



# Virgil's *Aeneid*

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
by Samuel Johnson



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# QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Aeneid</i> . Virgil. Robert Fagles, trans. ISBN: 978-0143105138
<i>Plot</i>	Trojan warrior Aeneas flees the burning city of Troy and journeys with other refugees to establish a new homeland on the coast of Italy.
<i>Setting</i>	Troy Carthage Latium The Mediterranean Sea The Underworld
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aeneas</li> <li>• Venus, Aeneas's goddess mother</li> <li>• Anchises, Aeneas's father</li> <li>• Ascanius, Aeneas's son</li> <li>• Dido, queen of Carthage and Aeneas's lover</li> <li>• King Latinus, ruler of Latium</li> <li>• Lavinia, daughter of Latinus</li> <li>• Amata, wife of Latinus and mother of Lavinia</li> <li>• Turnus, fiance of Lavinia and ruler of neighboring land</li> <li>• Evander, king of the Arcadians, who aid Aeneas in the battle for Latium</li> <li>• Pallas, Evander's son and Aeneas's protegee</li> <li>• Juno, wife of Jupiter and adversary of Venus and Aeneas</li> <li>• Iris, agent of Juno</li> </ul> <p>Other gods and goddesses make their appearances, usually in conjunction with the Trojan War Cycle.</p>
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Fate Man vs. God (the gods) Man vs. Society Man vs. Man Man vs. Self
<i>Theme</i>	The One and the Many (The Individual and Society) Civic Duty – the ideal Roman Citizen Patriotism and civic virtue Providence/Fate Passion vs. Stoicism

<p><i>Literary Devices</i></p>	<p><i>In medias res</i> Epic Similes Epic Catalogues Stock Epithets Latin poetry-syntax and construction Allusions</p>
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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



## **Where does this story happen? (1a-c)**

The *Aeneid* takes place in the city of Troy, the Italian shores, and numerous locations in between. Virgil's story rises as high as Mount Olympus to visit the quarrelling goddesses and plunges as deep as the Underworld to give a glimpse of Anchises among the departed souls. The *Aeneid* throws the reader from location to location just as Aeneas and his companions are battered by land and sea, tossed from place to place by fate.

## **What is the weather like in the story? (1e)**

The story opens with a violent storm brought on by Juno out of fear for her beloved Carthage. She knows that the Romans will one day destroy Carthage, so she wants to do whatever she can to prevent the founding of Rome. To this end, she asks Aeolus to unleash the strong winds and destroy the Trojan fleet. Grateful for the past favor Juno has shown him and bribed with the promise of a sea nymph for his wife, Aeolus agrees and whips up the waves against Aeneas and his fellow Trojans.

Raging storms are a fitting beginning to the *Aeneid*, reflecting the tumult and terror of the sack of Troy and the conflict between Juno and Venus that throws Aeneas from place to place. The story begins in despair as the Trojans mourn their lost family members and friends. They do not know where they will go or if they will survive the journey as they sail from their desecrated home. The fury of the storm is a physical representation of the wrath of Juno against them.

As the story progresses, the weather plays a much smaller role. In fact, as the storm rages in Book One, Neptune, the god of the sea, rebukes Aeolus for overstepping his bounds. He scolds the wind god for stirring up the waters and scattering the ships; the sea is not his domain. The storm then clears, and the Trojans eventually find their way to Carthage. This pattern is repeated throughout the story: Juno stirs up trouble for Aeneas and his companions, but her efforts are eventually thwarted by Venus or another god.

## **Is the setting a real or imaginary place? Is the setting of the story important because of historical events which may have taken place there? (1g,j)**

Since the *Aeneid* is founding a myth, it offers fictional presentations of historical places. Carthage and Rome were real locations, but the events of the story are written with an eye to politics, in order to reflect a particular national identity. Virgil constantly weaves the pantheon of Roman gods into the storyline in a way that cannot be anything other

than myth. This genre of story is unique: it carefully straddles the line between fact and fiction. The *Aeneid* uses fanciful stories of arguing gods, Furies, and goddess-born men to create a compelling background story for the Roman people. In order to accomplish its pro-Augustan empire agenda, the gods themselves must play a role in the founding of Rome. Virgil presents a divinely-favored civilization to inspire confidence in the hearts of Roman readers.

**Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)**

The Trojans are downcast at the beginning of the *Aeneid* as they mourn their exile from Troy. Many have just witnessed the murders of their family members; the group is hopeless and weary. They grieve over the wrath of the gods and wonder why they have been spared; this question haunts them each time they encounter near tragedy. Yet as Aeneas learns of the city he is destined to found and the magnificent future that awaits it, the tone of the poem shifts from plaintive to hopeful. The Fates have determined that the Trojans will bring forth a great nation when they arrive in Italy. This decree propels the Trojans through their exile.

It will be helpful to students to have a basic understanding of the geography of the poem since it includes so many locations. While there are several maps of the voyage available, students may engage more fully with the narrative by charting Aeneas's journey for themselves as the story progresses. There are many geographical places and names for cities and people that can be recorded on a map for reference. One of the greatest challenges of reading ancient epics is remembering names and places that are unfamiliar to begin with, and students will gain a better understanding of the plot if they are certain who each character is and where the event is taking place.

