

How do the great epics of Greek and Roman antiquity – the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* – strike the modern reader?

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Receptive aesthetics of today, which allows the reader to take the role of an interpreter, has totally demolished the notion that antique literature should be remote from us, as if it were from another planet, written for an alien race of beings. If, however, a perceptive and intelligent modern reader feels that episodes such as the Trojan War, Ulysses returning home from the cruelties of the war or the eventful flight of Aeneas and his fellow refugees in search of the promised land, reflect current issues better than modern literature, what else can a researcher do than to listen to his arguments and offer him further information to enrich his reading experience? Here it is appropriate to quote T. S. Eliot, according to whom the episode of the *Aeneid* which presents the encounter of Aeneas and the shade of Dido in the Underworld is “one of the most poignant” and at the same time “one of the most civilized passages in poetry”, because Virgil transfers the events to the realm of human consciousness and conscience. This is the viewpoint from which this lecture introduces the famous epics of classical antiquity; in other words, it tends to reveal the most essential features in them and to point out the highlights. *Kalevala*, the great epic of the Finns, has been chosen to provide appropriate reference material.

The foundation of our culture is in ancient Greece, but it did not become a legacy until the Romans managed to transfer it, in all its scope, as a system of forms and values, from one society to another and from one language to another – from Athens to Rome, from Greek to Latin – and gave it the form which later nations – each in their own way – were able to adopt.