

Sienkiewicz for beginners

Joanna Bossowska

After having dealt successfully with several issues regarding 'PanTadeusz' at my Polish class using the CLIL method, I felt encouraged to go for yet another set book assigned for year 8 of primary school – 'Quo Vadis'. These two monumental obligatory readings have always been a real challenge for both teachers and students. Trying to convey the value of these books, so complex in the aspect of the language and the text, must undoubtedly be an uneasy task in the native language, let alone English. Nevertheless, with strong classes, it may just be possible. Naturally, I had to focus on very few issues and tasks to cover in the course of one lesson. The complexity of this historical novel demands from a teacher a great deal of work beforehand and strenuous labour during the analysis. Bearing in mind that not every student trudged through the novel, one must try and find some kind of way of approaching it in order to achieve some of the curricular objectives. Year 8 students are already familiar with the author's 'In Desert and Wilderness' and a short story 'The Lighthouse Keeper'.



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1 The author's short profile. Gap filling exercise.

novelist	'Quo Vadis'	trilogy
Wola Okrzejska	Nero	Nobel
the Lighthouse Keeper	Nel Rawlison	Rome

Henryk Sienkiewicz was born in 1846 in _____. Polish _____ and winner of the _____ Prize for literature in 1905. Sienkiewicz's great _____ of historical novels comprises 'With Fire and Sword', 'The Deluge' and 'Pan Wolodyjowski'. His travels to America and California provided him with material for a short story _____. His last novel and the only one written for children, tells the story of two young friends Staś Tarnowski and _____. However, he is best known for his monumental historic epic _____ that portrays the decadence of _____ Empire, the reign of the Emperor _____ and of the emerging era of early Christianity. He died in 1916 in Switzerland.

2 The origin of the title.

I begin with a presentation of the painting by Henryk Siemiradzki 'Neron's Torches'. It depicts a group of early Christians who are about to be burned alive as responsible for the Great Fire of Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero in 64 AD. The painter was a good friend of Sienkiewicz's and both were fascinated by the antique culture and early-Christian themes. Many 19th century artists looked for the inspiration for their oeuvres in the antique world. While visiting Italy, they came across an intriguing inscription in one of the little churches: 'Quo vadis, Domine?'. Saint Peter the Apostle, as told in the New Testament, fleeing from barbarous Rome, asked Christ: 'Lord, where are you going?' He replied that he was going to Rome to be crucified a second time. That made Peter turn back and follow Christ.



Nero's Torches painting by the Polish artist Henryk Siemiradzki

The questions to follow:

- ① *What inspired Sienkiewicz to base his novel on the antique culture?*
- ② *What do the words in the title mean?*
- ③ *What does the painting by Siemiradzki represent?*

③ *The facts and the fiction in the novel.*

Sienkiewicz studied ancient history extensively before writing the novel and knew Tacitus – a Roman historian and politician, almost by heart. As a whole, the novel discusses universal values and the victory of the spirit over the tyranny of a pagan world and carries a pro-Christian message. The main thread contrasts early Christianity with the declining pagan Rome at the time of Nero's rule and the time of persecution of early Christians. The author joined the historical and fictional threads. The love story developed between a young Christian Lygia and a Roman officer Marcus Vinicius hides an underlying religious plot. The two worlds of totally different values, principles and religions clash in dramatic circumstances and mark the end of the era of the Nero's Empire.



Historic manor house and museum of Henryk Sienkiewicz, in Oblegorek, Poland.

Task 1

Decide if the following events are fiction or fact:

- ① *Nero rules Rome from AD 54 until 68.*
- ② *Persecutions of early Christians.*
- ③ *Vinicius falls in love with Lygia.*
- ④ *Seneca at the Nero's palace.*
- ⑤ *Ursus saves Lygia.*
- ⑥ *Saint Peter arrives in Rome.*
- ⑦ *Petronius as arbiter elegantierum – the oracle of good taste.*
- ⑧ *The Great Fire of Rome.*
- ⑨ *Vinicius converts into Christianity.*
- ⑩ *Nero kills his first wife, mother and his half-brother.*

Task 2

Divide the values and ways of living between Pagans and Christians:

superficial faith in many Gods, love of beauty, modest life, pride, deep faith in one God, love

of art and philosophy, love of fellow human being, revenge and violence, care of temporal matters, forgiving of wrongdoing, no fear of death, contempt for poor people, respect of human's life, numerous amusements and lack of restraints, belief in eternal life, fear of death, goodwill, charity, lack of respect for human's life.

'Quo Vadis' in the US was the most popular book of 1898. On the wave of its great popularity, the Swedish Academy awarded Sienkiewicz a Nobel Prize for 'his outstanding merits as an epic writer, and not for this particular novel. However, he would probably not have won it without 'Quo Vadis'.

With this Polish-English lesson I might have just made a bow towards the author who in 1898 wrote to his America translator Jeremiah Curtin: *All I can tell you is that I am feeling so well here that if I were given a promise of eternal life I wouldn't spend it anywhere but here.*

Answers (Task 1): fact: 1-2, 4, 6-8, 10; fiction: 3, 5, 9.