**the *Aeneid***

Virgil (70–19 b.c. )

Publius Vergilius Maro , unquestionably the greatest Roman poet, was born near Mantua in what was then the province of Gaul. Virgil’s childhood experiences on his family’s farm marked his outlook in a profound and permanent way. Throughout his life, he would remain a person who was sensitive to nature and acutely aware of the beauty and wisdom of the natural world.

**A Country Boy**When Virgil was eleven years old, Julius Caesar came to govern Gaul. His arrival opened Virgil’s eyes to a world different from his father’s farm in a culturally isolated town. Virgil traveled to study in various cities, including Rome. It was there that he took courses in rhetoric, the construction and delivery of speeches. Rhetoric was an essential part of instruction for young Romans being trained for public affairs. Although Virgil was trained as a lawyer, he never pursued a legal career.

Virgil felt the effects of the ongoing Roman civil war directly. When Mark Antony, a factional leader, needed to reward his soldiers with land grants in 41 b.c. , he confiscated many farms, including Virgil’s. During this time, Virgil withdrew from the turmoil of the capital. He retreated to Naples and there began the study of Epicureanism, a Greek philosophy that emphasizes simple pleasures and serenity of mind.

Soon afterward, Octavian, who would eventually become the emperor Caesar Augustus, recognized the poet’s genius and gave Virgil back his land. Understandably, Virgil felt deep and enduring gratitude to Octavian all his life. Virgil became the official poet of the empire. He was welcome at the emperor’s court, but his heart remained in the countryside. Augustus had given Virgil an estate in the south of Italy, and the shy, delicate poet spent as much time there as he could.

**Early Writing**Virgil’s early works were poetry collections called *Eclogues* and *Georgics.* Throughout these pastoral poems, Virgil idealizes the return to peace made possible by Caesar Augustus after a long civil war. One of the poems, the fourth *Eclogue,* had profound significance among later Christians. Written around 40 b.c. , the poem speaks of a divine child whose birth would bring about peace and a return to the Golden Age. Many Christians believed Virgil had predicted the birth of Jesus, and so they considered the poet an honorary Christian and a prophet.

**A National Epic**When Caesar Augustus became the first emperor of Rome in 27 b.c. , his new empire had no national epic. The Greeks had the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* venerated by Greeks and Romans alike, but Roman culture had produced nothing comparable. There were a number of impressive works of prose, theater, and even poetry by Roman writers. However, there was no national epic for Roman citizens, whose patriotism might be aroused by a mythic account of their origins.

Virgil undertook to remedy that deficiency. He spent the last eleven years of his life working on the *Aeneid*, Rome’s national epic and the greatest single work of Latin literature. He wrote many drafts, revising and polishing his verse “like a she-bear licking her cubs into shape,” as he put it. When he fell ill after a hard voyage and died, Virgil left instructions to destroy the manuscript he thought imperfect. Naturally, and luckily, Augustus intervened and saved the masterpiece.

Virgil’s epic tells a story of adventure and bravery, with a beauty of language and style rarely equaled in world literature. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Europeans considered the *Aeneid* to be the greatest literary work of all time—the ideal every writer dreamed of equaling, though none ever did.

**Connecting to the Literature**

Ancient Romans viewed Aeneas, the hero of the *Aeneid,* in much the same way that Americans view George Washington. Aeneas was considered the father of Rome and the embodiment of its ideals.

**National Epic**

An epic is a long narrative—often a poem—about the adventures of gods or of a hero. A **national epic** tells a story about the founding or development of a nation or culture. Virgil’s goal in writing the *Aeneid* was to give Rome a national epic that would equal Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in literary greatness and prove that Rome was as great a civilization as Greece. As you read, note details that would make Romans proud of their culture and their origins.

**Literary Elements**

An **epic hero** is the central figure of an epic. The hero of a national epic usually serves as a model for an entire culture. These characters are admired not just for their strength or skill in battle but for their integrity and beliefs. Ancient Roman values included the following:

* devotion to duty
* compassion and mercy for opponents in battle
* honesty and fairness

Note the ways in which Aeneas embodies and promotes these values in recounting the fall of Troy.