**When does this story happen? (2)**

The *Aeneid* begins in the time just after the Trojan War ended in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The war was precipitated by the marriage of Helen of Sparta (eventually known as Helen of Troy) to Menelaos, and the other suitors who sought her hand vowed their assistance and military intervention should the bride ever be abducted. When Helen ran away with Paris, a Trojan, the other suitors honored their commitment and began a war that would last a decade.

It is of the utmost importance to note that the primary source for Virgil's epic is Homer's two much older Greek epics concerning the period of the Trojan War: the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Since Virgil alludes to both stories frequently, a basic knowledge of the plotlines and main theme of both works would be helpful in understanding this Roman epic. In broad strokes, the *Odyssey* is the story of one man's journey home from the Trojan War. Like Aeneas, he is tossed from one location to the next and encounters numerous mythical figures, peoples, and lands. The *Illiad*, on the other hand, covers one particular portion of the Trojan War in which Hektor, the Trojan hero, is killed by

Achilles as he wreaks havoc in his prideful rage. Virgil draws heavily from the themes and events of these two stories, while also using them as the backdrop for his *Aeneid*.

Virgil's poem begins *in medias res* (in the middle of things) after Troy has already been destroyed and the Trojans have tried to find a new home in several locations. Aeneas relates their prior trials to the Carthaginian Queen Dido, and Virgil uses this plot point to narrate the previous events in retrospect for the reader as well. According to Aeneas, the city of Troy was destroyed after the famous Trojan Horse incident, in which the Greeks feigned defeat and departed, leaving behind a wooden horse, supposedly as a gift offering to the goddess Athena. In truth, the Greeks merely sailed a distance from the battlefield to hide. Meanwhile, the Trojans claimed the horse as a war trophy and dragged it into the city, never suspecting that armed Greek soldiers lay hidden inside its hollow belly. After night fell and the horse was opened by the lying Greek Sinon, the city of Troy was burned and completely sacked. Since the Trojans brought the horse into the gates believing it a tribute to the gods, which they could use as their own offering, those remaining felt that the disaster meant the gods had turned against them. Assuming that the Achaians were favored by the gods to win the Trojan War, the remaining citizens of Troy felt the disfavor keenly.

When reading the *Aeneid*, it is essential also to understand the historical context in which the poem itself was written. Virgil wrote the poem in the years before his death in 19 B.C., during the rule of Caesar Augustus. The Augustan Age came after the Roman Republic had fallen and civil war had broken out in Rome. As the Republic crumbled, so did the society around it. Marriage rates were extremely low, as was devotion to the Roman gods. Augustus sought to rectify this moral deterioration by creating penalties for unmarried men and other incentives to encourage proper marriages and legitimate children. He also encouraged and emphasized the need for a revival of piety. After a period of widespread turmoil and violence, Augustus established peace and a renewed emphasis on traditional Roman values.

The *Aeneid* provides a founding myth that promotes and upholds all of the values Augustus sought to instate. Virgil constantly reinforces the crucial role of piety; the poem is peppered with countless sacrifices and prayers to the gods. By Virgil's reckoning, the success of Aeneas and the eventual founding of Rome hinged up on the will of the gods. According to prophecy, the Roman Empire would be favored by the gods and rule the world. Virgil seems to suggest that piety is a necessary condition of the continued endurance and success of Rome. As the city was founded, so must it remain.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## Who is the story about? (3)

Virgil sings of the weapons and the man, Aeneas, in the first lines of the *Aeneid*, identifying the legendary Roman founder as the main character and protagonist of the poem. Aeneas is a figure introduced in Homer's *Illiad*, who escaped the sack of Troy as the leader of a group of survivors. Though there is no historical evidence to suggest that Aeneas was actually involved in the founding of Rome, legends did exist in Italy that connected his descendants with Rome. Searching for a character that would satisfy all the narrative needs the *Aeneid* would require, Virgil settled on Aeneas. Born of Venus, brave in battle (second only to Hektor), and already a recognized character in the Trojan Cycle, Aeneas brought themes of courage, pity, divine favor, and piety to the poem. Thus, Virgil created a connection between Aeneas and the future founding of Rome, and the *Aeneid* had its protagonist.

Aeneas is the son of Venus, and she is dedicated to him and the plight of the other Trojans who are exiled with him. He is a mighty Trojan warrior and challenges Achilles to fight toward the end of the *Illiad*. Twice he challenges a mighty Achaian in battle (Diomedes and Achilles) in the *Illiad*, and both times he is spared by divine intervention: first his mother's, then Neptune's. Aeneas is brave and strong, attributes which make him an ideal leader for the Trojans as they wander toward Italy.

Aeneas is also a very pious man. He esteems the gods and values prayer very highly. He makes frequent sacrifices to the gods. Where the *Illiad* is spattered by the constant bloodshed of war, the *Aeneid* is stained with the blood of bulls and other sacrificial victims. Aeneas never misses an opportunity to pour out an offering to the gods, lift a prayer, or make a sacrifice for divine favor or assistance. He also trusts the words of the Sybil without hesitation. Aeneas embraces all aspects of proper Roman piety, yet he is not a stiff or inhuman character. His piety and obedience to the gods do not diminish his accessibility. When he is called away from Dido, he leaves regretfully. His piety is presented in a way that would seem attainable to the people of the Augustan Age. He is a sympathetic character.

