On the Nature of Things Study Guide

On the Nature of Things by Lucretius

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Introduction

Lucretius' scientific epic *De rerum natura* is considered a masterpiece of Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus taught that the world could be understood by reason and that religion only arouses unnecessary fear. Lucretius denounced popular beliefs in deities and supernatural creatures. He viewed humans as ignorant creatures who fabricated the powers of the gods, only to live in fear of them. In his epic, Lucretius appeals to reason in order to enlighten his readers and persuade them to accept his belief system. Because of its atheistic ideals, *De rerum natura* almost faded into obscurity as Christianity gained momentum. During the Renaissance, however, Lucretius's epic was rediscovered, and it continues to be translated and studied today.

As a poem, *De rerum natura* is remarkable. First, it is a lyrical presentation of what would otherwise be tedious information. Second, it is the earliest known work of Latin hexameter verse. (Hexameter verse is poetry in which each line has six "feet," or units of rhythm.) The fact that it is such a lengthy example secures its distinction as an important work. Although a rumor persists that Cicero edited the epic, history better supports the idea that Cicero's brother Quintus directed its publication.

De rerum natura is praised for its depiction of nature as a source of life, death, joy, peace, and terror. It is not a poem strictly about the physical world, as Epicureanism also offers guidelines for human conduct and relationships. Lucretius's philosophy of how human beings should live dictates pursuing friendship and avoiding war. In the introduction to his translation of *De rerum natura*, Anthony M. Esolen comments that Lucretius "really believes that in Epicureanism lies our best hope for happiness, and he very much wants to let us in on the secret, so that we may be as happy as is possible in a world imperfectly suited for our existence."

Author Biography

Titus Lucretius Carus, known as Lucretius, was born in Rome circa 94 B.C. Little is known about his life apart from the beliefs and values he describes in his epic scientific poem, *De rerum natura*, or *On the Nature of Things*. Unfortunately, nothing is known about Lucretius' schooling, family, or literary development. There is confusion regarding his social standing, as the name "Carus" suggests servitude, while "Lucretius" indicates aristocracy. Scholars believe that his six-book masterpiece, *De rerum natura*, is unfinished. In this epic, he repeatedly discourages the reader from fearing death, advice Lucretius apparently embraced when he committed suicide in about 55 B.C. According to a longstanding (although questionable) rumor reported by the historian Jerome, Lucretius was driven insane by a love potion given to him by his wife.

Throughout his life, Lucretius was surrounded by political upheaval and war. He saw firsthand the cruelty and domination of dictators, along with the instability of such rule. He saw the decline of Rome's republican government and died before stability was restored. He was a man who felt deep compassion for the human race, which he perceived as living in fear and ignorance. He criticized religious leaders who instilled terror in order to bring about moral living. Lucretius was a follower of Epicurus and his scientific, rational way of understanding the world. In turn, Lucretius became a strong influence on later writers such as Virgil and Ovid.

Plot Summary

Book One

Lucretius begins by invoking the name of Venus as a creative force, appealing to Memmius (to whom the work is addressed), and then praising his master Epicurus. (Scholars have noted the seeming inconsistency in Lucretius' invoking Venus at the beginning of a work that disclaims the gods' involvement with human life. The solution most commonly offered is that such a invocation was standard in the literature of the time, and that by keeping to the standard Lucretius hoped to win the trust and continued attention of readers.) Lucretius states that religion teaches fear, while science teaches fact. He recounts the story of Agamemnon, who was willing to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia for the good will of the gods. This is not piety, Lucretius says, but rather wickedness demanded by religion.

Next, Lucretius sets about describing atoms as the building blocks of every object and living thing in the world. Nothing comes from nothing, and no object can ever be reduced to nothing. Although atoms cannot be seen, their presence can be felt in the wind, evaporation and humidity, and sensory experience. The entire world is composed of atoms and space, or void. Void is what allows motion because atoms can move through space without interference. Lucretius asserts that atoms are indivisible, solid, and indestructible, as each one moves from thing to thing.

In anticipation of protests, Lucretius disclaims the theories of the philosophers Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and the Stoic objectors. Next, Lucretius explains that the universe is infinite. He illustrates this point by asking what would happen if a man went to the edge of the earth and threw a spear. The spear would, of course, go somewhere. Consequently, he reasons, atoms and void are infinite.

Book Two

Lucretius explains that the differing properties of things are accounted for by the different properties of atoms. For example, substances with a bitter or harsh taste have sharper atoms than substances that have pleasant tastes. The same is true for aromas. A disagreeable scent irritates the nose as its atoms pass through, while pleasant scents are composed of smooth atoms. There are a fixed number of atomic shapes even though there are infinite atoms. Atoms are also colorless. He stresses that atoms are indestructible, but their compulsion to move on to other things creates instability in the world. He describes atomic motion as swerving. If atoms simply moved straight down, he explains, they would never collide and hence would never create anything at all.

All things must die, despite the fact that the atoms that make up a person came from another source and will become something else when the person dies. Earth provides

everything humans need to live, but not forever. Lucretius concludes with the idea that there are other worlds like this one, subject to the same laws of atoms.

Book Three

The atomic theories are applied to humankind as Lucretius considers the nature of the soul (which he equates with the mind). He argues that even the soul is subject to death because it is composed of atoms, which are only present temporarily. Lucretius sets out four elements of the soul's atomic composition □air, breath, warmth, and an unnamed fourth element. He claims that the soul resides in a person's chest and is really a body part, except that the soul cannot exist without the body and vice-versa. Lucretius likens the body to a jar holding the soul; if the jar is dropped and shatters, the soul leaks out. Lucretius ends the book by reproaching those who fear death. After all, there is nothing after death, so why live in fear of nothingness? Death brings about the end of desire and is not to be mourned. Lucretius adds that all the great men who have gone before have died, so it is approaching arrogance to feel uncomfortable about following their paths. Living one's entire life in fear of death serves only to ruin what chance of happiness and peace there may be.

Book Four

Sense perception and visions are accounted for in Book Four. Lucretius explains that objects constantly give off atoms that can be perceived by the senses. These are called "films" or "peels." He adds that the senses are completely reliable, although interpretations of what is sensed are not always accurate. As an example, he writes that there are no such things as Centaurs, yet people have seen them because they perceive a film of a man and a film of a horse stuck together and interpret this as a single creature. Because people can be fooled by films that produce, what seems to be, images of Centaurs and other non-existent creatures, they feel compelled to create mythologies about them. This is how woodland gods, spectres, and dreams come into being in the mind.

As Lucretius approaches the end of this book, he begins a fiery section about love and lust. He describes romantic love as an emotional state to be avoided, as it is destructive and causes men and women to make poor decisions and lead themselves into ruin. Oddly, he includes a discussion of infertility and explains why it happens and how it can be corrected. He concludes with a brief description of true love. "Habit is the recipe for love," he says, suggesting that true love is not found in sudden passion but, instead, develops over time.

Book Five

In Book Five, the longest of the six books, Lucretius offers an account of how the world began and how civilization developed. He again emphasizes the futility of fearing gods or death, and he praises the virtues of friendship and peace. First, Lucretius establishes

that his telling of the creation of the world is not blasphemous because the gods are remote and unconcerned with human dealings. Besides, the gods have nothing to do with the creation of the world; nature is solely responsible. Explaining the wonders of celestial bodies, he returns to the assertion that everything is mortal and is subject to decay. The sun and moon are about the same size as they appear to the eyes and celestial bodies move because of gusts of heavenly winds. He describes the destructive nature of the elements and how they often battle each other.

Next, Lucretius describes life for early people as difficult and dangerous, but free of war between tribes. Early in human history, there were freakish beings that failed to continue in existence because they were unable to survive into adulthood, find food, or procreate. He explains that whenever a new idea came about, it was shared so that the other people could benefit by it. Humankind comes to discover fire, create language and music, develop medicine, establish law, and, upon discovering metal, makes progress in farming. Warfare is also raised to new heights with the creation of metal weapons.

Book Six

Lucretius opens Book Six with an extended speech about Epicurus, which many scholars view as a eulogy. In the final book of his epic, Lucretius intends to cast away any doubt in his reader's mind that there exist deities that meddle in human affairs. Natural occurrences such as high winds, volcanic eruptions, lightning, and earthquakes have nothing to do with divine activity. Only nature has the power to make these things happen, and to assume that the gods create them is ridiculous. Further, worshipping the gods does not prevent catastrophe. By discussing each type of natural disaster (and phenomena such as magnetism and rainbows), Lucretius hopes to reveal the folly of superstition so prevalent in his society.

Lucretius tells of the Athenian plague of 430 B.C., during which there was no comfort for the afflicted or for the survivors. Lucretius supposes that the Athenians failed to realize that there are limits to both pleasure and pain, otherwise they would know that nature does not give death without also giving life. This story brings the epic to a fitting close, as Lucretius began with the figure of Venus as a creative and life-giving force. Throughout the poem, Lucretius emphasizes the fleeting quality of life, and he supports his argument by constructing his poem in such a way that it begins with life and ends with death.

Characters

Epicurus

Epicurus is the father of the philosophy embraced in *De rerum natura*. Throughout the work, Lucretius praises Epicurus as "the founder of that way of life called 'wisdom'," "glory of Greece," "founder of truth," and "the first to stand firm in defiance" of popular religion.

(Gaius) Memmius

De rerum natura is addressed to Memmius. Lucretius writes to him as to a student, a convention that allows Lucretius to speak authoritatively as an instructor to all his readers. Memmius was a contemporary of Lucretius who wrote erotic verse. He became involved in questionable political activities and was eventually exiled. Many historians believe that Lucretius received financial patronage from Memmius.

Themes

War and Friendship

As an Epicurean, Lucretius opposes war and values friendship and cooperation. He carries out these twin themes in *De rerum natura*, painting dreadful, gruesome pictures of war and pleasant pictures of people enjoying each other's company and supporting each other. Lucretius frequently uses war imagery to illustrate scientific points about atoms and nature. Describing the occurrence of accidents, he introduces the story of Helen of Troy and the Trojan War that resulted from her abduction. In Book Three, Lucretius explains that there is no reason to fear death, using an illustration from the Peloponnesian Wars to make his point. He writes that during these horrific wars, everyone lived in fear of which side would triumph and who would subsequently rule them. According to Lucretius, this is how most people view death. Letting go of one's fear of death, however, means releasing the fear of which "side" (life or death) will win.

