

Descent to the Underworld in the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*

I chose to compare the *Odyssey* written by the Greek poet Homer and the *Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil. I will focus my interest on Book 11 of the *Odyssey* and Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, since that is when both of the main characters make an educational visit to the underworld. The description of the underworld created by Homer's wild imagination, inspired Virgil eight centuries later. Virgil's masterpiece was planned as an imitation of Homer's poems, so one automatically starts comparing the creations of the two authors. They were separated by eight centuries and by the cultural differences of their people. These differences are reflected on the structure of their compositions.

At first the reasons for Aeneas's and Odysseus's voyage to the world below seem similar. Both of them want to receive information from the people who have already died. This knowledge is necessary in order for them to continue a successful life in the real world, amongst the real people. Aeneas wants to ask his wise father Anchises for advice about the foundation of a new state – Rome. His father tells him about the future of his family. This prophecy includes the history of Rome all the way until the days of Virgil himself.

*What glories follow Dardan generations
In after years, and from Italian blood
What famous children in your line will come,
Souls of the future, living in our name,
I shall tell clearly now, and in the telling
Teach you your destiny.¹*

The need for Odysseus to travel to the underworld doesn't seem to be motivated at all in the poem. But it is possible that this part of the poem contains the main idea of the *Odyssey* plot. He travels around the world for ten years but still comes back to Ithaca. He goes into the kingdom of the dead and returns safely. It is his death and his resurrection. After a person goes through so much, he finds out everything about his inner self. He knows exactly what his fears are and how much his body can handle physically and emotionally. Odysseus's self-knowledge becomes greater and greater through out the story.

In my opinion Odysseus is simply driven by his curiosity when going to Hades, he wants to know, see and feel everything himself. But there is a formal reason for the descent – to meet the “famous Theban prophet” Tiresias.

*A sweet smooth journey home, renowned Odysseus,
that is what you seek
but a god will make it hard for you...²*

¹ Virgil *Aeneid* B.6 line 1015

² Homer *Odyssey* B.11 line 111

*And even if you escape, you'll come home late
and come a broken man – all shipmates lost,
alone in a stranger's ship...³*

*And at last your own death will steal upon you...
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age...⁴*

Everything that Odysseus asked Tiresias about was concerning his personal destiny only – the possibility of his returning home, seeing his beautiful wife and his only son. The prophecy made by Anchises, on the other hand, is of a political character.

Greeks believed in life after death, but it was the life of shadows with all the human feelings. This is very noticeable in Odysseus's conversation with Achilles. After Achilles is told of his son's bravery:

*...the ghost of the great runner, Aeacus' grandson
loping with long strides across the fields of asphodel,
triumphant in all I had told of his son,...⁵*

The most general belief of antiquity, given its form by Homer, was that all the dead dwell below the earth in the realm of Hades and Persephone. Robbers and their victims together, leading a cheerless and meaningless existence, they are disembodied souls waiting to be reincarnated.

*House of Death –
where the senseless, burnt-out wraiths of mortals make their home.⁶*

Apart from Hades there is a scarier place called Tartarus, the light never shines there. The gods, who have been thrown down are sent to suffer in Tartarus. Homer also speaks of Elysium or the Isles of the Blest situated somewhere on earth where certain favored heroes may pass, but he never specifies who.

In ancient Greece, according to Homer, a clear picture of the underworld didn't exist. Romans adopted the general idea about Hades, Tartarus and Elysium. Virgil developed it to the smallest detail; so that even a person from the twenty-first century starts believing, against his own will, in the existence of the imaginary kingdom.

Romans supposed that a person consists of three substances – the body, the soul and the ghost. The body is burned and the ashes are kept in a jar, the soul flies into the sky and the ghost, the disembodied shadow, is sent to the underworld. Here a separation occurs – the shadows of chaste men fly away to Elysium the world of felicity.

³ Homer *Odyssey* B.11 line 129

⁴ Homer *Odyssey* B.11 line 153

⁵ Homer *Odyssey* B.11 line 614

⁶ Homer *Odyssey* B.11 line 540

*This was the company of those who suffered
Wounds in battle for their country; those
Who in their lives were holy men and chaste
Or worthy of Phoebus in prophetic song;⁷*

The shadows of criminals fly to Tartarus for torment and suffering. Every offender receives his or her own punishment, which depends on the felony they committed.

*Some heave at a great boulder, or revolve,
Spreadeagled, hung on wheel-spokes. Theseus
Cleaves to his chair and cleaves to it forever.⁸*

*If I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, a voice
Of iron, I could not tell of all the shapes
Their crimes had taken, or their punishments.⁹*

In Virgil's underworld we notice "iron" order. Suicides are found in one place, people who pined from love in another, etc... A big difference between his world of the dead and Homer's is the amount of clear details which describe the system in Hades. This difference, in my opinion, reflects the distinction of two state systems: Greek and Roman.

During that time Rome already had a well planned out state system, accurately regulated code of laws and a Court of Justice. Meanwhile in Greece during Homer's time all of the state institutions were still amorphous, not developed. Only one thing can be inferred here – the differences and the similarities that we see in the description of the underworld are determined by the differences and the similarities, which existed in life, in the understanding of the world, in the state systems of two great civilizations.

If in the center of Greek civilization and culture, as a constituent part of it, stood a human being, his soul, his thoughts and deeds, than we can see all of the above in Odysseus's trip to the dark world. He melts into tears after finding out about his mother's death, attempts to embrace her three times, grieves over the death of his companions-in-arms and worries about the destiny of his son, wife and father. Odysseus's personal feelings: the love for his son and for Penelope, the love for his motherland, his infinite curiosity and the will to find out everything about himself and the world around him – that's the main motive force in Homer's poem.

A totally different force drives Aeneas, even though he also experiences the death of father and Dido, but it doesn't affect him as much. He thinks of himself as a political figure whose mission is to establish a new State – Rome. His personal feelings are not taken in an account; only the great mission is of any importance. He leaves the woman he loves, Dido, because of that.

⁷ Virgil *Aeneid* B.6 line 883

⁸ Virgil *Aeneid* B.6 line 824

⁹ Virgil *Aeneid* B.6 line 835

In the center of the Roman culture is the State, its strength and welfare, its power and size. Rome must rule the world. The last words, which Aeneas's father delivers to him, are very symbolic:

*Let others better mold the running mass
Of metals, and inform the breathing brass,
And soften into flesh a marble face;
Plead better at the bar; describe the skies,
And when the stars descend, and when they rise.
But, Rome, 't is thine alone, with awful sway,
To rule mankind, and make the world obey,
Disposing peace and war by thy own majestic way;
To tame the proud, the fetter'd slave to free:
These are imperial arts, and worthy thee.¹⁰*

Through an analysis of the adventures of the two characters in the invented underworld, we draw conclusions about their real life, their hopes and dreams. The world of the dead represents a mirror, which reflects this real world and helps us to understand not only the characters but also the poets who wrote the two outstanding compositions, on which all of the world's literature is based.

Homer who glorifies the great value of a person and Virgil who glorifies the grandeur of the State – Rome.



¹⁰ Virgil *Aeneid* B.6 line 1230

Works Cited

Fagles, Robert. *The Odyssey*. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc. 1996

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