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The Journey's Not Over: A Veteran's Homecoming in *The Odyssey* and *Ulee's  
Gold*

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## Introduction

Reading *The Odyssey* I was frustrated. Before reading the poem, I had a simplistic idea of what the story was, a sympathetic veteran's desperate and difficult journey to get home to his family after years away. With this simplistic view I imagined Odysseus's desire to get home as the primary motivating factor of his actions and the journey to Ithaca as the central conflict of the poem. I assumed that the end of the poem would be a happy reunion with his family and the end of a long journey. However, when I finally read it, I realized the story was not as simple as I had thought.

Rather than sympathizing with Odysseus, I was confused with his ambivalence. His desire to get home was prevalent, but alongside that desire was this yearning for the glory that could only be achieved in battle. I could not understand how these seemingly contradictory desires could coexist. When Odysseus finally arrived at Ithaca, much earlier in the poem than I had expected, I was thrown off by his commitment to revenge against the suitors. Instead of quickly handling the situation, he chose to spend days strategizing, purposely delaying the reunion he so desperately seemed to be after. The revenge itself was all the more shocking. Odysseus, who at one point sat weeping on Calypso's island for his homeland, was now in full battle mode, showing no mercy as he unleashed his wrath on the suitors who had taken over his house. Even after all this, the moment that I had been waiting for, the reunion with Penelope was cut short by his revelation that he had yet another journey to take up before he could settle down for good.

After reading *The Odyssey* I kept wondering how this was a story of homecoming. Not only was Odysseus himself more ambivalent about coming home than I thought he would be, but also when he finally got home, he did not get the happy ending that I assumed he would. After

sitting with this confusion toward the poem, I began to wonder what if coming home is more complicated than just arriving there physically. Is there more going on with Odysseus's journey? For answers to these questions I turned to the poem's reception. Studying the reception of antiquity can be a beneficial way of gaining a deeper understanding of an ancient work. Turning to modern works that explore the same themes in ancient literature can give us a new way of seeing the ancient work itself. Furthermore, looking towards the reception of the work can reveal even more questions about the ancient work, giving us an overall more complex way of viewing the themes presented.

To better understand *The Odyssey* I sought out a modern take on the Odyssean theme set in a time and place that I could better connect with, and eventually came across the movie *Ulee's Gold*, written and directed by Victor Nunez and set in the late 1990s in the Apalachicola rivers of the Florida panhandle. The movie follows Ulee Jackson, a Vietnam veteran and apiarist as he works to overcome the emotional distance between him and his family. In the movie, Nunez is interested in the mental aspect of the return journey home for veterans. His protagonist has been home from war for two decades; however, he has yet to fully reconnect with his family as he deals with the mental wounds inflicted by war as well as his current struggles mourning the death of his wife, raising his two granddaughters, and his son's current prison sentence. While battling these struggles, he also works to maintain some sense of normalcy as he continues his work making Tupelo honey. To add to this already overwhelming predicament, Ulee's hope for a better future is threatened by his son's former partners, Eddie and Ferris, who demand Ulee to give them the money his son had hidden from them. While *The Odyssey* ends with a less than ideal homecoming, *Ulee's Gold* picks up after the moment of return to explore what comes next.

How does the veteran reenter this home that was once familiar, but now is complicated and confusing?

Seeing these two works in conjunction with each other deepens our understanding of the process of coming home. Although I sought an idyllic return in *The Odyssey*, *Ulee's Gold* reveals that coming home is not so simple. The mental aspect of the process continues long after arrival and can be even more difficult than the physical journey. Seeing Ulee's mental and emotional struggles helps me to better sympathize with Odysseus and understand the complexities of his journey. While Odysseus certainly desires to arrive home, the impact of experiencing war leaves lasting scars that must be healed before true reconnection with family can begin. *Ulee's Gold* helps to emphasize the ongoing process of return and shows just how long the journey can be.

In this thesis, I will look at the way viewing *The Odyssey* in conjunction with *Ulee's Gold* provides a more complex understanding of the journey home from war by understanding the positionality of the two works, examining the importance of the physical land, exploring the role of veteran, and analyzing the process of redefining glory and manhood.

## Chapter I: Positionality

Initially watching Nunez's *Ulee's Gold*, one might not make the connection to *The Odyssey*. Nunez, however, does provide a subtle clue to trigger the Odyssean connections through the names of some of the characters. The most distinct connection would of course be Ulee, short for Ulysses, the Latinized version of Odysseus. Another noticeable character is Helen, Ulee's daughter-in-law, who serves as a reminder of Helen the wife of Agamemnon taken by Paris to Troy, starting the Trojan war. Finally, the least obvious connection is Penny, Ulee's granddaughter. Penny is named after her grandmother and Ulee's wife, Penelope, the same name of Odysseus's wife. Although Nunez's characters are not exact parallels to their ancient counterparts, his use of the ancient names invites his audience to position the film against *The Odyssey*.

Ulee is only referred to as Ulysses once toward the end of the movie, a subtle nod to antiquity without being too overt. Even so, he shares many qualities with his Odyssean counterpart. On the surface, both men are war veterans, struggling with the process of reconnecting with the home they have been separated from due to their time in war. During this process, they also come to terms with new perspectives of glory and manhood as they refigure their new place in the world without war. Alongside their internal conflict, they are also threatened by outsiders who jeopardize their return home.

Nunez's Helen is not an exact counterpart to the ancient Helen, but they do share some similarities. In *The Iliad* Odysseus goes to Troy to help the Greeks get Helen back. Similarly, Ulee goes to Orlando to bring Helen back from her drug binge. Both Odysseus and Ulee are reluctant to go on this journey, but ultimately acquiesce. For Odysseus, going to Troy to get Helen is the catalyst for the war and the series of events that ultimately leads him to being away

from Ithaca for two decades. For Ulee, going to get Helen from Orlando is what begins the conflict with Eddie and Ferris, and eventually the process of reconnecting with his family.

While *The Odyssey* ends with Odysseus's reunion with his wife Penelope, Ulee starts the film with his wife having been dead for six years. Although the Homeric Penelope and Nunez's Penny are not exact analogies (one being the hero's wife, the other his granddaughter), they do play a similar role in Odysseus's and Ulee's journey to reconnect home. They represent the simple home life both veterans are trying to reconnect with. Penelope is often considered the ideal wife who remains faithful to her husband throughout the many years of his absence, maintaining the household as best she can until Odysseus's return. Penny also serves to remind her grandfather of the home life he has been disconnected from. To be the parent that he was not for Jimmy, Ulee does his best to maintain some sense of normalcy with Penny by taking her to school, having family dinners, and even reading her to sleep. Through Penelope and Penny, Odysseus and Ulee see the end goal of their journeys.

Nunez's use of names clues the audience in to the Odyssean themes presented without making his movie a simple comparison between the two works. If the comparison was meant to be so simple, the Odyssean elements would probably have been made more obvious, and Nunez would have aligned the stories more succinctly. For Nunez though, *The Odyssey* was not a focal point in the creation of the film; instead, "it was never something [he] felt a viewer needed to know" (personal communication via email, 11/13/2018). Nunez's use of *The Odyssey*, as he states, was to provide "clues to certain scenes, like the memory of being the only survivor of an ambush, and reasons for Ulee's bitterness at the loss of his wife" (personal communication via email, 11/13/2018). Nunez's film sets out to tell the story of a Vietnam veteran's struggles reconnecting with his family even after the war has long since ended. He uses the Odyssean

elements as a subtle reminder that Ulee's story is still a veteran's story. By positioning his film alongside arguably one of the most well-known veteran's story, Nunez reminds his audience that the impact of experiencing war goes beyond coming home.