Complementing Lucretius' view of war is the Epicurean view of friendship. The Epicureans regarded friendship as one of the greatest and most worthwhile experiences humans can pursue in life. This idea is not, however, carried over into the realm of romantic love. Lucretius denounces surrendering to this kind of love, as it only leads people to make unwise decisions and squander their fortunes, and leaves them vulnerable to jealousy and rejection.

Religion and Science

The Epicurean rejection of religion in favor of reason and science permeates *De rerum natura*. Lucretius explains that people have been too quick to believe that the movements and events of nature are dictated by the gods. On the contrary, Lucretius depicts the gods as remote beings living in total peace and tranquility. They have no reason to be interested in human affairs, so it is no use to worship them or make sacrifices to them. By telling the tragic story of Agamemnon willingly sacrificing his own daughter to win the favor of the gods, Lucretius demonstrates that what humans understand to be piety is actually senseless cruelty.

Science, on the other hand, is the path to truth. Lucretius maintains that the senses are unfailing and that, combined with experience, they have the power to teach people how the world truly operates. He appeals to reason and makes methodical arguments that not only tear down existing belief systems about natural occurrences, but also seek to replace them with reasonable explanations. For Lucretius, the only worthy religion is reverence toward nature. In Book Two, he goes so far as to assert that Earth is the only true creative divinity: "So Earth alone is called 'Great Mother of Gods' / And 'Mother of Beasts' and 'She Who Formed Our Flesh.'"

Nature's Cyclical Rhythms

Throughout the poem, Lucretius affirms that nature functions in ongoing, predictable cycles. There is no death without birth, and every atom moves through a series of cycles as it converges with other atoms to create different things. In Book One, Lucretius writes, "Nothing returns to nothing; when things shatter / They all return to their constituent atoms. . . . / Nature restores / One thing from the stuff of another, nor does she allow / A birth, without a corresponding death." In Book Two, he comments, "So the / Whole is ever / Renewed, while mortal things exchange their lives." The cycles of nature are also apparent in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars.

Fear and Ignorance

Perhaps Lucretius' greatest goal in writing *De rerum natura* was to bring readers out of a state of superstition and needless fear into a state of rationality and understanding. He renounced fear in all six books, viewing it as a limitation on human life. In Book Three, he blamed fear for urging men to betray their countrymen and their own families, for generating envy, and for ruining friendships. Because life is relatively short and there is nothing afterwards, Lucretius sees no reason to spend one's life in constant fear of the wrath of the gods or of death. Ultimately, he contends, whatever will happen cannot be averted or in any way controlled by a person, so it is best to pursue simple pleasures and a carefree lifestyle.

The harshest realization, according to Lucretius, is that most fear is human-made. Unable to explain the world around them and aware of the presence of the gods (Lucretius says these people could see the gods), early people devised stories about divine intervention. This provided an explanation of the workings of nature and their own fates. Unfortunately, the result was that people learned to live in fear of seemingly all-powerful and fickle gods. From fear comes misery, as well as barbaric practices such as sacrifice, and senseless practices such as kneeling and burning incense. In Book One, Lucretius writes that "before our eyes man's life lay groveling, prostrate, / Crushed to the dust under the burden of Religion. . . . " Lucretius hoped that by explaining how nature really works, he would be able to lift the veil of ignorance and fear so that people could live fully, happily, and educated. Praising Epicurus in Book One, he proclaimed, "Religion now lies trampled beneath our feet, / And we are made gods by the victory."

Style

Epic Features

De rerum natura is a very unusual example of an epic. It lacks many of the epic's typical features, including an expansive setting, a heroic and adventurous figure, and praise for the gods. Still, the language is lofty and lyrical, and Lucretius often utilizes analogies and metaphors to convey his ideas. While he makes frequent allusions to the works of other philosophers, he generally does so to refute their positions rather than to align his work with theirs, as most epics do.

Audience

Lucretius claims that his audience is Memmius, the person to whom the epic is dedicated and addressed. In reality, however, the work is written for those who falsely believe in divine intervention and fear death. In short, his audience is his contemporaries and others who would come after him. His intention was to enlighten his readers in order to free them from a life of needless fear.

Didactic and Methodical Approach

In presenting his scientific ideas, Lucretius adopts a fitting writing style to complement his ideology. He explains the laws of physics in a methodical, organized manner that gives the reader the feeling that Lucretius is an instructor who is teaching a straightforward lesson. He proves one point, only to build on that point in a later discussion. The poem is didactic□intended to teach, not to inspire emotions or profound thoughts. Throughout the text, he makes statements of absolute truth as one who speaks with authority. In Book Two, for example, he proclaims, "Apply your mind now, hear the truth of reason!" To further establish himself as a reliable expert, he constantly denounces those who would disagree with him. In Book Four, he writes, "Lend me your subtle attention and keen mind, / And don't shout 'That can't be!' at what I say. . . . " Typical of his comments regarding opposing theories, he writes in Book Five, "This farfetched nonsense reason must reject."

Analogies

In order to make his scientific explanations accessible to a wide range of readers, Lucretius relies on analogies. He likens his scientific verse to honey-rimmed glasses of foul-tasting wormwood given to children by doctors. As he discusses the lightness of the soul's atoms in Book Three, he tells the reader that the fact that the soul cannot be felt by touch does not deny its existence. To illustrate this idea, he reminds the reader that chalk settling on the skin cannot be felt, fog cannot be felt, and a cobweb drifting onto one's head cannot be felt, yet all of these things exist.

Repetition

Just as Lucretius employs analogies to make certain his reader understands his ideas, he uses repetition to ensure that they do not forget what he has taught them Numerous times and in numerous ways, for example, Lucretius emphasizes that nature operates in cycles that cannot be altered. He believes it is essential that his audience understand this point, so he inserts it in various forms throughout the text. The same is true for his views on fear. At every opportunity, he reiterates the wastefulness of living in fear.

Historical Context

Political Turmoil

During Lucretius' life (94 B.C. to 55 B.C.), Rome suffered a great deal of political upheaval in the struggle for power. In 88 B.C. civil war erupted between the aristocrat Lucius Cornelius Sulla and the populist Gaius Marius. When Marius marched against Rome, he was cruel and vindictive, seeking vengeance on the aristocracy with indiscriminate killing sprees. When Lucretius was a teenager, Sulla returned to Rome to be its dictator, seeking retaliation against those who had opposed him in the earlier conflict. Lucretius also saw the decline of the republican government that had been in place for much of his life. Although unstable, at least the republican government was familiar to the people and they did not have to live in constant fear of what kind of oppressive military regime would rule them next. A consequence of the fall of the republic was a shift in loyalty from the government to individual military leaders and political figures. The decline of the republican spirit among the people also weakened the Romans' traditional commitment to the family and state. In addition, many Romans were beginning to call into question the mythology that had guided their religious beliefs for so long. All of these factors created a cultural transformation and uncertainty.

The ongoing struggle for power among Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar was underway throughout much of Lucretius' youth. Although the three formed a triumvirate (a political coalition intended to help each get what he wanted), power was abused and internal conflict eventually destroyed the compact. Shortly after Lucretius' death, Crassus died, which brought Pompey and Caesar into direct conflict with each other. In 52 B.C. the Senate made Crassus sole consul in an effort to defeat Caesar. Caesar returned to Rome in 49 B.C. and was soon ruling all of Italy. Lucretius' death came before Caesar brought the hope of stability to Rome. Many scholars contend that the extreme political conditions in which Lucretius lived account for his adherence to Epicureanism. Faced with ongoing war and strife, he found Epicureanism to be a peaceful, pleasurable, moral way to live his life. His horrific depictions of war throughout *De rerum natura* can certainly be attributed to the political environment in which he lived. In addition, Lucretius admired the Epicurean pursuit of friendship. Having witnessed the massacres and bloodshed of power struggles, it is little wonder he would so fervently believe that people should seek to befriend and help each other.

Religious and Philosophical Crossroads

During Lucretius' time, educated Romans were beginning to feel uncertain about the elaborate mythologies in their religion. They began to doubt that gods and goddesses were really so active in human affairs that they would involve themselves in everything from love to mildew. The absence of a clear relationship between natural occurrences (volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, rain, etc.) and deity worship was a problem. Still, Romans continued to run colleges offering religious training, to worship the deities, and

to dedicate sports events to the gods. The growing unwillingness to believe in the complicated mythology of the Roman gods may explain why, a century later, Romans would begin deifying their emperors. This practice not only personified Roman gods, but also discouraged the cults that were gaining popularity.

As an Epicurean, Lucretius was a philosophical outsider. Aristotle and Plato, though offering different views of the world and the universe, were the accepted thinkers of the time. They disagreed about certain key philosophical questions, such as the origin of the universe. Plato claimed that the universe was intentionally created by a divine being he named "The Craftsman." Aristotle, on the other hand, asserted that there was no beginning to the universe because it had always been in existence. Despite their divergent philosophies, Plato and Aristotle both claimed that the world is unique in the cosmos (i.e., that there are no other worlds like Earth) and that humans live in an intentional and ordered world. Lucretius, on the other hand, believed that there were more worlds like ours, and he states throughout *De rerum natura* that the world was created neither by gods nor for humans. In Book Five, he writes, "I'd dare assert / And prove that not for us and not by gods / Was this world made. / There's too much wrong with it!" This assertion directly opposes the notion of an ordered world created by a deity according to a design.

The teachings of Plato and Aristotle rose to prominence among the cultured citizens of Greece, after which the view of an ordered world was adopted by the Stoics in Rome. This happened around the time that Lucretius was writing *De rerum natura*. The teachings of the Stoics were the dominant philosophy in Rome at the time, which positioned Lucretius squarely in opposition to the accepted cosmological view.

Critical Overview

As the oldest known example of Latin hexameter poetry, Lucretius' *De rerum natura* continues to be the subject of much scholarly debate. Entire journal articles focus on the translation of single excerpts, and an accepted "standard" translation is yet to be published. The challenge lies not only in translating the work, but also in preserving its rhythms and imagery in a way that is meaningful to contemporary readers while maintaining the integrity of the text. Scholars and students of classicism admire the text for its lyrical presentation of scientific models. It is also an important text because it is the best single presentation of Epicurean ideals and classical atomic theory that is available. Although the hard science behind Lucretius' assertions concerning the physical world is somewhat naive, there are many ideas that have either been proven or are related to later, more sophisticated theories. In a review for *Free Inquiry*, Gordon Stein notes, "Granting his lack of equipment to measure things of an atomic (or even galactic) size, we must still marvel at how close his speculations came to the findings of modern science." As for Lucretius' religious beliefs (or lack thereof), critics find that the epic is still relevant to modern-day atheistic and agnostic beliefs.

