with no sign of surprise when their father suddenly shows up again – alive, to slightly more subtle and philosophical differences like the deconstruction of patriarchal society showcased in Everett having seven children and none of them being a son. This hint of disfunctionality and lack of loyalty (at least by one party) is what prevents the happy reunion. Meanwhile, Vernon T. Waldrip embodies all of Penelope's suitors, but his most prolific character traits are shared with the foremost suitors, those being Antinous and Eurymachus. The aggression of Antinous is shown through Waldrip's knowledge of boxing, and him dispatching Everett rather quickly during their fight, while Eurymachus' charisma is shown in his ability to sweet-talk Penny.

The women doing the laundry and singing represent another parallel to *The Odyssey*. They stand for the Sirens who lure men to their deaths via their singing. The washing-women

use both song and alcohol to seduce Everett, Pete, and Delmar and turn Pete in to the police for the reward money. Their connection to the "magic" of *The Odyssey* comes from Delmar's mistaken belief that they turned Pete into a toad. Big Dan Teague echoes the Cyclops Polyphemus, as was mentioned before. In *The Odyssey* he actually kills some members of Odysseus' crew, while in the movie Dan kills the toad that Delmar believes is Pete, who as mentioned before, represents the mutineers in Odysseus' crew. During the KKK rally episode, the trio hide in Klansmen disguises, similar to how Odysseus and his crew escaped from the Cyclops by hiding under sheep, and Big Dan is part of that same rally, even being the one who reveals their disguises.

Sheriff Cooley is Poseidon, god of the sea. While in the epic Poseidon is furious at Odysseus for blinding his son (Polyphemus), the sheriff pursues Everett, Delmar, and Pete plotting against them, and even nearly killing all of them (Pete twice). When Everett mentions that they were pardoned by the governor, the sheriff implies that he follows a higher power, likening himself to a god and even exclaiming: "Law is a human institution" (01:35:48 – 01:35:52), as if he were in some way above it. He is also connected to Tommy: when Tommy describes Satan whom he sold his soul to, the description perfectly matches the sheriff, even including the hound that follows him. So, one could argue that the sheriff combines both the Greek and Christian mythology and is portrayed as a judge of character, punishing those who have committed a sin. Another character with ties to the Greek gods from Homer's epic is the governor Menelaus "Pappy" O'Daniel. Even though he shares the name with the king Menelaus, husband of Helen of Troy, Pappy is more similar to Zeus than anyone else. Both hold the highest position of judgement (Zeus being the ruler of the gods, and Pappy being the highest authority in the state of Mississippi), and they both help the main protagonist reach a fairly safe end of the journey. Zeus does this by allowing Athena to help Odysseus, while Pappy pardons the trio from their past crimes, giving them a blank slate and a new life.

Another recurring character from *The Odyssey* is present in the form of Mr. Lund, the radio station owner who pays Everett, Pete, Delmar, and Tommy, now known as the Soggy Bottom Boys, to sing a song. The song named "Man of Constant Sorrow" is a reference to both Odysseus' and Everett's life story, and so the parallel can be drawn to King Alcinous to whom Odysseus recounts his wanderings. The second possible interpretation is that Mr. Lund is Homer himself, recording the life of Odysseus.

The blind railway handcar driver, who foresees the great fortune after travelling on a long and difficult road, is clearly Tiresias, the blind prophet. While Athena is not embodied in a character, her influence is still present with her being the goddess of wisdom, and Everett being the wordsmith that he is (granted, this extravagance with words also comes from Odysseus, who then again received it as a gift from the gods). A generalization can be made from the two different constituencies of voters for the gubernatorial candidates, and it is possible to equate their conflict as the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Also, some characters do not have equivalents in the poem, but their actions and character traits were taken from characters within the poem. Homer Stokes has some similarities to both Poseidon and the suitors in the fact that he is trying to stop Everett's successful redemption and return (as well as bearing the name of Homer), while George Nelson can be interpreted as a part of the crew that kills the sun god's cattle, when he shoots the cows grazing in the field.

