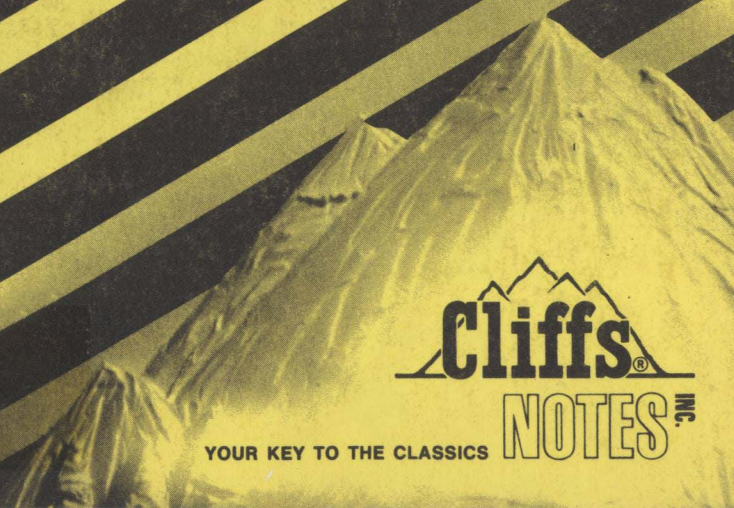


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THE AENEID

INTRODUCTION

The *Aeneid* of Virgil is probably the single most important poem to have been written in the history of western civilization. For almost 2,000 years it has continuously held its central place in the hearts and minds of its readers, and has offered guidance and inspiration to untold numbers of people. No other literary work, with the possible exception of the Bible, has had such a lasting and noble influence on so many generations of writers and thinkers, leaders of society, and common people in all walks of life.

Reading and understanding the *Aeneid* is one of the richest opportunities that can be offered to any student. From this book one is able to learn much about what beauty in literature is and to gain a fuller understanding of the meaning of human life.

The *Aeneid* is not an easy book, but, after all, no treasure is easy to uncover. That which is achieved with effort is what is most appreciated. Read this outline and the supplementary essays in order to familiarize yourself with the poem, its characters, and its place in history. When you have learned what this outline can offer, then go on to the *Aeneid* and meet face-to-face with Virgil, one of the most adroit literary craftsmen and profound thinkers who has ever lived. Read the *Aeneid* thoroughly and carefully, giving it the attention it deserves. Upon completing the poem, a review of this outline may help you to understand the *Aeneid* more fully and will offer suggestions about further study on your own.

VIRGIL'S LIFE AND WORKS

Publius Vergilius Maro, now known to the world as Virgil, was born on October 15, 70 B.C., in a small village in the north of Italy, near the city of Mantua. Virgil's parents recognized the great intelligence of their son, and he was given all the benefits of a good

education. He attended schools at Cremona and Milan and eventually, in 55 B.C., went to Rome, where he studied rhetoric and law. Upon completing his training he pleaded his first case in a Roman courtroom and, realizing that a career in law was not suitable for him, retired to the country again.

Virgil was a shy and unassuming young man, constantly bothered by poor health. For the next few years he devoted himself to the study of philosophy and literature. One of his most influential teachers was the Epicurean philosopher Siro, who conducted an academy at Naples. During this period, Virgil made several friends who were later to be of great importance in Roman political and intellectual life. Among these were the poet Asinius Pollo, Cornelius Gallus, and Octavius, the nephew of Julius Caesar.

In the years 43-37 B.C., Virgil composed his first major work, a collection of ten poems known as the *Eclogues* ("Select Pieces") or *Bucolics* ("Pastoral Poems"). These works were, to a degree, imitations of the works of Theocritus, a Sicilian Greek of the 4th century B.C., but they were far superior to their models. The beauty and richness of Virgil's poetry, as well as the sincere and deep affection for nature which they demonstrated, rapidly gained him a considerable place in the Roman literary world.

Virgil continued to devote himself to a life of quiet contemplation, spending most of his time away from the excitement of life in the city. His powerful friends encouraged him in his career and often assisted him. For example, when his estate was confiscated by the government in 41 B.C., they were able to provide him with another in the same vicinity. They also gave him a fine house in Rome, to be used during his rare visits to the metropolis, and their generosity supplied his means of support. Because of ill health, Virgil spent much of his time in Naples and it was there, in 30 B.C., that his didactic poem, the *Georgics* ("On Agriculture") was published. This work was a unique masterpiece which, in four books of superb poetry, presented a complete handbook of Italian agriculture and agricultural methods. It was, at one time, an accurate manual and an esthetic triumph, which gained much popularity among the reading public. Virgil's praise of rural life was pleasing

to the government, for official policy favored encouragement and subsidy of the small farmer.

