O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* through Popular Culture

Mallory Young
Tarleton State University
Stephenville, Texas, USA
myoung@tarleton.edu

Abstract:

Like so many of my academic colleagues, I spend an inordinate amount of time lamenting our students' lack of engagement, discipline, and preparation. The problems are naturally exacerbated when the subject is literature and the literature in question is, by its nature, far removed in time and place from students' daily lives. At the same time, requirements to study literature have become compressed, if not eliminated entirely. Ancient Greek works, in particular, seem to pose special problems for unmotivated or unprepared students. As our students become less likely to have a prior context from which to approach ancient texts, the challenge of introducing those texts in a one or two-semester Western literature course becomes greater. And yet, how can we omit foundational works like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from a general education? If we do include them, how do we remain true to the works while spending only two or three weeks considering them? Even after decades of teaching, I have not, I admit, fully managed to answer that question to my satisfaction. But I will share two approaches – one to the *Iliad*, the other to the *Odyssey* – that can be used successfully, I believe, in undergraduate survey courses on Western literature and culture. The two interpretive strategies, while different, share two central elements: each is based on a single theoretical framework that is easily accessible to lower-level undergraduate students, and both incorporate popular culture. In the case of the *Iliad*, I have used the twentieth-century lens of the Vietnam War provided through Jonathan Shay's study, *Achilles in Vietnam*. For the *Odyssey*, I have drawn on two contrasting movies, each focused on an Odysseus-like character placed in a twentieth-century setting: *Ulee's Gold* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou*?

In teaching Western classics, I, like many other instructors facing similar challenges, frequently turn to popular culture as an entryway for typically uninitiated students. Given my students' lack of academic preparation in Greek mythology (the days of high school introductions via Edith Hamilton being long passed), their only prior knowledge has come to them through popular films, a smattering of TV shows, and a few works of adolescent literature. Most of my current students are familiar, for example, with *Clash* (and most recently *Wrath*) *of the Titans*. (A few years ago, *Troy* and *300* were the top movie candidates.) A smaller group has watched the 1990s TV series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (still accessible online). And a few are familiar with the novels and/or film versions from the Percy Jackson series. Today's students might, therefore, have at least some notion of the Greek pantheon, along with a popularized view of ancient heroic culture, but little more. As a result, I can for the most part dispense with the process of defamiliarization I find needed in teaching ancient biblical texts: in the case of the Homeric epics, most of my students are entering a world that could not be more foreign. My efforts then are focused, at least partly, on helping them recognize what might be familiar.

Before considering my differing approaches to each epic, let me digress for a moment to distinguish them. Since the appearance of Mikhail Bakhtin's 1975 groundbreaking essay, "Epic and Novel," Homeric scholars have been united in their partial acceptance and partial rejection of its primary thesis. Bakhtin, as is well known, distinguished what he considered the early monologic genre of epic from the later dialogic genre of the novel. The chorus of critics responded almost unanimously. According to Gregory Nagy, for example, while the *Iliad* clearly fits Bakhtin's description of Classical epic, the *Odyssey* equally clearly does not (73). Nagy goes on to quote John Peradotto: "I would venture to say that close readers of Homer are far more likely to recognize the *Odyssey* in Bakhtin's characterization of the novel than in his account of epic" [11] (73).

What Nagy, Peradotto, Charles Segal, Denys Page, and other critics have pointed to, in particular, is the *Odyssey*'s *heteroglossia*, its multiple, complex, and ambiguous voices, that is, what Bakhtin himself refers to as dialogism.[1] While the *Iliad* is dominated by a single, all-powerful, controlling voice, the *Odyssey*, that most postmodern of ancient works, resists any central point of view, presenting and re-presenting a multiplicity of perspectives, constantly undercutting itself, playing with truth (or truths) and falsehood, identity and disguise, reality and illusion – not only in the plot, characters, and overt themes, but also in the very techniques and sensibility of the work itself. Like its (ostensible) hero, the *Odyssey* is *polytropos*: devious, multi-faceted, "many-turning." Outside the basic issues of language and poetics, the *Odyssey*'s connections to the postmodern magical realism of Márquez, Allende, and Rushdie are more immediately obvious than any links to its Homeric sibling. While the *Iliad* can be seen as largely monolingual (to use an appropriate parallel), the *Odyssey* is unquestionably multilingual.

Although these issues have been thoroughly investigated in the theoretical realm, they also have far-reaching effects on teaching. I have found here what I consider a strange paradox. The *Iliad* is invariably considered the more difficult read, but it is not necessarily, for precisely the reasons suggested above, more difficult to teach. The *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is a far more accessible work, drawing in even reluctant readers with its suspenseful mix of exotic exploration and revenge fantasy: *Star Wars* meets *Indiana Jones* and takes a sudden turn into *Lethal Weapon*. But given its many-layered narrative complexity, the *Odyssey* presents, in my view, a much greater challenge when it comes to teaching – at least when it comes to teaching a class not entirely devoted to the *Odyssey*.

