

The Pomade Won't Save You Now: Salvation and Sorrow in *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

Redemption, it seems, is a product of self-reliance. And a palm-sized jar of pomade. At least, this logic applies as far as Ulysses Everett T. McGill is concerned.

In the Coen Brother's Depression Era adaptation of *The Odyssey*, Everett (McGill) and his two accomplices, Pete and Delmar, escape their labor sentence on a penal farm in Mississippi with the intent of re-capturing Everett's hidden treasure, a sum worth 1.2 million dollars. The three covertly travel through cornfields, farmhouses, town squares, and railroads, traversing the all-too-familiar path of the impoverished American South while adopting a series of misconstruing identities to throw off the law that pursues them.

The men find themselves in unlikely circumstances of all kinds: first they escape arrest by Pete's car-stealing nephew, then they pick up a young musician named Tommy who claims to have sold his soul to the devil. They are drugged by alluring 'sirens,' attacked by a manipulative 'cyclops,' implicated by an adrenaline-addicted bank robber, chased by corrupt politicians, and nearly killed by a blood-thirsty gang of Ku Klux Klan members. Yet despite the outlandish plotline, perhaps the least anticipated thread is the subtly ballooning fame of the trio's alter-ego, The Soggy Bottom Boys. They create this impromptu band in attempts to make some fast cash at a roadside recording studio shortly after their initial escape, and the single they record, "A Man of Constant Sorrow," quickly catapults the group to fame. The first verse goes like this (based on Bob Dylan's original of the same name):

I am a man of constant sorrow
I've seen trouble all my day.
I bid farewell to old Kentucky
The place where I was born and raised
(The place where he was born and raised)

From there, Everett laments over his misfortunes, singing, "For six long years I've been in trouble/ No pleasures here on earth I found/ For in this world I'm bound to ramble/ I have no friends to help me now." The song has a rather melancholy tone, telling of his long-winded, aimless journey ahead. However, the final lines offer some hope: "But there is one promise that is given/ I'll meet you on God's golden shore."

The "Soggy Bottom Boys" sub-plot occurs alongside the rest of the action, so while the men themselves (Everett, Pete and Delmar) attempt to remain incognito, their doppelganger band becomes a sensation—despite the public believing that they're a crew of "negro one-hit-wonders." Records fly off the shelves while the three continue to evade the law. The lyrics perform rather like a confessional, with Everett admitting to a consistent state of rambling, uncertain despair. He has broken the law and avoided the consequences, and thus, his life has been one of Sorrow.

However, it is the very notion of “law” existing in the escapees’ absurdist world that makes this real-life adaptation of Homer’s mythological epic nearly as folkloric itself; each new character surpasses the last in his hypocrisy, with scenes dripping in ridiculous irony throughout the film. And yet, every one of these characters insists that his or her conventions are rational. These conventions are Machiavellian to the core—tactics to “meet the goal” or “get the gold” or just survive in the *O Brother* universe. In a realm entirely devoid of financial and moral certainty, acquiring the upper hand is really the only objective worth chasing, and thus, all rules bend to meet this Grail. Everett’s song, then, is a sarcastic justification of his felonious conduct; The Soggy Bottom Boys and their lyrics are about as ironic as it gets.

To understand this individualized state of morality, though, first one must understand a few of the protagonists and their opponents. These whimsical individuals loosely embody the canon of Mortal Sins, forced (or so they’d claim) to extreme behavior during the severe economic drought. To begin, we have Ulysses **Everett** T. McGill, ie **Pride**, the slick, handsome, and arrogant ringleader of the fleeing threesome. From the first scene, it is obvious that Everett fancies himself a man of reason; his logic, he riddles, will save them from any and all situations. His confidence is overwhelming, but he is also neurotic, and his obsession with having perpetually gelled hair reveals his compulsion for self-perfection throughout the film. Without his Dapper Dan, Everett McGill is a witless man.

Perhaps the most poignant quality, though, is Everett’s satirical relationship with religion. As the calamitous events influencing these three begin to resemble mystic intervention with increasing transparency, Everett reacts with quipped statements like “Well, ain’t it a small world, spiritually speaking. Pete and Delmar just been baptized and saved. I guess I’m the only one that remains unaffiliated.” Of course, in the final scene of the movie, as a noose is being placed around his neck and the end looms near, the man drops to his knees in an uncharacteristic fit of distress, crying out to God to save him, despite him being guilty of “pride and short dealing.” When a flood then washes through to relieve them of their imminent deaths, he responds:

Well, any human being will cast about in a moment of stress. No, the fact is, they're flooding this valley so they can hydroelectric up the whole durn state. Yes, sir, the South is gonna change. Everything's gonna be put on electricity and run on a paying basis. Out with the old spiritual mumbo jumbo, the superstitions, and the backward ways. We're gonna see a brave new world where they run everybody a wire and hook us all up to a grid. Yes, sir, a veritable age of reason. Like the one they had in France. Not a moment too soon.

While Everett is making these statements, however, “A Man of Constant Sorrow” spreads like wildfire, contradicting his “reasoning ways” as an admission of weakness and woe.

