

## Class Consciousness

Edith Hall

This dog's owner has died far away.... Now his situation is hard, because his master has died away from his homeland, and the women do not look after him. Slaves never work properly when their master is not there to govern them, for far-thundering Zeus removes half a man's capacity when the day of slavery takes him down. [17.312-23]

Such is the comment that Eumaeus the swineherd makes to the beggar he does not yet know is Odysseus, when the faithful dog Argos recognises his disguised master and dies. The position the speech takes on slavery is complex, not least because the person who delivers it is himself a loyal slave, to whom the old hound offers an implicit parallel. But Eumaeus also believes that slaves are insubordinate, needing constant supervision. Acknowledgement of the deleterious effects of slavery on the human being is rare in the *Odyssey*. Its dominant picture portrays idealised, harmonious inter-class relationships. Eumaeus himself, an exemplar of virtue, conveniently turns out to be an aristocrat who was kidnapped as a child (15.351-484). In 1829 an Ithacan scholar claimed to be a direct descendant of Eumaeus, but he emphasised Eumaeus' origins as son of the king of another island rather than his status as slave and swineherd.

One reason why the *Odyssey* has proved susceptible to adaptation is that its characters are not confined to an elite, aristocrat group: besides the significant slave characters (Eurycleia, Eurynome and Melantho as well as Eumaeus), the poem includes an ordinary rower (Elpenor) and the beggar Irus: in *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, Monteverdi upgraded the character of Irus significantly, giving him social aspirations and a serious suicide scene. The *Odyssey* includes stories about

merchants and pirates, and much backbreaking peasant labour. The setting on rugged Ithaca contrasts with the luxury of Phaeacia and Menelaus' opulent Sparta. Little wonder the Renaissance critic Julius Caesar Scaliger, who despised the lowlife tenor of the *Odyssey*, scoffed that Homer 'was instructed by rustics and little old women in Ithaca and Chios'. Charles Perrault, a snob and acolyte of Louis XIV, felt 'indignation and disgust' when he discovered that Odysseus 'sleeps with pigs in the evening and has a fistfight the next day with an ugly tramp over the scraps from Penelope's kitchen.'

The *Odyssey* portrays sudden reversals of fortune leading to violent movements up or down the social pyramid. The most brutal of these occur in the stories told to Eumaeus by Odysseus in his fictional persona as a displaced Cretan. He says that he since he was the illegitimate son born by a slave to a prosperous Cretan, he was given only a small peasant holding on his father's death. He had fought at Troy, but was thereafter press-ganged into forced labour in Egypt, before insinuating himself into the favour of the Pharaoh. He was then misled into taking a voyage with a Phoenician crook who sold him into slavery, but a shipwreck meant that he arrived as a free man in Thesprotia. He was kidnapped again and faced slavery, if he had not escaped and swum to shore in Ithaca (14.191-359). This compelling tale is calculated to make its audience remember that in the ancient Mediterranean liberty was always a fragile status.

On arrival in Ithaca, Odysseus disguises himself as the poorest type of free individual. For nearly ten books the perspective of the poem fuses that of a king with that of a tramp. It is in this context that the audience listens to the insults loaded upon the vulnerable outsider by Melanthe, herself a slave (19.66-9), when she demands to know if he intends to mangle at the house, prowling around and staring at the women: 'Go away, you loser, and eat your supper outside, or you will soon find

yourself beaten away with a blazing torch.’ Odysseus’ response would alone explain why his poem has attracted so many class-conscious readings:

Strange woman, what is the reason for such anger with me? Is it because I am dirty, and dressed in rags, and go begging from people? I have to do this out of necessity. That’s what indigent men and beggars usually do. There was a time when I too was a wealthy man, who could hold my head high as master of my own flourishing household; in those days I often used to give things to tramps who lived as I do know, regardless of who they were or what it was that they needed (19.71-7).

The *Odyssey* insists that its audience remember that there, but for the grace of the gods, go they.

Yet scholars have disagreed about the class agenda of the *Odyssey*, and the point is an important one, since the poem informed all ancient ideology through its role in education. The class politics of the *Odyssey* have been seen as either fundamentally conservative, or fundamentally radical. The most important statement of the former position, which argues that the poem affirms the necessity of a dominant aristocracy, came in Moses Finley’s anthropological study *The World of Odysseus*. He said that the socially subordinate characters in the *Odyssey* are presented as mere ‘stock types’. In the Ithacan power struggle, as in the *Iliad*, ultimately ‘only the aristocrats had roles’. This view has been developed in a brilliant book-length study of class in the *Odyssey* by Thalmann (1998).