Nunez's use of ancient names may point us to a connection with Homer, but this does not mean that we should view *Ulee's Gold* as a direct adaptation to *The Odyssey*. It would be meaningless to try to position *Ulee's Gold* as simply a modern version of the ancient poem. Any analysis in this vein would overlook the value of Nunez's film as a piece in and of itself. Rather than viewing *Ulee's Gold* as an adaptation of *The Odyssey*, it would be more accurate to see it as what Lorna Hardwick calls a refiguration. While an adaptation typically maintains many of the same elements of the original work, a refiguration involves the process of "selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition" (Hardwick 10). When viewing *Ulee's Gold* as a refiguration of *The Odyssey* rather than as an adaptation, the "focus is on the two-way relationship between the source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture" (Hardwick 4). This two-way relationship allows for a back and forth approach to analyzing both the ancient and the modern work. Rather than simply using the ancient to understand the modern work, the modern work can "frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten" (Hardwick 4). Furthermore, a modern reconfiguration of an ancient character "may radically alter his traditional image" (Stanford 4). Although Nunez uses *The Odyssey* as a loose inspiration for his movie, *Ulee's Gold* goes further to change the way we see the story of Odysseus. Nunez refigures *The Odyssey* by honing in on the last few books that detail what comes after coming home. Through an analysis of this refiguration we come to see that coming home goes beyond the physical return as veterans are tasked with reconnecting with the home they had left behind.



Through an examination of the refiguration of *The Odyssey* as represented in *Ulee's Gold* we see three stages of the homecoming process emerge: the war itself, the physical journey home, and finally reintegration with home. Neither *Ulee's Gold* nor *The Odyssey* explore the war itself. We come to Odysseus's journey in its second phase, the physical return home. He has been at war in Troy for ten years and has spent another decade struggling to make it back to Ithaca. By the end of the poem, he has completed his physical journey, and has reunited with his family, hinting at the beginning of the reintegration phase but not going further. We come to Ulee's journey, however, at the beginning of the third phase, the reintegration process. Unlike Odysseus, Ulee has physically been home for twenty years. If Nunez's goal is to tell the story of a Vietnam veteran who continues to find difficulty mentally reconnecting with home even twenty years after war, through positioning the film in relation to *The Odyssey*, the story of a veteran's physical journey home, he emphasizes the importance of the psychological leg of the journey. By focusing on what comes after the physical return, Nunez presents a continuation to *The Odyssey*, reminding audiences that coming home is only the first step in making sense of life after war.

Although *The Odyssey* is primarily seen as a coming home story, the end of the poem hints at the fact that there is more to come for Odysseus. After spending his first night with Penelope in twenty years, he tells her that he must again leave home, this time to make a sacrifice to Poseidon as recompense for his killing of the Cyclops (23. 275-280). Before he is even able to carry this out, he must also deal with the Ithacans who are enraged at his slaughter of the suitors, as well as make up for the loss of goods to the suitors. Even though he is home, his struggles are far from over. Nunez's film, therefore, is interested in this part of the journey. His veteran, Ulee, has been home for two decades, but is still facing challenges that have prevented

him from fully reintegrating home. While the challenges Odysseus's faces after his return are more physical, Nunez modernizes the tale by focusing on the mental aspect of the process of reintegration.

Shortly after the Vietnam War, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-III*, published in 1980. Following its addition to the *DSM*, Hollywood began to explore PTSD in movies, however, veterans were usually presented as psychopathic killers or as people who've been totally broken. Nunez's film goes against this grain, depicting a veteran who is many years past his traumatic war experience, but who is still dealing with the devastating impacts of combat experience. Rather than showing a man teetering on the edge of mental breakdown, Nunez shows a man unable to open up emotionally, creating distance between him and his family. These struggles are only heightened by the addition of his family's issues. Certainly, in ancient Greece concepts of psychological disorders were not as refined as they are today, but, by positioning his veteran's story alongside *The Odyssey*, Nunez also makes his audience consider the psychological effects war had on Odysseus. If Ulee is still struggling twenty years after returning home to find his place in the new dynamics of his family, how is Odysseus meant to cope once he realizes that battle is no longer the solution to his problems?

By understanding how these two works are positioned to one another, we are able to see *Ulee's Gold* as a modern continuation of *The Odyssey*, giving us a more complex way of viewing the overall homecoming process for veterans. This way of looking at the movie and the poem allow us to appreciate both as independent works telling individual stories, while simultaneously acknowledging the way knowing one helps us to better understand the other. Watching *Ulee's Gold* knowing *The Odyssey* emphasizes Ulee's veteran experience, while reading *The Odyssey*

knowing *Ulee's Gold* reminds us that Odysseus's journey home must have a psychological aspect as well as physical. Seeing *Ulee's Gold* as a continuation of *The Odyssey* complicates the veteran's return home, providing a more accurate view that goes beyond the moment of return and into the more difficult process of healing the mental wounds inflicted by experiencing war.

## Chapter II: Importance of Land

While the bulk of the homecoming process comes during the reintegration phase that takes place after the moment of return, we cannot ignore the role that the strong physical relationship to land plays in both works. This reconnection with the physical land must be made before the psychological return can occur. The emotional and physical toll of being away at war

would leave any veteran desperate for the familiarity and safety that comes with not only reconnecting with family, but with the physical return to the land one calls home. Both Odysseus and Ulee can only reconnect with their family by first reconnecting with the land they are finally returning to after war.

To reunite with his wife, Odysseus must prove his identity as her husband, and does so through proving his knowledge of the physical aspects of his home. After slaughtering the suitors and finally revealing to Penelope that he is her husband returned from Troy, Odysseus faces yet one final obstacle before he can fully reunite with his wife. To prove that the man before her is in fact her husband, Penelope decides to test him. She tells her servants to “make the bed for him outside the room he built himself. Pull out the bedstead, and spread quilts and blankets on it” (23.178-180). Penelope knows that this cannot be done, as Odysseus himself built the bed he shared with his wife using an olive tree as one of the bed posts, therefore rooting the bed to the physical structure of their room, unable to be moved. After hearing his wife give an impossible order to the servants, Odysseus becomes frustrated as he knows that the bed cannot be moved. Furious, he reminds her that he made the bed out of the olive tree, and begins to wonder if some man has since destroyed it. Penelope takes this as proof that the man before is her husband and the two are finally able to reunite. In this scene, we see that for Odysseus to reunite with his wife, he must first prove himself by acknowledging the physicality of his home. Just as the marriage bed is literally rooted to the produce of Odysseus’s homeland, Odysseus’s marriage itself, and by extension is family, are figuratively rooted to that same homeland.

Another way Odysseus reconnects with home through the physical land is in the familial ties he has to that land. Odysseus’s familial tie to Ithaca is represented by his father’s orchard. When finally meeting with his father, Laertes, after returning to Ithaca he proves to his father

that he is indeed his son by telling him of “all the trees that grow in this fine orchard,” and he reminds his father of when he was little and how he would “follow [him] around the garden, asking all their names.” Finally, Odysseus asserts his connection to the land reminding Laertes that he had promised the trees to him (24.339-342). Alongside cultivating his orchard, Laertes also raised his son. This creates a familial connection between Odysseus and the land of his father. Odysseus proves this connection by being able to name the trees he grew up with. By inheriting this land, Odysseus shows himself to be rooted to the land of his home.