One of Lucretius' major themes in *De rerum natura* is death. The ending of the poem, with its extended description of a plague that terrorized Athens, strikes many readers as abrupt and dark. The ending has, therefore, been fertile ground for critical debate. For a time, many scholars maintained that the sudden ending was evidence that the epic was incomplete. They argued that Lucretius intended to return to his masterpiece and finish it. Today, most scholars agree that the work is unfinished, but not because of the ending. In various places in the poem, Lucretius alludes to a later discussion of the gods and their living conditions, yet at the close of the work, he has not addressed this.

Although the ending seems abrupt, critics have devised various arguments to explain why Lucretius wanted his epic to end as it does. To some, the ending presents a sort of test for the reader. Having read Lucretius' account of death and the cyclical nature of the world, the reader has a choice. The reader either can be horrified at the scope of this historical event of human suffering; or can take comfort in the knowledge that with death comes life and the afflicted have nothing to fear because there is nothing beyond death□no judgment, no hell, and no desire. J. L. Penwill, in an article for *Ramus Critical Studies in Greek and Roman Literature*, applies Lucretius' worldview to contemporary situations: "The victims of the plague are . . . innocent. And in the pain of an individual death from cancer or AIDS, or in the face of natural disasters such as fire, flood, and earthquake, or even of ones that can be ascribed to human causes such as ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or genocide in Rwanda, the undeserved suffering again and again forces the anguished cry, 'Why does God let this happen?' The answer is simple. God has no interest in the matter. That is the way things are." Granted, this is a harsh view that clashes with popular religious belief systems, but later in the same article, Penwill offers an insight that reveals Lucretius' tenderness toward people: "Unlike the gods, human beings possess the quality of compassion."

Also related to Lucretius' theme of death is a seeming contradiction in the text. His Epicurean ideals dictate that there is nothing beyond death, and so people should neither fear it nor seek immortality. He states that the pursuit of immortality leads men into ruin as they become creatures of envy, cruelty, and selfishness. Still, Lucretius claims that he will secure poetic immortality through his great work. In Book One, for example, he states, "Let the fame be mine, for I teach great things, stride forth / To free the soul from the stranglehold of religion; / Also, I sing dark matters into the light, / Spicing all with the grace of poetry." One school of thought argues that there is a difference between subjective and objective views of survival. The poet is the objective component that will eventually die. This is what Lucretius teaches should not be feared. Poetry and philosophy, however, have the subjective ability to survive the writer and continue into existence without their creators. In an article for *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Charles Segal expressed his doubt that this resolution is realistic. Believing that Lucretius did not differentiate between two types of immortality, he wrote, "Perhaps, then, to be a great poet means, ultimately, to be less of an Epicurean. Perhaps for all his philosophical acceptance of the power of death, something in Lucretius the poet has not given up 'hoping' what every poet since Homer had seen as his goal and his right."

Lucretius also addresses love in his epic. He opens by invoking Venus as his creative muse, but later delivers an impassioned section denouncing love as a wasteful and destructive distraction in people's lives. Although questionable, the rumor regarding Lucretius' wife giving him a love potion that eventually drives him mad has led some scholars to claim that his wife's conniving is what brought about his anti-love lecture. Still others, including William Fitzgerald in an article for *The Classical World*, contend that for Lucretius love and death are the "enemies of mental health: both the fear of death and the torments of love derive from a mind fettered to its own or another's unique individuality." Both force otherwise rational people to behave in ways that create confusion and pain for themselves. As an Epicurean, Lucretius valued pleasure and freedom, but in romantic love, these two seem to be mutually exclusive.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Bussey defines Epicureanism and demonstrates how Lucretius upholds its basic tenets.

Lucretius' masterpiece *De rerum natura* is acknowledged as the preeminent presentation of Epicurean philosophy. How Lucretius came to learn about Epicureanism is uncertain, and there is no evidence of a specific teacher who guided Lucretius' philosophical development. Because Greek professors lectured on the teachings of Epicurus in Rome at the time, however, it is clear that he was well instructed. Epicureanism is based on four central ideas, which are that the gods are not frightening, there is nothing to fear in death, good is accessible, and bad is bearable. Epicurus and his followers formed small communities of like-minded friends who gathered in gardens to study and discuss philosophical issues. Historians note that these communities were especially noteworthy for their surprising inclusion of women and slaves. Studying science and the physical world, Epicurus found support for his ideas in nature. In his epic poem, Lucretius brings together Democritus' and Leucippus' theories of "atomism" (which guided Epicurus' philosophies regarding the physical world) and Epicurus' teachings on atomic properties and moral living. Lucretius' achievement is in bringing these ideas together into a coherent philosophy of rationalism and a virtuous lifestyle. Central to Epicurean thought is atomic theory.

Epicurus learned much from the early scientific theorists Democritus and Leucippus after realizing that their physics supported his beliefs about the absence of divine intervention. This, in turn, had a profound effect on his beliefs regarding morality. The atomists also taught that reality is accessible to anyone through sense perception; the world can be understood without resorting to divine explanations for natural occurrences. The Epicureans' major contribution to atomic theory was the notion of an imperceptible movement called "swerve." Lucretius explains in *De rerum natura* that atoms do not fall straight down to the earth, but fall in a swerving path. This allows them to collide and combine with each other, resulting in the creation of objects and beings. In Book Two, Lucretius explains, "When the atoms are carried straight down through the void by their own weight . . . they swerve a little. . . . For if atoms did not tend to lean, they would / Plummet like raindrops thorough the depths of space, / No first collisions born, no blows created, So / Nature never could have made a thing." Unfortunately, there is no explanation of why or how atoms swerve. From Epicurus' cosmology came his views on morality and ethical living. In order to live fully, he claimed, it was necessary to observe and study one's natural surroundings. Epicurus designated three types of desire, the first and most important of which is natural and essential desire. This is desire for necessities, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Necessary desires are generally the easiest desires to fulfill. The second type is natural and unnecessary desire, such as sexual desire. The third type is unnatural desire, which includes luxury, power, wealth, and popularity. People who pursue these desires are often miserable because they fail to understand that what they desire is unnecessary. At the end of Book Three, Lucretius writes, "What vicious yearning for life, then, makes us hurry / In such a panic, attacked by doubts and dangers? . . . / Whatever we lack, we want, we

think it excels / All else, but when we've grabbed it something new / We thirst for, always panting after life."

Epicureans pursued pleasure in life, although not to excess. In the opening of Book Two, Lucretius proclaims, "Our nature yelps after this alone: that the body / Be free of pain, the mind enjoy the sense / Of pleasure, far removed from care or fear!" Avoiding the excess of passions allows a person to remain in calm control and avoid the torments of being overly emotional. The Epicureans believed that pleasure was the natural standard that enables people to assess what is good and what is bad. From infancy, people recognize pleasure, but what must be learned is how to find pleasure in the right things. In other words, Epicurus taught that it is not adequate to seek immediate pleasure at every passing moment of life, but rather to strive to maximize pleasure over the long term. Along the same lines, Epicureans understood that they must sometimes endure pain and discomfort in order to enjoy pleasure later. Friendship is important in the Epicurean way of life because it provides pleasure, facilitates philosophical pursuits, and helps to avoid pain by creating a supportive community of allies. By extension, it is no surprise that the Epicureans, and Lucretius in particular, despised war.

The Epicurean fascination with atomic theory comes from the need to explain natural wonders in order to refute existing beliefs about the activities of the gods and goddesses. The result is important to Epicurean doctrine□the removal of fear of the deities. In essence, the Epicureans apply philosophy as a remedy for fear and worry. Lucretius' presentation of religion in *De rerum natura* almost resulted in the epic's permanent rejection. As Christianity grew, Epicurean assertions of mortal souls and a god absent from the world were almost forgotten. Further, Lucretius' depiction of religion as a great monster, choking humankind and inciting it to cruelty, was unacceptable among Christians. In fact, were it not for the beauty of the verse and the poetic art of the work, the epic would very likely be obscure today. Scholars, however, began to revisit the epic for its achievement in hexameter and language, which is what ultimately saved it from being forever lost.

The Epicureans were not atheists, despite the fact that atheists often share many of their beliefs. While Epicureans claimed that the gods had no hand in human life or in the creation or maintenance of the world, they never denied their existence. Nature alone is responsible for life. Consequently, the role of the gods in human life is simply to be admired, but not worshipped. Many scholars have noted that Lucretius' description of the gods' world very much resembles Epicurus' philosophical garden community of friends.

According to the Epicureans, the gods lived together in complete peace and happiness. They were remote from the activity of the world and had no reason to become the least bit involved in human affairs. To do so would only disrupt their perfect world and bring unnecessary turmoil upon themselves. In Book One, Lucretius describes the gods: "For by necessity the gods above / Enjoy eternity in highest peace, / Withdrawn and far removed from our affairs. / Free of all sorrow, free of peril, the gods / Thrive in their own works needing nothing from us, / Not won with virtuous deeds nor touched by rage." Later in the same book he addresses the human tendency to fear the gods out of

ignorance and writes, "Fear grips all mortal men precisely because / They see so many events on the earth, in the sky, / Whose rational causes they cannot discern □/ So they suppose it's all the will of the gods."

Epicureanism attributes most human fear and anxiety to the basic fear of death. Lucretius blames the fear of death for greed, cruelty, and selfishness in the world. Understanding and accepting death is pivotal in Epicurean thought. Once liberated from the fear of dying, people can live in *ataraxia*, a state of peaceful serenity. Although people live their lives terri.ed of dying and of what happens beyond life, the Epicureans taught that there is, in fact, nothing beyond death. This conclusion is drawn from atomic theory, which claims that only what can be sensed is real. Interestingly, Lucretius offers an explanation that the soul is composed of atoms and is, therefore, mortal. He argues that the body and soul cannot exist without each other, and because the soul is a collection of atoms, it dies with the body. Of course, for Epicureans, dying means that the body and soul cease to be in a particular state and so move on to another form. The atoms are immortal although the form they take is not.