Those scholars, however, who think that the poem offers a critique of class society, stress the radical potential of the device through which Ithacan society is

inspected from 'the bottom up' while Odysseus is disguised as a beggar. An early proponent of this view was Felix Jacoby, the scholar-son of a wealthy merchant family, writing in 1933 in Germany before anti-Semitism forced him to emigrate to England. He praised the *Odyssey* for offering a portrayal of social relations that took in the 'little people' as well as the grand. More recently, this has informed Rose's sophisticated reading (1975), 'Class ambivalence in the *Odyssey*'. Rose denies that it is possible to identify a consistent ideological position underlying a text in any class-torn society since texts express tensions rather than positions. My own view is similar. There are several passages in the *Odyssey* which could be enjoyed by the slaves who heard performances, and felt to contain perspectives personal to them, or which expressed, at least, some fellow feeling. This is suggested by the ways in which the class element of the *Odyssey* has reappeared in its later adaptations. Its reception, from the perspective of the depiction of social class, is certainly different from that of the *Iliad*: no scene in the *Odyssey* contains the same insistence on the gap between aristocrat and commoner as the confrontation between Thersites, the ordinary Greek soldier at Troy, and his overlords.

In the *Iliad* it is Odysseus who strikes Thersites with the sceptre -- symbol of inherited god-given kingly status -- in order to silence him. This point was not lost on Walcott, who includes a painful new scene between the two in his stage version of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, no parallel in the Roman reception of the *Iliad* exists to the moment when in *Satire* 2.5 Horace constructed a humorous dialogue between Ulysses and Tiresias, which exposes the strategies by which lower-class fortune-hunters wheedled their way into the wills of rich old men. Nor is there any ancient burlesqued *Iliad* equivalent to Petronius' transposition of the *Odyssey* to the seedy brothels portrayed in his *Satyrical*, nor the identification of its hero with the simple villagers and fisher-folk to be found in some early Christian narratives (see above, ch. 4). Although Renaissance versions of the *Odyssey* saw its hero as an important

prince, and lower-class characters as sometimes evil and usually laughable, by the early 18th century a proletarian Odysseus had appeared.

This was in the ballad opera *Penelope*, by John Mottley and Thomas Cooke, which premiered in London at the Little Haymarket theatre on 8th May 1728 and is sometimes falsely attributed to the famous ballad opera composer John Gay. The songs of ballad opera (folk tunes, urban popular ditties, and famous refrains composers like Handel), were known on the streets and the audiences could sing along if they wanted. *Penelope* sets the story of the *Odyssey* in a London working-class tavern; the Sign hanging outside reads, 'This is the Royal Oak, the House of Pen, / With Entertainment good for Horse and Men.' The publican is Penelope, wife of Ulysses; he is a sergeant in the grenadiers and has been absent for nineteen years. Meanwhile, she has been besieged by suitors: a butcher, a tailor and a parish clerk.

Cooke, although an innkeeper's son, was a classical scholar (indeed, the first translator of Hesiod into English), and the opera is his barbed response to his long-time enemy Alexander Pope's translation of the *Odyssey*, issued in 1725-6. One of the allegations made in the Preface, indeed, is that Pope had relied too much on his so-called assistants in the *Odyssey* translation, William Broome and Elijah Fenton. But Mottley, as a Grub Street pamphleteer and the son of an absentee Jacobite soldier, was equipped to write about abandoned women and the seedier underside of London life. The vigour of the opera derives from the unorthodox Cooke/Mottley collaboration. Its demotic tone is signified when Penelope tells the audience that she has not combed her 'matted locks' for a month, and only put on one clean smock in the last three. Her maid Doll suggests that she seek comfort in the bottle, but neither gin nor whisky can help. Penelope calls Doll a 'silly sow', and Doll recommends that she marry Cleaver the butcher, singing:

He's tall and jolly,

Believe thy Dolly,  
It wou'd be Folly,  
To slight his Pain.