Just as Odysseus is connected to the land through his familial connections, Ulee also shows continuity of place through generations in his work with his bees. When telling his neighbor Connie about this work, he tells her “I learned from my dad. He learned from his” (Nunez 50). This mirrors the familial relationship to land seen between Odysseus and his father. He goes on to give her a brief explanation of the honey making process. He tells her that the Tupelo, the premium grade, is made from a particular bloom of flowers called Ogeechee Tupelo that only grows in the Apalachicola river banks, Ulee’s home. After that bloom “the bees get moved to late flowers for bakery grade...They go up about two hours from here to honey dew, and then there’s another move in January for winter clover” (Nunez 50). Because Tupelo honey can only be grown in one place, Ulee is tied to that land. Furthermore, Ulee’s description of the family business of beekeeping highlights the routine nature of the work. There is a preciseness about the process that must be carried out properly to ensure the quality of the honey. For this reason, Ulee finds comfort in the work. He clings to the routine because it is straightforward, unlike the complex issues that are going on with his family. For Ulee, working on the land is a means of connecting to family, albeit indirectly. This way of reconnecting through his work with the land provides a sense of solace. As he tells one of his buyers, “The

bees and I have an understanding, Chance. I take care of them, they take care of me” (Nunez 4). As Ulee cares for the bees, he is also nourished by them, not simply because they provide him a livelihood, but because they deepen his connection to the land of his family.

The connection to land also reveals an ongoing element to the process of coming home. Although Ulee bears much in common with Odysseus, he can also be seen as a Laertes. Much of Nunez’s movie focuses on “Ulee as a he performs backbreaking daily chores-working at the hives, repairing wooden crates and moving barrels of honey” (Hall 139). He also tells Connie that working with the bees is “hard work, and not many young folks want to bother” (Nunez 50). In the few times Laertes is mentioned in *The Odyssey*, he is often described by the physical labor he undertakes to maintain his orchard, and the toll that has on his overall wellbeing. When first meeting with him after his return, Odysseus tells him “Old man, you know your trade and take good care of this neat garden. Every plant and vine, and tree-the figs, the pears, the olive trees-and bed for herbs is nicely tended. But I have to say something-please do not get angry at me-you do not take good care of your own self” (24. 245-251). In his *Imagining Men*, Van Nortwick argues that Laertes’s “wretched condition is a measure of how badly out of joint things are in Ithaca” (134). With Odysseus being gone for so long, his family has been in a state of limbo, impossible to move on without him. Ulee, therefore, is both an Odysseus and a Laertes. He works hard in a desperate attempt to maintain some normalcy, but it is his own reintegration home that is necessary to establish a more stable home life.

Seeing Ulee as both an Odysseus and a Laertes reinforces the idea that coming home goes well beyond a physical return. If Ulee represents both characters, then Odysseus’s meeting with his father after he returns to Ithaca is also a meeting with his own future. He may no longer be at sea, but the home he has returned is no longer the home that he had left. After twenty years,

his family life has taken on new dynamics that he must learn and ultimately find his own place in those dynamics. Odysseus left as a new father with an infant son but returned an aged man with an adult son eager to find his own glory. He has moved into a new stage of his life, but due to his long journey to Ithaca, he has missed the transition into that stage, and must now try to make sense of the once familiar home. Similarly, Ulee is also renegotiating his place at home without his wife and with his son in prison. Just as Laertes turns to his orchard to find some sense in the chaos of the situation, Ulee turns to his bees. This working of the land as seen in Ulee and Laertes serves a metaphor for the reintegration phase of the journey home. By positioning Ulee alongside both Laertes and Odysseus, Nunez drives home his message that in order to reconnect with home, one must actively engage with that home, cultivating not only the land but the relationships from which home grows.

### Chapter III: Role of Veteran

At the center of both *The Odyssey* and *Ulee's Gold* is a veteran's coming home journey. As such, understanding the impact of their status as veterans is crucial to understanding their process of reintegration. Through a close examination of Ulee's and Odysseus's attitudes towards their soldier past and the way those attitudes manifest themselves in the conflicts they face at home, we are able to gain a more thorough view of the difficulty of reconciling the role of veteran and transitioning back into civilian. While Odysseus is still very much in a warrior mindset upon his arrival home, Ulee has been struggling with his experiences in Vietnam for two decades. Ulee's continued struggle with his past points toward what may lie ahead for Odysseus.

The climax of *The Odyssey* shows the impact of war on a veteran's psyche as we see elements of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Odysseus. After returning to Ithaca, he discovers that his house has been taken over by the suitors wishing to take his place. To remove them he becomes the warrior he once was at Troy, carrying out an outright slaughter of all the suitors. Odysseus's rage against the suitors reveals that he has yet to shed the warrior mindset that he has maintained for over a decade. Instead, his perspective has been so influenced by his time at war that he approaches the suitors in the same way that he would approach a battle. Looking at the way Odysseus handles the suitors through the lens of modern discussions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can help us to better understand the psychological factors that are at play. Criteria of PTSD as listed in the *Diagnostic Statistics Manual-5* include "physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders" as well as "irritability and aggression" (DSM5). The suitors' takeover of his home serves as the traumatic reminder for Odysseus, triggering his reversion back to his warrior mindset and the release of his aggression on the suitors. The level of Odysseus's aggression meets the standards of what Jonathan Shay refers to in his *Achilles in Vietnam* as the berserk state, characterized by a veteran becoming "beastlike, godlike...crazy/mad/insane, enraged, cruel/without restraint of discrimination" (82). According to Shay, when in this state, a veteran becomes "figuratively-sometimes literally-blind to everything but his destructive aim" (86). Embodying this state, Odysseus focuses not on the reunion with his family, but on the revenge he has planned for the suitors, an outlet within which he can unleash the full intensity of his berserk state.

Odysseus's desire for revenge becomes almost an obsession. He spends days planning the moment, strategizing every detail, going so far as to even to create an elaborate cover story for his beggar disguise. When Odysseus finally reveals himself, he makes it clear to the suitors what



his plans are, telling them “You thought no man would ever come to take revenge. Now you are trapped inside the snares of death” (22.39-41). Even after killing Antinous, the de facto leader of the suitors, Odysseus’s hunger for revenge is not yet satiated. When the remainder of the suitors beg for mercy telling him that he has killed the main enemy, Odysseus responds saying “I will not keep my hands away from slaughter until I pay you suitors back for all your wickedness. You have two choices: fight, or run away: just try to save your lives! Not one of you will get away from death” (22. 63-67). The desire for revenge is characteristic of Shay’s berserk state. In an interview with a Vietnam veteran in this state, we can see the commitment he has for revenge, calling it his “single value...No other value had claim on him...When he entered this berserk state, he stopped writing home, even ceased to care about the other men on his tank, except as instruments of his revenge” (Shay 33). Odysseus’s own desire for revenge also prevents him from reconnecting with his family. He even calls upon his son, Telemachus, to help him carry out the slaughter, putting his own son in harm’s way. Through his commitment to revenge, it is clear that the warrior mindset still has a hold on Odysseus. Until he can shed this way of approaching issues, he will be unable to begin the reintegration process of his journey home.

The actual slaughter of the suitors is certainly the most warlike scene of the poem. Having yet to shed his warrior mentality, Odysseus reverts back to his warrior state as he uses his skill to take out the suitors one by one, as if he were on the battlefield once more. Due to the exposure to the extreme violence of war, a soldier’s “body remains mobilized for battle indefinitely” (Shay 174). Odysseus, still with the mind of a warrior, sees battle as his only option in dealing with the suitors. While mentally still a warrior, he physically becomes one once again as “he slung the four-fold shield across his shoulders, and put the well-made helmet on his head...He grasped a bronze-tipped spear in either hand” (22. 121-125). In his berserk state, the

emotions of his combat in Troy are “relived, not remembered” (Shay 173). Even Athena encourages Odysseus to revert to his role in Troy to take out the suitors. During a slow point in the slaughter she asks Odysseus “Where is your courage now? You fought nine years on end against the Trojans, for white-armed Helen, Zeus’ favorite child. You slaughtered many men when war was raging, and formed the plan that made the city fall. Now you are home at last, how can you flinch from being brave and using proper force against these suitors?” (22. 225-233). With her words, Odysseus confirms his warrior mentality and continues the battle against the suitors, during which “Screaming filled the hall, as skulls were cracked; the whole floor ran with blood” (22. 309-310). By the time the action ends, Odysseus’s hall looks as if a war was waged, with the bodies of the suitors “fallen, all of them, so many, lying in blood and dust...heaped across each other” (22. 384-391). Although Odysseus is physically home, his mind is still in Troy.

