
The Underworld in The Aeneid Versus The Odyssey

The Aeneid clearly reflects the influence which Homer's Odyssey had on Virgil's writing. Among the several common aspects shared by these two epic poems, each author's depiction of the Underworld provides an interesting basis for comparison. Although the resemblance appears extraordinary at first, several important differences can be discovered upon closer examination. These differences enable the poems' reader to draw comparisons not only between the two poets, but between their characters as well namely, Aeneas and Odysseus. Two particular passages one can compare are Book VI, lines 335-489 from The Aeneid and Book X, line 560 through Book XI, line 62 from The Odyssey.

The characters of Aeneas and Odysseus are revealed through their respective journeys to the Underworld. One sharp contrast lies in the steps each hero must take in order to reach his destination. The process which Aeneas must go through is much more involved. The beginning of the said passage (lines 331ff.) from The Aeneid describes the last step of this process, when they make the formidable journey across the Sibyl's cave. They reach this last trial only after making the proper sacrifices to the gods and finding the Golden Bough, which grants them access across the river Styx. For Odysseus, the process described in XI.23-45 from The Odyssey seems simple by comparison. After he sacrifices the animals and promises his best heifer to the dead, he simply calls up the lost souls and converses with them. He achieves his goal without a long, arduous journey like that which Aeneas has to go experience. The journey that Aeneas makes can be interpreted as a test of his determination. He says to the Sibyl, "No novel of hardship, no surprises...I foresaw them all, went through them in my mind" (Aeneid VI.156-158). Aeneas has been through so much that there is no form of struggle or danger he cannot face. And because he endured all those hardships, his resolve has been proven, whereas there is little testing of Odysseus' resolve.

Aeneas, however, does have the help of a guide throughout the arduous process. Apollo's prophetess, the Sibyl, accompanies him to the Underworld, showing him the way and helping him understand what he sees. For example, when they are in the Sibyl's cave, she instructs Aeneas to "enter the path here, and unsheathe your sword" (Aeneid VI.359). She continues to dispense similar commands to him throughout the journey. His dependence on the Sibyl makes the reader question whether he would have succeeded without her assistance. Odysseus, on the other hand, embarks on his journey entirely on his own. He has no guide and this difference reflects the character of the heroes. Aeneas' passive nature causes him to always look toward the fulfillment of his destiny, and is helped along or hindered by the gods. Odysseus, however, pushes his own way through the trials that fate has dealt him.

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Aeneas' passivity can also be seen in the fact that he receives help even before he journey to the Underworld. The Sibyl informs him, "Your friend's dead body...lies out there unburied...First give the man his rest" (Aeneid VI.217-221). She commands him to first bury Misenus' body which he does. Odysseus has no such advisor: he too had lost a friend, Elpenor, but this one had remained unburied, and so lamented to Odysseus when they met in the Underworld. Elpenor asks Odysseus, "...do not go and leave me behind unwept, unburied" (Odyssey XI.72). Aeneas' passivity is subtly present even in something as minor as the person in which the story is told. Aeneas' journey is related to the reader by the narrator in the third person, while Odysseus himself tells of his hardships as he sits with Alkinoös and Arete.

The striking difference in the character of these two heroes can also be seen in their intentions for going to the Underworld. Odysseus is there only because Circe commanded that he do so, saying to him, "First here is another journey you must accomplish and reach the house of Hades...to consult with the soul of Teiresias" (Odyssey X.490-492). He must go to the Underworld before he can go home. As such, it is decreed by fate that he complete this task before reaching final destination. For Aeneas, it is a rather different matter: he is fulfilling the last wishes of his father, who had begged him, saying, "Come meet me son" (Aeneid, V.952). He wants Aeneas to journey to Hades after his father's death for one last moment to speak to him. Being the "duty-bound" hero that he is, Aeneas obeys his father's wishes even when he is dead.

Another aspect of their character is revealed in the words they said to those they meet in the Underworld. When Odysseus encounters Elpenor, the first thing he asks him is, "Elpenor, how did you come here beneath the fog and the darkness? You have come faster on foot than I could in my black ship" (Odyssey XI.57-58). Elpenor beat him to the Underworld as if this were a race between them. Here Odysseus is immediately concerned more for his own pride than for the welfare of his friend, who had died unburied. Odysseus changes the event into a competition, wanting to win above all. Aeneas, on the other hand, expresses his concern for fulfilling his destiny upon encountering his friend, Palinurus, who had recently drowned. He quickly asks Palinurus, "Tell me. In this one prophecy Apollo, who had never played me false falsely foretold you'd be unharmed at sea and would arrive at the Ausonian coast. Is the promise kept? (Aeneid VI.464-468). Worried that if Palinurus' destiny as revealed had not been realized, Aeneas became concerned that his own destiny might not come true. By experiencing this immediate concern, he reveals his sense of responsibility and destiny-consciousness. He is always looking forward to achieving his goal. Odysseus, on the other hand, reveals his pride and self-concern when he inquires Elpenor about how he managed to get to the Underworld before Odysseus did.

The comparison between the two passages gives insight into the two heroes. Through the actions, words and thoughts of Aeneas and Odysseus, their character is revealed in sharp contrast to the other. The comparison also shines light on the authors' views on the afterlife.

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Virgil envisions the Underworld as a place that cannot be reached easily. Even the hero Aeneas needs a guide to ensure his journey's success. And even then, there is a whole process he must go through before getting to the Underworld. For Homer, it is much simpler. The Underworld which he envisions is not too far out of reach. Odysseus had a relatively easy time reaching it. Homer pictures the Underworld as a place that almost anyone can reach, whereas Virgil believes that the individual's resolve will be tested before the possibility of reaching the Underworld can be considered.

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