By linking his epic to the Homeric epics, Virgil is able to create a rich depth of character in Aeneas. For example, when the Trojans arrive in Latium, King Latinus, following a prophecy that his daughter, Lavinia, should marry a foreign husband, slights Turnus and promises her to Aeneas instead. When Lavinia is taken away from Turnus and given to Aeneas, the reader should instantly think of Achilles and Agamemnon. At the beginning of the *Illiad*, haughty King Agamemnon, sore over the loss of his own prized Chryseis,

orders Achilles to give up his beloved Briseis. This conflict and the resulting argument set the tragic events of the *Illiad* into motion and inspire the devastating rage to which Achilles clings for most of the poem. Now in the *Aeneid*, Turnus loses his beloved Lavinia, and he becomes inflamed with violent rage. Through this parallel, Virgil paints Turnus as the new Achilles.

Who, then, is Aeneas? The answer comes in the final moments of the poem when, after chasing Turnus, Aeneas finally kills his Latin enemy. The chase scene and resulting kill are reminiscent of the one-on-one battle between Achilles and Hektor. Since Turnus has already been established as the new Achilles, Aeneas must necessarily be the new Hektor. This time, however, the Trojan champion is the one to strike the victory blow and win the kingdom for his people.

#### **Who else is the story about? (4)**

##### Venus:

Aeneas's mother, Venus (goddess of love and desire), who consistently guides and aids him and other surviving Trojans. She is the one who appears on the shores near Carthage and guides Aeneas to the citadel. She is the one who disguises Cupid as Ascanius to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas. Venus asks Vulcan to make armor for her son.

An interesting point about Venus is that she ultimately causes the sufferings her son faces. Juno bitterly points out near the end of the poem that it was at Venus's prompting and tempting that Helen first ran away with Paris, leading to the war that would ruin the city of Troy and cast Aeneas into exile. As Juno and Venus spar verbally, Juno asks a series of pointed and accusatory questions that reveal a deeper conflict:

“What inspired Europe and Asia to surge up in arms,/ underhandedly  
break the bonds of friendship?/ Was it I who lured the Trojan adulterer on/  
to lay Sparta low? Or I who equipped the man/ with weapons, fanned the  
flames of war with lust?/ You should have feared for your children then./  
It's too late now for rising up with your groundless/ accusations—flinging  
empty slander in my face!” (X.109-116)

Venus, try though she might to help the Trojans in their exile, is the ultimate cause of their sorrow. Though this thread is not followed further in the story, it is an interesting dynamic to consider, inasmuch as this truth undergirds the entire movement of the narrative.

##### Juno:

The highly jealous Juno constantly tries to prevent the founding of Rome. At the very beginning of the poem, the reader learns that Juno's wrath and fury are, in fact, the main causes of Aeneas's troubles. We also learn that she has a beloved city, Carthage, that she

has cared for and nurtured into great strength. Juno also knows, however, that the future Roman nation will rise up and destroy Carthage. With this in mind, the goddess will stop at nothing to prevent Aeneas from settling in Italy.

#### Ascanius:

Aeneas's son, Ascanius was a small boy when Troy was sacked. Aeneas led him by the hand out of the city and away from death at the hands of the Achaians. According to prophecy, Ascanius will play a role in the founding of Rome, and among his descendants will be great emperors. Ascanius is also called Iulus throughout the poem, which clearly refers to Iulius (Julius) and the future leaders of the Latin people.

#### Anchises:

The mortal lover of Venus and the father of Aeneas, he is carried out of the city by his son during the devastation of Troy. After Anchises dies, Aeneas visits him in the Underworld. Together they foresee the glory of Rome and receive the Latin Mandate.

#### Dido:

The Carthaginian queen, a Phoenician princess, her brother killed her husband and she fled to Carthage, where she became queen. She welcomes Aeneas and the other Trojans as another exile. After Venus hatches a plot to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas, Dido becomes smitten, pitying their suffering. She enters into a kind of one-sided marriage with Aeneas, which ends as soon as he is reminded of his duty to fate and abandons her. Heartbroken, Dido creates a funeral pyre of Aeneas's possessions, climbs to the top, and kills herself, using a sword he left. Her sister discovers her as she breathes her last, lamenting her ignoble, selfish action, which identifies her neatly as a foil to the selfless and noble Aeneas. Aeneas discovers Dido's suicide when he sees her shade in the Underworld among the suicides.

Though it will be discussed further below in the teacher guide, the love of Dido and Aeneas is a casualty of Fate and the Roman founding, introducing the concept that a great undertaking such as the founding of an empire often necessitates personal sacrifice and pain.

#### The Sybil:

A seer of sorts who confirms the prophecies about Aeneas founding a city in Italy, she also serves as a guide in the Underworld.

#### King Latinus:

The ruler of people living in Italy when Aeneas and the Trojans finally arrive.

Lavinia:

Latinus's daughter, who was originally promised to Turnus. When the Trojans arrive, the arrangement is called off, and she is pledged to Aeneas instead. This conflict begins the war that occupies the final books of the *Aeneid*.

Amata:

King Latinus's wife and the mother of Lavinia, she falls prey to the schemes of Juno and is overcome by crazed anger toward Aeneas. As Turnus and the Latins are losing the battle and she thinks Turnus has been slain, she kills herself.

Turnus:

Lavinia's intended until Aeneas arrives, he feels slighted by the change in plans and Juno takes advantage of his anger. Just as she possessed Amata, Juno overcomes Turnus as well and causes wild anger to seize him. He is eventually killed in battle by Aeneas.

Evander:

The king of the Arcadians.

Pallas:

Evander's son, whose death inspires an Achillean rage in Aeneas.

