

The fire imagery in virgil's aeneid essay sample



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Virgil's *Aeneid* is pregnant with symbolic images much like its inspiration the Homeric poems. However, the presence of the image of fire fuels and dominates the entire story with its different traditional and metaphorical functions.

In the first four books of the *Aeneid* fire is used to denote strong passions like hate, rage, revenge, love, and to show destruction. Foremost, the destructive usage of fire is shown through Troy's sad fate as narrated by Aeneas to Dido in many lines in Book II: " Troy sunk in flames I saw (nor could prevent), (Line 844), " Thus, when a flood of fire by wind is borne/ Crackling it rolls, and mows the standing corn" (Lines 406-407), when Pantheus says of Troy, " The fire consumes the town, the foe commands" (Lines 440), "...we, feeble few, conspire/ To save a sinking town, involv'd in fire (Lines 473-474), when the remaining deceitful Greek finally opened the Trojan horse fire signals Troy's impending fate, " Within the gates, proud Sinon throws out/ The flames; and the foes for entrance press without" (Lines 443-444), and:

The palace of Deiphobus ascends

In smoky flames, and catches on his friends.

Ucalegon burns next: the seas are bright

With splendor not their own, and shine with Trojan light. (Lines 417-430)

A conflagration consumes Troy. From Anchises' home he says:

".... The crackling flames appear on high.

And driving sparkles dance along the sky.

With Vulcan's rage the rising winds conspire,

And near our palace roll the flood of fire. (Virgil, " Aeneid", Book II, Lines 958-961)

Also, when Aeneas realizes that he has lost Creusa, he narrates how he goes back to Troy:

In shining armor once again I sheathe

My limbs, not feeling wounds, nor fearing death.

Then headlong to the burning walls I run,

And seek the danger I was forc'd to shun. (Virgil, " Aeneid", Book II, Lines 1018-1021)

Upon reaching his father's house in the hope of finding his wife, Aeneas sees:

The house was fill'd with foes, with flames beset.

Driv'n on the wings of winds, whole sheets of fire,

Thro' air transported, to the roofs aspire. (Virgil, " Aeneid", Book II, Lines 1029-1031)

Fire also denotes blessing such as the halo of fire that came from young Ascanius' head in Book II:

Strange to relate, from young Iulus' head

A lambent flame arose, which gently spread

Around his brows, and on his temples fed. (Virgil, " Aeneid", Lines 930-932)

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Furthermore, the fire image as symbols of hope and escape are exposed as when after they saw the fire from Ascanius' head, Aeneas and his father Anchises saw something in the sky:

There shot a streaming lamp along the sky,
Which on the winged lightning seem'd to fly;
From o'er the roof the blaze began to move,
And, trailing, vanish'd in th' Idaean grove. (Virgil, "Aeneid", Lines 942-945)

Fire also symbolizes safe deliverance such as Achates' first act upon reaching the shores of Carthage from their long perilous journey at sea:

First, good Achates, with repeated strokes
Of clashing flints, their hidden fire provokes:
Short flame succeeds; a bed of wither'd leaves
The dying sparkles in their fall receives:
Caught into life, in fiery fumes they rise,
And, fed with stronger food, invade the skies. (Virgil, "Aeneid", Book I, Lines 245-250)

Love and desire are symbolized by fire and that is epitomized in the character of Dido, the Queen of Carthage. Dido's doomed love story only encompasses one book (Book IV) of *Aeneid* but it is full of fiery images showing her consuming profound affection for Aeneas. Virgil's opening lines of Dido's feeling shows that it is beginning to erode her self-control:

She fed within her veins a flame unseen;
The hero's valor, acts, and birth inspire

Her soul with love, and fan the secret fire. (Virgil, "Aeneid", Book IV, Lines 1-4)

When Anna, Dido's sister counseled her to marry Aeneas to increase the strength of Carthage this strengthened Dido's feelings:

These words, which from a friend and sister came,
With ease resolv'd the scruples of her fame,
And added fury to the kindled flame. (Virgil, "Aeneid". Bk IV, Lines 72-74)

In Line 91 fire is a feeling: "A gentle fire she feeds within her veins." The ultimate consummation of Dido and Aeneas's fevered love in the cave is further reinforced by the image of fire:

Then first the trembling earth the signal gave,
And flashing fires enlighten all the cave; (Virgil, "Aeneid", Bk. IV Lines 241-242)