5.3. The Political and Racial Subplot

Self-contradictory as ever, the Coens mentioned, when asked about *O, Brother*, that to them "… [*O, Brother*] was presumably the movie [Sullivan] would have made if he'd had the chance. The important movie. The one that takes on the big important themes", later denying that statement by saying that *O, Brother* "pretends to be a big important movie, but the grandiosity is obviously a joke. It's a comedy", and commenting on the political subtext with the reply that the "political undercurrent of the movie functions primarily for dramatic purposes" (Allen 129-136). Their equivocal statements testify to their postmodern attitude of the Barthesian "death of the author" in line with which they try to leave it up to the audience to find potential meanings in their film/text, rather than representing a kind of authority over it. What mostly differentiates *O, Brother* from *Sullivan's Travels* is the distinct lack of direct social commentary. Despite the silliness interwoven with the politics and racial disparity, it is impossible to completely ignore the impact of, in particular, the Klan rally scene on the viewer's moral judgement.

Moreover, true to the postmodernist fashion, the Coens endorse a view of history inexorably mediated by written documents, implying that, as Linda Hutcheon states: "there is no directly and naturally accessible past 'real' for us today: we can only know – and construct – the past through its traces, its representations" ("Postmodern Film" 39). And that is exactly what the Coens did here; they constructed a subjective presentation of the American South of the 1930s in which "real" characters intersect with the fictional. The "real" historical characters include Tommy Johnson (whose role will be discussed at length later, pertaining to the music of the film) and the two candidates in the race for governor: "Pappy" O'Daniel and Homer Stokes.

Both Stokes' and O'Daniel's real life counterparts were political figures, with Stokes being based on Louisiana governor Huey Pierce Long, and O'Daniel on W. Lee O'Daniel, who was the governor of Texas. So much was changed in the incumbent governor O'Daniel from his real life counterpart, that instead of being an accurate representation of the person, he becomes a symbol clad in the historical figure's hat (Booker 145-168). The first time the audience hears him is during one of his radio-shows which consist of "old-timey" music, his friendly campaign speeches, and advertising for his flour brand. His façade of the friendly neighbourhood politician is debunked when the audience sees him for the first time: after the

Soggy Bottom Boys get their money from singing at the radio station, outside of it they meet "Pappy" and his entourage and are quick to share their knowledge of getting money, with Delmar saying: "Hey mister! I don't mean to be tellin' tales outta school, but there's a fella in there'll pay you ten dollars if you sing into his can!" (00:26:51-00:26:59). Pappy's response is short and crude: "I'm not here to make a record you dumb cracker!" (00:27:00-00:27:02). Even when his son suggests that he should be politer to potential voters he tells him off with: "I'll press your flesh you dim-witted sumbitch! You don't tell your Pappy how to court the electorate! […] Thank god your mammy died givin' birth. If she'd have seen you, she'd have died o' shame" (00:27:19-00:27:39). He shows a completely different persona from the one in his radio shows.

Stokes is a completely different kind of a "showman" from Pappy. He belongs more to the in-person variety: driving around a truck displaying his campaign poster, playing music, and with a little person standing on the back of it with a broom in his hand. His reform movement is based on the slogan "Sweep the state clean", and according to his own words, he represents the interests of the "little man", the working class (hence the inclusion of a person with dwarfism in his campaign). He is the embodiment of the political idea of populism, which presents a stance that emphasises the idea of "the people" and juxtaposes this group against "the elite". However, just like Pappy, Stokes is not entirely honest with his voters. He belongs to a "certain secret society", even being their Grand Wizard, and basically shamelessly admitting to it during his speech against the Soggy Bottom Boys at the gala dinner. Sure enough, the crowd rides him out on a rail, not because of his racist exclamations, or his superiority standpoint, but because he interrupted the performance. This allows Pappy, the experienced political strategist, to seize the opportunity and secure his position as governor by simply reading the atmosphere of the room and pardoning the Soggy Bottom Boys.

Stokes' position as Grand Wizard of the KKK and the entire scene of the Klan rally carries subtle implications of the Coen brothers' commentary on racial disparity of the period, amalgamated with slight satire. The KKK and its actions are real parts of American history, and this scene evokes the audience's moral condemnation of their actions, because "there is quite simply no possibility of avoiding the historical setting of the episode and the ethical response that that setting demands" (McFarland 48). To keep in line with the jovial, comedic tone of the rest of the movie, the Coens break up the tension of the scene with a bizarre, ritualistic dance performance by the Klan members, reminiscent of "The March of the Winkies" from the *Wizard of Oz*, where guards parade in military style outside the wicked witch's castle (Adams 143).

The entirety of the scene and Stokes' character serve to showcase the Janus-faced dilemma of populism: on the one hand, it presents the opportunity for real social reform and the implementation of progressive ideals; on the other, any mass movement, like the guards in Oz or the Klansmen, has the potential to become a fascistic enterprise.