The idea that there is nothing beyond death is not necessarily comforting, so the Epicureans offer another way of considering death. Before people are born, they feel nothing, and thinking about nonexistence prior to birth does not seem to upset people. Therefore, the Epicureans reason, there is no need to worry about non-existence after life. Lucretius expresses the Epicurean idea that if a person lived a happy life, then when it is time to die, he or she should simply go like a guest leaving the dinner table. If, however, life was unpleasant, the person should consider that there is little to be lost in death.

Although Lucretius was an Epicurean, he was also an independent thinker. He possessed qualities that were un-Epicurean, the most notable of which was his desire for poetic glory. Epicurus himself advised against writing poetry, yet Lucretius was compelled to write a sweeping epic poem focused on Epicurus' own philosophies. Lucretius lapses into passages surging with emotional force (such as his passage on the pitfalls of love), even though the Epicurean way is one of calmness and serenity. Despite his few Epicurean shortcomings, Lucretius will be forever known as the great epic poet who preserved Epicureanism for centuries of students, scholars, historians, and scientists.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, for *Epics for Students*, Gale, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Penwill views the ending of Lucretius' Book 6 *as a representation of the ending process of life, which leads to an explanation of the abrupt ending.*

That Lucretius should choose to end his Epicurean representation of the world with a long and harrowing account of the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C.E. is certainly one of the more remarkable facts in classical Roman poetry. More remarkable still is the suddenness of the ending. The poem simply breaks off as one critic says 'almost in mid-sentence'; and even if we follow this same critic in tidying up the end by transferring 6.1247-51 to follow 1286 we are still left very much *in mediis rebus*, with the plague at its height and death and misery all around. Our initial response is one of surprise and puzzlement as we feel cheated of a sense of an ending; this in turn leads to questions about overall design and authorial intent. Why does the poem end this way? Indeed, has it ended at all?

This was for a long time the accepted answer; there is no ending, because the poem is unfinished. The supposedly unfulfilled promise to write at greater length about the abodes of the gods at 5.155 was cited in support of this view, together with the sensationalist tradition that Lucretius was driven mad by a love-potion and that the (by implication unfinished) poem was published posthumously. But even if Lucretius died before the poem was completed and so was unable to tie up or remove the loose ends, it does not follow that the present ending is not the one he planned for it; the *Aeneid* too was published posthumously and it too has a problematic ending, but surely no-one these days tries to argue that had Virgil lived he would have added a further section to move the spotlight away from Aeneas' signal failure to live up to Anchises' ideal. Both the *DRN* and the *Aeneid* have endings which are deliberately provocative; they require the reader to make sense of the work which s/he has just read as a work which ends in the way it does. The challenge is to work out what the poet means by ending this way, not to rewrite the poem.

Modern criticism has by and large accepted this challenge. Minadeo has offered a systematic study of the cycle of creation and destruction that pervades the poem; and while some of his formulations have a Procrustean air, there can be no doubt that in the case of the poem as a whole and of the major sections of it he is right. The poem itself reflects the cycle it describes; every atomic construct goes through the process of coming to be and passing away, and so does the poem: the invocation to *Venus genetrix* in the proem to Book 1, replete with images of fertility, joy, and the exuberance of new life, is neatly answered by the epilogue to Book 6, with its emphasis on sickness, despair, and the awfulness of death. Indeed, Bright's transposition of 6.1247-1251 to the end of the poem makes the antithesis particularly neat:

lacrimis lassi luctuque redibant; inde bonam partem
in lectum maerore dabantur. nec poterat quisquam
reperiri, quem neque morbus nec mors nec luctus
temptaret tempore tali.

Wearied by tears and grief they would return; then for
the most part they would give themselves to their beds
from sorrow. Nor could anyone be found whom
neither disease nor death nor grief was attacking in
such a time.

The despondency of the mourners who have disposed of their dead in whatever way they could stands in stark contrast to the laughter and joy which permeates the first 20 lines of Book 1 as the world bursts into life at the advent of Venus; and the sequence 'disease, death, grief' baldly listed in the final couplet (if such it be) together with the image of the mourners taking to their beds to grieve in silence and solitude is the complete reverse of the expansive and syntactically complex description of the energy, vitality and *joie de vivre* of the creatures inspired by Venus to love-making and the creation of new life.

While this is an attractive and persuasive account of the overall design of the poem, it does not in my view constitute a sufficient explanation for the way in which the poem ends. Certainly there is balance, which functions as both demonstration and fulfilment of the Epicurean doctrine of *isonomia*; but this does not of itself account for the fact that Lucretius has chosen to end his poem with 130 lines of unrelieved horror in which he has taken care to edit out whatever vestiges of hope there are in Thucydides' bleak narrative of the same event. This, what is more, in a poem which has the stated purpose of removing those fears which perturb the mind of human beings, one of which is the fear of death. Can we still face death with equanimity after reading the end of Book 6? With this closure ringing in our ears, can we still be convinced by what had heretofore seemed so compelling but now so theoretical a series of arguments against the fear of death in Book 3? And how does this final passage accord with the author's earlier defence of the (un-Epicurean) use of poetry?□

id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione uidetur; sed
ueluti pueris absinthia taetra medentes cum dare
conantur, prius oras pocula circum contingunt mellis
dulci flauoque liquore, ut puerorum aetas inprouida
ludificetur labrorum tenus, interea perpotet amarum
absinthi laticem deceptaque non capiatur, sed potius
tali pacto recreata ualescat□

For this too seems not to be without purpose; but as
doctors, when they are trying to give bitter wormwood
to children, first coat the rim around the cup
with the sweet yellow liquid of honey, so that in their
youthful thoughtlessness they will be fooled as they
taste it, drink down the bitter juice of the wormwood
and be deceived, not cheated, since in this way they
will be restored to health□

Honey may certainly be a suitable image for the invocation to Venus in Book 1; but the description of the plague is unadulterated wormwood. The comparison of the unenlightened to children, familiar also from the 'for just as children tremble and fear everything' formula, is grimly recalled in the picture of children's corpses:

exanimis pueris super exanimata parentum corpora
nonnumquam posses retroque uidere matribus et
patribus natos super edere uitam.

Sometimes you could see the lifeless bodies of parents
lying on their lifeless children, and again children
giving up their lives on their mothers and fathers.

Medicine for these children is an irrelevance; indeed, medicine has been reduced to silence (*mussabat tacito medicina timore*, 'medicine muttered in silent terror', 6.1179). Again we ask, why end on this note?

Some critics draw attention to what they see as an ethical dimension to this ending. Throughout the poem, Lucretius has been drawing attention to the difference between the Epicurean and non-Epicurean world-views, depicting the latter as productive of anxiety and unhappiness. The earlier part of Book 6 has been particularly strong on this, dealing with meteorological and terrestrial phenomena that the unenlightened ascribe to the intervention of the gods; but as the syllabus to this book makes clear, that attitude is fraught with danger:

quae nisi respuis ex animo longeque remittis dis
indigna putare alienaque pacis eorum, delibata deum
per te tibi numina sancta saepe oberunt.

If you do not spit these ideas out of your mind and put
far away from you thoughts unworthy of the gods and
inconsistent with their tranquillity, the holy godhead
you have diminished will often come against you.

The threat is not that god will hurl a thunderbolt at you if you do not worship him in the right way or if you deviate from religious orthodoxy, but rather that false belief will set up motions in your soul which will prevent you from receiving and correctly interpreting the *simulacra* ('images') that emanate from the gods. The state of the unenlightened is thus one of self-inflicted psychological sickness. Noting that one of the ways in which Lucretius has modified Thucydides is to increase the emphasis on the psychological malaise experienced by the sufferers of the plague, Commager suggests that the whole episode is in a sense symbolic: the sufferings of the Athenians in 430 B.C.E. are generalised and rendered emblematic of the spiritual state of the unenlightened. Smith in his revision of the Loeb Lucretius adopts the same position.

The verbal parallelisms between the poem, with its emphasis on moral sickness and health, and the final passage confirm that Lucretius views the Athenian plague as a physical disaster that involved moral disaster as well, and as symbolising the moral condition of unenlightened mankind. The truth is that the prospect of salvation and of a heaven on earth which Lucretius offers in the *DRN* shines with a brighter and stronger light on account of this dark and hellish picture of what life is like without the guidance of Epicurus.

Now it is true that the unenlightened are termed *aegri,* 'sick', in the opening line of Book 6; it is also true that Athens is hailed in the proem to this same book as the home of Epicurus and the source of his *diuina reperta* ('divine discoveries', 6.7), and this framing of the book could lend some support to the idea that a contrast is being set up between the preand post-Epicurean city. But if this is what Lucretius is trying to do, he has been singularly and unusually reluctant to inform the reader of the fact. Lucretius' normal practice is to make his moves abundantly clear, as in the image of the man gazing out to sea in the proem to Book 2 (to which I shall return) or in the case of the sacrifice of Iphigenia at 1.80-101. And while both Commager and Bright are right in drawing attention to Lucretius' interest in the psychological impact of the plague, the emphasis has not in any way been removed from the physical. The context in which the modifications towards the psychological should be viewed is not so much that of the proem's outline of the spiritual malaise of the unenlightened but rather that of the arguments for the mortality of the soul in Book 3. One thinks particularly of 3.429-525, where the fact that mental derangement often accompanies physical illness indeed is itself part of that physical illness, in that it too is a consequence of the behaviour of the material particles of which the human organism is composed is cited as evidence that the mind is subject to disease as much as the body and is therefore just as mortal. The sickness of soul experienced by the victims of the plague is thus not due to their unenlightened state but to the nature of the disease, which attacks all parts of the organism. Moreover, one of the effects of the plague is to break down religious observance:

nec iam religio diuom nec numina magni pendebantur
enim: praesens dolor exsuperabat.

Now neither religion nor the gods were regarded
as of any importance; the present anguish overwhelmed
them.

It is as if the plague has effected what Lucretius' entire argument and particularly the argument in Book 6 has been directed towards: a realisation that the gods have no interest in human affairs. On the one hand this is hardly an image of unenlightenment;

on the other, we have to ask whether an Epicurean would be any better off than a non-Epicurean in coping with a disease that affects the mind to the extent that this one does.