I will turn first to the *Iliad* with its controlled, perfectly unified, single voice. That work, I want students to see, is both expansive and narrowly circumscribed. The main plot of the twenty-four-book epic, although part of the much larger conflict of the Trojan War, covers just two weeks. And the action is literally circumscribed by the walls of Troy: everything of importance takes place in a space created by those crucial walls, whether inside them or outside them – or, in a few instances, on them. While hundreds of characters are introduced, most are quickly dispatched in just a few lines, the victims of battle. Only a few characters actually play a significant role. We might imagine Homer viewing a miniature world through a gigantic magnifying glass. The plot is, on its surface, a simple, linear one, focused almost entirely on Achilles, specifically that anger introduced in the first line and reaching its end in the last book. It can be summed up quickly: in the final year of the decade-long Trojan War, the Achaeans' greatest warrior Achilles, humiliated by his leader Agamemnon, withdraws from the fighting; the battle continues without him to the detriment of Agamemnon's troops; Achilles re-enters the war to avenge the death of his closest comrade, Patroclus, and kills the Trojan leader Hector; after taking and abusing Hector's body, he returns it to Hector's father, King Priam, for burial. The only events occurring beyond these parameters are the scenes focused on the squabbling of the gods, brief interludes of comparatively comic relief – although they frequently have tragic side effects for the human characters.

This oversimplified recounting of the plot, however, neglects the strangeness of the world Homer creates. In teaching the *Iliad* as part of a survey class, I make use of one primary interpretive approach that I believe provides the spark of recognition my uninitiated students need. The connection comes not through their knowledge of specific pop-culture texts but rather through a typically indirect but keen interest in the experience of soldiers and veterans. A steady stream of war movies, political views espoused on TV news and across the Internet, and response to the successive conflicts in Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq have all contributed to a pervasive curiosity, if often shadowy knowledge, regarding the experience of war. And even after several generations, the Vietnam War remains in our students' collective consciousness as a defining moment in American identity. The approach I have most often used to bring my students into the foreign world of the *Iliad* picks up on their familiarity with these ideas.

My approach is based on Jonathan Shay's incisive psychological treatise, *Achilles in Vietnam*.[2] I start by introducing students to the *Iliad*'s ambiguous attitude towards war, which Bernard Knox has so effectively presented.[3] As Knox explains, the *Iliad* not only illustrates, but makes us feel, the intense excitement, the thrill, the overpowering lure, even the beauty, of violence (27-29). Forget Nascar and first-person-shooter video games – this is the real thing, the true, albeit temporary, experience of "god mode." At the same time, often in the same passage, we experience the equally real horror, the blood-soaked and blood-curdling agony, the terrible, and final, loss of blooming life (Knox 26-27). No better representation exists of the double-edged experience of war. My students and I also discuss the limited roles of women in a patriarchal heroic culture. We note the surprising compassion for the Trojans revealed in the meeting of Hector and Andromache,[4] and we consider the unexpected moment in Book 9 when Achilles not only refuses to return to the fighting but also questions the entire heroic code. But all of these discussions are temporary stops along the poem's inexorable drive to the core issue. The focus of our analysis, as of the poem itself, is and must be the rage of Achilles: what Shay so aptly refers to in his subtitle as the "undoing of character."

Shay's surprising connection between the overwhelming psychological breakdown suffered by Achilles in Books 18-22 and the experience of Vietnam soldiers become the key to my students' understanding. The students are, without exception, familiar with the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans. The fact that Shay himself is a psychiatrist who spent decades working with Vietnam vets suffering from PTSD makes him a reliable authority. The link between the onset of the berserk state experienced in battle, which Shay identifies as the pre-condition for PTSD, and Achilles' response to the death of Patroclus is immediately transparent and overwhelmingly convincing (*Achilles* 82). Not only does Shay's explanation make sense of what happens to Achilles, it also simultaneously creates a connection that contemporary students find both recognizable and memorable.

As Shay reveals, two primary conditions for the onset of the berserk state experienced by Vietnam soldiers appear clearly in Achilles' situation as well: humiliation by a commanding officer leading to a lack of faith in and commitment to the war effort and the death of the soldier's closest comrade-in-arms (*Achilles* 80; 96). These conditions are not merely met in the *Iliad*; they are the primary focal points of the narrative, as even the least sophisticated readers are able to recognize. All of the action is driven by these two crucial events. Achilles' resulting loss of humanity – his unbridled violence, disconnection from society, sense of invulnerability – is equally evident (*Achilles* 82; 88; 97). Shay explains, "Achilles – to use the words of our veterans – 'lost it.' When a veteran says he 'lost it,' what did he lose? What did Achilles lose? I believe that the veterans and Homer shared similar views on this subject. In the veterans' own words, they lost their humanity" (82).

