

Vergil as the greatest of all latin poets

Profession, Poet



Vergil is generally acknowledged as the greatest of all Latin poets. He was famous in his own lifetime and was the first poet in the history of Latin literature to be the subject of lectures given by a contemporary teacher.

There seemed to be a great deal of interest in him and on his rare appearances in Rome he was pointed out in the streets as if he were a celebrity. However, in his private life he was known to be very shy and preferred the quiet countryside to the pandemonium of Rome. He was born as Publius Vergilius Maro in Andes, a small village, near Mantua (Mantova), Italy on October 15, 70 BC.

He had two brothers; Silo, who died in his childhood, and Flaccus, who lived to be a young man. Vergil's father, a potter and cattle farmer, worked hard to provide his son with an Aristocratic education. After he completed his studies in Cremona and Milan, Vergil went to Rome to study law and rhetoric at Epidius' academy. It was in Rome that he met Gaius Maecenas, a Roman statesman and patron of the arts, who saw Vergil's promise of greatness and sponsored his education. In addition he developed a friendship with Octavian, who later became Emperor Augustus.

While in Rome, he studied alongside many prominent poets including Gaius Cornelius Gallus, Horace, and Lucius Varius Rufus. After leaving Rome, Vergil went to Naples to study under Siro. Here, he studied philosophy and also became a member of a group of Epicurean thinkers outside Naples. This group gathered in Campania, at a retreat known as "the Garden", under the leadership of Siro, Vergil's teacher and friend. Originally, Vergil wanted to study law but he gave up after pleading only one court case and devoted himself to philosophy and literature.

He spent most of his life in the countryside of Campania, but kept a house on the Esquiline Hill in Rome, which was given to him by his friend and patron Maecenas. He wrote three major works in his lifetime. Early in his career he wrote the Eclogues, a book of 10 pastoral poems. This was followed by the Georgics, a didactic poem on farm life. His last and greatest work was the Aeneid, a mythological epic poem describing the seven-year wanderings of the hero Aeneas. Vergil's first major work was composed between 42 and 37 BC.

This was a ten book pastoral poem known as the Eclogues or Bucolic. It was modeled on the Idylls of Theocritus, an Alexandrian poet. Vergil's emphasis is on graceful rhymes and the description of a romantic setting in northern Italy, but he also added many realistic details such as, his father's eviction from his farm due to political seizure. The most famous of The Eclogues, The fourth celebrates the birth of a child who is destined to usher in a new Golden Age of peace and goodwill. Critics have made definite connections between Vergil's fictional characters and real people.

Some have suggested that the divine birth refers to Mark Anthony, or possibly Vergil's friend Octavian, who became Augustus, Rome's first emperor. Still others see this divine birth as a reference to the birth of Christ. His next major work was the Georgics, or Art of Husbandry, which was written from 36 to 29 BC. It is a four-book poem that described the life of a farmer. Its inspiration is said to come from the Greek poet Hesiod's Works and Days. Vergil's position as the leading poet of the age was confirmed with

the Georgics publication. The poem deals with planting, caring for orchards and vineyards, stock management, and beekeeping.

However, the main emphasis is on the values of Roman life, particularly the work ethic. The poem was designed to be universal in scope with the topics of war, peace, death and resurrection concluding each book. Vergil devoted his last ten years to the composition of the Aeneid. This is his last and, by far, best known work. It was written between the years of 30 to 19 BC in twelve books. Modeled after Homer's epics, the Iliad and the Odessey, the Aeneid is a mythological epic describing the seven-year wanderings of the Roman hero Aeneas, from the fall of Troy to his military victory in Italy.

Aeneas, while central to the story, is more symbolic than realistic. His character exists to tell the story of the founding of Rome and to personify the Roman values of duty and responsibility. In the story, Aeneas escaped from Troy carrying his father on his shoulders and leading his young son Ascanius by the hand. He brought together a fleet of Trojans and sailed the eastern Mediterranean Sea to Thrace, Crete, Epirus, and Sicily before being shipwrecked on the coast of Africa. Here Dido, the queen of Carthage, fell in love with Aeneas.

The two began to live together as husband and wife and Aeneas intended to make Carthage his home. Jupiter, king of the gods, warned Aeneas that he must leave Dido in order to continue on his destined mission to found Rome. In despair, Dido killed herself when Aeneas departed for Italy. After landing at the mouth of the Tiber River in Italy, Aeneas killed Turnus, the king of the Rutulians, in a war for the hand of Lavinia, who was the princess of Latium.

According to Vergil, the Romans were direct descendents of Ascanius, the founder of Alba Longa, the mother city of Rome.

The Aeneid is usually considered the first great literary epic, unlike the Iliad, which in essence is a work of oral poetry. The Aeneid was written as a deliberate attempt to glorify Rome at the request of Augustus Caesar. The historical elements are especially prominent in books five through eight, the central portion of the poem. The Aeneid became a classic in its own day. All of Rome, particularly the royal family, followed the progress of the epic. Vergil would read aloud from rough drafts of the Aeneid to Augustus, his sister, Octavia, and Maecenas.

As he refined his work during his later years, the poet led a comfortable life, devoting himself to historical research. In 19 BC, Vergil set out on a trip to Greece and Asia with the intention of revising his masterpiece. In Athens, he met Augustus and unfortunately became very ill during his stay in Greece. Augustus escorted his friend back to Brundisium, Italy, where he died before his epic could be revised to his satisfaction. To prevent the Aeneid from being read in rough form, Vergil left instructions that it be destroyed.

Augustus, realizing the value of this work, intervened before this request could be carried out and assigned two of Vergil's poet friends, Varius Rufus and Plotius Tucca, to edit the manuscript for publication. The work was completed near the end of 18 BC. It achieved immediate acceptance throughout the Mediterranean as the definitive Roman epic. On his deathbed, Vergil immortalized himself with a short epitaph, which his friends

inscribed above his grave. It ends with this line: " I sang of pastures, farms and rulers". This became a touching summary of his three great works.