However, *O, Brother* also showcases a less dystopian version of populism, hinting at integration and valorisation in the scene where Pappy sings "You Are My Sunshine" with the Soggy Bottom Boys. The crowd does not care that the group is "integrated" or "miscegenated", they simply care about good music, pleasing to both heart and mind. *O, Brother* is not profoundly concerned with whether Pappy is a political opportunist and Stokes a reformer-racist, or not. What is in the focus is the importance of pretence and theatricality which makes up a good campaign and a good politician. While the issue of race does occasionally spring up (characters referring to Tommy as "boy" or "son", and his near lynching by the KKK), it is not at the forefront, but rather it creates an overlapping of film and political history, which forces the audience to acknowledge the existence of this dark moment in American history (Adams 142).

5.4. "Old-timey" Music

There are not many movies whose soundtrack is intertwined with the visual images at such a high level that it becomes an indistinguishable part of the entire viewing experience. The work of Bernard Hermann and Ennio Morricone on *Psycho* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* respectively, set some of the highest standards when it comes to music composition of movies from the particular genres of horror and western, and gave worldwide audiences unforgettable audio cues of emotional reaction and action. It is safe to say that the soundtrack of *O, Brother*, compiled by T Bone Burnett, had an equally impactful role on the memorability of "old-timey" music by the fact that it ushered in a resurgence of the popularity of Depression era music. Whereas the film's plot represents an adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*, as the previous chapters have shown, its use of music serves as a means to immerse the classical story into the American context.

One of the biggest oddities connected to the soundtrack of *O, Brother* is that it, having been released separately, enjoyed a popularity that equals, if not supersedes, that of the film. Both Burnett and the Coens wanted to preserve as much authenticity and historical accuracy:

> Wherever possible, vocal and instrumental music is performed on-screen by an all-star line-up of musicians including veteran artists like country legend Ralph Stanley and the Grammy Award-winning Cox family, as well as younger talents like Alison Krauss and Union Station. Some vocals had to be lip-synched, notably, George Clooney's lead vocal on 'A Man of Constant Sorrow'… The gravediggers who sing 'You've Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley' are not professional actors but members of a vocal group called the Fairfield Four. 'Keep on the Sunny Side' is sung by the Whites (end title version by the Cox family) and 'I'll Fly Away' is sung by the Kossoy Sisters. The sirens' lullaby 'Didn't Leave Nobody but the Baby', is voiced by country singers Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, and Gillian Welch…, while 'Angel Band', first recorded by the Stanley Brothers in 1955, was rerecorded for *O, Brother* by the Peasall Sisters. Some of the tracks are remixes of archival recordings and new performances. (Adams 144)

While it is true that the Coens resurrected the popularity of the music genre by garnering it mainstream popularity, its appearance in films dates back to the 1960s. "Bluegrass" music as a standalone genre is a genre of music that developed around the 1940s in the Appalachian region of the US. It derives its name from the band Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys and

features acoustic string instruments while emphasising the offbeat. Notes are anticipated in contrast to laid back blues where notes are behind the beat, which creates the higher energy characteristic of bluegrass (Smith 8-9). The themes present in such music are largely sentimental narratives on everyday lives of the people from the region where the music originated – laments about loss and separation (both religious and secular), interpersonal squabbles, comments about unwanted changes in the region, and descriptions of the hard life with often lacking financial resources in the rural areas. One of the first films to make use of bluegrass was Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie & Clyde*, a highly fictionalized story about two bank-robbers. The music was mostly composed by Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt, members of Bill Monroe's band. The choice of composers was not incidental – the filmmakers used the two bank-robbers, icons of the Depression era, to illustrate something about the 1960s, and Flatt and Scrugg's soundtrack helped define the boundaries of the imagined space of the South in the film in a way that only music created intentionally to call up such a place and time – lost though it may be – could do (Sullivan cxix-cxx).

The use of bluegrass and other Depression era styles in *O, Brother* is seminal in presenting two generally diverging reactions to the film. On the one hand there is the earnest sentimentalism of bluegrass as originally practiced by Monroe, Flatt, and Scruggs. On the other hand, there is the conscientious use of particular sounds (fiddle, banjo) in producing a politicised image of Southern poverty. By using the track listing on the movie's soundtrack CD as a reference point, and further analysing the list of performers, it becomes noticeable that they can be divided into three groups, though the performed material is rooted in the 1930s:

- the performers tied to the era depicted in the film, including Ralph and Carter Stanley; the film also uses Alan Lomax's original field recording of James Carter and the Prisoners singing 'Po' Lazarus' and Harry McClintock's 'Big Rock Candy Mountain'
- performers tied to the urban folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s, like John Hartford, Emmylou Harris, and Norman Blake
- and performers from long after the revival, including Alison Krauss, Gillian Welch, and Chris Thomas King, who plays Tommy Johnson.

