

On such a night as
this: analysis of
vergil's aeneid, ii.248-
259



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This passage from Vergil's Aeneid comes from Aeneas' tale to Dido, as the Trojan leader describes his city and comrades on the night when Sinon released the Greeks from the Trojan Horse and opened the gate for the Greek armies on the beach. Aeneas did not observe most of the scene he describes, and eschews details that he could not know in favor of obtaining aid from the Carthaginians and enthralling his audience, eliciting sympathy for the doomed Trojans. The passage contrasts the Trojans' ignorance and trust in the gods with imminent, unrevealed danger and the cruelty of fate, helping the Greeks in every way possible. The first event in the passage is the Trojans' celebration of the Horse. Sinon, a captured Greek, has told them that the creature is a gift from the Greeks, an offering to placate Pallas Athena. He also tells them that the Greeks have sailed home, where, for some reason, they can better pray to Athena. The Trojans, good servants of the gods, wheel the device into the temple of Minerva and deck the "delubra" with "festa...fronde," symbols of life that provide an ironic contrast to the Horse's load of death and impiety. The first instance of "delubra" in the Aeneid occurs just prior to this passage, at II. 225-6, when "delubra ad summa dracones/effugiunt" to kill the family of Laocoön, who urged the Trojans not to accept the horse. The word's repetition gives the passage a sinister tone, highlighting the hostility of the gods toward Troy. This sense of danger is elaborated by Aeneas when he mentions "miseri, quibus ultimus esset/Ille dies." The initial and unnecessary inclusion of "nos" calls attention to Aeneas' viewpoint and sympathies (not that they have not been well established elsewhere) as he recounts his own experience as one of these worshippers. The slightly displaced location of "ille dies," after the verb and at the beginning of a line, as well as the use of "ille," emphasize that this

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very day of festivity would be the end for the Trojans. They allowed the Horse into their city out of piety, and they are undone by the Greeks on a day of worship. The tone of this passage abruptly changes in the next lines, moving our gaze from the city of Troy to the nightfall over the entire world. The scene literally “vertitur” to the Greeks, while “interea,” like the “ille dies” before it, emphasizes the simultaneity of the event with the Trojan rejoicing. The phrase “caelum et ruit oceano nox” indicates events on a larger scale, as does the size of the “magna” shadows. Night is indifferent to the Trojans, and, if anything, helpful to the Greeks. The “caelum,” a word often used to indicate the home of the gods, does nothing to help Troy; the “nox,” placed emphatically at the end of a line, “ruit” inexorably on. (though, in fairness, the phrase “nox ruit” is often used by Vergil) Harsh “t,” “c,” and “x” sounds throughout the line (“vertitur interea caelum et ruit oceano nox”) underscore a harshness and menace as yet unconnected to any sign of danger. The next line, “involvens umbra magna terramque polumque,” continues the foreboding with a series of somber spondees, whose unhurried pace reflects a leisurely, almost relaxed night, contrasting with the hidden dangers. Its consonant “m” sounds rumble dangerously and contribute to the integrity of the line. Pairs of words with the same endings and numbers of syllables, as well as equivalent syntactical function, “umbra magna” and “terramque polumque,” follow each other; consonance resonates in almost every word, and the content is natural, almost pastoral; the line has a beauty divorced entirely from its context. But we, like the Trojans, are jolted from this calm meditation in the beginning of the next line, with the end of the tiny tricolon crescendo, “terramque polumque/ Myrmidonumque dolos,” moving us back from the cosmic scale to the battlefields again, ending on <https://assignbuster.com/on-such-a-night-as-this-analysis-of-vergils-aeneid-ii248-259/>