Penelope complains that all the suitors are but 'rakehells'; she will not choose one of them until she has finished weaving her cabbage-net. She despises, she says, the hotpots, stout, ale and punch with which they woo her.

Doll favours the butcher because he bribes her with tasty offal; she is less impressed with the tailor's silver thimble, and nonplussed by the parish clerk's bible and offer of a reserved pew at church. (The man of god, interestingly, is himself sent up for his supercilious speech and respect for the King). Doll and Cleaver are secretly in love and plotting; Cleaver will marry Penelope, thus acquire her property, and keep Doll as his mistress. Cleaver is evil but engaging, and able wittily to send up the Homeric archetype. He is a butcher, and therefore asks, 'Shall I my Fame with whining Sorrows stain, / Whose Arms have Hecatombs of Oxen slain?' But the opera ends as satisfactorily as the *Odyssey*, and with far less bloodshed.

The English working-class Odysseus has reappeared spasmodically in the theatre, notably in Richard Hope's fine play *Odysseus Thump* (1997), performed at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. Norman Nestor is also trying to get back to the pub – the Ship & Anchor in a Lancashire town. Against a setting of football terraces, closed mills and canal banks, Norman observes the destruction of the Northern industrial working class. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most *déclassé* version of the *Odyssey* appeared in Andreas Karkavitsas' novel *The Beggar* (1896), the earliest novel to be written in demotic modern Greek. Karkavitsas was convinced that if Greece was to inaugurate a worthy national literature, it needed to be in a language understood 'by people both of the drawing-room and the hills'. He used the *Odyssey* as a springboard for his novel about the return of a beggar to an impoverished northern

Greek village, a backward area which had only been re-annexed by Greece from the Turks in 1881. Karkavitsas, himself middle-class, had studied ancient Greek mythology at the Gymnasium in Patras, but after enrolment as a medical officer in the Greek army, travelled in the poorest areas and came to sympathise with the miserable conditions under which most Greeks then lived. He was struck by the professional beggars in the area known as Roumeli, and he recorded how strong he found the parallel between their culture and that of Homeric heroes, especially the clever Odysseus. Each beggar went on long journeys, dressed in noxious rags, to acquire the means on which his family subsisted, but returned secretly at night to his home village to attend public festivals. He would hang his beggar's staff from a nail 'in which are preserved all the ancestral staffs, like the weapons of heroes in their arms-rooms...the trophy by means of which his beggarly cleverness is advertised.' The beggar then appeared in public, clean, freshly dressed, and triumphant, and 'whoever sees them the next day in the market will be thunderstruck like Telemachus before his transformed father'.

The Odyssean hero of the novel is the titular beggar, Tziritokostas, a man capable of killing, with steely muscles beneath his rags, a revenge motive, and exceptional cunning. Although his ethics are abominable, through him Karkavitsas celebrates the inherent intelligence and potential of the downtrodden serfs of Thessaly, while sparing no detail of the poverty and superstition that plagued them. Karkavitsas' outrageous new hero, by embodying an ironic twist on one of the canonical works of ancient Greek culture, allows his author to make political points without whitewashing the rivalry that existed between starving rural villagers, and their tawdry malice towards one another. One contemporary review, which for political reasons was unfavourable, saw acutely what Karkavitsas was doing in the novel, with its image of the beggar, 'that strange being formed of cunning and naiveté

at the same time, guileless and clever, descended in a direct line from that great Greek ancestor from whom we are all descended after all -- Odysseus'.

A similar relocation down the social scale is manifest in a novel by Józef Wittlin, the translator of the *Odyssey* for early 20th-century Poland. During WWI, Wittlin (like Karkavitsas) had worked in a military hospital, and developed a Polish idiom for the *Odyssey* that would match the trauma he had encountered and suggest the old diction of folk ballads. The same style permeates his novel *The Salt of the Earth* (1935). This hero of this modern Odyssey is an updated equivalent of the swineherd Eumaeus, an illiterate, near idiotic provincial named Piotr Niewiadomski. But his simple moral instincts offer an alternative to the mad nihilism of the war: he is the 'salt of the earth' in the early Christian sense. Piotr's Odyssean voyage is through the trauma of the early twentieth century; his only defence against monsters and lethal seductions is his human decency.