Above all we need to remember that we are dealing here not with a generalised image but with a historical event. This is not an imagined scene of a man driving his chariot to the country and then coming home again, nor of a cow searching for her lost calf, but a record of an actual occurrence; and the poet has made this clear to the educated readership for which he is writing by the conspicuous use of Thucydides to which I have already alluded. Elsewhere when he alludes to or describes particular events, Lucretius explicitly draws the moral, as with the already mentioned sacrifice of Iphigenia in Book 1 or the death of major historical figures at 3.1025-44. But nothing of the kind is found here; the description is introduced as a particular example (*haec ratio quondam morborum*, 'this cause of diseases on one occasion □', 6.1138) to illustrate the nature of disease and runs to its end without comment. Indeed, if we compare Lucretius with Thucydides, we might conclude that it is the historian who is making the moral point in juxtaposing the account of the plague to Pericles' Funeral Speech, and so contrasting the ideal of the civilised city with the sordid reality of human nature reduced to its basics. Lucretius offers no such correlative; true, there is the reference to Athens as the home of Epicurus at the beginning of the book, but after line 5 the focus switches from city to philosopher, the verbs become third person singular instead of third person plural, and Athens, named but once (line 2), is quickly forgotten. The notion that the plague is somehow symbolising the state of unenlightened, pre-Epicurean humankind is, in my view, untenable. The answer does not lie here.

Another view, put forward most forcefully by Clay, is that the description of the plague is presented as a kind of test:

> So Lucretius' reader arrives at the end of *De rerum natura* to face a spectacle of disease and disturbance and also to face the final test of his mastery of the poem. He is left to contemplate the ugliest face of an indifferent nature that destroyed, even as it created, the highest form of human civilisation.

The correct response on the part of the reader who has achieved the required grade of philosophical wisdom would presumably then be that of the watcher on the seashore:

> suaue, mari magno turbantibus aequora uentis, e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem; non quia uexari quemquamst iucunda uoluptas, sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suauest.
>
> Sweet it is, when the winds are creating great rollers on the sea, to view from land the great toil of another; not because there is any pleasure in the fact that someone is in trouble, but because to look upon evils from which you yourself are free is sweet.

The poet goes on to make clear that by this image he is bringing to our minds the enlightened individual who has detached himself from the mad pursuit of wealth and power which is responsible for so much human unhappiness. He is in the fortunate position of being able to stand back and watch, and to experience the pleasure of knowing that he is no longer enmeshed in the toils of the rat-race. But this is merely to congratulate oneself on avoiding humanity's self-inflicted wounds and to engage in little more than poetic/philosophical/satiric commonplace. Reason can tell us that the desire for wealth and power, *auri sacra fames*, is a destructive force, that allowing oneself to succumb to sexual passion will ultimately bring more pain than joy (we've all seen some version of *Phaedra* or read the neoterics), that the doctrines of conventional religion, with their emphasis on interventionist gods and the bogey of eternal punishment for those who step out of line, are not worthy of belief; these are the 'storms' from which the philosophic mind can free itself in the quest for *ataraxia* . But are we as readers of the *DRN* being invited to adopt a similar attitude when it comes to the plague? Are we the watchers on the seashore experiencing the *suauitas* of not being embroiled in these horrors? Is Lucretius expending the full force of his poetic talent to create a picture of devastation and misery in order to give us *pleasure*? Is that the challenge of this final scene? If we view the plague as a test of Epicurean correctness as Clay would have us do, then that is the only conclusion we can come to. After all, the gods who constitute the ataraxic ideal do not care; and as for us, we are as remote from these events as we are from those of the Second Punic War, of which, as the poet triumphantly tells us (3.832ff.), we felt nothing.

The problem with this is that the gods neither perceive what takes place on earth nor read poetry; we are human beings and do both. Further, the idea that we are supposed to respond to the account of the plague with indifference would set up an impossible tension between invited and expected response, with the poetic voice immersing us in horror and the didactic voice counselling calm detachment. Poetry works through engaging the emotions, and Lucretius does this throughout, the fascination of this text lies in the fact that from first to last it demands involvement, drawing the reader in to experience the intensity of its representation of and response to *natura*. We may be able to congratulate ourselves on escaping from error; from *natura* there can be no escape.

So pedagogically attractive as it may be, the model of the *De Rerum Natura* as a course of instruction culminating in a final examination paper does not altogether appeal. The description of the plague is not an appendix or epilogue, any more than Virgil's account of the final confrontation between Aeneas and Turnus is to the *Aeneid*; rather it is central to the poem's thematic design, as Minadeo's analysis makes clear. We are not being asked to use the whole poem in order to 'master' one of its parts; rather we are being challenged to integrate this, the most problematic of its parts, into the overall structure of the work. This is what I shall be attempting to do in the remainder of this essay.

Let us consider the plague in its more immediate context, Books 5-6. The basic argument of these books is that everything is explicable in material terms, and so by applying the principle of Occam's razor we can exclude the hypothesis that the gods

have any role to play. It is no accident therefore that Book 5 opens with that remarkable proem in which Epicurus is virtually deified:

nam si, ut ipsa petit maiestas cognita rerum, dicendum
est, deus ille fuit, deus, inclute Memmi, qui princeps
uitae rationem inuenit eam quae nunc
appellatur sapientia□

For if we may speak as the perceived greatness of the
matter itself demands, he was a god, a god, noble
Memmius, who first discovered that rationale of life
which is now called wisdom.

The sentiment is repeated at 5.19-21; we also hear echoes of it in the divinity ascribed to Epicurus' doctrines in the proem to Book 6:

cuius et extincti propter diuina reperta diuolgata uetus
iam ad caelum gloria fertur.

Even though he is now dead, his fame, spread abroad
of old, is now carded to the skies on account of his
divine discoveries.

The only 'god with us' in this system is the philosopher; it is he who brings us the means to achieve happiness, and it is he who is the only true culture-hero. The world in which we live and of which we are a part is neither divine nor sentient; the notion of Mother Earth, presented particularly forcefully at 5.795ff., arises from our perception of the earth's fertility now and what *ratio* tells us about the origin of living things. But we must not allow ourselves to be carried away by this image to the extent of actually regarding the earth as a mother goddess; that would be both false and dangerous. The argument in Book 6, with its concentration on meteorological and terrestrial phenomena which have traditionally been ascribed to divine agency (thunder, lightning, thunderbolts, earthquakes, volcanoes and the like), not only stresses that all such occurrences may be explained in material terms (even though we may not be able to pinpoint precisely what that explanation is) but also, by the very explanations it offers, draws attention to the fact that earth is an unstable atomic construct, which will itself one day fall apart. Lucretius explicitly draws the conclusion:

et metuunt magni naturam credere mundi exitiale
aliquod tempus clademque manere, cum uideant tantam
terrarum incumbere molem. quod nisi respirent uenti,
uis nulla refrenet res neque ab exitio possit
reprehendere euntis.

And they fear to believe that the nature of the great

world is awaiting a certain time of destruction and a disaster, although they see the great mass of lands leaning down. But if the winds did not pause for breath, no force would rein things in nor be able to hold them back from destruction in their onward rush.

Not only is the world not divine but it is subject to the same process as all other compounds, passing through the stages of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death. The individual human being is also subject to this process; and the essential similarity between earth and individual, macrocosm and microcosm, is shown by the recycling of the language of 3.806-18 (proof that the soul is mortal because it is a compound) to prove that the earth itself is mortal at 5.351-63.

One of the functions of the section on disease with which Book 6 concludes is to underscore this relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. In a passage just after the one to which I have just referred, Lucretius makes the point that compounds are subject to dissolution as a result of bombardment by particles from without:

neque autem corpora desunt, ex infinito quae possint
forte coorta corruere hanc rerum uiolento turbine
summam aut aliam quamuis cladem inportare pericli□

Nor are bodies lacking that can by chance come together out of the infinite and overwhelm this sum of things in violent storm, or bring in some other destructive calamity.

Particles from without are likewise the cause of disease, both generally (6.1090ff.□note particularly the recurrence of the phrase *forte coorta* at 1096) and in the particular case of the plague at Athens, where Lucretius follows Thucydides in saying that the infection came from Egypt (6.1141). The graphic details in the description of the plague are a telling illustration of the effect of noxious particles, which the principle of *isonomia* shows must be as numerous as bene.cent ones (see esp. 6.1093ff.). The emphasis in the account of physical symptoms is on the internal organs; see especially 6.1163ff., where the poet states that the burning sensation could not be perceived by touching the skin: it affected only the *intima pars* ('innermost part', 1168), and the enormity of the suffering caused could only be judged by observation of behaviour. These are *corpora caeca* at work; and as death is the end result for the individual in the grip of plague, so will it be for the world as a whole as its *moenia* ('defences') are finally beaten down (*expugnata*, 2.1145) by the destructive particles that continually bombard them.

By concluding with the plague, Lucretius is also providing evidence for another argument introduced earlier in Book 5, namely that the world could not possibly have been made for mankind by the gods because there is too much wrong with it□or rather, so much of it is unsuitable or downright dangerous for human habitation. Disease is in fact adduced as one of the aspects of this unsuitability (*cur anni tempora*

morbos/adportant?, 'why do the seasons of the year bring forth diseases?', 5.220f.). The general section on disease in Book 6 shows that many regions of the world are hotbeds of infection; as inhabitants of this world, we are subject to those infections just as birds are to the particles that emanate from the Avernian regions. We cannot escape the limitations of our human existence; for us too there is that *alte terminus haerens* ('deep-set boundary stone') which marks off what can be and what cannot within the whole of nature. A salutary reminder of this fact constitutes a suitable ending for the poem as a whole, as well as a fitting climax to the arguments presented in the final two books.

For one of the basic messages of the *DRN* is surely that we, the human race, are part of nature. Like everything else, we are compounded of primary particles, and are ourselves subject to the same eternal process of coming-to-be and passing-away. Attempts to transcend this limitation are futile, and lead inevitably to frustration and despair: to look for a better existence for the soul after death is to invent the worry of a worse one; to try to establish a link with some transcendent deity is to subject ourselves to the tyranny of a Big Brother who is always watching; to pretend that we are somehow different, that we are apart from rather than part of the natural world, is to create a poisoned physical and psychological environment. The 'progress' of civilisation outlined in the latter stages of Book 5 shows a progressive alienation from nature, nowhere more tellingly illustrated perhaps than in the account of the use of animals in warfare at 5.1297-1349. The poetic power of Lucretius' description of the world around us, which the philosophic voice describes as the honey round the cup, drags us back to the natural world and forces us to recognise that that is where we belong. We are part of a world, a scheme of things, which has both a creative and destructive aspect, a fact that we must comprehend and learn to live with. It is one thing to produce a string of arguments against the fear of death as a concept; it is quite another to face the reality of the death-process in all its grim, sordid, squalid detail. The ulcerated corpses at the end of the work are the ultimate condition of all of us, the end towards which our lives proceed as each of us lives through the cycle that all things must follow; and the nature of this end is in the vast majority of cases something over which we have no control. The poet of nature confronts the reader with the most uncomforting reality of all not as a test but as a statement; to write *de rerum natura* entails a duty to tell it how it is. Like Tannhäuser, we must quit the seductive delights of the *Venusberg* and face the truth.