The rest of his companions are no less ironic. The remaining cast is as follows:

Wingman 1, known as **Delmar** O'Donnell, is a simple and impressionable man, incarcerated for robbing a Piggly-Wiggly. Very soon after his escape from imprisonment, he “gets himself baptized” in a cult-like service that he, Pete and Everett encounter by a river. From that point forward, his reliance on God only strengthens, and he carries his baptism like an indulgence, an abstract shield protecting him from ultimate harm. Every exploit on their way to the stolen-treasure is in the name of the Lord, because Delmar “has been saved!”

Wingman 2, or **Pete** Hogwallop, ie **Lust**, is a countryman of the most stereotypical proportions. He is hot-blooded and quickly aroused, which serves to nearly kill him when he, Everett and Delmar stumble upon three women singing and bathing on rocks in a stream. He succumbs to their advances and when his comrades awake, they find his clothes sans Pete, believing he has been turned into a toad “on account o’ the fornicatin’!” (Ultimately, they find him in a movie theatre, freeing him from his re-capture so they can pursue “the treasure” once more.)

Big Dan Teague, ie **Gluttony** and **Greed** combined (his enormous girth representative of his vices, it seems), serves as one of the heroes’ greatest foes, a one-eyed bible salesman and member of the Ku Klux Klan who robs the men of their money after luring them into an isolated picnic on the country side. He dies during an lynch mob that Everett, Pete and Delmar interrupt to save Tommy, who faces death at the hand of the racists. Big Dan is crushed (we presume) beneath the weight of a burning cross as it crashes over his head.

Pappy O'Daniel, ie **Greed** (as well), is an unscrupulous politician feening for re-election. He will stop at nothing to achieve his goal, and thus at the end of the movie, endorses the Soggy Bottom Boys (who have snuck onstage to stop Everett’s wife from marrying another man) and absolves them of their crimes, promising to protect them from the law once he sees how popular they are with the townspeople.

Next, we have **Homer Stokes**; he is potentially the most villainous of them all, promising to be a “servant of the little man,” fighting against “nepotism, racialism, cronyism” and, most importantly, Pappy O'Daniel in the upcoming election. Then, in the scene with the KKK, he is revealed as the head of the mob, tearing off his mask to curse Everett, Pete, and Delmar for thwarting the terrorists’ attempt to “preserve [the town’s] hallowed culture and heritage!”

Finally, there is **Sheriff Cooley**, ie **Wrath**, a relentless policeman who chases Everett, Pete, and Delmar to the very end, attempting to hang them all for foiling him time after time. Despite this execution being too extreme for their crimes, when they

insist that Pappy O'Daniel pardoned them (as the Soggy Bottom Boys), crying "It ain't the law!," he states, "The law? The law is a human institution."

O Brother presents us with a set of predictable eccentrics living according to their own rules, pitted together and against one another in scenarios created as the effects of adherence to (or dismissal of) constitutional law. Legally speaking, every one of these men has broken this law somehow or another, and yet they believe their actions are justifiable, implicitly moral and redemptive in their own unique right. Everett has to save his marriage, Delmar has to buy back his farm. Pete insists on family loyalty, and Homer wants to reestablish purity in a "misceginatin' world." Their corruptions are well-founded; in a world of impoverished debauchery, the ends really do justify the means. The characters' objectives range from reasonable to grotesquely dogmatic, but regardless, these men believe they are upholding a standard. The constitutional law only holds weight when they need it to, which skews the morals of the *O Brother* universe even further.

Everett, Delmar, Pete and their enemies represent their values with fervor, but this symbolic fervor does not bring them to the treasure, nor power, nor security. Their respective ideals, or those results that will bring them fulfillment, none of them save these men from their transgressions. One by one, these characters meet a near-fatal—or completely fatal—end. Their rules, or the created morals to which they adhere, fail them. Big Dan dies and Homer falls out of public favor. Pete is re-arrested then almost hanged along with Everett and Delmar, and though Everett gets his wife back, their final conversation ends in strife.

And yet, there is one factor woven throughout the storyline, one factor to which every character—big and small—relates: the song. The Soggy Bottom Boys are champions to the people because, despite their failures as individuals, they sing the truth.

They are Men of Constant Sorrow, all of them, attempting to make some sense out of a world robbed of morality and security. The economy is depressed, but the people of *O Brother* are *oppressed*, and thus they try to create mini redemptions for themselves, objectives to aim for amidst the swirling dust and moneyless desperation of their realities. Everett, for one, has a plan: if his hair is perfectly gelled, his words sound and his marriage saved, his sorrows will be erased. He will be well and the world will be on his side once more. However, as *O Brother* proves time and time again, plans fall through, hopes are dashed, and expectations become jokes for the audience's pleasure.

The ironies and hypocrisies breed absurdity, but against the grain of ridiculousness and satire, The Soggy Bottom Boys spin a yarn more honest and more reliable than any bout of reason that Everett, Delmar or Pete could convey. Their self-constructed rules for survival emerge as twisted logic, and yet they cling tight to these structured hopes for deliverance.

The title of the film asks: O Brother, where art thou? Everett, Pete and Delmar seem to be asking this same question throughout. They turn to themselves and each other. They turn to the world. O Brother, where art thou? Where do we meet? What do we have in common? The Soggy Bottom Boys answer: we have the Sorrow. There is trouble and there will be trouble, but at the end of that trouble, we will see one another on God's golden shore.