Another aspect of the berserk state seen in Odysseus is his lack of mercy (Shay 79). For Odysseus, murdering all the suitors is not enough. When Melanthius goes to the storeroom to get weapons for the suitors, Odysseus orders Eumaeus not only to kill him, but also to “torture him with hours of agony before he dies” (22.172-177). Odysseus further exemplifies the berserk quality of being cruel without restraint when the priest Leodes begs for mercy, claiming that he tried to stop the suitors from ransacking his house. Odysseus, not satisfied with his plea, tells him “You will not escape. Suffer and die!” (22. 313-326). Then, carrying out his order, “Odysseus swung, slashed down and sliced right through the priest’s neck, and his head, still framing words, rolled in the dust” (22. 326-329). Odysseus remains unrelenting when it comes to the slave girls who slept with the suitors. He orders that they also be tortured telling Telemachus to “Take the

girls between the courtyard wall and the rotunda. Hack at them with long swords, eradicate all life from them” (22.441-444).

What makes Odysseus’s actions in his dealings with the suitors so characteristic of the berserk state as well as PTSD is the lengths to which he goes in his aggression. Although Odysseus’s rampage on the suitors seems almost out of control, some scholars such as W. B. Stanford have claimed that it would be wrong to conclude that “Odysseus was a man distracted by psychological conflicts and distressed by social tensions” (Stanford 78). Stanford’s argument goes on to claim that throughout the poem, Odysseus remains “well integrated both in his own temperament and with his environment...fully able to control conflicting passions and motives. His Psychological tensions never reach a breaking-point” (Stanford 78). This argument, however, strips Odysseus of his humanity. It fails to acknowledge the mental state of a veteran and the complexities of that state outside of the realm of war. While Stanford argues that Odysseus acts out of desire for returning home, his handling of the suitors proves otherwise. If Odysseus were solely motivated by going home to Ithaca he would not have postponed his own arrival by planning an elaborate revenge, nor would he have ordered the gratuitous torture of Melanthius and the slave girls. To begin the reintegration process of his journey home, Odysseus must forgo the warrior mentality that stands in the way.

Nunez’s movie picks up further in the process of reconciling the hero’s veteran past. We meet Ulee twenty years after his homecoming, with the Vietnam War well behind him; however, the impact of that war still has a hold on Ulee. The impact of the war manifests itself through the psychological struggles Ulee now must overcome. While Stanford argues that psychological tensions play no role in Odysseus’s way of thinking, *Ulee’s Gold* emphasizes the humanity of

Odysseus by continuing his story through the exploration of those tensions that maintain a strong hold years after war.

Although Ulee's veteran status is rarely mentioned throughout the movie, the effects of his time in Vietnam play a vital role to understanding the makeup of his character. Unlike Odysseus, Ulee does not think back to his time as a soldier with pride; if anything, there is a sense of shame present instead. The most direct reference to Ulee's soldier past comes toward the beginning of the movie. Ulee is working in his shed when his granddaughter, Penny, comes in and sits on the back table. She looks toward the back wall where we see war memorabilia from Vietnam, including a Purple Heart and a faded photo of a platoon ready for combat, all of which are buried under clutter collecting dust. Penny focuses on the photo of young men, including her grandfather, and asks him "And they're all dead? Every last one of them? 'Cept for you. All dead?" Ulee tells her she is correct, and she asks "Had they been bad bad? Did they deserve dying?" Ulee, surprised by the question, tells her that they did not deserve to die. With a sigh of sadness, he tells her they "were good guys." Furrowing his brow with a slight sense of anger toward himself, he goes on to say "Maybe only the tricky made it through. That's why your granddad made it. Tricky, lucky-." He cuts himself off as shame builds, telling Penny that he shouldn't be "talking to a little kid about terrible stuff" (Nunez 13). This shame leads itself into feelings of guilt.

This scene may be brief, but it gives us an idea of the way in which Ulee has come to regard his role in the Vietnam War. The sense of shame that he feels is one of the characteristics of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as outlined in the DSM. One of the criteria for PTSD is the occurrence of "overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself" (DSM-5). The shame that comes over Ulee when Penny asks about him being the only one of his platoon to survive is

characteristic of this criteria. Ulee views his survival as something he does not deserve, as he sees the only reason for his survival to be luck, or trickery. In this scene we see Ulee overcome with survivor's guilt when reminiscing over the fact his fellow soldiers died in Vietnam. As Jonathan Shay argues in *Achilles in Vietnam*, "grief and guilt often seem to merge in the wake of a closest friend's death in battle" (73). Although we are given no further details of Ulee's experiences in war, based on what we know of other account of Vietnam veterans, we can assume that Ulee had similar close bonds with the men in his platoon. Their death has caused a grief in Ulee that "can lead men to give up all desire to return home" (Shay 73). This is certainly true for Ulee as we see the mental barrier built by Vietnam stand in the way of Ulee making a true return home.

Penny responds to her grandfather's refusal to continue talking about the men in the picture saying that "It's so sad, Ulee." He asks her if she likes sad, to which she replies "Not always, but sometimes. It makes you quiet inside" (Nunez 14). Ulee, surprised to hear such insight from his young granddaughter, reflects on what she says with "thoughtful surprise" (Nunez 14). In a sense, it is that silence that Ulee is yearning for. Penny's wise words here foreshadow what it is that Ulee needs to do to overcome the mental barrier that has instilled itself since he came back from Vietnam. Rather than trying to forget what happened, Penny instead touches upon the therapeutic nature of tackling those painful memories that produce such sadness. Scholar Nancy Sherman argues that the feeling of discomfort that often arises for veterans when thinking back to their time in war is necessary in the healing process. If the veteran does not feel this pain as a result of the "moral injury" he has gained from war, he is incapable of moving along the process of true healing and homecoming (Sherman, "Moral Injury

and Resilience through a Stoic Lens: Homecoming for Iraqi/Afghani Veterans”). By sitting with the discomfort, the restlessness of yearning to return home eases, becoming silent.

Ulee’s time in Vietnam also affects his ability to emotionally reconnect with his family. The DSM lists “feeling isolated” and “decreased interest” as two other criteria for PTSD, traits that are embodied by Ulee Jackson. The way Ulee is described throughout the screenplay are evidence of his feelings of isolation and disinterest, an “emotional deadness” (Shay 98). He is first described as “reticent” (Nunez 1). When picking Penny up from school he “stares blankly into space” (Nunez 6). When she shows him the picture she drew he tries to show interest, but has a difficult time doing so. When eating dinner with his granddaughters he is described as “distracted, lost in thought” (Nunez 10). Although Ulee tries to play the role of a caring, hardworking grandfather, he has trouble doing a convincing job. In his *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay conducts an interview with a veteran who says he has never emotionally returned home (73). Ulee is going through the same struggle as he tries to be more present, but the difficulty to do so is great.