After Patroclus' death, Achilles' loss of humanity becomes the focus of the *Iliad*. Shay's perspective provides an answer to questions readers have asked for centuries, questions shared by characters, both human and divine, within the *Iliad*. Before considering Shay's resolution, I lead the class through some of the more traditional but less satisfying answers. Achilles explicitly reveals that he feels responsible for Patroclus' death: he is no doubt suffering from a sense of guilt. We also note that in accepting once again the heroic code and its demand for revenge, Achilles knows he has simultaneously ensured his own death. Or perhaps – an answer traditionally put forward, but not, in my view, in any way supported in the poem – Achilles and Patroclus were lovers, and Achilles is suffering from the loss of his homosexual mate. But none of these answers begins to explain the inhuman, all-consuming rage Achilles enters.

In addition to identifying the causes of the berserk state in both Vietnam soldiers and Homeric warriors, Shay provides a list of behavioral and psychological effects (*Achilles* 82). Equipped with this information, students can easily discover evidence themselves. They notice, for example, that Homer repeatedly indicates the divide between the Achilles we met at the beginning of the work and the enraged and heartless killer he has become. A prime example appears in Achilles' response to the gods. When, in Book 1, Achilles reacted in fierce anger to Agamemnon's insult, he began to pull out his sword with the intention of assassinating his leader. The *Iliad* thus begins, Shay suggests, with an "interrupted fragging" (126); like many Vietnam soldiers, Achilles is impelled to kill his own commanding officer. But the most significant point here is that he does not: still able to control his rage, he stops immediately, in mid-draw, when Athena enters the scene urging him to resist the impulse to violence. The Achilles of Book 19, by contrast, has become indiscriminate in his vicious slaughter. When the river god Scamander orders him to stop choking his waters with dead bodies, Achilles, in his maddened state, flatly refuses to obey. He only backs down when the god overwhelms him with superior force.

Accompanying the changes in Achilles' behavior, Homer's similes highlight the beastlike and godlike characteristics associated with the berserker. What might initially appear to be mere epic convention becomes startlingly revealing. Achilles is "Like a bearded lion . . . gripped by piercing rage" (18.369, 374). He is compared to "inhuman fire raging on," "like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he killed" (20.554, 558). Or he is quite simply "like something superhuman" (21.256). Even Achilles' standard epithet "godlike" takes on new meaning. As he approaches Hector for their final confrontation, we can now understand Hector's terror: Homer is not telling us that Hector is a coward, but that Achilles has become an inhuman force no man – not even the great Hector – could stand against:

> . . . Achilles was closing on him now
>
> like the god of war, the fighter's helmet flashing,
>
> over his right shoulder shaking the Pelian ash spear,
>
> that terror, and the bronze around his body flared
>
> like a raging fire or the rising, blazing sun. (22.157-61)

Achilles' loss of humanity appears most clearly, of course, in the scene of Hector's death. When Achilles gives Hector his death blow, he gives voice to the beast inside: "Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now/to hack your flesh away and eat you raw" (22.408-9). Though he does not finally reach that level of brutality, his horrifying abuse of Hector's corpse comes close, and again we can note the chilling contrast Homer suggests. In Book 6, Andromache, pleading with Hector during their last meeting, reveals that she lost her entire family to Achilles in an attack on her native city. But she also informs us that Achilles had shown respect for her slain father and buried him along with his war gear.

Shay's focus on the berserk state provides a clear understanding of Achilles' dishonorable behavior. As Shay goes on to explain, we should not be surprised at Achilles' actions following Hector's death: the berserker's rage does not end with the act of revenge. As the accounts of Vietnam veterans attest, a soldier's berserk fury outlasts his enemy's life. When Book 24 opens, we find Achilles continuing his abuse of Hector's corpse, gaining no relief, still unable to eat, sleep, or reenter the world of normal social relations. But significantly, the epic does not conclude here. Equally important to Homer's purpose will be the end of Achilles' berserk state leading to the end of the *Iliad* itself.

The most far-reaching idea Homer will introduce at this point is the crucial importance of respect for human life (*Achilles* 115-117; 202-203). In Book 23, Achilles is reintegrated into his own society as he presides over the funeral games for Patroclus. But far more importantly, he is, in Book 24, reintegrated into humanity as he recognizes his common suffering with King Priam and feels compassion for his enemy. The deeply moving scene between Achilles and Priam, when the Trojan king comes to beg for the return of Hector's body, brings about Achilles' restoration. Even though we know Achilles will die in this war, the reintegration of his character is crucial to Homer and to his readers.