We have come some way I think in accounting for this poem's ending. It is the final response to the dilemma faced by all at some stage in their experience of the world: how to cope with the fact of natural catastrophe and undeserved suffering. The world is a violent place: it may not be Jupiter who wields the thunderbolt, but thunderbolts still exist; indeed, it is the very fact that they strike down the innocent as well as the guilty that proves there is no divine hand guiding them:

et potius nulla sibi turpi conscius in re uoluitur in
flammis innoxius inque peditur turbine caelesti subito
correptus et igni?

Why rather is someone who is conscious that he is
guilty of no wrongdoing engulfed in flames, an innocent

victim wrapped around by a tornado from heaven
and seized by sudden fire?

The victims of the plague are similarly innocent. And in the pain of an individual death from cancer or AIDS, or in the face of natural disasters such as fire, flood and earthquake, or even of ones that can be ascribed to human causes such as ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or genocide in Rwanda, the undeserved suffering again and again forces the anguished cry, 'Why does God let this happen?' The answer is simple. God has no interest in the matter. That is the way things are.

Such is the place of the plague in the poem as statement of the Epicurean position. It has in addition another function, related to that aspect of the poem on which Minadeo concentrates: its patterning around the creation/destruction cycle to which I referred earlier. In his analysis of individual books, Minadeo correctly observes that what he calls the *leitmotif* of the poem, the commencement of each book on a note of creation and its conclusion on a note of destruction, is broken in the proem to Book 2 and in the conclusion of Book 5; he errs in my view in trying to impose it on the sections of the work to which these passages are juxtaposed, namely the conclusion of Book 1 and the proem to Book 6. Certainly Book 1 ends on a seemingly destructive note as Lucretius demonstrates the absurdity of the centripetal theory of matter adopted by the Stoics, showing that on this view the world would simply fall apart. But unlike the conclusion to Book 2, where the eventual destruction of the world is argued for in terms of Epicurean theory, this is based on a false premise; and in fact Book 1 concludes not with a vision of the world's end but with a celebration of the transition from error to enlightenment:

namque alid ex alio clarescet, nec tibi caeca nox iter
eripiet quin ultima naturai peruideas: ita res accendent
lumina rebus.

For one thing will grow clear out of another, and blind
night will not snatch from you the path so as to prevent
you seeing the ultimate realities of nature: thus truths
will kindle torches for truths.

In fact the tone of the book is wholly creative: it opens with the wonderful image of *Venus genetrix*, a Venus who overcomes Mars the god of war, and proceeds to establish the basic postulates, to declare the poet's mission and to expose the deficiencies of rival theories. It is in fact the triumphal procession following the victory of the *Graius homo* celebrated at 1.62ff., parading both the spoils of the campaign (knowledge of the true nature of things) and the defeated prisoners (discredited alternative views). The sixth book, on the other hand, presents a mounting crescendo of destruction. True, there is that celebration of Epicurus and his *diuina reperta* in the proem (for which compare the openings of Books 3 and 5), but the content is unusually dark. It is here that we get the image of the corruption in the jar (against which we may contrast the honey round the cup of the poet's mission statement), recalling the negative observations on human life in the prologue to Book 2 which led Minadeo to exclude it

from his general schema. Also in the prologue to Book 6 we are given the information that part of the Master's teaching has to do with coping with natural disaster:

quidue mali foret in rebus mortalibus passim quod
fleret naturali uarieque uolaret seu casu seu ui, quod
sic natura parasset, et quibus e portis occurri
cuique deceret.

[He taught] what evil there was everywhere in human
affairs, which comes about and flies around in different
ways by natural force or chance, because nature
has so provided, and from what gates one should sally
forth to meet each one.

And the subject-matter of the book, while ostensibly supporting the thesis that the gods need not be feared because they have no part to play in the operation of the world, concentrates on those aspects of the earth and its surrounds which are indexes of its fragility and thus keeps before our minds the inevitability of its eventual collapse. Everything is hollow, everything is in motion, the force of moving matter tears objects apart.

This accounts for one of the more curious passages of this final book. Immediately prior to the section on disease, Lucretius devotes 184 lines to a discussion of the magnet, a seemingly innocuous phenomenon. As far as the syllabus of the book is concerned, it is presumably there because of its connection with the first philosopher, Thales, and his proposition that all things are full of gods; another example of the human tendency towards erroneous hypothesising of divine causation. But again it is the explanation which is thematically signi.cant and makes the positioning of this section appropriate. In the middle of his account of the magnet, Lucretius places a long digression, in which two principles are stressed: first that there is a constant ef.ux of particles from all physical objects and secondly that everything is porous. Both these principles are invoked to explain the action of the magnet; and both are intimately linked to the theme of destruction. For (a) it is when more particles are given off than taken in that decline sets in and (b) the fact that 'there is nothing that presents itself to us except body mixed with void' (*nil esse in promptu nisi mixtum corpus inani*, 6.941; cf. 936f. and 958, where the .fth foot *raro corpore* takes on a distinctly formulaic ring) is a clear indication of the instability of the world around us. Contemplation of the magnet is thus not as it was for Thales a reminder of the fact that all things are full of gods; rather it is a *memento mori*. Stone and iron are two of the most solid and stable substances that we know of; but the capacity of this 'stone' (*lapis*, 907) to interact with iron shows how deceptive this seeming solidity is. And the very diversity that Lucretius so often celebrates as part of the richness and beauty of the phenomenal world is likewise drawn on in the context of this argument as index of its impermanence and instability: efflux of particles 959-78; porosity 979-97. The creatures and landscapes of Venus' processional are already pregnant with the seeds of their own destruction.

So in its movement from Venus to the plague, from coming-together to falling-apart, the *De Rerum Natura* itself constitutes an image of the world it describes. This aspect of the work has long been recognised; and it is its fusion of form and content, medium and message, that marks this poem as one of the great artistic achievements in the western cultural tradition. The very words on the page image the atomic process at work:

quin etiam refert nostris in uersibus ipsis cum quibus
et quali sint ordine quaeque locata; namque eadem
caelum mare terras flumina solem significant, eadem
fruges arbusta animantis; si non omnia sunt, at multo
maxima pars est consimilis; uerum positura discrepitant
res. sic ipsis in rebus item iam materiai concursus
motus ordo positura flgurae cum permutantur, mutari
res quoque debent.

Indeed, in these very verses of mine it matters with
which and in what order each [letter] is placed; for the
same [letters] signify sky, sea, earth, rivers, sun, and
the same crops, trees, living things. Even if not all
[these letters] are alike, yet by far the greatest part of
them are; it is by their position that things sound
different. So too in the case of actual objects, when the
coming together, the motion, the order, the position,
the shape of matter are changed, the objects too
must change.

Words are the microcosm to the poem's macrocosm; words represent things and things in a process of change (cf. in particular the *lignum/ignis* illustration at 1.912-14), while the poem represents the world as a whole as it traverses through the cycle of generation and destruction. Beginning, middle, end: truly an Aristotelian *mimesis.*

And a *mimesis* that evokes the very emotions which Aristotle identified as aroused by the tragic experience: fear and pity. Let us accept that the gods have no role to play in meteorological upheavals or natural disasters; but this does not mean that such disasters are any the less fearful in themselves. Earthquakes:

ancipiti trepidant igitur terrore per urbis: tecta superne
timent, metuunt inferne cauernas terrai ne dissoluat
natura repente, neu distracta suum late dispandat
hiatum idque suis confusa uelit complere ruinis.

And so they panic through the cities in twofold terror:
they fear the roofs above, and they dread the caverns
below lest the nature of the earth should suddenly
break up, or be drawn asunder and widely spread her
gaping jaws, which she may seek to fill with her
own ruins.Volcanoes, too:finitimis ad se conuertit gentibus ora, fumida cum

caeli scintillare omnia templa cernentes pauida
complebant pectora cura, quid moliretur rerum
natura nouarum.

[Etna] drew towards itself the faces of neighbouring tribes, when perceiving smoke and sparks in all the regions of the sky they filled their breasts with terror and anxiety as to what kind of cataclysm nature was working towards.

In a universe in which the forces of creation and destruction are evenly balanced and a world in which nothing is inherently stable, we are at the mercy of thunderbolts, earthquakes, volcanoes, fire, flood□and those unseen particles that bring disease. To fear these is a natural human reaction; to avoid their depredations by moving from the vicinity of Etna, not going outside in a thunderstorm or boosting our immune system is regarded as perfectly reasonable behaviour. But there is no escape: death is the inevitable and necessary consequence of birth, and the chance of dying being a pleasant process is slim indeed. To pity those in the final stages of this process is also a natural human reaction:

illud in his rebus miserandum magnopere unum
aerumnabile erat□

One thing in particular that was most pitiful and distressing in these circumstances□

The horrific description of the suffering of these innocent victims, whose only *hamartia* was a combination of having been born and being in the wrong place at the wrong time, brings us to the true heart of darkness□the 'supreme moment of complete knowledge' to which the only appropriate response is Kurtz's final cry, 'The horror! The horror!' Can we still claim that 'death is nothing to us' after reading the last 150 lines of Book 6? Is it *nothing* to you, all ye who pass by?

