

**Lucius Annaeus Seneca, 4BC–65AD.**  
Seneca the Younger or simply Seneca

Born: 4 B.C., Córdoba (Cordova), Hispania (Spain).  
Died: 65 A.D., Pompey or Rome, Italy.

Roman philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and in one work humorist, of the Silver Age of Latin literature. Seneca was the second of three sons of Helvia and Marcus Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Elder), a wealthy rhetorician. Seneca's older brother, Gallio became proconsul at Achaia, where he encountered the apostle Paul about AD 52. Seneca was uncle to the poet Lucan by his younger brother Annaeus Mela.

Seneca was taken to Rome for schooling. A sickly child, he spent his childhood in Rome being nursed by an aunt, who later helped launch his official career. Seneca was trained in rhetoric and was introduced into the Stoic philosophy by Attalos and Sotion. Due to his illness, Seneca stayed in Egypt for treatment, from 25-31 AD.

After his return, he established a successful career as an advocate (lawyer) and became rather wealthy. Around 37 AD, he was nearly killed as a result of a conflict with the Emperor Caligula who only spared him because he believed the sickly Seneca would not live long anyway. In 41 AD, Messalina, wife of the Emperor Claudius, persuaded Claudius to have Seneca banished to Corsica on a charge of adultery with Julia Livilla. He spent his exile in philosophical and natural study and wrote the Consolations.

In 49 AD, Claudius' new wife Agrippina had Seneca recalled to Rome to tutor her son who was to become the emperor Nero. On Claudius' death in 54 AD, Agrippina secured the recognition of Nero as emperor over Claudius' son, Britannicus. For the first five years, Nero ruled wisely under the influence of Seneca and the praetorian prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus. But before long, Seneca and Burrus had lost their influence over Nero, and his reign became tyrannical. With the death of Burrus in 62 AD, Seneca retired and devoted his time to more study and writing. When false rumors convinced Nero that Seneca was a member of a plot to assassinate him, Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide.

In 65 AD, Seneca was accused of being involved in the Pisonian conspiracy, a plot to kill Nero. Without a trial, Seneca was ordered by Nero to commit suicide. Tacitus gives an account of the suicide of Seneca in his book, the Annals, in Book XV, Chapters 60 through 64. Seneca's wife, Pompeia Paulina, intended to commit suicide after but was forbidden to do so by Nero. She attempted suicide by cutting her wrists, but the wounds were bound up, and she did not make a second attempt. Unfortunately for Seneca, who also chose to cut his wrists, his diet caused the blood to flow slowly, thus causing pain instead of a quick death. He took poison given to him by a friend, but it didn't work. He dictated to a scribe, and then jumped into a hot pool. He did not try to drown, but instead, it appears, tried to make the blood flow faster. Tacitus wrote in his Annals of Imperial Rome that Seneca died from suffocation from the steam rising from the pool.

Seneca's stoicism tells us that the highest good is Virtue. One should strive to 'do the right thing' and be indifferent toward everything else. Seneca proposes that there is a god within each and every person to guide him along the path that Providence has laid for him. True happiness means being in accord with one's own nature and following this inner guide and being content with one's lot in life. Seneca exclaims the Oneness of all Gods. He advises us to care for humanity and to live a simple life.

All this, says Epicurus, we are to ascribe to Nature. And why not to God, I beseech you? as if they were not both of them one and the same power, working in the whole, and in every part of it. Or, if you call him the Almighty Jupiter; the thunderer; the Creator and Preserver of us all; it comes to the same issue; some will express him under the notion of Fate; which is only a connection of causes, and himself the uppermost and original, upon which all the rest depend. The Stoics represent the several functions of the Almighty Power under several appellations. When they speak of him as the father and the fountain of all beings, they call him Bacchus, and under the name Hercules, they denote him to be indefatigable and invincible; and in the contemplation of him in the reason, order, proportion, and wisdom of his proceedings, they call him Mercury; so that which way soever they look, and under what name soever they couch their meaning, they never fail of finding him; for he is every where, and fills his own work. If a man should borrow money of Seneca, and say that he owes it to Annaeus or Lucius, he may change the name but not his creditor; for let him take which of the three names he pleases, he is still a debtor to the same person. As justice, integrity, prudence, frugality, fortitude, are all of them goods of one and the same mind, so that which soever of them pleases us, we cannot distinctly say that it is this or that, but the mind.