Iris:

An agent of Juno, she carries out all sorts of mischief and manipulation.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



## What does the protagonist want? (5)

At the beginning of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas simply wants to find a place to settle with his fellow Trojan survivors. He and his companions try to settle in a number of different locations, but they are driven off each time by plagues and harpies. When we first meet Aeneas, he is weary from a restless journey and the constant battering of Fate. Accompanied by his son, Ascanius, and father, Anchises, he seeks a new land.

Aeneas wishes for no more than a new home. The first six books of the *Aeneid* closely follow the *Odyssey*, even sharing some of the same characters and locations; however, instead of a quest to return home, Aeneas is on a journey to *find* a home. His desire is simply to find shelter from the trials he has faced. When he addresses the Sybil, he expresses this wish:

“...And now, at long last, Italy’s shores, forever fading,/ lie within our grasp. Let the doom of Troy pursue us/ just this far, no more. You too, you gods and goddesses,/ all who could never suffer Troy and Troy’s high glory,/ spare the people of Pergamum now, it’s only right./ And you, you blessed Sibyl who knows the future,/ grant my prayer. I ask no more than the realm/ my fate decrees: let the Trojans rest in Latium,/ they and their roaming gods, their rootless powers!/ Then I will build you a solid marble temple,/ Apollo and Diana, establish hallowed days,/ Apollo, in your name...” (VI.74-85)

He does not seek glory or fame for himself, just the land he is fated to settle. In fact, he pledges to honor the gods if they give him safe passage to Italy. Aeneas is not concerned with the power he would gain from founding a new city; he is simply seeking security and safety for his son and companions.

## Why can’t he have it? What happens in the story? (6)

Aeneas’s desire is immediately at odds with Juno’s wishes. The city Aeneas is to found will grow over time and gain tremendous strength and influence. It will become a nation, and that nation will come into conflict with Carthage, Juno’s pet city. In the goddess’s eyes, Aeneas’s desire to found a city is the equivalent of a desire to destroy Carthage. Though Aeneas does not want to settle in Italy in order to raise an army against Dido’s kingdom, his survival and homecoming will lead to the city’s demise. Juno cannot have

this. Despite all his piety, prayers, and offerings, Aeneas is in deadly conflict with this goddess. The poem narrates the many ways in which Juno tries to thwart Fate and stop Aeneas from founding Rome.

Even after raising a terrible storm against the Trojans, Juno is not finished with her efforts to prevent Aeneas from reaching Italy. In Book Five, Juno sends Iris down to the Trojan women and convinces them that they ought to stay with Acestes and settle near him. Planting the idea in their mind, Iris stirs them up into a frenzied mob, and they try to burn the Trojan fleet to destroy any possibility of leaving again. For a brief moment, it appears that Juno will get her wish. Once Aeneas learns of the fire, though, he prays to Jove, submitting himself to the will of the god, and asks that the fleet be saved. Within seconds, a huge rainstorm descends and quenches the flames, highlighting the underlying war between the gods.

Though Juno is against him, Aeneas's piety allows him to overcome the countless challenges she poses. At every step, the gods smile on him and help him along on the journey to Italy. Despite Juno's jealous fury, Aeneas, with his many prayers and sacrifices, finds favor with the rest of the gods.

### **What other problems are there in the story? (7)**

As stated before, the *Aeneid* is a founding myth designed to promote traditional Roman morals and piety, but that doesn't mean the process of founding Rome goes smoothly. Virgil captures the complexity of Fate as he includes characters who are harmed by Aeneas and his destiny. The prime example of this is Dido, the queen of the Carthaginians. She falls in love with Aeneas, but eventually a sense of duty to the Fate he must fulfill drives Aeneas to continue on toward Italy. Dido is heartbroken and eventually commits suicide, becoming a victim of Rome itself. Though Aeneas is following a grand destiny, Fate leaves a trail of pain, sorrow, and irredeemable waste in his wake.

This dynamic is reinforced through the parallels between Dido's destruction and the sack of Troy. When Aeneas arrives in Carthage, Dido welcomes him as a fellow exile and opens her city gladly. She asks him to share his story while she holds his son, Ascanius. Little does she know, though, that she is holding Cupid (Venus's other son) in disguise. As the infant plays in her lap and she listens to Aeneas, Dido falls in love with Aeneas, nurturing an affection that will eventually destroy her.

What makes Dido's predicament so noteworthy is the story Aeneas tells. He unfolds his memories of the sack of Troy, beginning with the Trojan horse. He explains that the Achaians pretended to set sail for Greece while actually hiding out on the nearby island of Tenedos. They constructed an enormous horse, pretending that the structure was an offering to the gods to ensure a safe journey home, and filled it with soldiers. The Trojans, believing that the Achaians were long gone, approached the horse and wondered what to do with it. Sinon, an Achaian soldier who claims to have turned on the Greeks after they planned to sacrifice him, lies to the Trojans and encourages them to bring the

horse into the city and make it their own offering to the gods. Despite advice to the contrary, the citizens of Troy throw open their gates and celebrate the entrance of the horse. Later that night, Sinon himself opens the horse, and reopens the gates to the rest of the Greeks who have sailed in from Tenedos. Together, the soldiers burn the city and kill its citizens. They level complete destruction on the city.