Coinciding with the DSM criteria of isolation, Shay also argues that “personal relationships become increasingly difficult” (Shay 179). Even though Ulee certainly loves his family, he has difficulty connecting with them because of the trauma he experienced in Vietnam. This is made clear early on in the film during a dinner scene with Ulee and his granddaughters. They are described as sitting “quietly, automatically finishing supper.” Ulee in particular “appears distracted” (Nunez 10). Although he has returned from Vietnam he still struggles to regain the family life he once had. He tries to maintain some normalcy, but it is not enough. We see this disconnect in Ulee’s relationship with his oldest granddaughter, Casey. During dinner Casey’s boyfriend pulls in the driveway. Casey quickly puts away her dishes to meet him, and

Ulee tells her to be home by eleven. Casey stares at Ulee and responds, “And you try to figure out how to make me.” Ulee gets up from the table to follow Casey out the door, wanting to say something, but “he feels helpless and hates that feeling” (Nunez 11). Forlorn, he watches the car drive off.

Although Ulee is still facing the repercussions of experiencing war, he is looking toward a future where the war no longer has such a hold on him, a future where he is a father and grandfather, a soldier no more. Because Ulee is beginning to recognize just how Vietnam affected him mentally and how that is now serving as a barrier from him truly connecting to his family, he is able to do the work to move past this point of his journey. While Odysseus has yet to realize that clinging to his experiences in Troy will prevent him from true reintegration, Ulee is able to move on to the next phase of the coming home process. The effort Ulee makes throughout the film to open up to his family and leave the war in the past allows him to get closer to reintegration.

The most emblematic scene of Ulee’s changed perspective of his soldier past is in the climax of the movie. When Eddie and Ferris unexpectedly show up to Ulee’s house immediately demanding the money Jimmy, Ulee’s son, had hidden, he must act strategically to keep his family safe. He decides it is better to give the men what they want rather than fighting them, a decision that could further jeopardize the homecoming he is after. After Eddie and Ferris tie up Helen and the girls, the three men leave for the money, hidden in an old truck deep in one of Ulee’s swamps. Before they drive off Ulee does everything he can to get Connie’s attention so that she can come over and free the girls. He coughs loudly and spins his tires in the gravel, desperately trying to get her to look out her window. In this way, Ulee is using the same cunning that he used to survive Vietnam, a trait of his that he had previously felt ashamed of. It could be

argued that by doing this Ulee is reverting back to the soldier mindset that he once had in Vietnam, but to make that argument would be to ignore the growth that Ulee has undergone. Evidence of this growth is seen in Ulee's second visit with Jimmy after learning about Eddie and Ferris's demands. Angry, Jimmy tells him "You gotta get rid of them. You're an ex-jungle fighter, for god's sake, and they ain't worth shit. Kill 'em! You'd be doing the world a big favor." These words could have easily been a trigger for a veteran still battling with the early onset of PTSD, but Ulee, who is beyond that stage of his return journey, remains calm and tells Jimmy "I didn't hear that" (Nunez 62). In his process to reconnect with his family, Ulee has been forced to reexamine the way he thinks about his time in Vietnam. By using his cunning to subvert the efforts of Eddie and Ferris, Ulee is not becoming the soldier he was once, but instead he is becoming the hero that he wants to be; he is moving forward in his journey.

The progress that Ulee makes in his journey as presented in this scene shows how his story is sequential to Odysseus's. Unlike what we have seen with Ulee, when Odysseus's return home is threatened by the suitors, he reverts to his warrior mindset, embodying Shay's berserk state. For Odysseus, the memory of war is still fresh. Since the end of his war, he has been focused on getting home, and has yet to deal with the emotional wounds inflicted by his traumatic experiences at war. Ulee, however, is tackling those wounds head on. He shows his progress in his response to Jimmy's suggestion to call upon the skills he gained in Vietnam and just kill Eddie and Ferris. When Odysseus is given a similar urge from Athena while fighting the suitors, he shows just how far he has to go before he is able to overcome the mental trauma of war. She tells Odysseus that slaughtering the suitors ought not be a problem especially since he "slaughtered many men when war was raging" (22.229). Rather than leaving his warrior self in the past as Ulee does, Odysseus takes Athena's words and cements his role as a soldier once



again. The way the two men respond to these suggestions shows that they are in different phases on their return journey. Odysseus is only starting to begin the reintegration phase, while Ulee is well into it.

When the men finally get to the swamp, Eddie holds a gun to Ulee as he sends Ferris to retrieve the cooler that contains the money from within an old truck. When he finally brings it to land, he and Eddie begin to count it out, rejoicing over the seemingly easy success of their plan. In his eagerness to get his hands on the cash, Eddie leaves his gun on the ground beside him. Tension builds as Ulee stares at the gun, hinting at the possibility that he might pick it up and use it on the two men. The screenplay even states that “there is motivation and perhaps time to go for the gun” (Nunez 80). Such an action, however, would be completely out of character for Ulee. Instead, he kicks the gun into the swamp, much to the anger of Eddie and Ferris. Maintaining his calm Ulee simply tells them “Neither of us needed that gun, Eddie. You’ve got the money” (Nunez 81). Ulee’s choice not to pick up the gun is perhaps the most significant difference between him and his Greek counterpart. When Odysseus’s family was threatened, he reverted back to his warrior mindset and sought out revenge over the suitors. The different ways the two approach those who threaten their home and family marks their different stages on their return journey.

Scholar Nancy Sherman argues that the transition from fearing for one’s life as one may have during war to concern over moral injury from the war signifies the process of healing a veteran must go through in order to reenter civilian life (Sherman “Moral Injury...”). Odysseus’s handling of the suitors is indicative of his continued warrior mental state. While such actions may have been necessary while at Troy, now that he has returned home, his actions are no longer warranted. Instead, Odysseus has yet to distinguish his warrior past from his civilian present and

future. Ulee, however, is beyond the point of fearing for his life as he would have in Vietnam. Because he has distanced himself from his time as soldier, he is now able to move on from his past. Ulee's choice to show mercy rather than to get revenge is indicative of his progress. Previously he avoided thinking of his time at war, but now that he is beginning to be honest with himself about his experiences he can do the work to heal the moral injuries that he endured in Vietnam. The discomfort he feels toward his past is necessary for his healing in the future (Sherman, "Moral Injury..."). While Odysseus has just arrived home and is beginning the struggle of separating his soldier identity from his identity at home, Ulee, having been home for over a decade, has moved beyond that part of his journey.

#### Chapter IV: Redefining Glory and Manhood

Because *The Odyssey* is often looked at as being the story of one man's journey home, it is easy to overlook what happens after the physical journey ends. For Odysseus, his arrival to Ithaca is just the beginning of yet another, arguably even more difficult journey--reintegrating to a home that he has been away from for two decades. If the story of Odysseus were viewed simply by what is contained within the poem it would be easy to see his handling of the suitors as a triumphal return. However, when looking ahead, it is clear that Odysseus has a long way to go before his journey will truly be complete. Odysseus is now faced with the most difficult part of his return journey home--transitioning from the warrior he once was to the family man he now needs to be. Odysseus's ambivalence toward different ways of achieving *kleos* as seen in his encounters with Calypso and the Cyclops foreshadows the struggle he will have in the reintegration process where he must relearn his role at home. This aspect of Odysseus's journey is not seen in the poem. Instead, the trajectory of the remainder of his journey is left open ended.