Up to this point, Shay's interpretation provides students strong evidence that literary works, even ancient ones, can present a penetrating understanding of human events and a close parallel to their own knowledge and experience. But as Shay explains, the parallel is not merely an academic one. Shay's experience with Vietnam vets led him to an understanding of the events in the *Iliad* and to his well-substantiated claim that Homer had intimate and impressive knowledge of the psychology of war (*Achilles* xiii). The revelations worked both ways though. At the same time that his experience with veterans led to a new understanding of the epic characters' motivation, events in the *Iliad* led Shay to new methods for training soldiers and treating vets. Compassion, not revenge, is the key to healing. The result for Achilles is, significantly, the emergence from his irrational rage, an end to the state that, in those soldiers who survive it, can lead to incurable PTSD (*Achilles* 98). The result for American methods of warfare has been a new emphasis on the "prevention of psychological and moral injury" (*Odysseus* xvi).[5]The result for my students is a true respect for the power of a 2700-year-old literary work.

I admit I especially enjoy leading students to a realization of the perfect rightness of the *Iliad*'s ending. They are initially surprised: where is the death of Achilles, the Trojan horse, the sack of Troy? (Ah, they did have some knowledge of the story, after all.) I ask them to think, for just a moment, of what the poet told us this story would be about. It takes only that hint for someone to get it. The end Homer gives us is not only the ideal conclusion from the point of view of literary structure and completeness, as the poem circles back to a father begging for the release of his child, this time with a significantly altered outcome. It is also, of course, the true end of the subject of the poem introduced in the first line. An understanding of Achilles' berserk state and his move towards a return to humanity as that beastlike and godlike rage comes to an end (*Achilles* 82-86) gives a resonance to the poem's conclusion that goes far beyond literary form.[6]

While the monologic *Iliad*, then, can perhaps be effectively approached through one major perspective, the dialogic *Odyssey* presents a different challenge. Although it is, in nearly every respect, closer to contemporary sensibilities, its wondrous complexity makes it, in my experience, especially challenging to teach in a survey course. While I can focus on a half dozen books of the *Iliad* and present the main core of the work, doing that with the *Odyssey* feels unsatisfying if not downright dishonest. While Achilles' experience of war effectively sums up the main thrust of the *Iliad*, no single defining experience can sum up the multi-threaded themes of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus' homecoming, the idea of *nostos*, would seem to be the parallel, but a major part of the epic occurs outside that event: related, yes, but not subsumed by it. What most people think of as the *Odyssey* is actually just the tale Odysseus presents of his wanderings, covering a mere four books of the epic's twenty-four. Focusing on that tale alone omits the coming-of-age story of Odysseus' son Telemachus, a nearly independent account that fills the epic's first four books. It omits Odysseus' subsequent return to his homeland of Ithaca and preparation to resume his role as husband, father, and king. And it omits both Odysseus' violent revenge against his wife's suitors and his tender reunion with Penelope herself. In the course of these events, the reader is taken quite literally to the ends of the earth – from the towers of Troy to remote islands inhabited by monsters, from the halls of Sparta to the halls of the gods. So, in contrast to my teaching of the *Iliad*, when it comes to the *Odyssey*, I have used a wide variety of approaches in different classes and different semesters.

One great advantage in teaching the *Odyssey* is the availability of a plethora of popular-culture resources. The *Odyssey* is constantly echoed in popular novels, mainstream films, and graphic adaptations. No matter what approach we might take, a pop-culture text or two will be available for support. If we are focusing, for example, on the prominent role of women in the work, Margaret Atwood's intriguing and accessible novel, *The Penelopiad*, provides an effective accompaniment.[7] This approach, I think, can be especially productive in a course focused on literary Good Girls and Bad Girls. (Coming to the epic through Atwood's revisionist work also provides an opportunity for a resistant reading based on issues of gender and genre, although that perspective is better suited, I think, to advanced classes.) If we are focused rather on Odysseus' story of his journey, Yann Martel's contemporary novel, *Life of Pi*, along with the recent movie version, can provide appropriate support.[8] Admittedly, these approaches, like numerous others, grasp only a small part of the *Odyssey* itself, but each can contribute to students' understanding.

An interpretation I admit I have found less than satisfying is, somewhat surprisingly, the one provided by Jonathan Shay in *Odysseus in America*, his follow-up study to *Achilles in Vietnam*. Shay, I believe, works from the same assumption that Bakhtin originally did: he considers the *Odyssey* as simply a continuation of the *Iliad*. If that were the case, then Shay's dark vision of Odysseus' painful attempt to reintegrate himself into postwar life would make for a satisfying reading. The darkness Shay points out is, I admit, fully apparent in the work. But Shay passes over the equally strong light the *Odyssey* shines on its subject.[9] Where, in Shay's reading, is the magic, the adventure, the fantasy, the bizarre and exotic? The limitations of Shay's interpretation led me back to a course on the *Odyssey* I took in graduate school with John Peradotto. Peradotto's interpretation, which became the basis for his 1990 study, *Man in the Middle Voice*, remains the most effective approach I have found to the epic as a whole, explaining the compelling and seemingly contradictory co-existence of darkness and light so integral to the *Odyssey*. And again, pop-culture texts are available for support – in this case, two almost diametrically opposed films: the 1997 Peter Fonda vehicle, *Ulee's Gold*, and the 2000 Coen Brothers film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The movies appear, on the surface, to have little in common – beyond, that is, the shared name of their protagonists. The stories are set in different times and different places; the two films' plots, characters, and tone bear no resemblance to one another. The movies differ radically even in their willingness to acknowledge their classical source. *Ulee's Gold* never overtly mentions the *Odyssey* and even goes to some lengths to suppress it. It is not until late in the movie that we learn the protagonist's name is short for Ulysses – although that in itself mirrors the *Odyssey*'s own suppression, first of its hero's name, then of his actual introduction into the work. *O Brother*, by contrast, immediately and showily announces its Homeric ancestry: the film includes the *Odyssey* among its opening credits and begins with Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the invocation to the Muse. Viewers and critics have suggested, however, that the *Cliff's Notes* (the movie came out before *SparkNotes* made their ubiquitous appearance) might have been a more direct source. In fact, the Coens openly acknowledged a lack of direct familiarity with the *Odyssey*. They cheerfully admitted to the French magazine, *Le Figaro*, that they had never actually read the work (Ramasseul).

