

Odysseus & Aeneas

If there is any possibility that a comparison could be made with the famous journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas, it must be known that Aeneas is actually a hero in search of his own soul while Odysseus is a hero trying to find his old life and in a sense, his old soul. The Aeneid is very much of a spiritual quest, which makes it unique in ancient literature and in contrast with the Odyssey. Only Virgil admits to the possibility that a character can change, grow, and develop. In the story's earlier stages, the character of Aeneas is obviously unsure of himself, always seeking instructions from his father or from the gods before committing himself to any course of action. In the underworld he sees a perspective of the future history of Rome down to the time of Augustus, and that vision gives him the self-confidence to act on his own initiative. Comparatively, Odysseus is driven though his journey beginning with apparent self-confidence and continuing with a vengeful vigor. While reviewing the myth's fantastic journey, I wondered if Aeneas was great because his fate made him great or was he great because he had the courage and determination to live up to the role fate handed him? There is a side to Aeneas, I noticed that is not very impressive, even when I could almost understand why he feels the way he does. He is sad, tired, always waiting for his father or the gods to tell him what to do. But Aeneas always fulfills his duty to his family, to his country, and to the gods, even when he is depressed. He is never selfish. He always puts his responsibility to others first. In that way, his actions throughout his journey to the underworld were somewhat different than Odysseus'. In Aeneas' case, he too was as great of a survivor as Odysseus. In fact, he at least matches him in the way that he is one of those people who can lose everything and still start all over again. Aeneas goes from being a victim of the Greeks at Troy to becoming a conqueror in Italy. Virgil's Aeneas is the first character in Western literature who actually changes and develops. His struggles help him discover who he is and what he thinks is important. If I had to name one quality that defines Aeneas throughout his journey, it is his devotion to duty, a quality that the Romans called *pietas* or piety. This quality keeps him going even when he would rather forget about his fate. Ultimately, this same quality makes him accept, even welcome, that fate. Because, when Aeneas finally realizes that all his efforts will make the glorious Roman Empire possible, his love of his family and his country are fulfilled. The result is that the Aeneas we see at the end of the Aeneid is determined, sure of himself, and confident that he knows what is right. He has become a great leader who is able to impose order on people who display more selfish and unruly emotions. Odysseus, as the classic definition of his name suggests, is truly an individual who causes great trouble. Throughout the Odyssey, there are many direct and indirect circumstances in which Odysseus wreaks havoc upon others. He leaves Troy, fights at the island of Ismaros, and witnesses the sleepy life of the Lotos Eaters. He blinds and then tricks the one-eyed cannibal, Cyclopes, the son of Poseidon. Eventually, he even buries Elpenor, one of his crew members who was killed during all this trouble. Never does he begin nor end with a lack of self confidence anywhere close to the one exhibited by Aeneas at the commencement of his journey. After his first stage of havoc, Odysseus resists the song of the Sirenes, and sails between the whirlpool and the cliff, personified by the names of Skylla and Charybdis. But his men make the mistake of eating the forbidden cattle of the sun god, Helios. So Zeus wrecks Odysseus' ship, drowning all of his men. Odysseus manages to survive Skylla and Charybdis again, and washes up at Ogygia Island where he stays eight years with Kalypso. After all that, he is still able to build a ship and set out again for Ithaka, but he becomes shipwrecked by Poseidon and swims to Scheria, where Nausikaa, King Alkinoos' daughter, finds him. Homer seems to purposely intrigue us by having other characters describe Odysseus, "He had no rivals, your father, at the tricks of war." described Nestor rather early in the story. If all of the graphically horrid events and "warrior descriptions" do not help to classify Odysseus as a troublemaker, I do not know what would! In extensive recounts of the story, his killings are graphically described in a vulgar fashion adding to his troublesome image "Did he dream of death?" Homer asks later on when Odysseus kills Antinoos. "How could he?". Antinoos' nostrils spurt blood and in his death throes he kicks over his table, knocking his meat and bread to the ground "to soak in dusty blood." It is indeed a graphic description and it exemplifies Odysseus' "pain-inducing image." Even with such stories, however, it is indeed very suitable to label Odysseus as an epic hero. He is in fact a legendary figure with more than the usual amount of brains and muscle. Sometimes throughout the stories it appears almost as though he is a superhuman. At the end of the story, with only his inexperienced son and two farm hands to help, he kills more than one hundred of Penelope's suitors. He is able to do it because he has the help of the goddess Athena. He embodies the ideals Homeric Greeks aspired to: manly valor, loyalty, piety, and intelligence. Piety means being respectful of the gods, acknowledging their control of fate and evidently, consciously knowing you need their help. Odysseus' intelligence is a mix of keen observation, instinct, and street smarts. He is extremely cautious. Also, Odysseus is good at disguises and at concealing his feelings. As is necessary for "his line of work", Odysseus is a very fast and inventive liar. In these respects, his random lack of integrity put him in sharp contrast with Aeneas and his actions on his journey.