While *O, Brother* is not a musical in the traditional sense like, for instance, *Singing in the Rain*, it contains a number of performances that are indispensable to the plot. The very first scene of the movie presents the audience with a chain-gang lip-synching to Lomax's field recording, the

very idea of which is contrasted to the rest of the movie where "commercial recording" plays a much bigger role. Accompanied by a stark black and white image, the scene slowly transitions into sepia and then into the digitally processed coloration that dominates the film, giving it an autumnal look. Joel explains the reasoning behind this simply by saying they wanted the movie to feel "old-fashioned", but the locations where they filmed were "greener than Ireland" (Scharf). During the silent-film like title card, McClintock's "Big Rock Candy Mountain" (the only commercially recorded song from the depicted period) is playing, giving substance to the trio's escape attempt. "At a narrative level, the song's lyrics extend an invitation to the odyssey upon which Everett and crew are about to embark:' I'm headed for a land that's far away'" (Adams 144). These two songs are significant because they act as signs showing the presented cultural period and setting up further action. Following these two songs, the film moves toward approximate recreations of period pieces, away from the natural documentary toward artificial, mechanical reproduction – the radio. The first case showing the significance of the radio's role is shown in the scene with Cousin Hogwallop; even though his land is close to being foreclosed, he still owns a radio, and the protagonists listen to Pappy O' Daniel's "Flour Hour" on it.

The most significant use of music is depicted in the scene at the radio station, where the trio, together with Tommy, record a song that becomes an instant hit across the state. This is made possible by the dissemination of information through the use of the radio. As Pappy exclaims: "We're mass-communicatin'!" (00:27:28 - :00:27:30). The radio acts as a veritable messenger of the coming "age of reason", as Everett puts it. His reasoning acts as a partial contradiction in itself: he awaits the coming of the new age (like in France), opposing the "good old ways"; ironically, the good old ways, specifically – the good old music, is what allows him to change the direction of his life, even resulting in a pardon from all criminal offences. His opposition is clearly shown when observing the baptism at the river scene together with the flood at the end of the movie. While Pete and Delmar eagerly rush into the river to "wash away their sins", accompanied by a congregation singing "The Good Old Way (As I Went Down to the River to Pray)," Everett chooses to stay out of such a "ridiculous superstition". Their salvation by a eucatastrophe in the form of a biblical flood at the end of the movie prompts Pete and Delmar to call it a miracle, while Everett complains about their ignorance. In the scene where they meet Tommy and he tells them he sold his soul to the Devil, Everett exclaims that he is the only one who remains "unaffiliated", symbolically placing him at an intersection of the "old timey" religiousness and secularism, mirrored in the relationship of documentary-style field recordings against radio broadcasts and commercial recordings of music.

The character of Tommy Johnson is, even among such a colourful cast of characters, unique in his own way. He is played by Chris Thomas King, a real-life musician and is based on two historical figures, legends of blues music – Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson. According to Elijah Wald, during the 1930s, Robert Johnson performed blues music and was familiar to a niche white blues enthusiasts and African Americans who attended his performances, while Tommy became the premier vocalist of Delta blues of the period. Robert died young, aged 27, but the story surrounding his death propelled both his popularity and the popularity of Delta blues to heights not seen before. Today, Johnson is considered a progenitor of the Delta blues genre; however, stories about his life claim that he was a mediocre performer at best, until he sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads (Wald). This urban legend echoes not only the story of Orpheus from Greek mythology, but also closely resembles the "Faustian" myth from Europe. What further strengthened the belief of him selling his soul for musical ability is the fact that he died under mysterious circumstances. Musicologist Alan Lomax dismissed the myth, proclaiming:

> In fact, every blues fiddler, banjo picker, harp blower, piano strummer and guitar framer was, in the opinion of both himself and his peers, a child of the Devil, a consequence of the black view of the European dance embrace as sinful in the extreme (365).