And yet, the *Odyssey* – acknowledged or not, read or not – is clearly, at least in some respects, a source for both films. At the same time that an analysis of each film reveals clear parallels to its Homeric roots, an analysis of the *Odyssey*'s dual roots reveals the reason for the films' divergence. As Peradotto explains, the *Odyssey* combines elements of both folktale – or *Märchen* – and myth. It offers the struggle between the two, never resolving the tension created (82-83). Bruno Bettelheim, Claude Bremond, and other scholars of narratology have noted that traditional narrative, at least with respect to Western literature, can be divided into two major types, one more closely associated with tragedy, the other with comedy (Peradotto 48-50). These two narrative types, the "narrative of desire frustrated" and the "narrative of desire accomplished," can be referred to as myth and folktale, respectively (Peradotto 49). In myth, the tale is generally focused on human endurance and mortality. The protagonist is one who, quite literally, suffers, endures fortune's slings and arrows. Humans live in a world that cannot be controlled by their knowledge or power (Peradotto 49). Humans are *amechanoi*, unable to achieve their desires or control their fates. In folktale, on the other hand, the emphasis is on desire and hope. Here, humans have the resources, the wits, the skill, the luck to get what they want. Obstacles can be overcome, and the protagonists can hope to live happily ever after (Peradotto 48).

As Peradotto has demonstrated, one part of the brilliance of the *Odyssey* appears in its constant shifting between these two narrative possibilities. In the folktale, Odysseus the trickster uses resourcefulness to outwit the Cyclops; he manages to persuade the reluctant Phaeacians to transport him home; he vanquishes 108 suitors; he is reunited with his beloved wife. He is *polytropos* – the word used to describe him in the epic's first line. In the tragic myth, by contrast, he suffers helplessly through the encounter with Scylla; he is held captive for seven years by Calypso; he endures the indignities of a beggar; he is fated to leave Penelope again. He is the man of *pathos* – the description given him in the epic's fifth line. On the one hand Athena; on the other Poseidon. The *Odyssey* never chooses between the two (Peradotto 82-83).

The work reveals that it is fully aware of the more traditional narrative options. We see the classic tragic myth in the story of Agamemnon, ending as it does in a cycle of violence and death. The classic *Märchen*, by contrast, appears in the story of Menelaus (Peradotto 82-83), who is seen living contentedly with the still gorgeous and gracious, if not quite penitent, Helen. (It must be admitted, however, that their happy home life is assisted by some pleasure-inducing *pharmakoi*.) In true romance fashion, their story has a fairy-tale HEA (happily-ever-after) ending: we are told that Menelaus and Helen will escape even the sufferings of mortality; instead of entering Hades, they will be transported to the Isles of the Blessed. Odysseus' story, by contrast, like his fate, remains unresolved (Peradotto 83).

These are ideas that students, even in a basic survey class, are capable of grasping. But the two films provide further and more concrete illustration of the *Odyssey*'s double nature. *Ulee's Gold*, focusing on a Vietnam vet returned to a world he no longer belongs to or believes in, steers toward the mythic *Odyssey*. (The focus on a Vietnam vet makes for an interesting parallel to Shay's interpretation, even while it provides another indication that Shay's study has picked up on only one side of the *Odyssey*.) *O Brother*, a Depression-era romp with a smooth-talking, smoothly coifed escaped convict, opts for the folktale *Odyssey*. Each film, then, reflects a different side of the epic itself.

