

The aeneid – a
criticism of rome's
founding through a
pyrrhic victory



The Aeneid, Virgil's well-known myth about the events leading up to the founding of Rome, curiously seems to contain two distinct voices. While Virgil's friendship with Augustus (one of Rome's great emperors) and the historical period may have forced him to write in a politically correct voice, he made sure to incorporate a more private voice that runs contrary to the majority of the text on a literal level. The Aeneid is often praised for its glorification of the Roman Empire because of its suggestion that the city was destined by the gods to be powerful and magnificent. However, upon closer examination of the text, it appears that Virgil may have favored the view of the Roman Empire as a Pyrrhic victory- not worth the high cost that its existence required. Throughout the work, subtleties in Virgil's diction lend clarity to his critical voice. For example, slight expressions of doubt are often worked into the dialogue. When King Latinus welcomes the Trojans to his kingdom in Book VII, he tells them that he is familiar with their destiny to found a majestic city, yet ends his declaration by stating, "Your king's the man called for by fate, so I conclude, and so I wish, if there is truth in what I presage" (Virgil 7. 368-370). Here, Latinus is essentially approving the concept that the Trojans will come onto his land and take over his rule, so it is interesting that such a major decision is infused with doubt. Virgil may be paralleling this uncertainty with his own uncertainty that the divine Roman Empire should have been founded in such a costly manner. Nuances such as these allow Virgil to maintain a sense of skepticism even in the face of the more obvious deification of Rome. A second literary technique Virgil employs to critique his overt message is frequent allusion to past events. A prime example of such an allusion is the retelling of the fall of the Trojans in Book II as a commentary on war in general. Aeneas begins his monologue by <https://assignbuster.com/the-aeneid-a-criticism-of-romes-founding-through-a-pyrrhic-victory/>

addressing Queen Dido: "Sorrow too deep to tell, your majesty, you order me to feel and tell once more" (Virgil 2. 3-4). His opening establishes a somber atmosphere that lasts for the remainder of the story. More importantly, it allows Virgil to quietly establish a key concept behind his criticism- that in order for Rome to be founded, there must be even further devastation. "Your majesty," and the entire sentence in general, seems to have a double meaning- Aeneas is literally addressing Queen Dido, while metaphorically addressing the deities that have given Aeneas his mission. Upon continuing the story, Aeneas describes tragedy befalling certain warriors on either side of the war, arousing sympathy within his audience for the entire event. However, it also reveals the animalistic brutality that warfare breeds. Priam- sympathetically described as an "old man, uselessly [putting] on his shoulders, shaking with old age, armor unused for years" (Virgil 2. 62-64) - is made to witness the slaughter of his own son moments before he is stabbed to death on his altar, "slipping in the pooled blood of his son" (Virgil 2. 718). The rage fermented by warfare even affects the mighty Aeneas, who, upon seeing Helen cowering in a corner of the city, has "fires [blaze] up in [his] own spirit- a passion to avenge [his] fallen town and punish Helen's whorishness" (Virgil 2. 754-756). Aeneas' misdirected fury almost causes him to raise a hand against a helpless woman - one of the most shameful acts a man in his time could do. Virgil seems to imply that passions inspired in battle can harm even the most honorable of men, possibly foreshadowing and explaining Aeneas' killing rampage in the end of the poem. If the opening of Aeneas' retelling of the Trojan War implies that he is also consenting to restart battle when given orders from the gods, the powerful anti-war sentiments in Aeneas' story can be seen as yet another

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one of Virgil's criticisms of the ensuing war to found Rome. In general, the interplay of verifiable historical information with more personal accounts from honorable men from the past creates a believable and appealing foundation for Virgil's critical views, which are exposed more thoroughly as the text develops. With a base thus established for his analysis of the fight for Rome, Virgil begins to utilize major events that take place within the plot to critique the actions that take place during Aeneas' mission. One such crucial event in the poem is his journey to the Underworld in Book VI. In order to enter the Underworld, Aeneas must first find a golden bough on a tree and break it off. Earlier, he was told that if it was destined for him to enter, the bough would break off easily, and if he was not, it would not budge. Interestingly, the event is described as follows: "though it clung, [he] greedily broke it off" (Virgil 6. 298). The bough is also described in a surprisingly negative manner - as "a parasite on the trunk it twines around" (Virgil 6. 294). This relationship can be investigated on multiple levels, and all seem to point to the bough as symbolizing Rome at the peak of its prosperity. If Aeneas is the tree, the bough seems to be taking all of his efforts for itself, hinting that Rome forces Aeneas (like others) to make sacrifices for its own sake. If the tree is thought of as lands surrounding Rome (the bough), it appears as though Rome takes the wealth and well-being of others to benefit itself - certainly a powerful statement against the city's values. Also, since the bough did not break off easily, it is implied that Rome will not be founded without a struggle - one involving personal greed like that displayed by Aeneas while seizing the bough. The struggle itself is not even that glorious: the bough will grow back after Aeneas is gone, suggesting that all of his efforts will eventually just be repeated by someone