We have a sense of an ending, here, and the ending is a tragic one. Classical tragedy tended to portray the downfall of an individual who sought to transcend the limits of human existence, to make him-/herself as god, an arrogance which the Greeks termed *hubris*. Such was the case with Oedipus, whose attempt to avoid the necessary consequences of his birth achieved no more than the fulfilment of those consequences. Such too was the case of Athens in Thucydides' history, to which Lucretius' ending so clearly alludes. For Lucretius, the tragedy is that of the common man, the person most truly 'undeserving' and 'like ourselves'□because s/he *is* ourselves. We may follow our Greek hero beyond the *flammantia moenia mundi* ('flaming ramparts of the world', 1.74) and defiantly thumb our noses at *religio* by committing the ultimate act of hubris in declaring ourselves the equal of god; we may feel that we have triumphed over death as a concept, and we may congratulate ourselves for doing so; we may even delude ourselves that our superior knowledge somehow gives us the power to overcome *natura*; but *natura* will have the last word. And here the 'last word' is not the satire with

which she berates those who object to having to die in Book 3 but the awfulness of the death agony itself. It is noteworthy that Lucretius does not choose to refer to the thoroughly 'philosophical' way in which Epicurus dealt with his own painful death as Diogenes Laertius does; he deliberately eschews anything that might enable us to feel that this is something we can face with equanimity. For the victims of this disaster, philosophy is to be no consolation, nor to us, who can only respond to their plight in human terms. Unlike the gods, human beings possess the quality of compassion.

In the course of his laudatory account of Epicurus, Diogenes Laertius writes of his [unknown word]('goodwill to all', 10.9) and [unknown word]('benevolence/feeling of friendship towards all', 10.10). This reflects the fact that . . .'friendship'. . . is for Epicurus one of the great human virtues:

. . . .
The same understanding both makes us confident
about nothing terrible being everlasting or of long
duration and perceives that even in this limited state
the most complete security is that of friendship.

But this reliance on the security . . . that friendship brings comes at a price; if we have friends, if we emulate the Master. . . then to share the pain of our fellow human beings is a necessary consequence:

nam et laetamur amicorum laetitia aeque atque nostra
et pariter dolemus angoribus.

For we both rejoice at the joy of our friends as much as
at our own, and are equally pained by their sorrows.

The irony, and it would not be inappropriate to call it *tragic* irony, is that that very bonding we feel towards our fellow *mortales aegri*, our main means of defence against the harshness of our existence in the world, renders indifference to their suffering impossible. The godlike detachment envisaged in the prologue to Book 2 is revealed as essentially unattainable. Philosophy can enable us to understand the physical processes involved in natural disasters, and to accept that these disasters are not to be seen as an act of divine vengeance. But it cannot destroy our feeling of compassion for our fellow human beings; and so, despite confident assertions such as 1.78f. and 3.319-22, it does not, cannot, make us equals of the gods. The insight is as old as Homer:

. . .
For so did the gods spin fate for wretched mortals,
that they should live unhappy; they themselves are
free from pain.

So too for Lucretius: between us and the gods there is a great gulf fixed (*diuom natura semota a nostris rebus seiunctacque longe,* 1.46 = 2.648), and their peace of mind is

contingent on the fact that they are 'free from all pain and free from dangers' (*priuata dolore omni, priuata periclis,* 1.47 = 2.649); 'the heartache and the thousand natural shocks/that .esh is heir to' are the lot of human beings. The only difference now is that it is not the gods who are responsible for this but *natura.* The tragic consequences remain: we are on this treadmill; the gods are not.

Thus the *De Rerum Natura*, as Book 6 moves through its account of meteorological and terrestrial phenomena to its grim conclusion, enables us to perceive, as tragedy does, what is truly pitiable and fearful in the human condition. Like the fate of Oedipus, the plague serves as a reminder that our claims to possess the mental capacity to solve all problems are essentially hubristic; we may have minds that can soar above and beyond the *.ammantic moenia mundi*, but as organisms compounded of atoms we are subject to the same process of creation and destruction as the most insignificant life-form. And while the Epicurean argument shows that (*un*like Oedipus) we have nothing to fear from the gods in elevating ourselves to their level, their lack of concern puts us completely at the mercy of *natura.* The plague is final and conclusive evidence that we do not live in a world ruled by any kind of moral principle; the conquest of our Greek hero has left us on our own in an unfeeling and indifferent universe. All we can do is bury our dead and learn how to draw on our own resources for the 'enduring spirit' that we need to retain our sanity. That is all that philosophy can offer.

It is not a comfortable or comforting ending; there are no last words of hope, no *Letter to Idomeneus* for the disciples to treasure. Lucretius is not making a work of art out of the life of Epicurus, but out of the life of the world and the individuals within it. And it is this, I think, that enables us to understand not only the content but also the suddenness of the closure. In the title of this essay I make allusion to Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending,* which deals (among other things) with the ways in which the closed system of a work of .ction relates to the open system of the world:

> Men, like poets, rush□*in medias res* when they are
> born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense
> of their span they need fictive concords with origins
> and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.

The *De Rerum Natura*□whose ultimate fiction is that it is a philosophical text masquerading as a work of art rather than a work of art representing the world as experienced□is such an attempt to establish 'fictive concord'. For in its progress from birth to death, from the mother-figure of Venus (*Aeneadum genetrix,* 1.1), whose function is to bring male and female together to procreate, to the corpses that choke the sanctuaries of plague-stricken Athens, the poem images not only the cycle of the world but also□and more importantly□that of the individual human being. Macrocosm becomes the symbol of microcosm. It is we who make the journey from joyful childhood to painful death; and in this journey the tools we have for making sense of the world in which we find ourselves are our sense-perceptions, the motions within the soul to which these gives rise, and our feelings of pleasure and pain in response to them. Death is the ending of sense as it is of the poem. The plague represents the process of dying: infection (the invasion of noxious particles), multiplication of symptoms, physical pain,

increasing mental derangement (be it delirium or senility), increasing solitude as one loses contact with those around, and finally the moment of death itself, which ends it all. The abrupt ending of the poem captures the ending of life precisely. After death there is no more sensation, no more feeling, no more words. The rest is silence.

Source: J. L. Penwill, "The Ending of Sense: Death as Closure in Lucretius Book 6," in *Ramus Critical Studies in Greek and Roman Literature,* Vol. 25, No. 2, 1996, pp. 146-65.

Critical Essay #3

Author Kirk Summers discusses Lucretius' ideas on the religious traditions of his time.
Epicurus' paradoxical attitude toward religious observances has fascinated scholars for a long time now. Although he dismissed most of the popular notions about the gods and their involvement in human affairs, he still encouraged his followers to participate in the traditional cults of their countries. He believed that, by engaging in popular religious activities, they would strengthen their own mental conception of the gods and thereby be better able to imitate and experience the divine blessedness. Yet, even when keeping this doctrine of imitation in view, one formidable inconsistency remains: How can an Epicurean maintain his [lack of disturbance] while praying, sacrificing, and making vows to gods who neither heed such ritualistic expressions nor are moved by them? In other words, would not the constant exposure to incorrect views about the gods and involvement in wrongheaded rituals corrupt the Epicurean's purified conception of the gods?

Many find a resolution to the problem in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Since there Lucretius sharply criticizes specific procedures of religious observance, some infer that Epicurus must have encouraged his followers to take part in cults in general terms, but discouraged participation in certain rituals. Numerous passages in Philodemus. . . however, disprove this inference. Philodemus draws heavily upon the words and actions of Epicurus, Hermarchus, Polyaenus, and Metrodorus to argue for full participation in traditional cults, thus presenting the school's orthodox position. Lucretius, on the other hand, by criticizing the specific details of religious practice, particularly Roman religious practice, represents a deviation from his master's original intent on the matter. It will be argued here that the religious ideas of Epicurus, especially as expressed by Philodemus, cannot be harmonized with the more revolutionary ones of Lucretius.

Critical Essay #4

For Lucretius' contemporary Cicero, *superstitio* is the groundless fear of the gods, while *religio* is the pious worship of them. Elsewhere he de.nes *religio* in practical terms by *cultus deorum* instead of a set of doctrinal statements. Whereas the exact nature of the gods remained nebulous, every Roman knew his or her duty regarding the traditional rituals that constituted *religio. Religio* meant fulfilling an understood contractual relationship with the gods. It involved acts, rather than beliefs; it centered on cult, instead of theology.

Therefore, when in the following passage Lucretius inveighed against the outward modes of worship, he struck at the heart of religion as the Romans knew it: few could have appreciated, as their primary expression of religion, the emphasis he was putting on meditation:

nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri vertier ad lapidem
atque omnis accedere ad aras, nec procumbere humi
prostratum et pandere palmas ante deum delubra, nec
aras sanguine multo spargere quadrupedum, nec votis
nectere vota, sed mage placata posse omnia mente tueri.

Cyril Bailey's comments on this passage exemplify the perplexity Lucretius' brief diatribe against religion has aroused. He remarks that Epicurus observed religious ceremonies and performed blood sacrifices and called on others to do likewise to prove their piety; he adds, "it is not the act of worship which the Epicurean thinks wrong, but its motive." It is important to note, however, that Bailey generalizes about Epicureans rather than attributes the view to Lucretius, since the passage at hand would contradict his assertion. The rest of his arguments exhibit the same unwarranted blending of Epicurean and Lucretian ideas. Lucretius is pious, he thinks, like Epicurus, and not at all against the worship of the gods; Lucretius only resents sacrifices and religious ceremonies, since they derive from superstition, that is, false fears stemming from false beliefs about the gods. Yet it cannot be, as Bailey says, that Lucretius is pious *like* Epicurus if Lucretius disparages the very sacrifices and ceremonies that Epicurus encouraged. Still he continues this train of thought: true piety for the Epicurean, he says, is the blissful contemplation of divine mental images. But does Lucretius' *placata posse omnia mente tueri* really have a parallel in Epicurus? Is "true piety" for Epicurus the same as for Lucretius? The texts suggest otherwise.

In analyzing this passage and others of the *De rerum natura* in detail I want to show that Lucretius writes about current Roman religious practice, and that the Romans who read (or heard) his poem would have recognized the elements of their own religion in it. Furthermore, Lucretius' attack on Roman cult is comprehensive; he attacks the totality of the Roman religious experience, including both *publica sacra* and personal acts of piety. Although Lucretius never explicitly forbids participation in cult, the hostility he shows throughout his poem to specific acts of traditional Roman piety and the confidence he places in reason suggest that he envisioned a religious experience

different from that of Epicurus. He gives no indication, as Epicurus often did, that participation in standing cultic rituals offered benefits to one with a right attitude. Instead, Lucretius emphasizes that religion has its origin in fear and intimidation, and that many of its cultic acts still depend on those ideas. Accordingly he derides current religious practice, with all of its browbeating and contractual requirements.

