

Poetic Pilgrimages and *The Aeneid*

Background & Study Questions

Humanities 110, Reed College

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1. Famous Pilgrimages in Poetry

A. Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 680 B.C.)

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus must descend into Hades to learn from the ghost of Tiresias how he will reach home.

B. Virgil's *Aeneid* (c. 19 BC; overall and particularly Book 6)

1. Problem: Aeneas must found Rome, but he stalls

2. In book 6, Aeneas is transformed into a new hero capable of founding Rome. What allows for this transformation?

C. Dante, *Divine Comedy* (c. 1307)

1. Problem: the poet is fallen. How do you write in a post-lapsarian world?

2. Solution: Dante is met by the poet Virgil who conducts him through Hell to free him from the temptation of sin. Meets ghosts (largely from Roman History). On Easter morning they begin the ascent of the mountain of Purgatory to purify Dante's soul of even the capacity for error. Without Grace man can go no farther. However, in the earthly paradise, Dante meets Beatrice who represents divine revelation, and she conducts him through Paradise to God.

3. Structure: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso

4. Allegory: the progress of the soul toward God, and the progress of political and social mankind toward peace on earth.

D. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1386)

The pilgrimage is the frame for this series of poems. The poet has joined 30 others to make the usual April pilgrimage to Becket's shrine at Canterbury. Their host at a tavern proposes to come and serve as a judge in a story-telling contest to occupy the long hours of the journey. The best tale gets a free dinner. 21 characters tell the stories that follow.

E. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, prose allegory)

1. Problem: Antagonist weeps--how can he avoid the destruction of himself, his family and his town as is prophesied in the Bible?

2. *The Call*: Evangelist warns Antagonist ("Christian") to flee and tells him to journey toward the light in the distance.

3. *The Journey*: Christian flees the City of Destruction and heads towards the light, but runs into obstacles along the way: The Slough of Despond, the Hill of Difficulty, the Valley of Humiliation. Along the way he meets spiritual guides who help him find the "right path." He also meets characters who try to trick him into taking short cuts.

4. *The Solution*: eventually he finds the right road, crosses the River of Death and enters the gates of Heaven.

2. Pilgrimage and *The Aeneid*

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do people go on pilgrimages?
2. What are the problem(s) Aeneas hopes to address in his pilgrimage? What must he overcome? How will he be healed? How does the first book set up the rest of the journey? What issues does he seem to suggest he will discuss?
3. What does the first two books tell us about Aeneas and what is he doing in this poem and poem cycle?
4. Who are the ghosts that he meets in book six? What does each seem to represent? (Support your position with evidence from the poem.)
5. Knowing this is a pilgrimage, what are our expectations for the structure of the poem?