It is true that at the outset *Ulee's Gold* bears little, if any, resemblance to the epic work. The film presents the quiet, slow-moving story of a rural beekeeper. Ulysses Jackson has returned home from Vietnam to the swamps of central Florida to live a life apart from human society. Admittedly the film focuses far more strongly on the sense of place its setting affords than on its literary source. The director, Victor Nuñez, is known for his portrayal of the rhythms and resonance of rural Florida and its people (Rosenbaum). Still, once we start looking, connections to the *Odyssey* become quickly evident. On an initial consideration, those Homeric echoes might appear superficial, limited largely to the ironic use of Homeric names for ordinary characters. Ulee, while a veteran, is not by any means a figure of epic proportions. He is simply a grieving widower whose wife Penelope has died, leaving him bereft. In addition to Ulee and his deceased wife, the film includes a central character with the obviously significant name of Helen, whose abduction drives the action. The result, however, is not a world-shattering conflict. Rather, the Trojan War is brought down to the level of an intimate domestic dispute.

Yet the film's focus on the grim forces of necessity does suggest a more significant relationship with the *Odyssey*, or at least one side of it. In one brief but significant scene, Ulee's younger granddaughter, Penny, asks him about a photograph taken in Vietnam that shows Ulee encircled by his comrades. "They're all dead?" she asks. "Every last one? . . . Did they deserve to die?" "No," he responds. "They were good guys. Your grandpa was *tricky* and *lucky*. That's why I made it out" [italics mine]. Like the suffering mythic Odysseus, Ulee endured the loss of his fellow soldiers. But at that point in his life, he was, like the resourceful folklore Odysseus, able to prevail, and by precisely the same means.

It is not Ulee's war experiences that have led him to withdraw from society. Rather he was embittered, we are told, by the loss of Penelope. His wife's death has revealed to Ulee the impossibility of overcoming fate. He has now opted for a life based on endurance. He has no hope, for he has nothing to hope for, nothing to gain. Here we can see the Odysseus of tragic myth, resigned to a life that promises no more than death. He will keep to himself, work his bees, sell his honey. Still, he cannot remain completely solitary. His only son Jimmy is in prison, and his daughter-in-law, Helen, has abandoned their two daughters. Ulee is now acting as the girls' surrogate father. He refuses, however, to involve himself further in the world beyond his beehives. When Helen is kidnapped by two of Jimmy's former accomplices, Ulee is unmoved. Only when the two lowlifes threaten not just his daughter-in-law but his granddaughters is he forced to become involved. Like his namesake, Ulee is initially unwilling to enter the conflict to retrieve Helen. He discovers, however, that, as in the case of Vietnam, he has no choice. Fate and necessity will not allow him to retreat from a world of violence.

The rambunctious joyride of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* could hardly seem further removed. We can, however, easily identify one similarity: here too, we might initially question the film's actual adherence to anything resembling Homeric epic. Indeed, the Coen Brothers have drawn as much from their vast knowledge of popular culture as from the *Odyssey*. The film provides references to at least a half dozen cinematic sources, most notably *The Wizard of Oz* and the 1941 film *Sullivan's Travels* – from which *O Brother* takes several scenes, as well as its title (Scott). (I would suggest, in fact, that what the Coens are actually doing here is making Sullivan's unmade film, but true to that movie's vision, making it as a comedy.) But a closer look at the Coen Brothers' re-creation reveals, in spite of their protestations, a close familiarity with the Homeric work and a nearly endless supply of possible or undeniable parallels.

Ulysses Everett McGill, in contrast to Fonda's Ulee, is less a man of constant sorrow than a man of unlimited hope. With his gift for eloquence and the appropriate hair pomade, he has no doubt he can conquer the world. At the very least he can reach his ex-wife Penny in time to prevent her impending marriage to a "bona fide suitor." The fact that he has escaped from prison chained to two other convicts is, at most, a minor inconvenience. In the rollicking escapade that ensues, Everett (as he is generally known) will indeed, thanks largely to a combination of far-fetched chance and blind luck, overcome all the obstacles in his path. Even divine intervention comes into play: Governor Menelaus (Pappy) O'Daniel's unexpected pardon of Everett and his fellow escapees provides an updated *deus ex machina*.[10]

Like *Ulee's Gold*, *O Brother* is strongly infused with a sense of Southern place – here afforded primarily through the Coens' reliance on traditional roots music, from bluegrass to gospel (Scott). The most obvious Homeric parallels, not surprisingly then, combine the Classical Greek with the Southern Baptist. The demonic sheriff, for example, functions both as the Poseidon figure relentlessly pursuing our hero and, at the same time, as a good old Southern fundamentalist Christian devil. The same conjunction is evident in the prophet, a Tiresias figure who appears as a blind black man speaking his riddles in biblical cadences. Similarly the congregation and preacher at the river offer Everett and his companions the Lotus-eaters' promise of forgetfulness along with Calypso's promise of immortality. And the Cyclops figure is an eye-patch-wearing, false-speaking Bible salesman. Clearly the Coens are taking huge liberties with the Homeric text – but it is equally clear that they are more familiar with it than they blithely admit.