**Applying Background Information**

When reading certain literary works, you must **apply background information** to fully understand them. Virgil makes frequent reference to characters and events in Homer’s *Iliad.* Therefore, information about that work is useful when reading the *Aeneid.*

For instance, when Virgil’s epic refers to “cruel Achilles,” you should remember that in the *Iliad*, Achilles shows no mercy to the Trojan hero Hector. Virgil is presenting the Trojan side of the story told in the Greek *Iliad*.

 



## Background

Virgil opens the *Aeneid* with an invocation of the Muse, a goddess who presides over the arts. He calls on her to remind him why Aeneas, an exiled hero who survived the destruction of his native Troy by the Greeks, had to suffer so much before he could found Rome. The reason is that Juno (Hera, in Greek mythology), the queen of heaven, persecutes the Trojan hero. Juno is still angry that Aeneas’ cousin Paris judged her to be less fair than Aeneas’ mother, the goddess Venus (Aphrodite, in Greek mythology).

As the *Aeneid* begins, Aeneas is at sea, about to land safely in Italy, but Juno creates a storm that wrecks the hero’s fleet. Aeneas is tossed about and lands on the African coast near Carthage, a city being built by Queen Dido. The Queen holds a banquet in the Trojans’ honor. Disguised as Aeneas’ son, the god Cupid attends the banquet and causes Dido to fall in love with Aeneas. To prolong his stay, Dido asks Aeneas to recount the fall of Troy and his subsequent wanderings, which he does as Book II begins.

 The room fell silent, and all eyes were on him,

 As Father Aeneas from his high couch began:

 “Sorrow too deep to tell, your majesty,

 You order me to feel and tell once more:

5How the Danaans**1**leveled in the dust

 The splendor of our mourned-forever kingdom—

 Heartbreaking things I saw with my own eyes

 And was myself a part of. Who could tell them,

 Even a Myrmidon**2**or Dolopian**3**

10Or ruffian of Ulysses,**4**without tears?

 Now, too, the night is well along, with dewfall

 Out of heaven, and setting stars weigh down

 Our heads toward sleep. But if so great desire

 Moves you to hear the tale of our disasters,

15Briefly recalled, the final throes**5**of Troy,**6**

 However I may shudder at the memory

 And shrink again in grief, let me begin.

 Knowing their strength broken in warfare, turned

 Back by the fates, and years—so many years—

20Already slipped away, the Danaan captains

 By the divine handicraft of Pallas built

 A horse of timber, tall as a hill,

 And sheathed its ribs with planking of cut pine.

 This they gave out to be an offering

25For a safe return by sea, and the word went round.

 But on the sly they shut inside a company

 Chosen from their picked soldiery by lot,

 Crowding the vaulted caverns in the dark—

 The horse’s belly—with men fully armed.

30Offshore there’s a long island, Tenedos,**7**

 Famous and rich while Priam’s kingdom**8**lasted,

 A treacherous anchorage now, and nothing more.

 They crossed to this and hid their ships behind it

 On the bare shore beyond. We thought they’d gone,

35Sailing home to Mycenae**9**before the wind,

 So Teucer’s**10**town is freed of her long anguish,

 Gates thrown wide! And out we go in joy

 To see the Dorian**11**campsites, all deserted,

 The beach they left behind. Here the Dolopians

40Pitched their tents, here cruel Achilles lodged,

 There lay the ships, and there, formed up in ranks,

 They came inland to fight us. Of our men

 One group stood marveling, gaping up to see

 The dire gift of the cold unbedded goddess, The sheer mass of the horse.

45Thymoetes**12**shouts

 It should be hauled inside the walls and moored

 High on the citadel**13**—whether by treason

 Or just because Troy’s fate went that way now.

 Capys**14**opposed him; so did the wiser heads:

50‘Into the sea with it,’ they said, ‘or burn it,

 Build up a bonfire under it,

 This trick of the Greeks, a gift no one can trust,

 Or cut it open, search the hollow belly!’

