

Oh Brother, Where Art Thou? - Discussion Topics

1. We have said that the Coen Brothers are students of film history. What events or characters in the film are drawn from our collective cinematic or cultural history?
2. The first 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ minutes of the film are very cleverly crafted by the Coens. Let's explore how they ply their craft. What is the first sound we hear, even before the studio logo disappears from the screen? What is it? Describe the nature of the sound.
3. Note the graphic style of the opening credits, the typeface, the borders. This style is meant to direct the audience attention in a certain way. What information are the Coens trying to convey?
4. The opening song, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, is also meant to alert the viewer to something. What style of song is it? What is it about? What is the song's general origin? Putting this all together - why this kind of song?
5. Then we have a quote:

"Oh muse, sing in me and through me tell the story of that man skilled in the ways of contending. A wanderer harried for years on end."

It's the opening line of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*.

And in case we are not classical scholars they tell us that the film is based on the *Odyssey* by Homer. With this connection in mind are there any other allusions to the *Odyssey* here at the very opening of the film? Think again of the first sound we hear. Think of the first visual we see, the fields stretching off to meet the horizon, and the three convicts popping up and disappearing in the field of grass. Think of the visual of the chain gang and how it is filmed. How could these visuals be connected to the *Odyssey* or to ancient Greece?

6. The narrative of the film also contains many allusions to Homer's epic poem. Here are a few characters or situations in the poem. Can you spot the corresponding allusions in the film?
- Homer was said to be blind.
 - The sorceress, Circe, turned Odysseus' men into swine.
 - The Roman name for Odysseus was Ulysses.
 - The cyclops was a character in the poem.
 - Odysseus' wife, Penelope, was beset by suitors during her husband's travels. Yet she remains faithful. Odysseus bests them in the climax of the story.
 - In Greek plays the term "Deus ex machina" refers to the gods intervening to rescue mortals from a hopeless situation. Does something similar happen in the film?
7. Describe the different character traits of Ulysses, Delmar and Tim?
8. The sheriff can be seen as a demonic character. What traits are given in this character to enhance this?
9. This film has been criticized for demeaning southerners as hicks or simpletons. Do you agree or disagree? What examples from the film would bolster your argument?
10. Would you call this film a road movie or perhaps a buddy movie?