This is the tradition in which cinema has more recently reacted to the *Odyssey*, for almost all the films that over the last 15 years have transplanted its plot to 19th- or 20th-century contexts have made the Odysseus-figure lower-class, and his travelogue an exploration of the social underbelly of society. Many have set the story in the USA, where democratically-minded citizens have had a special affection for Odysseus, or rather Ulysses, since the Revolutionary War. Indeed, the town of Ulysses in Tompkins County, Ithaca, is one of several in a chunk of New York State gifted to soldiers in reward for securing the new nation. The name was chosen by a land commissioner named Robert Harper, who looked to heroic names associated with Greece and Rome after rejecting the associations of either British or Native American nomenclature.

The Southern states of the USA have had a paradoxical relationship with the poem ever since the future US president Ulysses S. Grant (who was actually from the Midwest) led the Union forces to victory over the Confederacy in 1864-5. As US



president, Grant fiercely supported the Radical Reconstruction policy that imposed martial law, thus allowing the South to get back on its feet without falling into total anarchy. His name was for a whole generation on the lips of every family in the states readmitted to the Union, amongst which are those -- Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida -- where authors have set new versions of the *Odyssey*. The near-mythic status of the Civil War has become a substitute for the legendary Trojan War.

The earliest Deep South *Odyssey* was Jon Amiel's *Sommersby* (1993), set in Tennessee, the first state to be re-admitted to the Union in 1866. Richard Gere stars as Horace Townsend, who assumes the identity of the deceased Jack Sommersby. Horace knew the dead man intimately, and since he bears a visual resemblance to him, he returns in his place to his wife and son after the Civil War. The movie divided audiences, partly because Townsend's altruistic decision to die at the end fails to persuade, but much of it is powerful and filmed with careful realism. It conveys the desperate situation at the end of the war; there are marauding confederate soldiers, failed crops, newly liberated but destitute blacks, derelict buildings, and grim scenes in the gaol.

The wanderings end with the opening credits, during which the figure of a man -- Townsend/Sommersby -- is seen trampling through snow and sun. Jack Sommersby's estate has been looted and the Penelope figure Laurel Sommersby (Jodie Foster) is virtually destitute, living on in the dilapidated grand house. The whole community, white and black alike, is starving. The Eumaeus figure is Joseph, a former slave, now a share-cropper, who loyally supports the man he thinks is his former master; Eurycleia is represented by Jack's nanny, a freed slave. The suitor is a bible-punching minister, played with menace by Jack Pullman, and the showdown between the rivals for Penelope takes place in her rundown barn. The genesis of *Sommersby* can partly explain the poverty of the context in which it is located, since it was conceived as a remake of Daniel Vigne's famous film *Le Retour de Martin*

*Guerre* (1982), set in a 16th-century French peasant community. Indeed, *Sommersby* was also written by Vigne in collaboration with Jean-Claude Carrière, screenplay writer for *Martin Guerre*, who regarded the former as a straightforward adaptation of the latter. Between the two films, Carrière had worked with Peter Brook on *The Mahabharata*, learning much about epic convention and its transference to dramatic form.

The relationship of *Sommersby* to the *Odyssey* is explicit: the impostor hero, a former Classics teacher, is given two scenes in which he reads from Homer to the Telemachus figure, Little Rob. He is also forced to kill the household dog, who of course does not recognise him, in a poignant rewriting of the Argus scene with which this chapter began. In the French prototype, the connection with the *Odyssey* constitutes a set of parallels rather than provable influence: Arnaud de Tihl (Gérard Depardieu) did exist, and did pretend to be the long-lost husband of Bertrande de Rols. In evoking peasant culture, Vigne and Carrière had a novel and historical documents on which to draw, as well as the expertise of a Princeton scholar. Even the breeds of livestock farmed at the time were researched. But the parallels with the *Odyssey* had been noticed, and were elaborated by the time Odysseus -- and Arnaud de Tihl -- found themselves transplanted to Tennessee.