Fire also describes the anger of King Hyarba, Dido's rejected suitor, upon learning of her amorous affair with the Trojan chief:

He, when he heard a fugitive could move
The Tyrian princess, who disdain'd his love,
His breast with fury burn'd, his eyes with fire,
Mad with despair, impatient with desire; (Virgil, "Aeneid", Bk. IV Lines 294-297)

Upon learning of Aeneas' departure Dido's fury and bitterness burns her heart and is overwhelmed only by her equally burning love for the Trojan:

".... Fury turns/ My brain; and my distemper'd bosom burns" (Bk. IV Lines 853-854) She requests her sister to prepare a great fire in the courtyard to burn Aeneas' personal belongings that he leaves behind including the bed where they slept on. The image of fire here serves as symbol of Dido's attempt to release herself from the bondage of her own feelings towards Aeneas. Thus:

Then cast the Trojan image on the fire,

And, as that burns, my passions shall expire (Virgil, " Aeneid", Bk. IV Lines 917-918)

However, this becomes an important fire image since eventually it becomes the Dido's own funeral pyre. It ultimately ends Dido's own sufferings of the heart and further moves the journey of Aeneas forward to meet his fate.

The fifth book of *Aeneid* is filled with the fire as a destructive symbol once again. This is when the Trojan women, who were left to themselves while the men were having funeral games in honor of Anchises, turn to riot, stirred by the still angry Juno's messenger Iris, against the thought of more endless journey and battles ahead by setting the ships on fire:

The matrons prosecute their mad design:

They shriek aloud; they snatch, with impious hands,

The food of altars; fires and flaming brands.

Green boughs and saplings, mingled in their haste,

And smoking torches, on the ships they cast. (Lines 857-861)

The second half of *Aeneid* shows its parallelism to the story of *The Iliad* whereby a war with the Latins led by Turnus ensues. Here more destruction symbolized by fire is found. In Book IX, taking advantage of Aeneas' presence, Turnus charges towards the Trojan fortress but finds no weakness. He then spots the Trojan ships and destroys them with fire:

He takes the wish'd occasion, fills his hand

With ready fires, and shakes a flaming brand.

Urg'd by his presence, ev'ry soul is warm'd,

And ev'ry hand with kindled firs is arm'd.

From the fir'd pines the scatt'ring sparkles fly;

Fat vapors, mix'd with flames, involve the sky (Lines 82-87)

Ever angry, Juno's heart burns when Aeneas was welcomed in Italy by its King who also offered his only daughter Lavinia as the Trojan's wife:

Another queen brings forth another brand,

To burn with foreign fires another land!

A second Paris, diff'ring but in name,

Shall fire his country with a second flame. (Bk. IX Lines 445-448)

Juno's fire is rage expressed in her instructions to the Fury Allecto:

Now shake, from out thy fruitful breast, the seeds

Of envy, discord, and of cruel deeds:

Confound the peace establish'd, and prepare

Their souls to hatred and their hands to war (Bk. IX Lines 472-475)

Allecto sends a fire to infect Amata, wife of King Latinus. This caustic fire represents chaos, destruction, mindless rage:

Unseen, unfelt, the fiery serpent skims

Betwixt her linen and her naked limbs;

His baleful breath inspiring, as he glides,

Now like a chain around her neck he rides,

Now like a filet to her head repairs,

And with his circling volumes folds her hairs.

At first the silent venom slid with ease,

And seiz'd her cooler senses by degrees;

Then, ere th' infected mass was fir'd too far,

In plaintive accents she began the war (Bk. IX Lines 491-500)

Upon her failed persuasion of Latinus not to offer Lavinia as a bride to a foreigner, Amata's fire of fury awakens:

But when she saw her reasons idly spent,

And could not move him from his fix'd intent,

She flew to rage' for now the snake possess'd

Her vital parts, and poison'd all her breast (Bk. IX Lines 522-525)

Also,

Amata's breast the Fury thus invades,

And fires with rage, amed the sylvan shades'

Then, when she found her venom spread so far,

The royal house embroil'd in civil war (Bk. IX Lines 565-568)

One noteworthy and very vivid part of Book IX was when Allecto in disguise tries to rouse Turnus' anger of Italy's foreign invasion by Aeneas but is rejected at first by Turnus. Turnus believes that peace and war should be the affairs of mortals and not for him to start. Allecto's wrath is provoked and she unleashes her ferocity in her naked form:

These haughty words Allecto's rage provoke,

And frightened Turnus trembled as she spoke.