To understand Odysseus's motivations throughout Homer's epic poem, we must first understand the notion of *kleos*. *Kleos* can mean renown, glory, or, more specifically "what is said about [a hero] near and far, even when they are dead" (Schein 71). The traditional method of achieving *kleos* is in battle. The best example of this is Achilles, who had the choice of either surviving the Trojan war and coming home to live a long life, unknown to others, or dying in Troy and obtaining an eternal glory. Achilles chose the latter. In this way, *kleos* serves as compensation for death in battle. Even though the warrior might have died, by achieving *kleos*

his name would be recognized by all, and he would gain “immortality in heroic poetry” (Schein 178). But how would an epic hero achieve *kleos* if he survived the war? This is the predicament that Odysseus finds himself in, and the central question of *The Odyssey*. Not only does Odysseus struggle through the many obstacles that prevent him from getting home, but he is also coming to terms with his new role in the world as a war veteran. Throughout his journey home, he faces various situations that force him to try out new ways of achieving *kleos* while also trying to maintain the traditional *kleos* he is no longer able to achieve. Ultimately, *The Odyssey* does not come to a conclusion as to what shape this new *kleos* takes, but rather posits that it is indeed possible for *kleos* to be achieved beyond the battlefield,

Even though it is no longer feasible for Odysseus to achieve the traditional *kleos* that comes with war, he is still unable to fully shed the desire for it, even if it jeopardizes his journey home. This is seen in his encounter with the Cyclops. When the Cyclops notices Odysseus and his men in his cave, he asks them who they are and where they come from. Odysseus responds saying,

“We are Greeks, come here from Troy. The winds have septe us off in all directions across the vast expanse of sea, off course from our planned route back home. Zeus willed it so. We are proud to be the men of Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, whose fame is greatest under the sky, for sacking that vast city and killing many people” (9.259-266).

He goes on to present himself as a suppliant to the Cyclops. In this response, Odysseus assumes that the reputation he has earned as a Greek warrior at Troy will be enough to move the Cyclops to provide him and his men safety. However, the Cyclops is “unmoved” (9.272). This is the first sign that the traditional standards of glory no longer apply. Odysseus has grown accustomed to his strength in battle preceding him, but before the Cyclops his performance in Troy means

nothing. Odysseus now must find another way to get through this situation, much in the same way that he is forced to adjust to a new way of obtaining *kleos*.

The Cyclops then eats a few of Odysseus's men. Still thinking like a warrior, Odysseus's first reaction is to attack the Cyclops head on. He tells the Phaeacians that "I thought I should get out my sword, go up to him and thrust right through his torso, feeling for his liver" (9.300-302). However, Odysseus recognizes that this approach will not work: "On second thoughts, I realized we were too weak" (9.303-304). Like his wooden horse strategy in the Trojan War, Odysseus must come up with a more strategic way of escaping the Cyclops. This requires a "more convertible form of *kleos*" and requires him to "exercise skills which have an ambiguous value among the warriors at Troy" (Segal 29).

Odysseus devises a plan that requires him to give up his name, shedding his identity of the reputation he gained in Troy. Odysseus tells the Cyclops his name is Noman, so that when he attacks him the Cyclops screams "Noman is killing me" (9. 407). Presuming his safety, no one comes to help the Cyclops. Odysseus and his men then escape tied to the underbelly of the Cyclops' sheep. The plan succeeds, and Odysseus can continue his journey. Although Odysseus manages to escape the Cyclops, he makes one vital error right before he departs the island. While still yearning for traditional *kleos*, Odysseus cannot help but desire credit for his success. While rowing away, Odysseus begins to hurl insults at the Cyclops, who in turn hurls rocks back at them. His men urge him to stop, but Odysseus cannot restrain himself. Still desiring heroic *kleos*, Odysseus tells the Cyclops "If any mortal tasks you how your eye was mutilated and made blind, say that Odysseus, the city-sacker, Laertes' son, who lives in Ithaca, destroyed your sight" (9. 502-506). By telling the Cyclops not only his name, but his race, origin, and native land, he has given the Cyclops all the necessities to have a curse placed on him. And with Poseidon being the

Cyclops's father, that curse is indeed placed on Odysseus, prolonging his journey home.

Although Odysseus claims to only want to get back home, his underlying desire for traditional *kleos* is still present. When Odysseus acts on this hidden desire, he effectively interferes with his expressed desire to go home. As long as Odysseus tries to achieve traditional *kleos*, he will not be able to fully return home. Instead, he must embrace the life that lies ahead and the new glory that will come with it, leaving the past, and the yearning for warrior *kleos*, behind.

Now starting to realize that traditional *kleos* is no longer viable in this post-war world, Odysseus must find another way to achieve glory. He focuses on his journey home, hoping to regain a new *kleos* by returning to his role of husband, father, and king of Ithaca. When he is presented with opportunities to forgo his homecoming for an easier end to his journey, he ultimately chooses home. This is seen in his encounter with Calypso. After washing up on the shores of Calypso's island where he stays for seven years under her control, Odysseus grows increasingly homesick and wants to leave the island. While on the island. "his eyes were always tearful; he wept sweet life away, in longing to go back home" (5. 151-153). Although he spent his nights in Calypso's cave, during the day "he sat out on the rocky beach, in tears and grief, staring in heartbreak at the fruitless sea" (5. 156-158). After telling Odysseus that she has been ordered to send him home, she asks him if that is what he really wants, telling him that he will suffer even more along his way home. She even reminds him that home will not be the same as he had left it; specifically, Penelope will no longer be the beautiful young woman that Odysseus last saw her as. If he were to stay with Calypso, he would delight in her eternal youth, and become immortal himself (5. 204-214).

However, to stay with Calypso would prevent Odysseus from achieving the glory he desires. Calypso's name is derived from a Greek word meaning to hide, and if Odysseus stays

with Calypso then he too will be hidden. Because achieving *kleos* requires one to achieve glory so great that their story is told throughout the ages, Odysseus cannot achieve glory staying with Calypso as it is not a story worth telling. For him to choose the eternal, easy life with Calypso would be the equivalent of Achilles choosing a long, unremarkable life. Instead, Odysseus tries to achieve a new *kleos* through his persistence to overcome the obstacles that he will encounter on his journey home. To Calypso's offer of immortality, Odysseus responds saying "But even so, I want to go back home, and every day I hope that day will come" (5. 219-220). Through this choice, Odysseus shows his understanding that the traditional way of achieving *kleos* no longer applies to him; instead, he must seek out a new way of gaining glory.

Still, Odysseus is pulled by the appeal of the traditional *kleos* that he is no longer able to obtain. Arguably, the length of time he spent on Calypso's island shows the ambivalence in his desire to return home. Even after he leaves Calypso's island in the pursuit of the new *kleos*, he wishes for the traditional *kleos*. While enduring yet another storm he says "I wish I had died that same day the mass of Trojans hurled their bronze-tipped spears at me around the corpse of Peleus's son. I would have had a funeral, and honor from the Greeks" (5. 308-313). If Odysseus were to have died in Troy, he would have already earned his *kleos* and would not have to endure this long journey home; his story would have been much simpler. Yet, because he survived the war, this option is no longer available for him. The ambivalence between wanting to get home while still yearning for the glory days of Troy is one of the central conflicts Odysseus faces. Although the external conflict of getting back to Ithaca is ultimately resolved, the internal conflict only grows stronger. By the end of the poem, the question of how *kleos* is achieved without war remains unanswered.

Nunez's *Ulee's Gold* provides a possible idea as to what this new *kleos* may look like through Ulee's own journey of redefining what it means to be a Southern man now that he has looked beyond his veteran past as a source for his own glory. In this possible answer to the question of what new *kleos* may look like, Nunez presents a veteran who gains his own sense of glory not on the battlefield, but through caring for his family. Because Ulee's veteran status is rarely mentioned throughout the movie, and when it is he approaches the matter with hesitation, it is clear that Ulee has reached the point in the reintegration process where he no longer looks to the war as a way of forming his current perspective of the world. The struggle that Ulee now faces is similar to Odysseus's struggle of finding a new *kleos*; however, Ulee's struggle to define a new form of manhood does not look toward war, but well beyond it, demonstrating Ulee's further progress in the reintegration process.