A similar context to that of *Sommersby* underlies Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2003), adapted from Charles Frazier's novel of the same name. It is, again, the end of the Civil War, and a destitute soldier is returning, although this Odysseus, a carpenter called Inman (Jude Law), is no impostor. The state is not Tennessee but the town of Cold Mountain in North Carolina. Here the Penelope figure, Ada Monroe (Nicole Kidman) moves with her ageing preacher father. The class focus of the film emerges less in the romance between the educated Ada and the artisan Inman than in the redemption Ada finds through physical labour and friendship with the lowest-class person in the area, Ruby Thewes. The connection

with the *Odyssey* is more explicit in the novel, in the opening hospital sequence of which Inman meets one man who has tried to learn Greek and another who is blind.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Ada is reading Homer's poem to Ruby while she awaits Inman's return, after 'filling Ruby in on who the Greeks were' (in the film the book is changed into a Jane Austen novel). Frazier imagines how the uneducated Ruby would have reacted. 'She had grown impatient with Penelope, but she would sit of a long evening and laugh and laugh at the tribulations of Odysseus, all the stones the gods threw in his pathway'. But as the daughter of a liar, Ruby was suspicious of Odysseus:

...she found his alibis for stretching out his trip to be suspect in the extreme, an opinion only confirmed by the current passage in which the characters were denned up in a swineherd's hut drinking and telling tales. She concluded that, all in all, not much had altered in the way of things despite the passage of a great volume of time.

Frazier here signals the importance of the least aristocratic scene in the whole *Odyssey*, the storytelling in Eumaeus' lowly hut, but he makes his Eumaeus equivalent, Ruby Thewes, articulate the premise of his approach to the mythic undertext -- that human nature does not change much at all.

The best *Odyssey* movie set in the American South is the least well known: it is *Ulee's Gold* (1997), written and directed by Victor Nunez. Here the war that has scarred the hero is Vietnam; Ulee Jackson (Peter Fonda) lost all his friends in combat. The location this time is the Florida panhandle of the tupelo swamplands, where Ulee ekes out a livelihood from his ancestral trade of beekeeping. Nunez's camera focuses on Ulee as he performs backbreaking daily chores -- working at the hives, repairing wooden crates, and moving barrels of honey. In a sense this Odysseus is more of a Laertes, retired to his small-holding, especially since his wife Penelope

died several years ago. Ulee struggles to raise his grand-daughters, Casey and Penny, abandoned to his care after his daughter-in-law -- Helen -- vanished two years previously (she is hooked on heroin and staying with lowlife criminals in Orlando). Their father, Ulee's son Jimmy, is in prison serving a sentence for armed robbery after taking to crime during his father's absences. There is a confrontation between Ulee and the criminals, who take a suitor-like role in invading his house and taking the womenfolk captive. Ulee finally rouses himself from his depression and takes violent action to save his family. The film realistically evokes a deprived family, and the realism is not compromised by the mythic authority lent by the parallel with the *Odyssey*.

Tennessee, North Carolina, Florida -- in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Coen brothers' comic take on the *Odyssey*, the hero is from the Deep South, 1930s Mississippi, during the Great Depression. Indeed, the title of the film is taken from Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), a movie within which a director named John Sullivan is attempting to make a truthful film account of contemporary social deprivation. Its title is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The Coen brothers' heroes reveal their lowly status by opening the movie on the run from a prison work detail: they are Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney), Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson). Tiresias is a blind black railroad worker; the Eumaeus figure (Mr Hogwallop) is so poor that he serves his visitors horse meat; the *nekuia* is represented by the black guitarist who has sold his soul to the devil in return for the gift of music; the Cyclops' lair becomes a terrifying meeting of the Klu Klux Klan; Poseidon is downgraded to the status of a power-mad local sheriff.

Another darkly comic work is the bizarre *Cannibal: The Musical!*, which uses the *Odyssey* as a framework for its retelling of the true story of Alferd Packer, a former Union soldier who was involved in the death of some miners in Colorado and convicted of cannibalism. *Cannibal* is itself a live version of a movie made in 1993 by

Trey Parker (creator of *South Park*), entitled *Packer: The Musical!* The material from the *Odyssey* includes the Cyclops (represented by a Confederate soldier), and the Sirens (Francophone Lesbian Indians), while the overall ambience suggests dropouts and losers, living off their wits in a provincial outback.<sup>23</sup> Class issues could not be more prominent than in Toni Morrison's quest novel *Song of Solomon*, first published in 1977. Circe is an ex-slave living on in the decaying mansion of her deceased masters. She helps the wanderer Milkman Dead metamorphose from a thuggish narcissist into a sensitive man. Expert healer, midwife, and benefactor of stray animals, she helps Milkman Dead find his father's grave, and discover his own ancestry, just as the Homeric Circe tells Odysseus how to conjure up the dead. This benevolent servile-class Circe has devoted her life to avenging slavery.

