

Dante vs aeneas essay



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When one thinks of the afterlife, they can't help but think of Dante's Divine Comedy. In his book, *The Inferno*, Dante ventures into hell, both as a poet and an epic hero. His story is obviously inspired by Book VI of Virgil's *The Aeneid*, which depicts the epic journey, into the underworld, of Virgil's hero Aeneas. There are many similarities between both books, despite the fact that *The Inferno* is written more than 1400 years after Virgil's tale. Dante's poem marks the change in religious values that occurred over this 1400 year intermission.

The Aeneid is written during a Pagan era, when the afterlife is viewed as more of a mythological Underworld than a Hell. Dante's poem represents the Christian ethics behind the afterlife. His afterlife is a much more strict and unforgiving place than Virgil's. Both *The Aeneid* and *The Inferno* have an epic hero and an epic poet/author. *The Aeneid* has Virgil and his hero Aeneas, and *The Inferno* has the great Dante and his hero, the less great pilgrim version of himself. Both stories are epic tales. They hold the same grand heroic-like journey characteristics.

Virgil wrote *The Aeneid*, in response to Homer's *Odyssey*, and Dante's work is in response to Virgil. Homer, who established himself as a great epic Greek poet, inspired the Roman Virgil to aspire to as high acclaim. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, there are moments when he attempts to one-up Homer's hero Odysseus, by hinting Aeneas might be the better leader. Dante carries on this tradition as well, at times attempting to overshadow Virgil. There is no denying Virgil and Dante created their works along the same blue print, each man aware of who came before him. A key connection between the two stories is the use of guides.

Both men are led through the Underworld. Aeneas is led by Sybil, who is a mortal given powers by Zues; Dante is led by Virgil's ghost. This is the poet's way of acknowledging Virgil's influence on his writing. Both Virgil and Sybil behave fearlessly in the Underworld. However, a difference is noticed between the two sagas; when Virgil leads Dante in the lower levels of Hell, Virgil behaves more shaken than his wise calm self. This is one of Dante's ways, as a poet, of showing the escalating nature of punishment that arises with each descending level in Hell. This is also the key theme and lesson Dante the pilgrim learns.

The majority of the differences between the two stem from their separate character traits and the way they react to their comparably similar situations. Aeneas is a realistic character with fears and doubts merely trying to live up to expectation. He has all the foundation of a normal human being. He is even a bit arrogant. Aeneas, who fought on the side of the Trojans, wanders along with his people in search of a new place to settle. He and his people feel defeated and thoughts of the Trojan War make him sad. These same thoughts also kill the morale of his men.

Though Aeneas, has been given a prophecy that states his people will start Rome, his men are still downtrodden. In the second book of The Aeneid, Aeneas steps up and convinces his men to carry on. Despite the fact they've just been defeated and have no land, Aeneas proves himself to be a competent leader for his people. Dante the character represents everyman. When he first meets Virgil, he showers him with admiration. Throughout the entire journey, he chokes up over the greatness of Virgil; but Dante the poet takes every opportunity he gets to hint to his supposed superiority.

An example of this is his placement of Virgil in story. By him placing Virgil in Limbo, for never having the opportunity to claim Christ, Dante presents himself as the epic poet of Christianity. This ideal of taking a poke at one of the greats to one up them is a tendency Dante most likely got from Virgil. Just like Dante, Virgil used *The Aeneid* to point out weaknesses in Homer's *Odyssey*. It is one of the parts where the two poems cross. Achaemenides is one of Odysseus' men, who he left behind when they were fleeing from the island of the Cyclops.

When Aeneas arrives to the island, he and his men actually take Achaemenides aboard their ship, giving refuge to him and metaphorically cleaning up Odysseus' mess. This scene is only in *The Aeneid*, but it makes a bold statement about the difference in leadership between Odysseus and Aeneas. Aeneas is a normal man connected to a prophecy that the reader never gets to see him fulfill. The reader anticipates Aeneas' rise to glory and waits until the moment when he will achieve the full extent of it, but his story ends abruptly with him killing Turnus.

The reader is never able to see Aeneas' redemption the way it's presented for Dante. At the end, the reader is aware that now Turnus is dead and Aeneas has Lavinia the future of Rome is more at hand, but the book stops in its climax. The difference in the two depictions of the Underworld are characteristic of the era in which each epic is written. Virgil separates good from evil, and there is a place for the neutral, but there are no descending levels of punishment. The Roman's during his era believed all men went to the Underworld. This is very similar to the same way Homer depicts it as well.

Dante, on the other hand, puts sinners in Hell, and those who aren't sinners either reside in Heaven, or if they aren't Christian in Limbo. The purpose of both epics is to document the journey. Both Aeneas and Dante have their respective journeys. Dante enters Hell, analyzing everything he sees. He takes the entire situation so serious that Virgil has to keep him on a schedule, and make sure he doesn't spend too much time talking to people in any one particular area. The first circle of Hell Dante enters is the home of pagans. All of the people here are virtuous by nature, but just lack the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Virgil is one of these souls and serves as Dante's guide. In the second circle, the monster Minos punished condemned souls. In the second circle, he learns that's where adulterers are placed. Dante travels from the Third to sixth circles seeing gluttons and the wrathful. Not all of these sightings of punishment humbled Dante. When Dante is in the Fifth circle, he sees an old enemy being tortured and it brings joy to his heart. As Dante descends through all the levels of Hell, the lesson he gains, and that's learnt by the reader, is the measure of sin.

By the end, when he's in front of the devil looking at the greatest sinners of them all, the betrayers, Dante has a better understanding of the value of his actions outside Hell. As Satan chews on the bodies of Brutus, Cassius and Judas, Dante experiences the epitome of the consequences to immorality. This message of virtue that Dante takes with him differs a little from knowledge Aeneas takes with him. Aeneas is confronted more with proof of the prophecy that he will establish Rome, than anything else. The Underworld of Aeneas' journey does graze on some ideals of Christian ethic.

But considering that Virgil wrote his poem before Christianity existed, it's surprising there is as much sin and punishment in the story as there is. Though, it does establish Virgil as some what of a Christian profit; because the reader is never given a good understanding to why most people are condemned to Virgil's hell, it lacks morale reasoning. The journey ends up being more a complement to the rest of Aeneas' journey outside of Hell. In closing, the two underworld journeys both have morals. One is a moral of epic prophecy, the other is of moral value. Aeneas is an epic hero, and a Dante is a poet who endures trials of epic proportions.