Ulee no longer looks toward his time in war for clues as to how he should define his manhood because of the shame he feels regarding his experiences. He not only feels shame for participating in the war, but he also is ashamed for the way the war has changed him, preventing him from being the family man he wants to be. He admits to Connie later on in the movie that he regrets being away from his family to go to war, and he acknowledges that he has not been fully present since he returned to Florida (Nunez 50). Because of the shame he feels, he tries to make up for it by providing for his family, while also striving to protect his family's reputation, especially now with his son in prison. In this way, Ulee tries his best to maintain Southern ideals of manhood. Because the movie takes place in the Florida panhandle, it is necessary to consider the Southern culture of the society and its influences. Many aspects of Southern culture are unspoken traditions and beliefs that although rarely directly acknowledge still shape the way one approaches life. Southern expectations of manhood call for the man to serve as the foundation of



his family. Not only is he meant to be hard-working and independent, but he is also responsible for protecting the family's image. Furthermore, it is atypical for Southern men to be emotionally expressive; rather they are expected to be reserved and calm in all situations. Ulee is an embodiment of these ideals.

Ulee's commitment to working hard in order to provide for his family is depicted in his work with his bees. He himself describes it as "hard work, and not many young folks want to bother" (Nunez 50). Caring for the bees involves heavy lifting and constant attention. Ulee is often forced to stay up late at night to fill up the drums with honey, and then he has to move the heavy drums to be loaded into his truck. Consequently, Ulee is consistently portrayed as worn out, often described as "utterly exhausted" (Nunez 55). His exhaustion is so great that at one point he even falls asleep on the dining room floor. However, it is precisely this dedication to providing for his family that is required by Southern expectations of men. To fall behind in his work would be to fall behind in his duties to his family.

Alongside his commitment to his work, Ulee is fiercely independent, a trait that is compounded by the isolation Ulee feels as a result of Vietnam. He would much rather handle any situation on his own than to allow others an insight to his family issues. Ulee makes this clear in the beginning of the movie when he asks Casey to watch Penny while he goes to visit Jimmy. Casey protests and tells him to ask their neighbor, Connie, instead. Ulee quickly reprimands her saying, "We don't ask outsiders for help, Casey. You know that" (Nunez 16). When Ulee brings Helen back home from Orlando, he struggles trying to secure Helen as she is going through withdrawal. Scared, Penny brings in Connie, who works as a nurse. She insists that Helen be taken to a hospital, but Ulee, determined to handle the situation on his own, refuses. He emphasizes his independence further when the sheriff asks him if he can help with anything.

Ulee responds in typical Southern fashion saying, “It’s Jackson mess, Bill, and Jacksons are the ones who’ve got to deal with it” (Nunez 46).

Ulee’s independence also coincides with his responsibility to protect his family’s image. When Ulee is driving back from Orlando with Helen, they drive by a church service letting out. Helen, coming off the drugs, wakes up and begins to yell and beat at the windows, trying to escape. Ulee tells her to “calm down. This isn’t the place.” He is described as loathing the situation as he speeds away from the many onlookers. Ulee’s response to Helen shows that his concern here is more for the fact that others are seeing what’s going on rather than Helen’s well-being. Later on, when word about Helen’s condition makes its way through town due to Connie talking to Sheriff Bill, Ulee once again goes into defense mode, telling her that “We don’t need the whole goddamn world knowin’ what’s going on in our house” (Nunez 49). Although Connie has been helping Helen get better, Ulee is still more concerned with how others will see him and his family.

The Southern ideal that Ulee battles with the most is the expectation to control emotions, a battle even harder to wage when compounded by the deep emotional scars caused by Vietnam. Although Peter Fonda plays Ulee as calm and reserved, the character is described with strong emotional words in the screenplay. Southern expectations dictate that men not openly show those feelings. As any person would, Ulee experiences deep emotional responses in regard to the various heartbreaking and stressful situations he encounters, but he does all he can to suppress them so as to not come off as weak, but rather in control. We see this internal struggle when Ulee visits his son in prison. The screenplay describes his reaction in the following way, “For a brief instant his eyes light up with joy then pain as a wave of heartbreak moves over Ulee’s face before he stiffens into his usual formality” (Nunez 17-18). Although Ulee experiences a mixture

of both joy and sorrow, he knows that he cannot let that be known, or else Jimmy might take advantage of his father's vulnerability. We also see this struggle when Ulee meets with Eddie and Ferris in Orlando. After seeing the conditions of his daughter-in-law, he is described as being "in a state of private fury" yet he "works to maintain his outward calm" (Nunez 27). Once again, it is important to Ulee that he keep how he really feels hidden, lest he give power to Eddie and Ferris. One final example of Ulee's commitment to guarding his emotions is seen when he delivers eighteen of the thirty promised drums of honey to Chance, the buyer. He asks Ulee if he is alright, and in true Southern fashion, Ulee responds, "Why shouldn't I be?" Chance then leaves Ulee "alone among his old hives, drums, and fears" (Nunez 68). Even to friends, Ulee is careful not to let on that inside he is struggling. If he were to open up, he would damage the image of the ideal Southern man that he is desperately clinging to.

Ulee's desire to uphold typical Southern ideals of manhood so as to make up for the shame he feels from his time in Vietnam prevent him from fully returning to his homelife and family. This comes to light most clearly in one of the few moments where Ulee loses control of his emotions. Because Ulee rarely expresses himself openly, it is revelatory when he does. While struggling to keep Helen under control the two get into a heated argument. Ulee yells at Helen for running away from her responsibilities, to which Helen says, "There's all kinds of running, Ulee. Your body might have stuck around, and that lousy bully part of your mind, but your heart took off a long time ago....'Fact, I'm not sure it ever made it back from Nam" (Nunez 48). Ulee, taking her words to heart, insists in a choked whisper that what she says is not true. He then blames Helen and Jimmy for "managing a high class fuck up," and finally leaves the room (Nunez 48). This is the first time throughout the movie that Ulee's disconnect from his family has been openly addressed, and Ulee is forced to confront the reality of the situation, that

although he has returned from Vietnam, his experiences there coupled with his commitment to Southern expectations of manhood have prevented him from truly returning to his family. This moment serves as the turning point in Ulee's mental journey home.

To fully return he must come to terms with his experiences in Vietnam, as well as reevaluate the Southern masculinity that is standing in the way. Helen's bringing this into light causes Ulee to begin to reassess his priorities. He becomes less concerned with his reputation and societal standards and more focused on his family. We see this when Ulee calls Eddie and Ferris on a payphone near a gas station after meeting with Jimmy to discuss the location of the money. While waiting for them to answer the call, Ulee hears a scream behind him. He turns to find its source and sees a father tickling his young child. The child's mother then approaches with ice cream for them. This idyllic scene of family life is a far cry from what Ulee is currently experiencing with his own family. Ulee is mesmerized and watches them with longing. He is described as "confused by the noise of the family" (Nunez 64). The sight of a family enjoying being with each other is a foreign concept to Ulee as he has been physically and now emotionally disconnected from his own family. As the scene goes on Ulee finally connects with Eddie and Ferris over the phone. By the time the conversation ends the family has gone and we are left with Ulee standing alone. The juxtaposition of Ulee's "lone still figure" with the image of the happy family creates a noticeable tension. It is now clear for Ulee what he truly desires, to be with his family, but also indicates for him just how far he is from that goal.

In order to achieve his goal of connecting with his family he must not allow himself to be restrained by the societal expectations that have been the barrier between them. While Odysseus maintains his desire for traditional *kleos* even though it prevents him from fully reintegrating with home, Ulee is beginning to realize that commitment to an old standard of glory is exactly

what is preventing him from the home he desires. Ulee's realization allows him to do the work to move forward in his journey. Until Odysseus realizes that as long as he looks for traditional *kleos* for value, he will be unable to achieve what he truly desires--home. After Helen brings Ulee's disconnectedness to light, he begins to slowly let his family back into his life, shedding himself of the expectation to be solely responsible for his family. In the beginning of the movie, Ulee is often depicted working alone, but eventually Casey begins to help him, and ultimately Helen as well. With the help of his family, Ulee is able to do his work more quickly and the pressure begins to alleviate.