In 27 B.C., Octavius, the old friend of Virgil, became the first Roman emperor, adopting the name of Augustus. Through his minister Maecenas, he became an active patron of Virgil and several other writers. Virgil became, in a sense, a court poet, although he always retained his independence of thought and expression. Augustus continually urged his friend on to greater heights of achievement. It was the emperor's suggestion that made Virgil first consider writing an epic about the Roman Empire, and he soon began to work at this poem with intense dedication and enthusiasm. The royal family followed his progress with great interest and all Rome eagerly awaited its publication.

The composition of the rough draft of the *Aeneid* lasted eleven years. Virgil planned a three-year trip to Greece and Asia, during which he intended to finish and polish the work. Unfortunately, he became seriously ill on the first stage of his journey and died on his return to Italy, on September 21, 19 B.C. In his will he asked his executors to destroy the uncompleted epic, but Augustus would not allow this. Two poets and friends of Virgil were assigned by the emperor to edit the manuscript and prepare it for publication. They were sternly instructed to remove all that was superfluous or redundant, but under no means to make any additions. The *Aeneid* was published shortly after this and was immediately acclaimed by its readers as a masterpiece.

VIRGIL'S LITERARY PREDECESSORS

Although Virgil lived and wrote nearly two thousand years ago, he was the heir of a literary and cultural tradition which was many centuries old. Virgil was a master of his art and a great creative genius, but it is both understandable and natural that the form and content of his epic poem should have been affected by the works of many other writers.

The foremost influence upon Virgil was Homer, the Greek poet who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. By Virgil's time,

Homer was generally acknowledged as the greatest of all poets. Virgil was obligated to study the Homeric works in order to develop his own artistic techniques and to learn the nature of epic poetry. In writing the *Aeneid*, Virgil was in conscious competition with Homer, for he was composing what he hoped would become the national poem of the Roman people, just as the Homeric epics were of such special significance to the Greeks.

Virgil derived from Homer many of the technical characteristics of the *Aeneid*, such as the use of hexameter verse, the duodecimal division into books, the use of epithets, and so forth. He also strove to duplicate many of the famous episodes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in order to surpass Homer and to demonstrate that the Latin language was as well adapted to poetry as was the Greek. It is easy to notice the relationship of such incidents as the duel between Aeneas and Turnus and that between Achilles and Hector, as well as the divine armor of Aeneas and Achilles, the funeral games of Anchises and Patroclus, and a host of other events.

Homer and Virgil vary greatly in the details of their styles, as well as in their attitudes toward the world. The Homeric epics are works in praise of the greatness and nobility of rugged individualism, whereas the *Aeneid* preaches the precedence that organized society and the state must have over individuals in order for men to achieve happiness and the good life. There is much to commend both attitudes, and both poets express their views in works of great beauty. It is most important to remember that had Virgil not known the Homeric epics, the *Aeneid*, if it were written at all, would have had a much different form and style. It is to Virgil's credit that he made use of Homer in composing the *Aeneid*, for it demonstrates his sensitive and intelligent understanding of his poetic heritage. The genius of Virgil is proved by the fact that the *Aeneid* is an original and creative poem of great worth, rather than a slavish Homeric imitation.

In the centuries that immediately followed the time of Homer, a number of epics of little quality were written which supplemented the information in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These poems satisfied the curiosity of readers by describing the events of the

Trojan War before and after the period covered by the *Iliad*, and by recounting the additional adventures of other heroes besides Odysseus. Because they dealt with the "Trojan Mythological Cycle," these poems are known as the *Cyclic Epics*. None of them survive today, except in fragments, but scholars have a fairly good idea of their contents. The *Cyclic Epics* provided Virgil with a wealth of mythological material which he incorporated into the *Aeneid*, in order to enrich his tale. The most important portions of the *Aeneid* to be drawn from these minor poems are the stories of the Wooden Horse and the Sack of Troy which are retold so dramatically in Book II.

