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Human-like Aeneas

According to the Joseph Campbell*,* heroism can be defined as a man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations. Though there are parallels that can be observed between the characters of Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas, each character stands out to be rightfully considered a Greek “hero” for very different reasons. Achilles is known for his great strength and fiery rage while Odysseus is known for his quick thinking and wit, yet the personality of each characters is, for the most part, unchanging. Aeneas, on the other hand, is not known for his godlike abilities yet is destined to create one of the greatest empires of all time. Aeneas stands out as a modern hero due to his emotional depth, devotion to his cause, and awareness of his own mortality through which he learns and grows as a character to complete his duty. It is through his compassion, devotion, and human qualities that we are able to see a hero worthy of the modern day title.

First and foremost Aeneas constantly exemplifies himself as a selfless and compassionate leader. Aeneas first shows his compassion for the common man early in Book 2 while recounting the tale of his escape from Troy. When the city comes under siege, Aeneas immediately dons his gear and rushes into battle to defend his city. He fights the losing battle bravely alongside his men, and after receiving a vision from Pallas telling him to flee the city, hurries to his father Anchises’ house to help his family escape with him. Anchises eventually agrees to leave, and Aeneas throws him over his shoulders leading his wife Creusa and their son through the city under siege. It is here when Aeneas suffers his first direct tragedy of the epic, the loss of his wife Creusa. In a moment of peace he realizes that she was no longer following behind them and immediately goes into a panic. “Creusa- torn from me by a brutal fate… overcome with grief I called out ‘Creusa!’ nothing, no reply, and again…” (p.100 l.916). Immediately off the bat Aeneas is exemplified to be a hero of values and devotion, both to his city and to his beloved wife. Aeneas’ compassion is shown again when he and his men stumble upon a stranger in “wretched condition” and “all but starved to death” (p.122 l.687) who we find out to be one of the unlucky members of Odysseus’ crew. He begs for mercy and, though he is technically an enemy of the Trojans, Aeneas takes pity on him and allows him to sail with his crew to Italy. This is an important decision in the spectrum of heroism because it reveals that he holds in high-regard empathy for human suffering, even in the case of a man who sacked his city. Aeneas’ compassion is what drives his actions to be virtuous, and in turn, for him to be a virtuous hero. It is made clear again that Aeneas understands and respects the harsh realities of suffering when he asks Anchises in the underworld why anyone would want to be reborn after they die. Aeneas is a hero who has witnessed many hardships first hand and carries those hardships with him on his journey to Italy.

Another important trait that distinguishes Aeneas from both Achilles and Odysseus is his unfaltering dedication to everything he does due to his acceptance of fate. He shows dedication to his family by refusing to leave without bringing them out of Troy, to his men by consistently praying for their safety, and most of all to the gods by never wavering in his duties. Throughout the journey Aeneas’ is regularly faced with challenges that he needs to overcome, but without a doubt his greatest challenge comes to him in the form of his love for Dido and the city of Carthage. After recounting his journey to the Carthaginians, Aeneas and Dido (with a little help from Juno) fall deeply in love. With Aeneas and his men safe and in good health and spirits in Carthage it seems as if his journey may come to a premature “fairytale-ending” until Mercury comes down to remind Aeneas of his destiny. Mercury scolds Aeneas for wasting time in Libya with misled hope, pleading for him to “remember Ascanius rising into his prime”, and to think beyond his own selfish desires. “Aeneas was truly overwhelmed by the vision, stunned, his hackles bristle with fear... He yearns to be gone, to desert this land he loves, thunderstruck by the warnings” (p. 137 l.46). Though torn between his personal desires and his own destiny, Aeneas again understands what is needed to be done, and though he doesn’t want to leave Dido “who means the world to him”, he knows that he must sail to Rome in order to fulfill his destiny and do right by the gods. Though it can be said that Aeneas wronged Dido by leaving her to die in grief, it is truly not of his own fault but of the gods themselves. “I set sail for Italy- all against my will” (p.140 l.451). Aeneas genuinely wants to stay in Carthage with Dido, but reluctantly understands and accepts that he cannot. Aeneas must then decide between leaving genuine happiness behind and doing his duties to the future people of Rome, to which he ultimately chooses the latter. In this sense Aeneas’ bravery is unmatched, as it is far braver to leave a life of comfort and love for one of unknown dangers and a predetermined fate. Though he wronged Dido he stays devoted to the will of the gods and to the future Romans of Italy.

Overall Aeneas can be considered a “modern” hero more so than Achilles or Odysseus because his emotions are the most human of the three “god-like” heroes. His humanity sets him apart and distinguishes him as a hero of the modern day because unlike Achilles and Odysseus, Aeneas is revealed to be sentient and more emotionally developed from the start of the epic. The Aeneid begins with Aeneas and his crew caught in a deadly storm, to which Aeneas throws his hands up to the sky and cries out “Three, four times blest, my comrades lucky to die beneath the soaring walls of Troy- before their parents’ eyes! If only I’d gone down under your right hand- Diomedes, strongest Greek afield- and poured out my life on the battlegrounds of Troy” (p.50 l.112). Aeneas is introduced in a dire situation, yet instead of taking action or cursing the gods as you would expect Achilles or Odysseus to do, Aeneas is hopeless and longs for a merciful death. This is a surprising transition from the classic definition of a hero with purpose to a hero who is scared with a very mortal perspective on life. Not only this, but through his interactions with his father in Troy and his men along his journey he is illustrated to be a wholesome and caring individual. Aeneas struggles emotionally again with the loss of his loves, Creusa in Troy and Dido in Carthage. Simply because he leaves Dido to a terrible fate is not to say that he does not feel guilt for her death. Aeneas weeps as he approaches the ghost of Dido in the Underworld, telling her, “I swear by the stars, by the Powers on high, whatever faith one swears by here in the depths of earth, I left your shores against my will… Nor did I ever dream my leaving could have brought you so much grief” (p.197 l.528). Both of these moments help to establish an understanding that Aeneas’ heroic value will be evaluated not only through his physical strength but by an inner struggle with himself as well.

More than anything Aeneas has a depth of character that is not found in Achilles or Odysseus. Aeneas is doggedly loyal to his people, family, and the gods, and though at times he is reluctant to proceed, he acts out of duty and is self-aware of the ramifications of his actions. He fears and loves, yet struggles between his internal desires and his duty bound by fate. He is able to accept his destiny even if it means sacrificing his own happiness, and his willingness to do so proves him worthy of being a hero. While Achilles and Odysseus seem to be simply the manifestations of one or two basic traits, Aeneas is a complex individual with hopes and desires contradictory to his destiny. It is with these controversial feelings that he struggles, and it is in this struggle we are able to see a hero who is very human in emotion. Aeneas is a hero who struggles with both external challenges and inner confliction that defines him as both a hero of ancient Greece and a hero of the modern day.