

The aeneid

Literature



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Aside from the Bible, there is perhaps no other literary force able to shape Western civilization other than Greco-Roman literature. From this great body of work one can find enduring classics such as the Aeneid.

This work of poetry by Publius Vergilius Maro, who is more popularly known as Virgil, has influenced western minds in ways that could never be measured. The Aeneid contributed to a modern understanding of antiquity and also to a better appreciation of a literary style of a bygone era.

The Aeneid is basically the story of Aeneas, the god-like leader of a band of Trojan refugees fleeing to Italy after the fall of Troy. In the beginning, Aeneas built a fleet with the goal in mind of settling in a foreign land and to finally establish a new nation of Trojans. In Virgil's mind, he wanted the world to understand the basis for the establishment of the Roman Empire.

Hornstein, Percy and Brown's book, *The Reader's Companion to World Literature*, was very helpful in understanding the context from which a better point of view can be reached and they said that, "...it was written at a time of great violence".

Italy was ravaged by more than fifty years of revolution and civil war. When the long-sought peace came, a new form of government was fashioned from a battle weary nation. And with the new set-up, ultimate power was in the hands of one man- Augustus. It was during this time that the Roman Virgil began working on the Aeneid. Hornstein, Brown and Percy wrote:

Vergil began the poem in 29 B. C., two years after the battle of Actium brought this period of civil war to an end. He had long been preparing for the task. His purpose was national: he desired to glorify the Roman people

by his theme and exalt the Emperor in the person of his hero. But he did not wish to write a historical epic.

For his material he went back to the heroic age, to the legend that the Roman nation was founded by Trojans who survived the war at Troy, and that the family of Augustus, was established by their leader Aeneas.(5)

Thus began the great work of his masterpiece. Yet the question remains, on whether Aeneid is truly an epic in the tradition of the great classical epics of antiquities?

Defining an Epic

There are no hard and fast rules leading to the exact meaning of the term epic. There can be at least two reasons for this. First of all, the various epics from different parts of the world sprung out from diverse cultures with differing literary styles and they are separated from each other by hundreds or even thousands of years.

The second reason, which is less serious, would be the fact that the ancients did not establish a " Society for the Study of Classical Epics" which would have formulated rules and guidelines on how to make one.

On a more serious note, there has been a general consensus among scholars on what makes an epic. An example definition for the term is "...a long narrative poem in which the characters and the action are of heroic proportions." (Hornstein, Percy and Brown, 1973)

If the definition of an epic is based on having a tale with heroic characters in it, then Aeneid is an epic. The main character in Aeneid, was half-man and half-god, he was a child of a goddess. Mark Petrini in his book *The Child and*
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the Hero , made clear that Vigil wanted his characters to die a hero's death. (11)

Discussing one of Aeneas deeds that made him a great leader, Hornstein, Percy and Brown said, " Here Aeneas sought out the Sibyl, an ancient prophetess who lived in a cave nearby. With her to guide him, he descended to Hades, where he found his father..." (p. 6) These easily describe the story Aeneid as having heroic characters.

Another distinguishing factor of poetry that distinguishes it as an epic is its lengthy composition. In his study of epics, N. K. Sanders made this comment " What we have in both the Sumerian and Semitic versions are the word for word repetition of fairly long passages of narrative or conversation, and of elaborate greeting formulae." (48)

Therefore, if one judges Aeneid by its length then it qualifies as one. Philip Gaskell in the book *Landmarks in Classical Literature* , remarked that, " The Aeneid is twelve books of hexameters totaling 9, 896 lines." (161)