The favorite source of plots of the Greek tragedians who wrote in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. was their mythological heritage and, naturally, the Trojan War was a major part of this. Many playwrights dealt with incidents drawn from Homer or the Cyclic poets, and Virgil, being a scholar as well as an artist, was familiar with their works. The plays of Euripides, in particular, seem to have influenced him, for Virgil possesses the same humanistic outlook and horror of war that the Greek dramatist was renowned for.

By the 3rd century B.C., the center of Hellenic culture and scholarship had moved from mainland Greece to the city of Alexandria in Egypt. Here a school of poetry developed which is mainly noted for its love of learning, decoration, and stylistic polish. Virgil and many of his Roman compatriots were deeply and permanently influenced by the methods of this group. One of the most important poets of the period was Apollonius of Rhodes, who composed an epic in four books entitled the *Argonautica*, concerning the Quest for the Golden Fleece. A comparison of the romance of Jason and Medea in the *Argonautica* with that of Aeneas and Dido in the *Aeneid*, as well as the treatment of the gods in both poems, clearly indicates the debt of Virgil to Apollonius.

It is obvious that Virgil, like most Romans, was subject to the influence of Greek culture. Nonetheless, he wrote in the Latin language and was the product of a Roman environment. The education of Virgil, like that of all well-off Romans, was predominantly Greek, but Rome had its own long and fruitful literary history, and

he was familiar with this also. Among the Roman writers, Virgil learned most from Ennius, an epic poet of the 2nd century B.C. who composed the *Annales*, a poem tracing the history of Rome from Aeneas to his own time; Lucretius, a poet of the early 1st century B.C., who wrote a philosophical epic, *On the Nature of Things*, from which Virgil derived many of his own philosophical ideas; and Catullus, a lyric poet who lived in Julius Caesar's time. It is interesting to note that each of these writers was himself under the influence of Greek models, just as Virgil was.

Discovering the many sources from which Virgil drew ideas in no way lessens the magnitude of his achievement. Every human being lives and works within a vast and complicated cultural and social framework. No intelligent person can avoid the stimulus of this inheritance and only the most egotistical or crude would try to ignore the aid that the many generations of his ancestors can offer him. Virgil was a student of his predecessors, but he was no imitator. He reshaped, unified, and gave new meaning to that which he borrowed. His genius is shown by the beauty and originality of the work which he eventually composed: the poem which has since become the literary justification and explanation of the Roman Empire to the entire world.

INFLUENCE AND LATER REPUTATION OF VIRGIL

Despite certain minor faults caused by the unfinished state of the poem at the death of Virgil, the *Aeneid* was quickly accepted by the Roman public as their national epic. Throughout the remaining centuries of the empire, the poem was constantly studied, admired, and imitated and was used, also, as a standard textbook in all the schools. Later Roman writers and critics, from Horace and Petronius onward, generally considered Virgil to have been the greatest Latin poet.

As Christianity spread through the civilized world, most pagan Greek and Roman literature was dropped by the wayside, admired only by a few antiquarians and religious nonconformists. Virgil's

work, however, continued to maintain its major position. This was partly because the ideal which is one of the central themes of the *Aeneid*, all civilization united in a single state under the rule of law, was not too far removed from some of the ideas of the Universal Church. But there was another, more significant reason. In his fourth *Eclogue*, a mystical and lyrical poem, Virgil had predicted the birth of a child, in whose lifetime a new Golden Age would be conferred upon humanity. It now seems likely that Virgil intended, in his poem, to compliment the Emperor Augustus, but many Christians of the period read this as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. In their study of Virgil's works, they discovered some similarities between his thought and that of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. It was decided that the poet was one of those few virtuous pagans who had been rewarded with a foreknowledge of the messianic age. From the time that these conclusions were drawn, Virgil's poetry gained an air of religious sanctity. They were safely preserved during the barbarian incursions which caused the downfall of the empire and were revered equally with the Bible and other Christian writings.

By the Middle Ages, Virgil's legend had gained fantastic proportions. Among literary people he was still praised as the greatest of poets and his works were, of course, the most important models for new composition. Dante, for instance, in his *Divine Comedy* praised Virgil as the "master" from whom he had derived all his skill and art, and Virgil served as his guide through Hell and Purgatory. In the less educated tradition, however, Virgil's reputation as the "virtuous pagan" had continued to expand. He was reputed to have been a great magician and enchanter, the embodiment of all earthly wisdom, and a worker of miracles. His poems were used, along with the Bible, as a means of telling fortunes and predicting the future and, in Italy, prayers were offered to him at his tomb.