One recent film that reworks material from the *Odyssey* in an American lower-class context, but without invoking the Civil War, is the German Wim Wenders' *Don't Come Knocking* (2005). It was immediately linked with the *Odyssey*,<sup>25</sup> a poem whose evocation of landscape had been praised by Wenders in a speech delivered in 2003.<sup>26</sup> His obsession with the *Odyssey's* poet was already apparent in the old storyteller, actually named Homer, in the Berlin of his *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987, usually known outside Germany as *Wings of Desire*). Wenders' Homer 'is the representative and bearer of collective memory, the spirit of history. He is also the spirit of Berlin, who laments the vanishing of the city in the war.' But *Don't Come Knocking*, written by and starring Sam Shepard, is ironically informed by the story pattern of the *Odyssey*. This Odysseus has fallen on hard times. A former star in Westerns, at the age of sixty he has only drugs, booze and sex to help him face his declining career. After yet another debauched night in his trailer, he gallops away from the film set in his cowboy costume to rediscover his soul.

He gradually loses his movie star identity, acquiring the clothes of a ranch hand, and taking the most demotic form of transport -- the Greyhound -- to his

hometown in Elko, Nevada. After an odyssey that takes him from his ancient mother's house to seedy bars and a crummy casino, he ends up in a drunken fistfight with another dropout (like Odysseus fighting Irus), collapses in the gutter, and spends a night in a drying-out cell. Learning that he has a child in a depressed Montana ghost town, he tracks down his ex-lover and his son. This is only the first part of the plot, which adds another child and Howard's desperate attempts to put his family life into a semblance of order. But the search for self, roots and family after discovering the hollowness of success in 'heroic' roles is a typical Wenders take on a familiar story, echoing the epic pleasure in travelling through vast American landscapes central to his earlier collaboration with Shepard in *Paris, Texas* (1984), but in a manner both darker and more amusing.

*Don't Come Knocking* shares with the British example, *Naked* (1993), its cinematic luxuriance in the habits and residences of the lowest echelons of society.<sup>29</sup> *Naked's* director, Mike Leigh is himself a northerner, born in Salford, Lancashire of Russian emigrant grand-parentage. First known as an experimental theatre director, he began to make powerful films about working-class life. In *Naked*, Johnny (David Thewlis) is a Mancunian drifter who, apparently after committing a violent rape, steals a car and drives to London. He heads for the home of his old girlfriend Louise. She now works as an office clerk in London, and for the purposes of the film the 'home' represented throughout is her rented flat.

The film examines inner city decay and the poverty-stricken underbelly of the Thatcher years, but since its release has been linked by critics with the *Odyssey*. This is a result not of any statement by the director, nor any mention of such a parallel in the publicity literature. Indeed, the *intention* of such a parallel would be difficult to prove, since Mike Leigh's actors often improvise their own lines, a technique of scene development in which Thewlis's skill is legendary. Yet the oral, improvisational quality of the film's dialogue, spoken in strong Mancunian over rippling harp music,

is suggestive of the way that the *Odyssey* and such epics were originally composed and performed. This conclusion becomes almost impossible to avoid during the encounter between Johnny and the waitress. She takes him to the flat she is 'sitting' while its owners are away. The sitting room is littered with Greek souvenirs, statuettes of gods and hoplites, and translations of Greek authors including a copy of E.V. Rieu's bestselling Penguin Classic translation of the *Odyssey*, which Johnny brandishes at his reluctant hostess. Of the owner of the flat Johnny enquires, mockingly, 'Is he a Homer-sexual, yeah?', and later comments that he doesn't want 'to sound Homer-phobic', before emphasising that he likes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, what with Achilles, 'the wooden horse, Helen of Troy...Cyclops'.