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greater than himself. This concept helps Virgil foster a sense of the worthlessness of all the fighting that takes place for Rome's founding, while the various implied metaphorical relationships between the tree and its golden bough all communicate statements against viewing the founding of Rome as worth its cost. The next part of the journey seems to reinforce this view. Aeneas passes a land of Unburied Souls and sees the soldier that earlier was thrown overboard on their journey to Italy. He also passes Dido, suffering in the Fields of Mourning, and a man who was murdered in Troy. All three of these people remind the reader once again of the great sacrifices that are made for the sake of Aeneas' mission. Through this portion of Aeneas' journey, Virgil seems to hint that surely the glory of one empire is not worth the possibility of an entire afterlife of suffering. It seems to put a slightly new perspective on Aeneas' mission, implying that earthly prosperity is not the only consequence to take into consideration when analyzing whether the Roman Empire was truly worth its drastic foundations. A second major event within the plot that strengthens the notion that Rome was not worth its price is the outbreak of the war itself. The events that stimulate the actual fighting between the armies are all caused by King Latinus' people's fears that their way of life will be neglected and replaced by the values of the intruding Trojans. For instance, Juno sends the Fury Allecto to provoke rage within Queen Amata at the fact that Latinus has agreed to marry their daughter off to Aeneas. Allecto is described as throwing a snake full of venom "down [Amata's] bosom to her midriff and her heart," where it "[slips] between her gown and her smooth breasts" and causes her to "[speak] out softly, quite like any mother, shedding hot tears at the marriage to a Phrygian" (Virgil 7. 477-478, 481, 492-494). With this description, Virgil <https://assignbuster.com/the-aeneid-a-criticism-of-romes-founding-through-a-pyrrhic-victory/>

is invoking sensual, sexual, and instinctual appeal to fully communicate the ferocity of Amata. Through this personal example, he seeks to imply that threatening the cultures of others leads to both personal and social destruction, since Amata's resulting actions help bring about actual battle. Rome is built upon the actions of a foreign army invading upon the Latins. In addition, Rome later is known for invading and conquering foreign cultures. Neither of these premises suggests that Rome is worth the destruction of the societies and individuals in its path. Major events within the epic's storyline, such as the voyage to the Underworld and the eruption of war in Italy, provide a ground for Virgil to utilize his anti-Roman voice while capturing the reader's attention so that it may be fully heard. On a smaller scale, certain characters provide some insight into Virgil's argument against the cost of Rome's glory - particularly female characters that stand apart from the masses of male soldiers and officials. The aforementioned Queen Dido is one of them; Aeneas has to sacrifice his personal relationship with her by leaving her behind when he sails off to find Italy. The agony of Dido's unrequited love- described as " a wound or inward fire eating her away"- causes her to commit suicide by burning herself upon a funeral pyre (4. 2-3.) The Queen was yet another victim of Aeneas' undertaking to found Rome- her own personal demise was brought on by his perceived necessity to leave her behind for his quest to Italy. The imagery of fire that is associated with Dido has many complex meanings - literally, of course, it is the flames that burn her body on the pyre. Metaphorically, it may refer to the uncontrollable passion within her. On a deeper level, it may refer to the burning of Troy and foreshadow the burning of Carthage that the Roman Empire is later responsible for. In all of these cases, actions by the Trojan (and eventually

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Roman) men create passions that lead to rampant destruction, sacrifice, and tragedy. If the Roman Empire is built upon such a foundation, how great can it really be? A second key woman, who appears later in the poem, is the great warrior Camilla. Camilla is slaughtered by one of the Trojans when she is distracted by lust for a shiny object. Before she is killed, Camilla's upbringing is briefly described: she was raised in "lonely mountains," breast-fed by a "wild mare," and clothed in a "tiger skin"; she remains a virgin, "untouched and ever cherished" (ll. 779, 781, 787, 795). Camilla has a certain appeal to the reader even though she is fighting against the Trojans because she is youthful, innocent, and symbolizes a natural way of life. However, she is tragically prone to corruption by her lust for riches. Her murder, in addition to representing yet another tragic sacrifice for the sake of Rome, symbolizes the dismissal of a more natural and pure way of life in the pursuit of riches. Virgil, it seems, believed that no amount of shiny objects are worth the sacrifice of purity and a natural manner of living. The culmination of the epic thus leaves the reader with an unexpected feeling: that perhaps the supposedly grand Roman Empire was not worth its Pyrrhic price tag. Beneath the obvious honor and riches that may be won through the fighting, Virgil layers reminders to never forget what lays beneath the empire- a foundation of sacrifice, bloodshed, and tragedy that affects even the most natural and honorable of people.