Seneca wrote mainly three types of works. He wrote essays on Stoic philosophy and beliefs. He wrote letters or epistles to give philosophical advice to his friends. And he wrote intense, violent plays which focused on Stoic belief that disaster results from passion destroying reason.

Works attributed to Seneca include a satire, a meteorological essay, philosophical essays, 124 letters dealing with moral issues, and nine tragedies. One of the tragedies attributed to him, *Octavia*, was clearly not written by him. He even appears as a character in the play. His authorship of another, *Hercules on Oeta*, is doubtful. Seneca's brand of Stoic philosophy emphasized practical steps by which the reader might confront life's problems. In particular, he considered it important to confront the fact of one's own mortality. The discussion of how to approach death dominates many of his letters.

The dating of his tragedies is problematic in the absence of any ancient references. A relative chronology has been suggested on metrical grounds but scholars remain divided. It is inconceivable that they were written in the same year. They are not based on Greek tragedies, they have a five act form and differ in many respects from extant Attic drama, and whilst the influence of Euripides on some of these works is considerable, so is the influence of Virgil and Ovid. The tragedies of Seneca have been successfully staged in modern times. Seneca the younger also makes an appearance as a character in Monteverdi's opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.

Seneca's plays were widely read in medieval and Renaissance European universities so they strongly influenced tragic drama in that time, such as Elizabethan England (Shakespeare and other playwrights), France (Corneille and Racine) and the Netherlands (Joost van den Vondel). Many scholars have thought, following the ideas of the nineteenth century German scholar Leo, that Seneca's tragedies were written for recitation only. Other scholars think that they were written for performance and that it is possible that actual performance had taken place in Seneca's life time (1). Ultimately, this issue is not capable of resolution on the basis of existing knowledge.

Medieval writers and works (such as the Golden Legend, which erroneously has Nero as a witness to his suicide) believed that Seneca had been converted to the Christian faith by Saint Paul, and early humanists regarded his fatal bath as a kind of disguised baptism. Dante, nevertheless, placed Seneca in the First Circle of Hell, or Limbo, a place of perfect natural happiness where good non-Christians like the ancient philosophers had to stay for eternity, due to their lack of the justifying grace (given only by Christ) required to go to heaven.

#### The Epistles

Epistle On God In Man.

Epistle On Friendship.

Epistle On Moderation.

Of A Happy Life, 22 chapters.

Of Benefits, Unity of Godhead

#### Tragedies

*Hercules Furens* (The Madness of Hercules)

*Troades* (The Trojan Women)

*Phoenissae* (The Phoenician Women)

*Phaedra*

*Medea*, contains *Ultima Thule* in Act II, Scene 2, line 371 of Seneca's 1,057 line poem.

*Thyestes*

*Agamemnon*

*Oedipus*

*Hercules Oetaeus* (*Hercules on Oeta*), was probably written by a follower.

*Octavia*, was probably written by a follower.

#### Dialogues

*Ad Marciam*, *De consolatione* (To Marcia, On consolation)

*De Ira* (On anger)

*Ad Helviam matrem*, *De consolatione* (To Helvia, On consolation)

Letter to his mother consoling her in his absence during exile.

*De Consolatione ad Polybium* (To Polybius, On consolation)

*De Brevitate Vitae* (On the shortness of life)

Essay expounding that any length of life is sufficient if lived wisely.

*De Otio* (On leisure)

*De Tranquillitate Animi* (On tranquillity of mind)

*De Providentia* (On providence)

*De Constantia Sipientiis* (On the Firmness of the Wise Person)

*De Vita Beata* (On the happy life)

## Other Works

Apocolocyntosis divi Claudii (The Pumpkinification of the Divine Claudius), a satirical work.

References to Nero as having a longer life than Nestor at the hands of the three fates - obvious flattery.

De Clementia (On Clemency)

Written to Nero on the need for clemency as a virtue in an emperor.

De Beneficiis (On Benefits), seven books

Naturales quaestiones, seven books

Insight into ancient theories of cosmology, meteorology, and similar subjects.

Epistulae morales ad Lucilium, collection of 124 letters

Dealing with moral issues written to Lucilius.

Cujus etiam ad Paulum apostolum leguntur epistolae, letters

Allegedly between Seneca and St. Paul, revered by early authorities, currently not believed to be authentic.

1) George W.M. Harrison, editor. Seneca in performance. (London: Duckworth, 2000.)