the polysyllabic “*Myrmidonumque*” whose length, placement, and scale catch the reader by surprise. The darkness, in all its beauty, is an aid to the Greeks, who make their first appearance in this passage under cover of night. After this jolt, the lines shift focus again to Troy, where the Trojans lie “*fusi*,” still unaware and calm, throughout the protection of the “*moenia*,” which, having been opened to the Horse, will not do the Trojans much good. The interior of the city is silent and momentarily safe; everyone “*conticuere*.” They are defenseless; “*sopor fessos complectitur artus*.” The next line shifts to the Greeks outside the walls, who, unlike the sleeping Trojans, industriously are at work on war, sailing the fleet from Tenedos. “*Et iam*” again stresses the simultaneity of the Trojans’ rest and the attack of the “*Argiva phalanx*,” both Greek words, menacing to Troy. The assonance of “*iam Argiva phalanx*,” “*instructis navibus ibat*,” and the alliterative “*Tenedo tacitae*,” like the gods’ favor, seem sadly bestowed on the warlike Greeks, but everything is working out for them; they sail in beauty, like the night. The chiasmic “*tacitae per amica silentia lunae*” shows the “*amica*” toward the Greeks of nature itself. The use of both “*tacitae*” and “*silentia*” emphasize the quiet, which probably refers to the Greek’s fleet rather than the night in general; while Vergil leaves no doubt that the night is quiet, there is no reason why that would help the Greeks, since if anything the lack of additional noise would make it easier for the Trojans to hear their approach. “*Tacitae*” is almost a transferred epithet. The moon is quiet, but quiet moons are hardly noteworthy; its light, not its silence, would be helping the fleet. The adjective’s placement thus makes the silent Greeks almost a part of their surroundings. Indeed, the Greeks are right at home on the beach. They seek the shore, “*nota*” not only because they know where it is, <https://assignbuster.com/on-such-a-night-as-this-analysis-of-vergils-aeneid-ii248-259/>

but because they have camped there so long that it has become familiar to them. War and convenience collide, as they do again with the “flammas” seen from the city. The word presages danger of a burning city to the Trojans, but to the Greeks it is merely a useful signal. Sinon, who deceived the Trojans with a story about how he escaped human sacrifice, works “furtim” in the darkness, “fatisque deum defensus iniquis.” The often impious Greeks, favored by Minerva, overcome the inhabitants of Troy by exploiting the Trojans’ good-naturedness and their desperation to win the goddess’s favor. The gods side with Greece, not Troy, and the fates are not just. As Anchises observes in III. 540-3, horses can be a sign of good or ill; the horse itself is a symbol of Neptune, once Troy’s beneficent patron god, who is now breaking down the city walls. Of course, the Greeks deserve some of the credit for Troy’s destruction. The description moves once from the whole Greek fleet, “instructis navibus,” to the “tacitae...lunae”; from there the scale focuses on a particular “regia puppis,” expands to encompass “fatisque deum,” and then contracts upon Sinon. His betrayal of the Trojans’ hospitality is emphasized by the placement of his name at the very end of this long sentence, in a build-up of suspense and shock. With his name begins a long list of invaders, showing the magnitude and threat of the Greek invasion. In a slight zeugma, Sinon “laxat” both the “Danaos” and the “claustra.” The final two and a half lines of the sentence, “inclusos utero Danaos et pinea furtim/Laxat claustra Sinon,” are not confusing, but they do contain much disjuncting hyperbaton, as the order and peace of the night are broken by the freed Greeks, born from the “utero” of a wooden horse. Although it is a Trojan who relates the story of Troy’s fall, the Greeks dominate this section of it. The shifting scale reveals powerful forces, such as

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fate, the gods, and the weather, working alongside the Greek armies at all levels, helping the fleet and Sinon alike. The overall tone, contrasting with the Trojans' doomed celebrations, is of subdued menace, consistent throughout the rest of the passage. War is about to begin anew, and, as Hector tells Aeneas, it is too late to save Troy. The goodness of the Trojans we see, of Creusa and Anchises, Priam and Hecuba, Hector and of course Aeneas, cannot change fate, but it can allow a new city to be founded. Fate now sides with the Greeks, but soon it will be with Aeneas. So will the gods, eventually, and all the tiny factors that here bring Troy's ruin. Works Cited: Austin, R. G. *Aeneidos Liber Secvndvs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1964. Vergil; Pharr, Clyde, ed. *Vergil's Aeneid, Books I-VI*. Wauconda, Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc. 1998.