 Contrary **notions** pulled the crowd apart.

55Next thing we knew, in front of everyone,

 Laocoön**15**with a great company

 Came furiously running from the Height,**16**

 And still far off cried out: ‘O my poor people,

 Men of Troy, what madness has come over you?

60Can you believe the enemy truly gone?

 A gift from the Danaans, and no ruse?**17**

 Is that Ulysses’ way, as you have known him?

 Achaeans**18**must be hiding in this timber,

 Or it was built to butt against our walls,

65Peer over them into our houses, pelt

 The city from the sky. Some crookedness

 Is in this thing. Have no faith in the horse!

 Whatever it is, even when Greeks bring gifts

 I fear them, gifts and all.’

 He broke off then

70And rifled his big spear with all his might

 Against the horse’s flank, the curve of belly.

 It stuck there trembling, and the rounded hull

 Reverberated**19**groaning at the blow.

 If the gods’ will had not been sinister,

75If our own minds had not been crazed,

 He would have made us foul that Argive**20**den

 With bloody steel, and Troy would stand today—

 O citadel of Priam,**21**towering still!

 But now look: hillmen, shepherds of Dardania,**22**

80Raising a shout, dragged in before the king

 An unknown fellow with hands tied behind—

 This all as he himself had planned,

 Volunteering, letting them come across him,

 So he could open Troy to the Achaeans.

85Sure of himself this man was, braced for it

 Either way, to work his trick or die.

 From every quarter Trojans run to see him,

 Ring the prisoner round, and make a game

 Of jeering at him. Be instructed now

90In Greek deceptive arts: one barefaced deed

 Can tell you of them all.

 As the man stood there, shaken and defenseless,

 Looking around at ranks of Phrygians,**23**

 ‘Oh god,’ he said, ‘what land on earth, what seas

95Can take me in? What’s left me in the end,

 Outcast that I am from the Danaans,

 Now the Dardanians will have my blood?’

 The whimpering speech brought us up short; we felt

 A twinge for him. Let him speak up, we said,

100Tell us where he was born, what news he brought,

 What he could hope for as a prisoner.

 Taking his time, slow to discard his fright,

 He said:

 ‘I’ll tell you the whole truth, my lord,

 No matter what may come of it. Argive

105I am by birth, and will not say I’m not.

 That first of all: Fortune has made a derelict

 Of Sinon,**24**but the witch

 Won’t make an empty liar of him, too.

 Report of Palamedes**25**may have reached you,

110Scion of Belus’ line,**26**a famous man

 Who gave commands against the war. For this,

 On a trumped-up charge, on **perjured** testimony,

 The Greeks put him to death—but now they mourn him,

 Now he has lost the light. Being kin to him,

115In my first years I joined him as companion,

 Sent by my poor old father on this campaign,

 And while he held high rank and influence

 In royal councils, we did well, with honor.

 Then by the **guile** and envy of Ulysses—

120Nothing unheard of there!—he left this world,

 And I lived on, but under a cloud, in sorrow,

 Raging for my blameless friend’s downfall.

 Demented, too, I could not hold my peace

 But said if I had luck, if I won through

125Again to Argos,**27**I’d avenge him there.

 And I roused hatred with my talk; I fell

 Afoul now of that man. From that time on,

 Day in, day out, Ulysses

 Found new ways to bait and terrify me,

130Putting out shady rumors among the troops,

 Looking for weapons he could use against me.

 He could not rest till Calchas served his turn—

 But why go on? The tale’s unwelcome, useless,

 If Achaeans are all one,

135And it’s enough I’m called Achaean, then

 Exact the punishment, long overdue;

 The Ithacan**28**desires it; the Atridae**29**

 Would pay well for it.’

 Burning with curiosity,

 We questioned him, called on him to explain—

140Unable to conceive such a performance,

 The art of the Pelasgian.**30**He went on,

 Atremble, as though he feared us:

 ‘Many times

 The Danaans wished to organize retreat,

 To leave Troy and the long war, tired out.

