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Similes within Virgil’s *Aeneid*

Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which details the journey of Aeneas, the mythical original founder of Rome, utilizes a multitude of similes when describing various character’s actions and character, as well as describing natural phenomena of the world. These similes serve the purpose of either expanding on the purpose of the events that take place or aiding in images in the reader’s mind during key moments within the poem. While these similes may appear at first glance to be rather long-winded, the amount of expression and imagery that is conjured by Virgil through them are vital to understanding the motives and meanings behind the characters being described, as well as describing the presence (and lack thereof) of Roman ideals in the characters of the poem.

Similes appear as early as the first 200 lines of the poem, when Neptune’s anger at Eurus and Zephyr comes to a boiling point as they try to sink Aeneas and his men. As Neptune strides across the sea, calming the roiling waves, he is compared to a righteous man in a riot:

“And just as, often, when a crowd of people

is rocked by a rebellion, and the rabble

rage in their minds, and firebrands and stones

fly fast - for fury finds its weapons - if,

by chance, they see a man remarkable

for righteousness and service, they are silent

and stand attentively; and he controls

their passion by his words and cools their spirits:

so all the clamor of the sea subsided”(Book 1, lines 209-217).

This comparison of the ocean to a violent riot, and of Neptune to a powerful, calming, righteous man who calms the squabbling crowd paints a vivid image that describes the *furor* contained within Juno towards Aeneas (and thus Aeneas’ own irrationality and unwillingness to push forward with his journey). The imagery is juxtaposed with Aeneas’ destiny to found Rome preventing him from throwing his own life away out of remorse for Troy. This theme of Aeneas having somewhat of a split position in regards to his founding of Rome is common throughout the numerous similes implemented by Virgil.

The duality expressed in the previous simile pops up again late in book 1, after Aeneas and his men make landfall at Carthage. Aeneas is gazing down at the bustling city, admiring its productivity and liveliness:

“Just as the bees in early summer, busy

beneath the sunlight through the flowered meadows,

when some lead on their full-grown young and others

press out the flowing honey, pack the cells

with sweet nectar, or gathering the burdens

of those returning”(Book 1, lines 611-616).

Aeneas looks longingly at the industrious and prospering Carthage, crying out “How fortunate are those whose walls already rise!”(Book 1, lines 619-620). The comparison of Carthage to a thriving beehive, with its citizens coming and going, is sharply juxtaposed with the tragic sense of loss that Aeneas must feel at that moment for his homeland of Troy, which was so recently lost to the Greeks. The simile stirs up a lot of pity for Aeneas who, just as in the previously discussed simile, is fighting two conflicting emotions within himself: that of longing for Troy, and that of duty towards the founding of Rome. Additionally, this image of a bustling beehive serves as a precursor to Rome’s own greatness and its ties to Aeneas.

Thus far, the similes examined have portrayed Aeneas as caught between two positions, showing him as floating in a state of limbo between his longing for Troy and his *pietas.* These themes are cemented in Book 4, when Aeneas is compared to a sturdy oak tree when confronted by Dido on his decision to leave Carthage and continue to Italy:

“As when, among the Alps, north winds

will strain against each other to root out

with blasts - now on this side, now that - a stout

oak tree whose wood is full of years; the roar

is shattering, the trunk is shaken, and

high branches scatter on the ground; but it

still grips the rocks; as steeply as it thrusts

its crown into the upper air, so deep

the roots it reaches down to Tartarus” (Book 4, lines 606-615).

Just as a tree stretches from below the ground into the sky, so does Aeneas stretch himself between differing levels of personal desires and personal devotion, and Virgil perfectly captures this with the simile of Aeneas, comparing him to a giant tree whose roots reach down to the darkest depths of the underworld up to the highest reaches of the heavens. These opposites represent in Aeneas his own personal desire to stay with Dido and rule over Carthage with her (“the upper air”), as well as the definitively harder choice of leaving Dido and pushing onward, as the Gods want him to, to Italy and eventually the founding of Rome. Thus, Virgil implants the idea of choices between desire and duty, a common theme throughout many heroic epics, such as Achilles’ decision to go to war rather than return home in Homer’s *The Iliad*.