The story of the sack of Troy hinges on a single act of deception, a lethal force disguised as an offering. As Aeneas tells the story of the Trojan horse, readers should pick up on the close parallels between his tale and the one unfolding for Dido presently. She herself has been tricked by the disguised Cupid and has flung open her gates to receive the exiled Trojans. Aeneas's words pull her further into love, just as Sinon's words convinced the Trojans to put fear far from their minds and trust the horse. Dido, like Troy, embraces the very thing that will completely undo her, exactly as she is fated to do. Just as it was fated for the city of Troy to fall, it is fated for Aeneas to found the city of Rome, and that same Fate that drives Aeneas on toward Italy is the Fate that will destroy Dido. Troy was desecrated by flame and sword, just as Dido meets her end by the sword atop a pyre of Aeneas's possessions. It is Fate that takes her love and leaves her in despair. The Fate that calls Aeneas on to fulfill his destiny, a glorious one at that, brings violence in its wake.

Turnus presents another problem within the poem, uniquely framed against the backdrop of heavy *Iliad* allusions. After the Trojans arrive in Latium, King Latinus promises his daughter, Lavinia, to Aeneas. She was previously pledged to a man named Turnus, but King Latinus followed a prophecy that said his daughter should marry a foreign husband (yet another example of the powerful role of Fate and prophecy). The king takes Lavinia away from Turnus and gives her to Aeneas. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Juno sends Iris once more to stir up violent fury against the Trojans. She sees an opportunity to destroy the Trojans once and for all and kindles rage in the hearts of Amata, Lavinia's mother, and Turnus. The two scheme together and begin an attack on the Trojans while Aeneas is away seeking Evander as an ally. The Trojans find themselves in peril once more, this time in battle.

Another, more perplexing problem within the *Aeneid* emerges at the very end of Aeneas's journey through the Underworld. When it comes time for Aeneas and the Sybil to return home, Virgil explains that there are two gates. One is made of horn, and only true shades pass through it. The other is made of ivory, and it is the portal through which the dead send false dreams to the living. Interestingly, Anchises sends Aeneas and the Sybil through the ivory gate. No more is sad about this choice, but the fact remains that they returned to the land of the living through the false gate. Some readers believe that Virgil was communicating a subversive, pessimistic view of the Roman Empire during this scene. Other explain the incident away, speculating that Aeneas left the Underworld after midnight, and that it was a common superstition that false dreams occur before midnight. Another explanation suggests that Aeneas is not actually dead; so he cannot pass through the gate for true shades. Yet another explanation is that Virgil, who died before he could put the finishing touches on the *Aeneid*, was in the process of revising that particular

section, and so the ultimate meaning and implications might be obscured in the unfinished version. Either way, these two gates pose a problem within the text and can open the door for students to see how a text can be read in a number of different ways. One can make a positive, pro-Augustan reading of the *Aeneid*, and one can just as easily make a reading that reveals Virgil as a subversive dissenter expressing his disagreement with Augustus furtively within the poem. Though the poem certainly flatters Augustus (there are several mentions of the future Caesar being numbered among the gods), there are also plenty of problematic and troubling elements within the *Aeneid* that call Virgil's true intentions into question. It would be a good exercise for students to think about whether they think the *Aeneid* is pro-Augustan or anti-Augustan. Do they take the poem at face value, or do they think there is something more subversive at play?

### **How is the problem solved? (9)**

The problem of Aeneas's conflict with Juno is solved in Book XII when Jove, after watching Juno torment Aeneas and the Trojans for years, turns to her and says, "Where will it end, my queen? What is left at the last?/ Aeneas the hero, god of the land: you know yourself,/ you confess you know that he is heaven bound,/ his fate will raise Aeneas to the stars" (XII.918-921). Jove tells Juno that she has reached the limit and he will allow her to do no more against Aeneas. He will be able to find peace and found Rome.

In the end, it is Aeneas's own divinity and Fate that solves his conflict. After years of fighting against it, Juno resigns herself to the glorious future awaiting Aeneas and his descendants. These descendants will include Caesar Augustus, to whom the poem frequently alludes. Jove acknowledges and affirms Aeneas's future and that his future progeny will be numbered among the gods. Since such glory awaits Aeneas, it is not right for Juno to continue to torment and abuse him as she has throughout the book. Since the glory of Aeneas's line will culminate with Augustus, it is, in a way, the emperor himself who provides an end to Aeneas's torment—this is yet another feature of the grand, national identity that Virgil has crafted in Rome's founding epic.

This solution not only concludes the main conflict in the *Aeneid*, but it also illustrates the role Augustus plays in the Roman empire. During the fall of the Roman Republic and in the years of civil war afterward, Rome was tossed about by fate and violence, just as Aeneas was. He journeys to find peace and security and eventually finds it through the predicted glory of his line. But Aeneas's quest is not simply a founding myth; it is an allegory for the Roman people prior to and during Augustus's reign. As the founder of Rome, he represents a people tormented by the violence of civil war. He finds peace through Augustus, just as Rome does centuries later. It is important that Jove indicates Aeneas's descendants and divinity as a primary reason for Juno to cease her struggle as it provides the connection between Aeneas and Rome itself. It creates and confirms an allegorical reading that is timely for Virgil and his readers.



### How does the story end? (10)

The *Aeneid* ends when Aeneas wounds Turnus by throwing a spear clean through his shield and into his leg. As Aeneas approaches to deliver a death blow and end the war between the Latins, Trojans, and Arcadians, Turnus pleads for his life. He asks that Aeneas spare him or at least return his body to his father. For a brief moment, Aeneas considers showing mercy and granting Turnus's request. This thought flees quickly, vanishing completely when he sees the belt Turnus stole from Pallas's body. His rage returns, and he kills Turnus.