145If only they had done it! Heavy weather

 At sea closed down on them, or a fresh gale

 From the Southwest would keep them from embarking,

 Most of all after this figure here,

 This horse they put together with maple beams,

150Reached its full height. Then wind and thunderstorms

 Rumbled in heaven. So in our quandary**31**

 We sent Eurypylus**32**to Phoebus’ oracle,**33**

 And he brought back this grim reply:

 ‘Blood and a virgin slain

155You gave to appease the winds, for your first voyage

 Troyward, O Danaans. Blood again

 And Argive blood, one life, wins your return.’

 When this got round among the soldiers, gloom

 Came over them, and a cold chill that ran

160To the very marrow. Who had death in store?

 Whom did Apollo call for? Now the man

 Of Ithaca haled Calchas out among us

 In **tumult** , calling on the seer to tell

 The true will of the gods. Ah, there were many

165Able to divine the crookedness

 And cruelty afoot for me, but they

 Looked on in silence. For ten days the seer

 Kept still, kept under cover, would not speak

 Of anyone, or name a man for death,

170Till driven to it at last by Ulysses’ cries—

 By prearrangement—he broke silence, barely

 Enough to designate me for the altar.

 Every last man agreed. The torments each

 Had feared for himself, now shifted to another,

175All could endure. And the infamous day came,

 The ritual, the salted meal, the fillets**34** . . .

 I broke free, I confess it, broke my chains,

 Hid myself all night in a muddy marsh,

 Concealed by reeds, waiting for them to sail If they were going to.

180Now no hope is left me

 Of seeing my home country ever again,

 My sweet children, my father, missed for years.

 Perhaps the army will demand they pay

 For my escape, my crime here, and their death,

185Poor things, will be my punishment. Ah, sir,

 I beg you by the gods above, the powers

 In whom truth lives, and by what faith remains

 Uncontaminated to men, take pity

 On pain so great and so unmerited!’

190For tears we gave him life, and pity, too.

 Priam himself ordered the gyves**35**removed

 And the tight chain between. In kindness then

 He said to him:

 ‘Whoever you may be,

 The Greeks are gone; forget them from now on;

195You shall be ours. And answer me these questions:

 Who put this huge thing up, this horse?

 Who designed it? What do they want with it?

 Is it religious or a means of war?’

 These were his questions. Then the captive, trained

200In trickery, in the stagecraft of Achaea,

 Lifted his hands **unfettered** to the stars.

 ‘Eternal fires of heaven,’ he began,

 ‘Powers inviolable, I swear by thee,

 As by the altars and **blaspheming** swords

205I got away from, and the gods’ white bands**36**

 I wore as one chosen for sacrifice,

 This is justice, I am justified

 In dropping all allegiance to the Greeks—

 As I had cause to hate them; I may bring

210Into the open what they would keep dark.

 No laws of my own country bind me now.

 Only be sure you keep your promises

 And keep faith, Troy, as you are kept from harm

 If what I say proves true, if what I give

215Is great and valuable.

 The whole hope

 Of the Danaans, and their confidence

 In the war they started, rested all along

 In help from Pallas. Then the night came

 When Diomedes and that criminal,

220Ulysses, dared to raid her holy shrine.

 They killed the guards on the high citadel

 And ripped away the statue, the Palladium,**37**

 **desecrating** with bloody hands the virginal

 Chaplets**38**of the goddess. After that,

225Danaan hopes waned and were undermined,

 Ebbing away, their strength in battle broken,

 The goddess now against them. This she made

 Evident to them all with signs and **portents** .

 Just as they set her statue up in camp,

230The eyes, cast upward, glowed with crackling flames,

 And salty sweat ran down the body. Then—

 I say it in awe—three times, up from the ground,

 The apparition of the goddess rose

 In a lightning flash, with shield and spear atremble.