What is missing from *O Brother* is not the knowledge of scenes or characters or potential allusions, but the Greek epic's emphasis on necessity, on fate – ultimately on the vast, unbridgeable gulf between humans and gods. Odysseus learns not only who he is, but what it means to be human, mortal, limited. Even months on a chain gang have failed to communicate that point to Ulysses Everett McGill. When he reaches home, he is fully ready to embark on his next career, as a dentist. Why, he has already lined up a guy who will print him a license. . .

The *Odyssey*'s clearest indication of the tension between *mythos* and *Märchen*, myth and folktale, comes at its conclusion (Peradotto 58). As in the case of the *Iliad*, what might at first appear to be an unsatisfying or inappropriate conclusion – "Did we read the actual end?" students ask – proves rather to be the right one.[11] At the end of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has prevailed: he has survived storms and monsters and goddesses and shipwrecks, contrived a passage home, dispensed with his rivals, convinced his justifiably doubting wife. At last he finds himself reunited with Penelope. And yet, it is here that Odysseus reveals to her the fate that awaits him: he must leave again, travel alone until he finds a place so far inland that the people have no knowledge of the sea. But will he find that place? Will he return to his home? Will his death come to him gently? As Peradotto explains, the prophecy Odysseus received from Tiresias is entirely conditional. Odysseus does not know which, if any, of those conditions will be fulfilled, and neither do we (69). While Menelaus' fate, like Helen's and Agamemnon's and Achilles', is sealed, Odysseus' is open-ended. Odysseus has chosen mortality, and we know he must die; everything else remains a question. The epic's final scene provides an odd, unconvincing *dea ex machina*, Athena's resolution of the conflict between Odysseus and the families of the slain suitors. Although the epic ends here with a clear episode of wish fulfillment, we know it's a fake: Odysseus has been pardoned, banishment will not be necessary; but we have already heard Tiresias' prophecy, we are aware this is not the true ending (Peradotto 170). The inconclusive conclusion is intentional.[12]

Students can quite clearly perceive that while *Ulee's Gold* follows the mythic pattern established in the *Odyssey*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* presents the folktale version. Interestingly, however, both films, like the *Odyssey* itself, provide open-ended conclusions. During the course of *Ulee's Gold*, Ulysses Jackson will gradually recapture the ability to hope. His journey becomes a journey from mere endurance to the possibility of action, achievement, fulfillment. Not accidentally, the woman who helps him make the transition, a nurse who also provides care for his granddaughters, has been given the name Connie Hope. The open ending provides the same balance between fateful myth and hopeful folktale that we see in the *Odyssey*.

While Ulysses Jackson has moved from endurance towards hope, Ulysses Everett McGill, who has succeeded even beyond his wildest hopes, is suddenly faced with the force of necessity. Up to the end, this Ulysses has prevailed almost entirely by luck – but luck, by its very nature, is something that cannot hold. Having made it home and overcome the suitor (through charm rather than violence), Everett is reunited with his ex-wife. Penny has agreed to remarry him but demands her original wedding ring – a test that proves far more challenging than the one the original Penelope presented her long-absent husband. The ring, we learn, is locked in a drawer of the roll-top desk stored in their old cabin, and the cabin is in a valley some distance away, and the valley is about to be turned, thanks to a new dam, into a manmade lake. But Penny has counted to three, the indication of a necessity Everett knows cannot be overcome. He has no choice but to set off again.

As it turns out, the sudden flooding of the valley saves him from the sheriff, and the prophet's wacky predictions are brought to pass. Everett, along with two of his companions, is unexpectedly rescued from the flood when a coffin – a comic version of Queequeg's in *Moby-Dick* – spews forth from the deep. But all hope of regaining the ring is lost. Then the fourth member of the group floats into sight buoyed by a piece of furniture – the roll-top desk. The prize, the (literal) golden ring, has been magically delivered into Everett's hand. He is saved again. He returns triumphantly to Penny bearing the ring that will seal their union. But wait: it's the wrong ring. The right one – maybe it wasn't in that roll-top desk after all – lies somewhere at the bottom of a lake – or is it somewhere else? At the end of the film, Ulysses Everett McGill's fate is comically unresolved.

At this point, the film's theme song takes on a new dimension. "I am a man of constant sorrow/I've seen trouble all my days": sorrow, endurance, *trouble* – the true meaning, at least according to one famous critic, of the name of Odysseus, the man who both endures and causes trouble (Dimock 59). Towards the end of their journey, McGill's comrades had actually, much like Odysseus', turned against him. As they point out, "Since we've been followin' your lead, we've got nothin' but trouble." The song has been delivered in a cheerful, lilting style that belies its sad take on life. Perhaps the same can be said of the film itself. In any case, we have arrived once again – this time from the opposite direction – at the *Odyssey*'s balance of endurance and hope, necessity and desire, myth and *Märchen*. Both films then, as different as they may be, are in some important respects true to the spirit of the *Odyssey* – whether by necessity or simply by chance.