Her eyes grow stiffen'd, and with sulphur burn;

Her hideous looks and hellis form return:

Her curling snakes with hissings fill the place,

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And open all the furies of her face:

Then, darting fire from her malignant eyes,

She cast him backward s he strove to rise,

And, ling'ring, sought to frame some new replies.

High on her head she rears two twisted snakes,

Her chains she rattles, and her whie she shakes'

And churning bloody foam, thus loudly speaks:

" Behold whom time has made to dote, and tell

Of arms imagin'd in her lonely cell!

Behold the Fates' infernal minister!

War, death, destruction, in my hand I bear."

Thus having said, her smold'ring torch, impress'd

With her full force, she plung'd into his breast. (Bk. IX Lines 622-639)

Book IX depicts the brewing war through the preparation of all involved.

Aeneas is

now backed by the gods led by Venus and her allies and not anymore under the torment of Juno unlike the first six books. Venus' convincing of her husband Vulcan to forge arms for Aeneas is full of warmth and desire:

...and straight her arms, of snowy hue,

About her unresolving husband threw.

Her soft embraces soon infuse desire;

His bones and marrow sudden warmth inspire;

And all the godhead feels the wonted fire. (Bk. VIII Lines 512-516)

In another vivid description, at the request of his wife Vulcan sets about the task of making a special armor for Aeneas:

The Cyclops here their heavy hammers deal; 555

Loud strokes, and hissings of tormented steel,

Are heard around; the boiling waters roar,

And smoky flames thro' fuming tunnels soar.

Hether the Father of the Fire, by night,

Thro' the brown air precipitates his flight.

On their eternal anvils here he found

The brethren beating, and the blows go round.

A load of pointless thunder now there lies

Before their hands, to ripen for the skies:

These darts, for angry Jove, they daily cast; 565

Consum'd mortals with prodigious waste.

Three rays of writhen rain, of fire three more,

Of winged southern winds and cloudy store

As many parts, thee dreadful mixture frame;

And fears are added, and avenging flame. (Bk VIII Lines 555-570)

Books IX to twelve spell in detail the dynamics of the war. Again the image of fire is used as a primary description of the destruction and chaos such as in Book X line 197, " Some firebrands throw, some flights of arrows send", Line 366 " His blazing shield, imbrac'd, he held on high. Describing Aeneas' armor:

The Latians saw from far, with dazzled eyes,

The radiant crest that seem'd in flames to rise,

And dart diffusive fires around the field,

And the keen glitt'ring of the golden shield. (Bk. X Lines 376-379)

As the war forges on more flaming images appear:

As when, in summer, welcome winds arise,

The watchful shepherd to the forest flies,

And fires the midmost plants; contagion spreads,

And catching flames infect the neighb'ring heads;

Around the forest flies the furious blast,

And all the leafy nation sinks at last,

And Vulcan rides in triumph o'er the waste;

The pastor, pleas'd with his dire victory,

Beholds the satiate flames in sheets ascend the sky: (Bk. X Lines 566-574)

Fire also symbolizes the defeat of the Latin army as shown in Book XI Lines 1311-1312 and 1316) when "...Aeneas sees/ Thro' smoking fields, his hast'ning enemies;" and " But westward to the sea the sun declin'd." Fire once again is used to describe Turnus' ire in his defeat: " So Turnus fares; his eyeballs flash with fire/ Thro' his wide nostrils clouds of smoke expire/ Trembling with rage, around the court he ran" (Book XII Lines 15-17). But like Hector in *The Iliad* , the poem is concluded with his death.

The fire image in the epic poem thus holds multiple meanings. Mostly as is its traditional metaphorical meaning, it is used to symbolize destruction and chaos. Other times it is a sign of blessing and deliverance. But most noted is that fire spurs action in *Aeneid* . It is fire that forwards the story to its fated conclusion, the destruction of the city of Troy to found another city in Italy, the death of Dido in a funeral pyre moves Aeneas and his crew out of Carthage to their predestined journey. Fire signifies change, action, constant movement. While it indicates death, it also typifies renewal after the embers have died down.

Works Cited

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