The lifestyles of blues musicians provided additions to the beliefs of them being "Devil's children". Katrina Hazzard-Gordon explains that, although they were itinerant performers, some of them earned money as street performers and many played for white people at segregated parties. However, the importance of so-called "juke joints" must also be stressed. Juke joints, usually found at local crossroads, catered to the rural workforce that began emerging after the emancipation. Plantation workers needed a place to relax and socialise. Set up on the outskirts of town, often in ramshackle buildings or private houses, juke joints offered food, drink, dancing and gambling for weary workers, and owners made extra money by selling groceries, moonshine, and offering cheap board and room (80-82).

The Tommy Johnson from *O, Brother* is immediately identifiable to the wider (particularly American) audience, or at least to the members of the audience that are familiar with the legend of Robert Johnson. Both the iconic shot of him standing at the crossroads and his exclamation of his name explain his character. His clothing is identical to the clothing Robert Johnson wears in what was, for a long time, considered to be the only existing photograph of him. However, what complicates the "Tommy Johnson" from *O, Brother* is the

fact that he seems to be a sum of multiple Delta blues musicians from the 1930s. As was mentioned previously, he is based on two historical figures, Robert Johnson and Tommy Johnson. The connection to Robert was just explained. What connects him with the historical Tommy Johnson (besides the obvious name) is also the fact that the legend of a musician selling his soul to the devil was shortly associated with the real-life Tommy as well. Furthermore, the song that Chris Thomas King performs solo, as his character, originates from a completely different Delta blues musician. The song titled 'Hard Time Killing Floor Blues', a song about the Great depression, was originally composed and performed by "Skip" James. All of this – Tommy being an embodied collection of multiple historical blues musicians – suggests that he should be viewed as more than a simple character; possibly as something akin to a personified metaphor. He can be seen as the archetypal blues singer, both through mirroring its most famous representative in the way he is dressed as well as being a prototypical stand-in for all the other performers of the genre and era.

5.5. The Journey Follows the Road

Harkening back to the previously mentioned statements about the structure of the film, it is important to mention that the film may also be categorised as a "road movie", owing this classification to the presence of multiple characteristics of the road movie genre. Road movies are simply defined as a film genre in which the main characters leave home on a road trip, typically altering the perspective from their everyday lives (Danesi 256). Such a definition is certainly applicable to *O, Brother*, though it requires slightly pushing the envelope – the three protagonists of *O, Brother* certainly leave on a "road trip", though the point of their departure is not home; instead, home (together with family) is Everett's destination, Delmar wants to use his share of the (non-existent) money to buy back his farm, his home, while Pete dreams of owning a restaurant, a possible surrogate for home. Even in the literary source text, *The Odyssey*, the protagonist undertakes what is, not in the full sense of the phrase a "road trip", but rather a perilous journey back home. However, his journey still falls under the parameters of the genre characteristics. In fact, as stated earlier, *The Odyssey* can be seen as the ultimate role model for or predecessor of road novel and road movie genres.

The action of road movies often takes place in settings depicting the hinterlands, exploring themes of alienation and issues of the cultural identity of a nation or a historical period; often enmeshed in a mood of actual or potential menace, lawlessness, and violence, a distinctly existential air populated by frustrated, often desperate characters. Besides the close confines of the car, the setting also includes booths in diners and rooms in roadside motels, all of which helps to create intimacy and tension between the characters (Cohen and Hark 1-8). The colour-corrected woods and dusty roads of rural Mississippi certainly fall into the category of hinterlands, further enhancing *O, Brother* as a road movie. Since the Coens love experimenting with different genres, the first half of the movie can be viewed as taking place in a classic road movie setting – the three convict protagonists, who are alienated from the rest of the law-abiding society, while fleeing from a life-threatening danger in the form of the sheriff who sentences them to death by hanging when he captures them, journey to Everett's hometown (this also includes the short stop at the restaurant where they meet Big Dan Teague). The second part of the movie switches into a more "urban" setting, taking place in Ithaca and its surrounding areas. During their travels and ordeals, the three protagonists develop closer bonds, with the focus of character growth being on Everett and his changing worldview, which was discussed earlier. As Neil Archer points out in his *The French Road Movie: Space, Mobility, Identity*,

road movies tend to focus on the theme of masculinity (with the man often going through some type of crisis), and they revolve around codes of discovery (often self-discovery) (2), perfectly summarising the effect the journey had on Everett's inner self (as it did in the case of Odysseus whose travels affirm his masculinity and his position as the king of Ithaca).