In the Renaissance much other Greek and Roman literature was rediscovered and studied, but the *Aeneid* retained its pre-eminence. Chaucer regarded Virgil as the perfect teacher, whom all poets should respect and emulate and most other writers the time tried to model themselves on Virgil and to rival his works.

In the years that have followed, the *Aeneid* and Virgil have continued to hold a central place in European literature. Virgil's work has managed to have an almost universal appeal and every age has found in it many ideas and perceptions on the nature of man and his relation to the universe that have seemed contemporary in their value. Despite the many changes of all kinds that have occurred since Virgil's lifetime, two thousand years ago, the *Aeneid* has always provided comfort and guidance to many people. Since human problems and needs do not change radically from generation to generation, it seems likely that Virgil and his *Aeneid* will never be forgotten.

VIRGIL'S STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

LITERARY EPIC

Unlike the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* which are "oral" epics, the *Aeneid* is a "literary" epic, for it is the product of a settled, highly civilized society, composed in writing, and intended to be read by an audience of literate, cultivated people. All epic poetry has a serious theme narrated on the grand scale and is intended to heighten understanding of human nature and the meaning of life, but there are many technical differences between the two forms of epic and in literary epic the ideological content tends to be more important than the human story itself. Comparison of the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, for example, shows that literary epic is less stark than oral, that it is more sentimental and didactic, has a more sophisticated poetic style, and subordinates its human characters and their affairs to its philosophical and moral theme. Poems like the *Iliad*, because composed and recited orally, often repeat speeches and episodes, but in literary epic the poet always seeks to achieve novelty and originality so there is no such repetition. Moreover, while oral epics are usually narrated in a simple, realistic, and objective manner, literary epic uses many elaborate subjective devices, such as symbolism and suggestive words or phrases, allegory, and allusions to other poetic or philosophical literature, and in general is more studied and precise than the spontaneous, loosely organized oral epic.

Most important, there is a great distinction between the purposes of oral and literary epic, and this has a profound effect on the contents of the poems and the ways in which the poet allows his story to develop. Oral epic was intended primarily to provide diversion and entertainment, although it also embodied much of the history and folk-wisdom of the culture in which it was created. It is true that the *Iliad*, for example, has a serious theme with many important moral lessons, but these are only a by-product of the story of Achilles, and the story is the main reason for the poem's existence. Thus oral epics are usually noted for their spontaneity and humor, and their heroes, like Achilles and Odysseus, have sharply defined, consistent personalities and seem always to have complete freedom of action as literary characters. This makes them more believable in human terms and more admirable from the critical point of view.

Literary epic, on the other hand, always has a serious didactic purpose, and this is always foremost in the poet's mind when he composes his work. Such poems as the *Aeneid* are intended to communicate a serious philosophical, moral, and patriotic message. The narrative story of the poem is always subordinated to this message and colored by its requirements. Because of this, literary epics often have a higher degree of unity and coherence than oral works, derived from their rich intellectual content, but their human characters are less believable and often less admirable in human terms, for they lack many important human qualities and are not free agents. Needless to say, literary epic also provides entertainment and diversion, especially because of its highly ornamental and beautiful form, but this is only because the poet, who is also a propagandist, has chosen to present his moral lessons in a pleasant package. To the poet and his readers, the underlying theme of the poem is its main element.

Oral and literary epic are very different art forms. Each has its own unique purpose and is the product of a unique social and cultural environment. It would be foolish and unfair to claim that one is absolutely superior or inferior to the other, since their techniques and purposes are so different. It is enough to point out that the best poems of each class, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, are counted among the finest works of poetry ever written.

INFLUENCE OF HOMER ON VIRGIL

Because of the undisputed position of leadership in epic poetry held by Homer, many of the techniques and devices used by him in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were adopted by later Greek and Roman epic poets. By Virgil's time, epic poetry had developed many formal conventions, most of which had their origin in the Homeric poems. Moreover, since Greek culture and literature had come to dominate Roman life, Virgil felt constrained to emulate Homer, partly because he consciously hoped to rival and surpass the great master. Thus, for all these reasons, the *Aeneid* contains many poetic devices and many episodes patterned after those found in the Homeric epics.