The poem seems to end rather abruptly without any type of closure or neat conclusion. What happens to Aeneas next? Since the parallels to the *Illiad* are so strong, we almost expect Aeneas to strap Turnus to his chariot and drag the body around the city three times. The ending of this national epic is as violent as Turnus's death. But why? Why would Virgil stop on such a jarring note? This is a point that is the subject of much speculation and discussion, though there are no definitive conclusions. Such silence and ambiguity often opens up the most space for fruitful interpretation!

Virgil is one of the most masterful storytellers to ever live, so certainly this ending-that-is-not-an-ending was the one he considered most fitting to his work. What could it mean? Is Aeneas's killing of Turnus justified? It would seem that one's final judgment on Aeneas's whole narrative, and thus also the narrative of the great city he embodies, hangs in the balance as he considers mercy and violence. Is it a stark warning, whose very abruptness calls the reader to consider more closely what they have just read, namely that the founder of Rome chose violence over clemency, and the story written in his name must end? At the moment Aeneas commits this act, does he cease to live in the spirit of the righteous Hektor, whom he has embodied throughout the epic, and submit to the wrathful spirit of Achilles? In such an act, does Aeneas cease in the very instant to be Aeneas? Similarly, when Rome chooses violence over mercy, does Rome cease to be Rome? It could be, but this is only one of many possible interpretations. What are others?

#### NOTES:

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



## What does the protagonist learn? (11)

The *Aeneid* is not so much about what Aeneas learns as it is about what the reader learns. The character of Aeneas remains steadfast through all. Since the poem's main purpose is to promote Augustan values, morals, and piety, the greatest takeaway from the book is reserved for the reader. How does the steadfast figure of Aeneas reshape and reform those who look upon him? In a sense, Aeneas's own story is written in stone before us, like the pictures on the walls of Carthage. It is not left for the stony image to alter, but the viewer to be moved by what they see. The *Aeneid* was designed to inspire a societal and cultural revival in Rome that would help heal a people wounded by a deteriorating government and civil war.

## What is the main idea of the story? (13)

The main idea of the *Aeneid* is to reinforce the inevitability of Fate, legitimize the Roman empire, re-establish traditional morals and values, explain the Punic Wars, and portray Caesar Augustus in a positive light as the savior of the Romans. On the other hand, the main idea could be more subversive: to remember the great waste that follows in Fate's wake, to show how the founding of Rome remains inseparable from this violence and sorrow, to emphasize how problematic traditional classical morals and values become when attempting to found an empire, etc. Remember, the first line of the epic invokes "arms and the man." How is one to relate the glorious strengths of empire ("arms") to the nature of humankind? How one answers this question will unfold the "main idea" of the story in tow.

### NOTES:

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



Because of the nature of studying an ancient work of poetry in translation, some of the typical poetic devices you may look for in a more recent work of English are simply not present. The most important and foundational aspect to the art of Latin poetry, its meter, is simply untranslatable. Virgil is a master of syntax and meter, but none of his subtleties make their way into English. Similarly, any alliteration or rhyme that you may find in your translation may be beautifully artful in its own right, but is utterly incidental to the translator and how he or she has chosen to unite their own art of translating to Virgil's art. One may wish to trace what the translator has chosen to emphasize by their own meter, rhyme schemes, alliteration, and other poetic devices, but it is important to remember that these are not Virgil's own, and some translations even become "too loud" in their presentation of their own art, and obscure Virgil's unique voice in the process.

## Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)

Virgil's true genius lies in his masterful syntax (syntax refers to the many rules according to which sentences may be arranged, and the ways in which these rules may be used, bent, and broken for the purpose of art). Though translation from Latin to English eliminates this literary device nearly completely, it is worth taking the time to explain what is at play in the Latin (Maybe this will inspire your students to take Latin! Reading a great master like Virgil in translation is sometimes described as being like "kissing through a veil"! ). Unlike English, Latin word order is virtually irrelevant. Verbs can come at the very end of sentences, and nouns and their adjectives can be separated by other words in a sentence. The looseness of Latin word order allows Virgil to build an additional layer of imagery into his work. When words can be arranged freely within and across lines, a poet can play with the reader.

For example, take these three lines from Book One of the *Aeneid*:

Urbs antiqua fuit, Tyrii tenuere coloni  
Karthago, Italiam contra **Tiberinaque longe**  
**ostia**, dives opum studiisque asperrima belli;

Translated, the lines read:

There was an ancient city, held by Tyrian settlers,  
Carthage, opposite Italy and the **Tiber's mouth**  
**a long way off**, rich in wealth and fierce in the study of war;

In the original Latin, Virgil separates “Tiberinaque” (referring to the Tiber River) and “ostia” (river mouth) and puts them on two separate lines on either side of “longe” (a long way off, etc.). “Ostia” and “Tiberinaque” are meant to be a pair, and when reading Virgil, a separation like this is always of note. By putting “ostia” in a different line, Virgil is creating an extra picture for the Roman reader to show that Carthage and the river mouth were very far away, so far in fact that they cannot even be mentioned in the same line. He even makes the words distant from each other by separating them with the very word for “long way off.” Virgil uses the free nature of Latin word order to syntactically illustrate the story he is communicating in his poetry. The *Aeneid* is filled with structures like this.