Films from the road movie genre usually revolve around one of two main narratives: the quest or the outlaw chase. In the quest-style film, the story meanders as the characters make discoveries, while in the outlaw road movies, in which the characters are fleeing from law enforcement, there is usually more sex and violence ("Road Movies"). Since the protagonists in *O, Brother* are clearly fleeing from the police, it would be obvious to categorise the film as an outlaw chase film, but since no sex is present in the movie and the violence is there for comedic effect (Big Dan easily overpowering Everett and Delmar, and the attempted lynching of Tommy that goes horribly wrong, at least for the KKK), it is clear that the film deviates from genre characteristics; the deviation from norms being a staple of not only *O,Brother*, but the Coens' films in general.

Road movies do not typically use the standard three-act structure used in mainstream films; instead, an open-ended, rambling plot structure is used. The genre itself, while being significantly popular, is not particularly examined or analysed. Besides the previously mentioned features, what mostly stands out is that road movies are typically associated with the US, and the myths of American culture: individualism and populism. In these movies the road is an "alternative space", where the characters, set apart from conventional society, can experience transformation (Laderman 43 – 62), which exactly happened to Everett. Regarding the structure of *O, Brother* (which was discussed in a previous chapter), and keeping in mind the Coens' tendency to add their signature "twist" to genre features in their movies, it is not a surprise to see that the movie is actually divided into three acts. However, the action within those acts may be classified as "rambling" since the individual scenes play out like episodes, with the cuts between them slightly progressing the story as well. Besides, the ending itself is open-ended, so it cannot be said that the Coens completely betrayed the genre.

Another staple of road movies is the use of diegetic sound – the music from the car stereo, which the characters are listening to, is used as the soundtrack (Archer 20). *O, Brother* shares this characteristic as well, going even one step further by making a major part of the music be performed by characters on-screen, but not going so far as to be classified a musical. Devin Orgeron, in his *Road Movies*, argues that: "Road movies […] extend a longstanding

cinematic tradition that posits a hopeless and lamentable mobility in an effort to eulogize or find *stability*" (2). This mobility connects to the global modernisation process by making the characters of road movies come into contact with various transportation methods. At first this was limited to mostly cars, but because of the changes in the American railway system and the widespread phenomenon of freighthopping it added another layer to road movies – hobos surreptitiously boarding trains became a symbolic act of rebelling against social norms (with rebellion being another characteristic of road movies). These hobos, or rather "travelling workers" are also present at the start of *O, Brother* when the protagonists try to board a train in an attempt to escape, but ingloriously fail in doing so. Still, partially thanks to luck, partially by accident, and mostly by stumbling through their troubles, the trio manage to find stability by being pardoned and starting new lives, with Everett once again reclaiming the position of *pater familias* and being together with his family, much like his ancient Greek predecessor Odysseus.

Conclusion

There are a lot of common themes in the entirety of the Coen brothers' body of work: God, America, the soul of man, and so on, but the most transcendent theme is money: what it does to people and what people do to get it. It plays different roles in their films, from a simple MacGuffin, to a structural force in life, but it always carries a wealth of meanings. The Coen brothers' are usually concerned with morality, and money is their favourite way of throwing a character's moral universe into doubt. In some movies the money does not even exist; instead it acts as an illusion for the characters to chase. This is the case in *O, Brother Where Art Thou*. The money that sets the plot into motion and gets the gears of action moving turns out to be a fiction invented by the main protagonist Everett. During the course of the movie, Everett undertakes a journey that changes his worldview and "restarts" his moral compass. His quest to reunite with his wife and his family brings him to the realisation that what he has been searching for is a form of deeper personal fulfilment, which can only be achieved through a harmonious arrangement with his significant other – Penny; a fact that his ancient Greek predecessor Odysseus knew the whole time, and that was part of the reason why he undertook his epic and treacherous journey home.

Simultaneously, Ulysses Everett is surrounded by the bleak reality of the Great Depression. The rich politicians co-opt working class bluegrass music while ignoring the struggles of its roots, hence the satirical presentations of both individuals and groups in relation to politics. *O, Brother* looks at a nation wracked by poverty and desperation finds solace in communal bonds. These bonds shine through the "age of reason", the widespread communication and dissemination of information made available by the explosive popularity of the radio, and more to the point, the music that draws people together.

To conclude, it is possible to say that the main point of their movies is showing the experience of the journey. The answers to the major questions often elude the characters; however, the Coens' answer to the questions their movies ask seems to be that life is mysterious and uncertain. There is no way to know what will happen next, except that something will happen, akin to the ancient Greek gods in *The Odyssey* directing the flow of people's lives. All a person can do is accept their powerlessness in the face of that truth and embrace the tragicomic absurdity inherent to human existence.

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