Ulee also begins to allow others into his life, and allows himself to open up emotionally, arguably his biggest hurdle. In the beginning of the movie, he refuses Connie's offers of help, but over time he gains the courage to talk with her candidly about his wife, something he had not done since she died. He even admits to her that he has withdrawn himself from his family when they needed his emotional support the most. After his wife died, he says that Jimmy and Helen took the loss hard, and he "pretty much fell off the planet" (Nunez 51). With tears in his eyes, he finally voices the feelings he has been holding back for years. Although indirectly, Penny also helps Ulee to open up emotionally. After taking her to work with the bees and seeing several hives destroyed, he shows her how to get the bees back to their hives. The next day at school she draws a picture of the scene for her mother. While showing it to her, Ulee listens in from the hallway. He hears Penny saying "Sometimes the bees get confused and run away. That's them on the tree there. But they don't really want to be gone, and they're happy when someone helps them back into their home" (Nunez 58). Although Penny is applying this to her mother's situation, her words also ring true for Ulee. As he struggles to return home emotionally, he has been declining any offers of help. Penny's words help Ulee to realize that it is alright to lean on

others for help. By doing so, he can come closer to his family and eventually home. Just as Ulee helps the bees return to their hives, their home, Ulee can turn to his family for help in his own journey home. He is ultimately able to begin the process of reconnecting with his family when he admits to Connie, "I'm realizing that I don't know enough about anything to say nothing" (Nunez 52). Only by admitting that he does not have all the answers, that he alone cannot solve the problems before him, is he able to endure the final leg of his journey home.

Rather than completely forgoing all elements of Southern expectations of manhood however, Ulee instead strikes a balance between those that have held him back and those that prioritize his family. In this way, Nunez might be providing an answer to what shape Odysseus's new *kleos* might take. Instead of completely abandoning the glory he did gain from Troy, he ought to accept that part of his past and now look toward his homelife for a new source of glory. Through Ulee, Nunez shows the glory of family, and the value of turning to family for help to come home.

Ulee puts his newfound perspective into words when driving Eddie and Ferris back to their truck. He first tells Eddie that "meeting someone like you has done me a world of good." Ulee then continues after seeing that Eddie is confused, saying "It reminds me that there's all kinds of weakness in the world. Not all of it is evil. I forget that from time to time" (Nunez 81-82). Despite Eddie's assertion that Ulee is "full of crap," Ulee's words show that he has released himself of the pressure that he had been carrying for many years. Since his physical return home from war he has been striving to prove himself to be the best man, husband, father, etc. Whenever he fell short of the Southern expectations of manhood he saw himself as weak, which would be considered a moral flaw by Southern standards. Ulee's move to define glory for

himself rather than what is dictated by society alongside his coming to terms with his time in Vietnam allow him to get closer to his return home, closer to full reintegration.

### Conclusion

With the help of *Ulee's Gold*, the frustration I had reading *The Odyssey* has subsided. Nunez's movie finds the humanity in Odysseus that was lost to me. Rather than being confused by Odysseus's ambivalence, Ulee's story has helped me to see that Odysseus's journey home is much more involved process than I realized. Instead of being left unsatisfied by the lack of a more complete ending, I can now see that this was the point of the poem, that the poem wants us to understand that Odysseus's journey is far from over. By viewing *The Odyssey* in conjunction with *Ulee's Gold* we are able to gain a more complex understanding of each protagonist's journey home. Reading *The Odyssey* with *Ulee's Gold* in mind helps us to see that Odysseus's journey home has not ended. Instead, he is faced now with the more difficult process of healing

the mental wounds inflicted by war and coming to terms with his new role in Ithaca after two decades away. Viewing *Ulee's Gold* after reading *The Odyssey* reminds us of Ulee's veteran past and the deep impact that has had on his mental and emotional state as well as its influence on his ability to reestablish a relationship with his family.

By examining how these two works reveal the more complex process of homecoming, another question arises. Does the journey ever end? *Ulee's Gold* shows us that Odysseus's arrival to Ithaca is only the end of one phase of the journey and the beginning of the even harder process of reintegration. In the film we see Ulee undergo that phase of the process as he breaks down the mental barriers that have stood in the way of his reconnecting with his family for the two decades that he has been home from Vietnam; however, the end of the film does not have the happy ending most audiences hope for. In one of the final scenes of the movie Ulee goes to visit Jimmy in prison with Helen, Casey, and Penny. During the visit Jimmy reveals that he might be released in the coming year and offers to help his father with the bees. Ulee tells him the business is dying, but he takes the offer "with some emotion...fighting back tears of hope" (Nunez 89). Although the conflict with Eddie and Ferris is resolved and the mental hurdles have been removed, the future of the Jackson family is still in question. While the family maintains a hopeful anticipation for what lies ahead, there are still questions that remain unresolved. Jimmy's release is not confirmed, and Helen has only been clean for a few days and it remains to be seen if she stays sober.

The final scene of the movie best exemplifies the never-ending nature of the journey home. Ulee comes home to see Casey and Penny in the kitchen laughing with their mother as they bake cookies. He tries to engage but they keep the joke between them. Ulee is happy to see the mother and daughters reconnecting, but unable to join them he "heads to the door with gentle



sorrow...Ulee feels lonely and annoyed with himself” (Nunez 91). He goes to his shed and begins to work when Connie comes by and asks, “Don’t you ever stop?” Ulee responds saying “There’s always something.” He hands her a jar of honey and looks toward the house where the laughter is still heard, feeling “tense despite himself.” Connie asks if things are going alright, and Ulee tells her “Helen and the kids are making up for lost time.” Failing to come across as joking he tells her “And I feel like an old drone bee. They don’t need me now. Least not like before” (Nunez 91-92). He then invites Connie to dinner and the two talk about the honey as the scene fades away. The dynamics of Ulee’s family have once again shifted, and he is once again tasked with reevaluating his position in the family. Furthermore, Ulee’s relationship with Connie is only beginning, and it is unknown where that will lead. Ulee’s story has not yet ended.

Although Ulee has done the work to move past the mental blocks that stood in between him and his family he must now begin to find where he fits in now that the dynamics have once again shifted. Before, Ulee took it upon himself to be the foundation for the family. Now that he realizes how being that foundation has prevented him from reconnecting with his family, he must find a new role that allows him to be more emotionally available. Looking back to *The Odyssey*, we saw Odysseus tasked with a similar issue. While he has been away his son has grown into a man, his wife has aged, and his father is now an elderly man. Odysseus must learn these new dynamics so he can find a place where he can reenter the family where they are now, unable to go back to the same family he left behind. The fact that Ulee is having to go through this process points to a cyclical nature of the process of coming home, but it is important to remember that in the process the veteran comes closer and closer to his end goal, never moving away from it unless he were to physically depart home again. Because Ulee’s journey does not come to a complete end, we see that coming home is a continual process.

So, if the veteran is continually moving closer to home, we might ask ourselves whether he will ever get there. From this examination of the coming home process as seen in *The Odyssey* and *Ulee's Gold* it is clear that the journey does not end. It is impossible for the veteran to return to the home he left behind when he went to war. As both works show, the home the veteran returns to is no longer the same home he had left. The family has continued living in the veteran's absence and has created a new environment that does not include the veteran. When the veteran does return, he returns to this new environment, not the one he left from. Furthermore, just as the home has changed, the veteran himself has changed. One can never fully let go of the impact of war. The veteran has been fundamentally changed by his experiences and must carry that with him back home. Over time the veteran learns how to cope with this experience, but never can he return to the time or the home before war. Instead, he can return to the place and the people, and begin the journey of discovering a new life post war.

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