

## Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

### Themes

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Primacy of Fate** - The direction and destination of Aeneas's course are preordained, and his various sufferings and glories in battle and at sea over the course of the epic merely postpone this unchangeable destiny. The power of fate stands above the power of the gods in the hierarchy of supernatural forces. Often it is associated with the will of Jupiter, the most powerful of the Olympians. Because Jupiter's will trumps the wills of all others, the interference in Aeneas's life by the lesser gods, who strive to advance their personal interests as much as they can within the contours of the larger destiny, do not really affect the overall outcome of events.

The development of individual characters in the epic is apparent in the readiness and resistance with which they meet the directives of fate. Juno and Turnus both fight destiny every step of the way, and so the epic's final resolution involves a transformation in each of them, as a result of which they resign themselves to fate and allow the story, at last, to arrive at its destined end. Dido desires Aeneas, whom fate denies her, and her desire consumes her. Aeneas preserves his sanity, as well as his own life and those of his men, by subordinating his own anxieties and desires to the demands of fate and the rules of piety. Fate, to Virgil's Roman audience, is a divine, religious principle that determines the course of history and has culminated in the Roman Empire.

**The Sufferings of Wanderers** - The first half of the *Aeneid* tells the story of the Trojans' wanderings as they make their way from Troy to Italy. Ancient culture was oriented toward familial loyalty and geographic origin, and stressed the idea that a homeland is one's source of identity. Because homelessness implies instability of both situation and identity, it is a form of suffering in and of itself. But Virgil adds to the sufferings of the wandering Trojans by putting them at the mercy of forces larger than themselves. On the sea, their fleet buffeted by frequent storms, the Trojans must repeatedly decide on a course of action in an uncertain world. The Trojans also feel disoriented each time they land on an unknown shore or learn where they are without knowing whether it is the place where they belong. As an experience that, from the point of view of the Trojans, is uncertain in every way, the long wanderings at sea serve as a metaphor for the kind of wandering that is characteristic of life in general. We and Virgil's Roman audience know what fate has in store for the Trojans, but the wandering characters themselves do not. Because these individual human beings are not always privy to the larger picture of destiny, they are still vulnerable to fears, surprises, desires, and unforeseen triumphs.

**The Glory of Rome** - Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* during what is known as the Golden Age of the Roman Empire, under the auspices of Rome's first emperor, Caesar Augustus. Virgil's purpose was to write a myth of Rome's origins that would emphasize the grandeur and legitimize the success of an empire that had conquered most of the known world. The *Aeneid* steadily points toward this already realized cultural pinnacle; Aeneas

even justifies his settlement in Latium in the same manner that the empire justified its settlement in numerous other foreign territories. Virgil works backward, connecting the political and social situation of his own day with the inherited tradition of the Greek gods and heroes, to show the former as historically derived from the latter. Order and good government triumph emphatically over the Italian peoples, whose world prior to the Trojans' arrival is characterized as a primitive existence of war, chaos, and emotional irrationality. By contrast, the empire under Augustus was generally a world of peace, order, and emotional stability.

## **Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.*

**Prophecies and Predictions** - Prophecy and prediction take many forms in the *Aeneid*, including dreams, visitations from the dead, mysterious signs and omens, and direct visitations of the gods or their divine messengers. These windows onto the future orient mortal characters toward fate as they try to glean, sometimes clearly and sometimes dimly, what is to come. Virgil's audience, however, hears these predictions with the advantage of hindsight, looking backward to observe the realization of an already accomplished fate. As observers who know about the future, the audience is in the same position as the gods, and the tension between the audience's and the characters' perspectives therefore emulates the difference between the position of mortals and that of gods.

**Founding a New City** - The mission to build a new city is an obsession for Aeneas and the Trojans. In Book II, Aeneas relates the story of Troy's destruction to Dido, who is herself recently displaced and in the process of founding a new city of her own. In Book III, Virgil relates several attempts undertaken by the Trojans to lay down the foundations for a city, all of which were thwarted by ill omens or plague. Aeneas also frequently uses the image of the realized city to inspire his people when their spirits flag. The walls, foundation, or towers of a city stand for civilization and even order itself, a remedy for the uncertainty, irrationality, and confusion that result from wandering without a home.

**Vengeance** - Avenging a wrong, especially the death of a loved one, is an important element of heroic culture and a pervasive motif in the *Aeneid*. The most prominent instance of vengeance comes in the final lines of the poem. Aeneas, having decided to spare Turnus, changes his mind when reminded of the slain Pallas, whose belt Turnus wears as a trophy. It would be considered dishonourable and disloyal to allow Pallas's death go unpunished. Vengeance comes in other, perhaps less noble, forms as well. Dido's suicide is at least partly an act of revenge on Aeneas, and she curses him as one of her last acts. The Harpies act out of vengefulness when they curse Aeneas for having killed their livestock. Similarly, the struggles of the gods against one another are likewise motivated by spite and revenge: the history of bruised vanity, left over from Paris's judgment of Venus as the fairest goddess, largely motivates Juno's aggressive behavior against the Trojans and Venus, their divine protector.

## **Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**Flames** - Fire symbolizes both destruction and erotic desire or love. With images of flames, Virgil connects the two. Paris's desire for Helen eventually leads to the fires of the siege of Troy. When Dido confesses her love for Aeneas to Anna, her sister, she begins, "I recognize / the signs of the old flame, of old desire" (IV.31–32). Dido also recalls her previous marriage in "the thought of the torch and the bridal bed" (IV.25). Torches limit the power of flames by controlling them, but the new love ignited in Dido's heart is never regulated by the institution of marriage, "the bridal bed." The flames she feels do not keep her warm but rather consume her mind. Virgil describes the way she dies in the synonymous terms "enflamed and driven mad" (IV.965).

**The Golden Bough** - According to the Sibyl, the priestess of Apollo, the golden bough is the symbol Aeneas must carry in order to gain access to the underworld. It is unusual for mortals to be allowed to visit the realm of the dead and then return to life. The golden bough is therefore the sign of Aeneas's special privilege.

**The Gates of War** - The opening of these gates indicates a declaration of war in a tradition that was still recognized even in Virgil's own day. That it is Juno rather than a king or even Turnus who opens the gates emphasizes the way immortal beings use mortals to settle scores. The Gates of War thus symbolize the chaos of a world in which divine force, often antagonistic to the health and welfare of mortals, overpowers human will and desire.

**The Trojan Hearth Gods** - The hearth gods of Troy, or *penates* as they are called in Latin, are mentioned repeatedly throughout the epic. They are symbols of locality and ancestry, tribal gods associated specifically with the city of Troy, who reside in the household hearth. Aeneas gathers them up along with his family when he departs from his devastated home, and they symbolize the continuity of Troy as it is transplanted to a new physical location.

**Weather** - The gods use weather as a force to express their will. The storm that Juno sends at the beginning of the epic symbolizes her rage. Venus, on the other hand, shows her affection for the Trojans by bidding the sea god, Neptune, to protect them. In Book IV, Venus and Juno conspire to isolate Dido and Aeneas in a cave by sending a storm to disrupt their hunting trip, symbolizing the rupture of normal social codes as well. Greek and Roman mythology has a tendency to make its symbols literal in this way—to connect the seen (a storm, for example) with the unseen (divine will) causally and dramatically.