This is not to say that either film presents the epic's full scope. In the first, after all, one of the most memorable of all literary heroes has been reduced to a quiet beekeeper; in the other, he has become a comic, even ridiculous, figure. And many of the *Odyssey*'s Big Themes are only marginally addressed: themes of identity, homecoming, gender relations, family loyalty, mortality, what it means to be human. Still, together the films can help students hear two of the most prominent voices that resound throughout the *Odyssey*.

I do not mean to suggest that any one interpretive approach will "cover" either of the Homeric epics or, for that matter, any major literary work. These approaches, like any, are limited, whether we are considering a monologic work such as the *Iliad* or a dialogic one such as the *Odyssey*. One side benefit, however, is the opportunity for a discussion of literary interpretation itself: in particular, how changes in the interpretive community will affect our readings, allowing us to connect with previously unseen possibilities inherent in the work. While the work itself does not change, our understanding of it does. Still, we do, I admit, risk skewing ancient works when we look at them primarily through a modern lens, whether that lens is serious psychological studies of Vietnam veterans or purely fictional popular movies. The ultimate goal, after all, is to consider the epics, as much as possible, on their own terms. But the approaches I have put forward can provide students with an entrance into a world far removed from their own. At a time when many, if not most, general-education literature courses have abandoned Classical texts, I continue to believe that our students can engage with them in meaningful ways. Approaches like the ones I have discussed here can, I think, make it possible for students living in a fast-paced world of high-tech information and low-level language to enter the stately, exotic, foreign, and yet eminently accessible world of the Homeric epics.[13]

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the* Odyssey and Denys Page, *Folktales in Homer's* Odyssey.

[2] I do not mean to suggest this is the only option for interpreting Achilles' motivation or his actions. As Shay himself admits in his preface to his study of the *Odyssey* (*Odysseus* xv-xvi), no single interpretation will fully grasp the range of possibilities either text provides.

[3] See, for example, Knox's introduction to Robert Fagles' translation of the *Iliad*, especially pages 26-30.

[4] Many of the students are particularly touched by Hector's removing his "shining helmet" – that is, voluntarily stripping himself of the very epithet used to identify him as a warrior – to take up his infant son. This is one of the notable occasions when Homer turns his use of epic convention to brilliant literary advantage.

[5] As Shay reveals in the Preface to his follow-up book *Odysseus in America*, he "was completely surprised by the tide of support for *Achilles in Vietnam* among professional military people" (xvi).

[6] My support for the effect these ideas have had on my students comes from the students themselves. Achilles and his berserk state remain, I am convinced, firmly entrenched in my students' memory. At the end of the semester, after we've considered some 3,000 years of literary history, from Homer and the Book of Job to Gabriel García Márquez and Tom Stoppard, Achilles' experience remains in the forefront, as both their comments and their final exams suggest. And for years, veterans of the class who have remained or gotten back in touch with me have mentioned the continuing impression those ideas have made on them.

[7] For a detailed treatment of the *Penelopiad*, see the article by Economou Bailey Green in this volume.

[8] It is worth noting that in both the ancient Greek epic and the contemporary novel, the central character offers a first-person narrative account of surviving a life-threatening and life-changing journey. The two works present the characters' accounts within a larger frame story, providing the storytellers with audiences. In both cases, as well, the central narrative is undercut by a competing narrative, whether directly stated or only suggested. Finally, the audience in each work along with the works' actual audience, is faced with a choice between narratives. In both cases, the storytellers' less trustworthy yet nonetheless truer accounts become the accepted versions.

[9] I find the same limitation in Stanley Lombardo's much heralded translation of the *Odyssey*. The connection is not surprising given that Lombardo was, as he explains, influenced by Shay's ideas (384).

[10] I would like to thank Rebecca Longster for the idea that Pappy O'Daniel and his cohorts function as a parallel to the Olympian gods.

[11] My students are not alone in that perception. Writers, both ancient and modern, have been impelled by a sense of the epic's inconclusiveness to provide the ostensibly missing ending. Note, for instance, the ancient *Telegony*, which followed Odysseus to his death at the hand of his son by the enchantress Circe, and Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*. On the other hand, as Benjamin Haller pointed out to me, both Aristarchus and Aristophanes claim that the *Odyssey*'s *peras*, its true ending, occurs at Book 23, line 296, when Odysseus and Penelope are reunited as husband and wife and the nurse Eurycleia closes the bedroom door on them.

[12] For another critical discussion of the *Odyssey*'s open-endedness, see Lillian Doherty's "Narrative Openings in the *Odyssey*."

[13] My thanks to Kirsten Day and Benjamin Haller for their perceptive and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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Author Bio:

Mallory Young is Professor of English and Languages at Tarleton State University where she teaches comparative literature, British literature, and women's popular culture and literature. She has published on a wide variety of subjects, from the *Odyssey* to European film. Most recently her scholarship has focused on "chick culture." She is co-editor of two collections of essays: *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (Routledge 2006) and *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (Routledge 2008).

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