235Calchas divined at once that the sea crossing

 Must be attempted in retreat—that Pergamum**39**

 Cannot be torn apart by Argive swords

 Unless at Argos first they get new omens,

 Carrying homeward the divine power

240Brought overseas in ships. Now they are gone

 Before the wind to the fatherland, Mycenae,

 Gone to enlist new troops and gods. They’ll cross

 The water again and be here, unforeseen.

 So Calchas read the portents. Warned by him,

245They set this figure up in reparation

 For the Palladium stolen, to appease

 The offended power and expiate**40**the crime.

 Enormous, though, he made them build the thing

 With timber braces, towering to the sky,

250Too big for the gates, not to be hauled inside

 And give the people back their ancient guardian.

 If any hand here violates this gift

 To great Minerva, then extinction waits,

 Not for one only—would god it were so—

255But for the realm of Priam and all Phrygians.

 If this proud offering, drawn by your hands,

 Should mount into your city, then so far

 As the walls of Pelops’ town**41**the tide of Asia

 Surges in war: that doom awaits our children.’

260This fraud of Sinon, his accomplished lying,

 Won us over; a tall tale and fake tears

 Had captured us, whom neither Diomedes

 Nor Larisaean Achilles**42**overpowered,

 Nor ten long years, nor all their thousand ships.”

*Despite warnings that Greeks are hiding in the horse, the Trojans bring it inside the walls of Troy. During the night, the Greeks emerge from the horse, ready for combat. Aeneas is also ready. In fierce spirit, he and his men fight against desperate odds. Toward daybreak, Aeneas finds a crowd of refugees gathered for exile, waiting for him to lead them to safety. He does so, with characteristic courage.*

## Critical Reading

**1. Respond:**If you were a Trojan listening to Sinon’s lying tale, do you think you would have sympathized with him? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:**Who recounts the story of Troy’s fall, and where?**(b) Interpret:**In what way do this perspective and setting color the narrative?

**3. (a) Recall:**According to Sinon, why did the Danaans leave him behind?**(b)Infer:**In what way does his explanation help him gain the Trojans’ trust?

**4. (a) Recall:**Why did the Danaans build the wooden horse, according to Sinon’s story?**(b) Analyze:**To what Trojan feelings might Sinon be trying to appeal with this story?

**5. Make a Judgment:**Do you think the Trojans’ compassion is what allows Sinon to trick them, or do you think the Trojans were really blinded by pride? Explain.

**Quick Review**

A **national epic** is a long narrative that tells a story about the founding or development of a nation or culture.

An **epic hero** is the central figure of an epic.

When you **apply background information** about a literary work, you consider its author or its context in order to understand it.

### Literary Analysis

**National Epic**

**1. (a)**Who is Aeneas’ mother?**(b)**Why might this fact have been a source of pride for ancient Romans reading their **national epic** ?

**2.**Why do you think Virgil repeatedly portrays the Greeks in the *Aeneid* as ruthless liars?

**3.**In what way do the last five lines of this selection allow Romans to remain proud of their origins despite the Trojans’ defeat?

### Connecting Literary Elements

**4.**The **epic hero** Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy even though it grieves him to do so. What Roman value does he demonstrate by agreeing to tell the story?

**5.**Which qualities of Aeneas and the Trojans might Romans have admired even though those qualities bring about Troy’s downfall?

**6. (a)**(a) Based on what the *Aeneid* reveals or suggests about each character, compare and contrast Aeneas with Ulysses (Odysseus), the epic hero of Homer’s *Odyssey.* Use a Venn diagram like the one shown.



**(b)**By contrasting the two heroes in the way that he does, what do you think Virgil suggests about the difference between Roman and Greek culture?

### Reading Strategy

**Applying Background Information**

**7.**Knowing that Ulysses’ (Odysseus’) reputation in Homer’s epics is that of a cunning and resourceful warrior, what do you think Laocoön means in the following lines?

 A gift from the Danaans, and no ruse?

 Is that Ulysses’ way, as you have known him?

### Extend Understanding

**8. Psychology Connection:** Sometimes a talent or strength can also be a weakness. In what way does the story of Troy’s fall support this paradox, or seeming contradiction?