Among the formal conventions derived from Homer which were adhered to by Virgil are: the formal invocation to the muse at the opening of the poem, the technique of starting the poem *in medias res*, the use of divine intervention at various points in the story to emphasize certain trends or developments, the use of long, rhetorical speeches, the use of extended similes, the use of the dactylic hexameter, and the division into twelve books.

In addition, many episodes from the Homeric poems are adopted in the *Aeneid*, although they were transformed by Virgil in the process. Roughly speaking, the first six books of the *Aeneid*, recounting the wanderings of Aeneas, are patterned after the *Odyssey* and include such originally Homeric incidents as: the descent of Aeneas into Hades (Book VI), the shipwreck (Book I), the tale told by the hero at a banquet (Books I, II, III). The last six books of the *Aeneid*, telling about the settlement of the Trojans in Italy and the wars with the Italian tribes, are modeled on the *Iliad*, containing such Homeric episodes as: the catalogue of chieftains (Book VII), the divine armor (Book VIII), and the climactic duel between the two heroes (Book XII).

As is discussed elsewhere ("Virgil's Literary Predecessors," page 7), Virgil was also influenced by other Greek and Roman writers. It should be emphasized, however, that Virgil's poem is an original work of considerable merit. Comparison of his

poem with the works of those who influenced him only serves to underscore his poetic skill and originality.

METER

The meter traditionally used by the Greeks for epic poetry was the dactylic hexameter. When Romans began to write epic poetry they also composed their verse in this meter, under the influence of their Greek models. But the rhythm and mood of the Latin language is very different from that of the Greek. The earliest Roman epic poets had great difficulty with the hexameter. Because of their arbitrary selection of a meter that was not native to their language, much of their poetry was awkward and clumsy in its execution. In the hands of Virgil, though, the hexameter finally became a smooth and fluent meter in Latin, thanks to the great skill and inventiveness with which he applied it. Nonetheless, even in the *Aeneid* there are many points where Virgil too was forced or artificial in his use of words because of the unsuitability of Latin for the hexameter. Despite this, however, it is generally held that Virgil's use of the hexameter is of a quality comparable to that of Homer, and this is no faint praise.

There are six metrical feet in each verse of the hexameter. The first five feet may consist of a dactyl (a long and two short sounds, — ∪ ∪) or a spondee (two long sounds, — —), but the last foot of each line must always be a spondee. The number of syllables to a line may vary from a minimum of twelve to a maximum of seventeen, but the structure of each line is always built on a combination of these two metrical forms.

EPITHETS

In Homeric epic poetry, epithets (defined as "metrically necessary extra words") were often used to help fill out a line to the required number of stresses and accents without altering its meaning. They also served as an important aid in concise characterization or description and often provided interesting effects of contrast or irony. Epithets are less frequently used in the *Aeneid*, but usually appear, when they do, for the same reasons. A typical Virgilian

epithet is this one, often applied to the poem's hero, "Aeneas the true."

SIMILES

A simile is a poetic comparison of an individual, thing, or event to something else of greater familiarity to an audience in order to clarify its meaning or significance. The simile is the most prevalent form of imagery used in the *Iliad* and is also used extensively in the *Aeneid*. Virgil's similes are often quite long and lyrical, and often have a more ornamental than functional purpose. They are drawn from nature, politics, literature, mythology, and all other phases of life. A typical Virgilian simile is this one, by use of which Aeneas describes the burning of Troy to Dido and the Carthaginian nobles (Book II):

And the truth all Ilium was now, visibly before me, settling into the fires, and Neptune's own Troy, uprooted, was overturning; like an ancient rowan-tree, high up among the mountains, which hacked with stroke after stroke of iron axes by farmers vying all round to dislodge it, begins to tremble and continues threatening while the crest shakes and the high boughs sway, till gradually vanquished it gives a final groan, and at last overcome by the wounds and wrenched from its place it trails havoc down the mountain-side.

(trans. W. F. Jackson Knight)

THE THEME OF THE *AENEID*

The *Aeneid* is not a personal epic about Aeneas, but a national epic, a glorification and exaltation of Rome and the destiny of the Roman people. The poem is not really concerned with the life and adventures of its hero, Aeneas, but with the part he played in founding the Roman state and with the way in which he embodies the most important Roman personal qualities and attributes, particularly the Roman sense of duty and responsibility, for these are what Virgil thought of as having built the Rome he loved. As a thinker, Virgil has a spiritualized, idealistic, and aspiring conception of