Aeneas is not the sole benefactor of Virgil’s use of similes throughout *The Aeneid,* however. The enemies that Aeneas faces are constantly compared to vicious animals or forces of nature when Virgil describes their actions. This plants in the reader's mind a respect for the Roman ideals that Aeneas mostly upholds up until the end of the poem, as well as disdain for the barbarically portrayed ideals held by the Greeks and later the opposing Latins. Again, Virgil creates a schism between Roman and non-Roman ideals through simile.

The greatest example of this in the text appears during the battle between the Trojans and Latins, when Turnus is compared to the Nile and the Ganges:

“Even as the silent Ganges

that rises high with seven tranquil streams,

or Nile when his rich flood ebbs from the fields

and he at last sinks back into his channel” (Book 9, lines 37-40)

This imagery of a flowing river when compared to Turnus appears at first to be a compliment by Virgil on Turnus’ behalf, stating that Turnus is as tranquil as the Ganges and as life-giving as the Nile. However, when considering that these rivers belong to the East of Italy, in lands that are not as known or admired to the Romans as other nearby lands, it is not a hard jump to make that this comparison in fact jabs at Turnus, calling out his barbarous and forceful nature. This comparison is backed even further, considering that earlier in the poem, Virgil compares the Greeks’ invasion of Priam’s palace to a river, with a negative connotation:

“Their soldiers stream across the palace -

less furious than these, the foaming river

when it has burst across resisting banks

and boundaries and overflows, its angry

flood piling in a mass along the plains

as it drags flocks and folds across the fields.” (Book 2, lines 663-668)

Thus the comparison of Turnus to two rivers carries with it more connotation than would appear at first glance. By combining the two meanings behind the river simile, that of Turnus being tranquil and prosperous to his people and that of Turnus being as deadly and malicious as the Greeks, Virgil has created an image of Turnus as having a split personality: one which is ferocious and barbarous and one that is decidedly less so.

The final major similarity that further exemplifies duality throughout the poem appears in the last lines of the poem, when Aeneas and Turnus finally face each other in battle. After clashing together, they are compared to battling bulls:

“Just as,

on giant Sila or on tall Taburnus,

when two bulls charge together into battle

with butting brows, the herdsmen fall back; all

the flock is mute with fear; the heifers wonder

who is to rule the forest, whom the herds

must follow; and the bulls with massive force

trade wounds;” (Book 12, lines 949-956)

Here, Virgil is not only exemplifying the brutal nature of Turnus, but that of Aeneas as well. This comparison of bulls fighting effectively strips both Turnus and Aeneas of morality, portraying them as base animals capable of brutal acts of violence. This simile further establishes Turnus as one who exhibits traits that are the opposite of that which Rome upholds. However, while Aeneas has, as stated before, been described to be in a state of emotional/dutiful limbo, he has for the most part been painted as one who is the opposite of Turnus; one who displays Roman ideals in his actions. During the battle with the Latins, this view shifts dramatically, suddenly portraying him as a promoter of violence and one who allows emotions to fog his judgement, as seen during his mental breakdown at the death of Pallas. The bull simile pushes this version of Aeneas to the forefront of the reader’s mind, as well as once again furthering the duality of Aeneas that has been present from Book 1.

Throughout *The Aeneid*, Virgil uses similes to convey the duality of Aeneas, as well as that of others that Aeneas encounters. This is seen from the very beginning of the poem as the violent storm berates Aeneas and his men on the seas, to the very end when Aeneas and Turnus battle with the ferocity and lack of morality seen in bulls. Without these epic similes, most of the meaning behind Aeneas actions, and the ideas that Virgil is trying to convey in the subtext of situations, would be lost.

Hunter,

You have some good ideas here. But the essay doesn’t quite fulfill the assignment. First, you need to explain the narrative context for each of the similes. Second, your analysis of the similes is often too brief. The text of your paper is no more than 4 pages, given the long similes you quote and the fact that the whole paper is about 4 ½ pages long. Also, the paper has a lot of syntactical errors. Please read through my comments and corrections carefully. I recommend that you revise.

B-