Once this intertextual allusion has been made, Johnny's violent past, his habitual wandering, his serial encounters with weird individuals, and the constant deferral of domestic closure with his woman begin to resemble a contemporary version of the *Odyssey*, where the monsters and villains are poverty, unemployment, and existential despair. Johnny is a knowing protagonist, and his references to philosophical questions or literary allusions create a collusive bond between him and the viewer. Thus after his attempt at dialogue with the foul-mouthed young Scot, Archie, he tells Archie's girlfriend Maggie that Archie has a wonderful way 'with Socratic debate'. All this is delivered in a stream of deadpan irony.

While waiting for Louise to come home from work, he has sex with the temporary lodger, Sophie, a goth drug addict sporting a Siren-like bird tattoo. She spends much of the movie trying to regain his sexual attention again, frustrated by his deep emotional bond with Louise. She thus synthesises Siren, lotus-eater, Circe and Calypso. Johnny subsequently leaves the flat after an unsuccessful encounter with Louise, and wanders off into the night, a new member of the London homeless. A night security guard, Brian, kindly offers him shelter; like Eumaeus, he has tumbled far down the social scale. He has his own mini-*Odyssey* to reveal, when it

turns out that his wife, whom he has not seen for thirteen years, is thousands of miles away in Bangkok. They watch a woman dancing through a window in a house opposite the offices, and Johnny visits her. He cools off when he sees the tattoo on *her* shoulder -- a skull and crossbones. She reminds him not only of his mother, but of his *dead* mother, and of death.

Johnny's sex scenes are intercut with episodes involving the other male lead. Jeremy, an upper-class sadist, represents the worst aspects of the suitors. Indeed, he moves in to Louise's flat and extracts brutal sex from Sophie by pretending to be the landlord. Meanwhile Johnny, after being mugged, turns up to the flat. The scene is set for what should be the showdown in which Johnny, loved by both women, discovers his inner hero and ousts the rival. In Mike Leigh's universe, however, there is no such thing as a traditional male hero, and Johnny fails miserably. He suffers blows to the head, resulting in a fit, regresses into a childlike state and is humiliated. It is the marvellous Louise whose raw courage and psychological cunning drive Jeremy away.

The film is Leigh's most Existentialist work, and Johnny is a working-class philosopher with traits inherited from Sartre as well as Homer and John Osborne. The questions Johnny raises include the existence of god, the imminent demise of the human race, and the impossibility of reincarnation. The film is an account of Johnny's quest for meaning. His enemy is boredom (unemployed and working-class, he comments wryly on how much training is required for manual tasks). His failure to deal with his emotional past, symbolised by the hooligan who daubs 'cancelled' signs over adverts reading 'Therapy', means that he is *psychologically* more 'on the run' than any other cinematic Odysseus. He left Louise because he thought she was pregnant; in the opening scene, he symbolically throws away a toddler's pushchair. At the end, Johnny and Louise tenderly sing together a song about going back up North, concluding with the lines



I don't want to roam,  
I want to get back home,  
To rainy Manchester.

But their reunion proves fleeting, because Johnny staggers off again at the film's conclusion, to life as a London vagrant. A more light-hearted story told with gritty urban realism is the Dutch movie made for television *Bijlmer Odyssee* (2004), certainly inspired by Leigh's film and yet more explicit in its debt to the epic. It is set in a low-income high-rise housing estate on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Two young lovers lose each other in labyrinthine blocks of flats, and undergo comical adventures before being reunited in a happy ending that contrasts sharply with Leigh's alienation of Johnny from Louise.

Homer has been able to transcend class barriers because people of all social classes, at least at times, have had access to him. In recent decades this has been through the films connected with the *Odyssey*, but the history goes back further than cinema. Victorian popular theatre, which attracted a cross-class audience, enjoyed light entertainments based on the *Odyssey*, such as Burnand's *Patient Penelope* (Strand Theatre, 1863). Homer, as well as Dante and Shakespeare, was read by 19th-century African American literary societies. Jonathan Rose's brilliant history of the reading habits of the British working class (2001), has drawn attention to the excitement that many people have experienced when they began to read Homer in translation -- the thrill of imaginative discovery. There could be no better way to conclude this chapter than the words of an autodidactic stonemason called Hugh Miller (born in 1802), who recalled his childhood pleasure in reading Pope's translations: 'Old Homer wrote admirably for little folk, especially in the *Odyssey*...I

saw, even at this immature period, that no other writer could cast a javelin with half the force of Homer. The missiles went whizzing athwart his pages’.