While students will not be able to pick up on any of these subtleties in English, it is important to note the incredibly complex literary style that takes place in the original language. Even a very small introduction like the one above will give them a glimpse of the syntactical genius of the *Aeneid* (and also help explain why the poem took so long to compose!).

**Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind?  
(16)**

Those who have read the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* will note how few **extended similes** Virgil uses in comparison to Homer. He does, however still include a good number of them. Rather than simply following the most basic formula of a simile (x is like/as y), an extended simile aids layer upon layer of detail upon the comparison, enriching it and illuminating the central subject all the more. The verification code for this resource is 977080. Enter this code in the submission form at [www.centerforlitschools.com/](http://www.centerforlitschools.com/) dashboard to receive one professional development credit. Still, Virgil’s extended similes often provide the reader with important information about the subject they describe, and should always be carefully searched for implied meaning and possible foreshadowing.

For example:

“Wild as a top, spinning under a twisted ship/  
when boys, obsessed with their play,  
drive it round/ an empty court, the whip spinning it round in bigger rings/  
and the boys hovering over it, spellbound, wonderstruck—/  
the boxwood whirling, whip-strokes lashing it into life—/  
swift as a top Amata whirls through the midst of cities,  
/ people fierce in arms.” (VII.442-448)

“As a wolf prowling in wait around some crowded sheepfold,  
/ bearing the wind and rain in the dead of night, howls/  
at chinks in the fence, and the lambs keep bleating on,  
/ snug beneath their dams. The wolf rages, desperate,  
/ how can he maul a quarry out of reach? Exhausted,  
/ frenzied with building hunger, starved so long,  
/ his jaws parched for blood.” (IIX.68-74)

“He writhes in death/ as blood flows over his shapely limbs, his neck droops,/ sinking over a shoulder, limp as a crimson flower/ cut off by a passing plow, that droops as it dies/ or frail as poppies, their necks weary, bending/ their heads when a sudden shower weighs them down” (IIX.497-502)

There are two levels of literary analysis that can be attained by looking at these poetic devices: the first is learning to simply notice them (“Oh look! There’s a metaphor!”); the second is then learning to discern what these devices *perform* for the narrative. This second aspect is always what we are working toward as readers, and to leave your student only at the first step might risk unintentionally making these great works a strange patchwork of plotline in between long metaphors. The greatest danger is that a student might actually skip over a metaphor when he or she encounters it, mistakenly thinking it has nothing to do with the actual story. As a means of preventing this and encouraging careful reading, one of the most important literary questions one can learn to ask is “So what?” “So what?” is how one enters into the second, far more fruitful level of reading. You can begin to lead your students into this second level by asking variations of the basic “So what?” questions.

For instance, the first simile example in this section serves as a prime illustration of a literary device that can benefit from a “So what?” On the surface, the simile simply describes Amata’s crazed movements and the haste with which she stirs up the people against Aeneas. Virgil’s use of a top creates a vivid picture that enriches the reader’s mental picture of the story. But the metaphor holds a subtler meaning that only careful readers can detect. Virgil is careful to mention the boys playing with the top and how they are obsessed with their play. In the simile, Amata is the top. So who are the boys? Iris and Juno are the ones who instigated the fury in Amata’s mind and heart, and the boys represent them. Once the metaphor is studied more closely, it becomes clear that Virgil uses the image of boys playing with a top to show that Amata and the other mortals are playthings in the hands of Juno. They obsessively play with her and wind her up again when she slows down. This characterization of the gods, once noted, may give rise to more questions and thus reveal further depth of the story. For example, what then does this mean about how Virgil intends for his readers to understand the nature of the gods in the poem? Are all of them simply childlike all the time, or just some of the time? Is it only some of the gods? Does this mean we ought to take the gods more or less seriously? The exercise can be endless, but with an author like Virgil, one will eventually find many golden threads to follow.

This is a simple exercise, but these kinds of questions are what prove a masterpiece like Virgil’s. The *Aeneid*’s ability to resound with meaning in the face of these questions are what begin to show the careful reader and inquiring mind that metaphors are not simply adornments, but vehicles of deeper meaning.

**Does the author use the characters and events in the story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)**

Much like Homer and other ancient authors, Virgil relies heavily on allusions, as he constantly draws on Greek and Roman history, myth, and the host of gods on Mount Olympus. Before beginning the *Aeneid*, it is important for readers to read a brief overview of the Trojan War, Rome’s founding story, and to become familiar with the main Roman gods and goddesses. Whenever a reference to a person or place appears in the text, students should make a brief study of it. Having that extra information can provide additional details or implications. The importance of careful attention to allusion is affirmed on the very first page of the *Aeneid* when Virgil mentions Juno is still upset over the judgment of Paris and the offense to her vanity. Ganymede and several other causes of anger are also alluded to, and in order to understand Juno’s fury, students should research each new allusion as it appears.

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## Who is the author? (18)

Unlike Homer (and many other ancient authors), much is known about Virgil. Publius Vergilius Maro was born on October 15, 70 B.C. He was considered Rome's greatest author, and his works – of which there are many beyond the *Aeneid* – are still widely read and studied throughout the world.

