



30 Years of Coens: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Homer meets Preston Sturges meets bluegrass

CHRISTOPHER ORRSEP 17 2014, 7:27 AM ET

• Though Sturges provides the movie's essential inspiration, the title credits twice advertise that its tongue-in-cheek narrative frame is "based upon *The Odyssey* by Homer." The references, tenuous as they may be, are all there: Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) is Odysseus—called Ulysses by the Romans—trying with his companions (played by John Turturro and Tim Blake Nelson) to return to his wife "Penny" (that is, Penelope, played by Holly Hunter) before she marries a suitor. (Everett even wears a long gray beard—i.e., disguises himself, like Odysseus, as an old man—when he makes his final approach.) On the long journey home the trio overcome the challenges posed by the blind bard Tiresias (the seer on the hand-pumped railcar), the Lotus Eaters (the baptismal congregation), the Sirens (the women washing clothes in the river), Polyphemus the Cyclops (John Goodman's malevolent Bible salesman), a near drowning, and so on. The two gubernatorial candidates the trio encounters are named [Menelaus](#) "Pappy" O'Daniel (Charles Durning) and Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall)—though thematically the "Homer" role probably matches up better with Mr. Lund (Stephen Root), the blind radio station manager who records the boys' rendition of "Man of Constant Sorrow." Even the song itself is related to the name Odysseus, which in some readings derives from the old Greek verb to "lament or wail." The idea of updating a classical tale to modern Mississippi was apparently inspired in part by the Howard Waldrop novella *A Dozen Tough Jobs*, which offered a contemporary version of the 12 labors of Hercules. (Waldrop is name-checked by the character of Penny's fiancé, Vernon Waldrip.) Rounding out the principal references, Everett's accompanist and sometimes-companion Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King) is loosely based on famed blues singer/guitarist [Robert Johnson](#), who was rumored to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his talent.