Virgil was raised in the Italian countryside and was educated in Cremona and Rome. In his studies, he gained a thorough knowledge of Greek and Roman authors, as evidenced by the many allusions contained in the *Aeneid* alone. While Virgil was still young, the Roman Republic came to an end, leaving the political and military climate in tumult. After years of conflict and civil war, Caesar Augustus finally assumed power in 31 B.C. Before the Augustan peace, however, were years of brutal fighting and unrest; the memory of violent civil war flavors the work of Augustan Age poets, including Virgil. Though they lived in a time of peace, they remembered the turmoil of times past.

Due to his somewhat fragile health, Virgil focused on his writings instead of a military or political career. His works, which focused on country life and Augustan themes of peace and morality, were instantly famous among Romans. He remains widely regarded as a master of his craft; his style, structure, etc. are unparalleled. In fact, legend suggests he only considered three lines of the *Aeneid* finished during the 11 years he worked on it. The work may have undergone additional changes, but Virgil died from an illness in 19 B.C. before he could finish it. There are accounts that reveal Virgil's wish that the manuscript of the *Aeneid* be destroyed upon his death, but the work survived and is celebrated as one of the most important books in Western literary history.

Virgil was the model poet for all antiquity, and all subsequent Latin poets learned Virgil and were judged by the standard his work set. In fact, the *Aeneid* was the one work that everyone with even a grade-school education would have read; Roman schoolchildren, for hundreds of years, used the *Aeneid* to learn everything from the rudiments of grammar to the most intricate poetic and rhetorical artistry.

Yet Virgil's influence goes far beyond the *Aeneid*, though this alone would make him still one of the most influential artists in the history of the world. Three of the greatest works of Western literature simply would not have been the same, and may not have even existed, if not for Virgil. Much of Augustine's *City of God* is written in direct conversation with the *Aeneid*, with Augustine juxtaposing the founding myth of the city of Rome with the founding (scriptural) stories of the city of God. Likewise, Dante thought so highly of Virgil, that he makes Virgil his guide throughout all of the *Inferno* and most of the *Purgatorio*. It is as if Dante is saying his own *Divine Comedy* would not

exist without Virgil. Similarly, before he wrote *Paradise Lost*, John Milton was one of the most talented Latin poets to emerge in more than a millennium. However, when he realized that even in all his genius he could only ever play second fiddle to Virgil, he decided that he would instead devote his life to writing the definitive epic in another language– which he did, in English. This should give just a taste of Virgil’s importance and lasting influence on world history and literature.

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# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. What role does Fate play in the *Aeneid*? How does it affect the characters' decisions and actions? What does Virgil consider to be the role of Fate in man's life? Use specific examples to demonstrate times when characters made decisions because of Fate.
2. Rome eventually fought with the city of Carthage during the Punic Wars. Does the *Aeneid* help explain why these battles were fought?
3. Choose an extended metaphor to study. How does this metaphor enrich the text around it? For example, does the metaphor contain any descriptions or implications that provide extra information about the situation it is describing?
4. Compare and contrast the events which led to Dido's demise to those that led to the destruction of Troy. How are they similar? How are they different? What do the similarities and differences say about Dido's plight vs. that of the Trojans?
5. Choose of the sections of Aeneas's journey to the Underworld, and research one of the characters found there. What was their crime? How did they die? Why do you think Virgil chose to mention them by name in the *Aeneid*?
6. What does the work seem to say about the gods? Does it have a high view or a low view of them? What makes the gods different from men? What makes them similar?
7. When Aeneas leaves the Underworld, Anchises sends him through the ivory gate, which is the portal for false dreams. What do you think is the significance of this? Does it imply anything about the poem? About Aeneas's fate? About the prophecies shared by the Sybil and Anchises?
8. Compare and contrast the *Aeneid* with the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. How are they similar? What themes do they share? How are they different? What do those differences imply about Aeneas's journey vs. that of Odysseus? How is Aeneas like Achilles, and how is he different?
9. Explain how the *Aeneid* is a political poem designed to promote a particular set of values. Research the Augustan Age, and choose two main morals or values Augustus sought to reinstate. Support your choices with specific examples from the text.



# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the **climax** and central **themes** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central **conflict**. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

# The Aeneid by Virgil: Story Chart

## SETTING

Ilion, Italy, and the lands and seas between. The *Aeneid* covers a number of locations on Aeneas's journey to his fated home.

## CHARACTERS

### Climax:

King Latinus gives his daughter, Lavinia, to Aeneas, slighting Turnus. Juno inspires fury and rage in Turnus and Amata and they begin a war. Evander and his son Pallas join Aeneas as allies. After much slaughter, Turnus kills Pallas in battle.

### Rising Action:

Aeneas is driven on by fate and duty to found Rome. He and his crew leave Carthage, resulting in Dido's suicide. They eventually make their way to the Italian shores.

### Denouement:

A peace treaty is agreed to, and then a duel is proposed. But Juno incites anger once more, and the agreement is breached. Aeneas chases after Turnus to kill him.

## THEME:

The *Aeneid* contains an exploration of the role of fate and piety. The story also focuses on Roman values and considers their importance to a good life.

### Exposition:

After the total destruction of Troy, Aeneas and his surviving companions are battered on land and sea until they come to Carthage and meet Dido. They tell their tale of woe and consider staying with the Carthaginians.

### Conclusion:

Aeneas stands above the wounded Turnus and considers sparing him for a moment, but ultimately decides to kill him.

## PLOT

## CONFLICT

Will Aeneas overcome Juno's efforts to keep him from founding the future city of Rome?  
(Man vs. Fate, Man vs. God)

*The Aeneid* by Virgil: Blank Story Chart