Lines 5.1198-1203 belong to the larger context of Lucretius' discussion of the origins of religious beliefs and rites among mankind (5:1161-67):

Nunc quae causa deum per magnas numina gentis
pervulgarit et ararum compleverit urbis suspiciendaque
curarit sollemnia sacra, quae nunc in magnis florent
sacra rebu' locisque, unde etiam nunc est mortalibus
insitus horror qui delubra deum nova toto suscitat orbi
terrarum et festis cogit celebrare diebus.

Nations have filled their cities with temples, he says, and have instituted sacred rites for holy days, because they have ascribed to the anthropomorphic images of the gods, which come to them intuitively both when awake and in dreams, human attributes that do not belong to them. Furthermore, since these mental images of the gods appear nobler, stronger, and happier, and since these gods seem to accomplish many miracles, people suppose that they control the events in the heavens.

Several points are worth noting from this larger context, 5.1161-93, before analyzing 5.1198-1203. Despite the broad historical (*pervulagarit, compleverit,* and *curarit*) and universal (*toto orbi*) scope applied to the discussion of *religio*, Lucretius' real interest in the here and now□contemporary Rome□permeates the passage. Thus he quickly dismisses the past tenses (1162-63) for the present tenses in the lines that follow: *florent, est, suscitat,* and *cogit*. He reiterates the *nunc* of 1164 in 1165 to emphasize the present, and then adds *nova* in 1166 to show that these habits persist. The phrases *sollemnia sacra*, *delubra suscitat*, and *festis diebus* are general enough that no Roman would have pictured, say, Egyptian or Jewish practices, but rather his own religion.

Regarding the next section (lines 1169-93), Bailey rightly notes that Epicureans viewed the initial cause of religious feeling in man, that is, the constant stream of divine images, as legitimate and pure. Religion became distorted only when mankind misinterpreted those images by attaching to them limitless power and the will to intervene in human affairs. Bailey recognizes that lines 1198- 1203 (*nec pietas ullast* □) relate to this later distortion, but he does not carry the point through to its conclusion. Lucretius transforms the idea of what piety is for a Roman by rejecting rituals that perpetuate a belief in a reciprocal contract between gods and men. He opts instead for a rational meditation of the workings of nature, which alone can ease fears. Clearly, Lucretius thinks that the implied threats and anxiety inherent within traditional Roman religion inhibit the attainment of this goal.

In 1198-99, *velatum saepe videri/vertier ad lapidem,* the word *velatum* connotes a specific Roman custom, as opposed to a Greek one. Pierre Boyancæ has suggested

that *velatum* refers not to the subject of *vertier*, as commonly taken, but to *lapidem,* which were sometimes garlanded. He bases his argument on the grounds that veiling the head is, according to him, properly *ritu Graeco;* however, exactly the opposite is true. Whether an official priest or priestess acting on behalf of the State, or a private citizen sacrificing for his own purposes, the Roman commonly worshipped *capite velato.* Commentators have drawn the parallel with Vergil *Aeneid* 3.405-7, where Helenus tells Aeneas and his companions,

purpureo velare comas adopertus amictu ne qua inter
sanctos ignis in honore deorum hostilis facies occurrat
et omina turbet □

Helenus then bids Aeneas to make this a traditional part of their religion. Ovid mentions Numa *caput niveo velatus amictu*. The purpose of the veil, according to Virgil's Helenus, is to keep the worshiper from seeing *hostilis facies* lest they disturb the *omina.* Various Roman coins and statues however, show that the eyes were not covered during the ceremony (see discussion below). On the *Ara Pacis* (voted 13 B.C., completed 9 B.C.), erected by Augustus, Aeneas (together with Vestal Virgins, priests, and magistrates) is represented in the act of sacrificing with his head veiled, yet eyes uncovered. Perhaps the veil only demonstrates the readiness to cover the eyes if evil visages should appear in the sacred flames and therefore was not always pulled over the eyes.

In particular, coins depict the head of *Pietas* herself wearing a veil (Herennius, Caesar, Hirtius, Tiberius) or her full figure with veiled head and in the act of sacrificing (Caligula, Galba, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius). Specifically, Caligula's coin shows a veiled *Pietas* seated and holding out a patera on the verse; the obverse portrays a veiled Caligula sacrificing a bull in the temple of *Divus Augustus* and holding out a patera. The extended patera, as well as the veiled head, connects Caligula with the *Pietas* on the reverse, suggesting both the piety of his sacrifice and the piety he offers to his subjects. On Galba's coin *Pietas* stands veiled at an altar on which is a relief with Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius; the legend around *Pietas* reads *Pietas Augusti, S.C.* The coin of Hadrian shows a standing, veiled *Pietas* on the reverse, holding her hands upward with an offering or in a praying gesture. On the reverse of Antoninus Pius' coin, *Pietas,* her head veiled, scatters grains of incense on an altar. These numismatic types derive from the numerous Roman statues, from all periods, of *Pietas* and similar goddesses wearing a veil.

Although the personification of *Pietas* most often signifies the devotion of child to parent, it also signifies the devotion of the citizen to the gods, as the many depictions of *Pietas* before the altar make clear. In the same way, Aeneas is *pius* both because he rescued his father from Troy and because he brought with him the household gods. I mention these depictions of *Pietas*, not because I think Lucretius refers here to the personi.ed deity (he does not), but to demonstrate the wide gulf between his concept of piety and the prevailing Roman view: in the latter view, piety entailed most certainly worshipping the gods at the altar with veiled head; the deity herself personified the importance of wearing the veil before the altar. The average Roman must have clearly

grasped that Lucretius had made a radical departure from religious custom when he asserted *nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri.*

The precise connotation of *lapis* in 1199 has troubled many. If we take 1198-1202 to refer to one ceremony, then Lucretius depicts a typical worshiper who veils his head, turns toward the god's statue (*lapis*), and then prostrates himself. An attractive parallel, often adduced by commentators, is Suetonius *Vitellius* 2. Here Vitellius flatters Caligula by worshipping him as he would a god: *capite velato, circumvertensque se, deinde procumbens.* In view of this parallel, Lucretius' use of *lapis* for the image of the god would be contemptuous and derogatory. Yet two factors preclude us from taking *lapis* to mean "statue": first, Lucretius does not trace the steps of any one rite here, so that we can draw parallels to the descriptions of ceremonies in other authors; rather, he combines elements from several ceremonies to make a generalization about *pietas.* Second, he does not employ derisive imagery in the passage to represent the other cultic objects or acts that he mentions; to the contrary, he describes the rites in straightforward terms. Indeed, the passage makes perfect sense if *lapis* simply means "stone," without further connotation.

A Roman would not have considered *lapis* to be a derogatory word in the same way as someone with a Judaeo-Christian perspective. There were many instances in which Romans revered *lapides,* probably aerolites, which they believed Jupiter hurled from heaven. The stones represented either the divinity itself or some aspect of its personality and function. For example, the Romans considered the relocation of the black Cybele stone from Pessinus to Rome in 204 B.C. to be equivalent to transferring the goddess herself. Both Munro and Bailey think that if *lapis* is not disparaging then it probably means either the *termini* stones or stones "set up in the streets and roads, etc. occurring so often all periods," which were said to be *sacer.* The former did indeed involve an elaborate worship service (including veiling and sacrificing) out in the country. As for the latter category of stones, I cannot find solid evidence that indicates what they were or even that they were venerated.

We have to wonder why Lucretius chose the singular over the plural (cf. the plural forms *aras*, *delubra*, and *vota*). One possible answer is that he intends to say *the* stone instead of *a* stone. If so, a better parallel is found in a letter of Cicero to his friend Trebatius who has recently converted to Epicureanism. Cicero complains that as an Epicurean Trebatius can no longer function properly in public life, since Epicurean principles so often contradict Roman laws that promote fairness and selflessness among the community. Furthermore, Cicero implies that as an Epicurean Trebatius will not be willing to swear by the Jupiter-stone: "Quo modo autem tibi placebit 'Iovem Lapidem iurare,' cum scias Iovem iratum esse nemini posse?" The Romans had two ceremonies involving a stone and an oath. In one instance the stone represents the perjurer, while the priest acts as Jupiter. The participants take their oath, and then the priest casts away the stone to show what will happen to the one who breaks the oath. The *locus classicus* of this ceremony is Polybius 3.25. In the second instance, the stone is an extension of Jupiter, representing his thunderbolt, which the priest uses to strike a pig, the perjurer. Livy explains the details of that ceremony. Possibly the same stone is at issue, viewed from two different perspectives: Jupiter either cast the stone (assuming

it was an aerolite) out from heaven as a perjurer, or hurled it from heaven against perjurers. From either perspective, the stone served as a sacred symbol of Jupiter's wrath against the practitioners of deceit.

A few other stones worshipped by the Romans could be mentioned here, but it should be evident by now how uncomfortable the phrase *nec pietas ullast vertier ad lapidem* must have made the average Roman, since he could immediately think of several instances in which he himself revered a stone. And perhaps Lucretius consciously intended to be vague, to leave each contemplating whatever instance came first to mind. Any Roman would have recognized himself in Lucretius' *vertier ad lapidem,* not because of the stone's intrinsic connection with statues of Jupiter and the like, but because sometimes the gods appeared as stones.

It is tempting to relate the phrase *omnis accedere ad aras* of 1199 to the *supplicatio*, which became an important Roman ritual around the third century B.C. We know from Ceasar and Cicero that Romans practiced it during the late Republic, and Livy describes the features of the ceremony as practiced during the Punic Wars: "undique matronae in publicum effusae circa deum delubra discurrunt crinibus passis aras verrentes, nixae genibus, supinas manus ad caelum ad deos tendentes." The *supplicatio* was an opportunity for the general Roman public, in times of peril and thanksgiving, to worship numerous gods at once, since images of them would be placed out on the lawn, often on couches, and there worshipped with kneeling or prostration. Lucretius' description of prostration, immediately followed by opening of the palms, along with the phrase *ante deum delubra* at 1201, resembles Livy's account. But the passage of Livy suggests that the participants of the *supplicatio* wore laurel wreaths rather than veils, although one could argue that the veiled women portrayed on the Altar of Manlius are engaged in a *supplicatio*.

The *supplicatio* afforded the opportunity for Romans to express intense piety. Latte remarks, "The participation of the people as a whole in a religious act, and the intensi.cation of feeling produced thereby, had previously been unknown in Roman religion. Instead of formulaic prayers consisting of wishes, we now have supplication that found words in the mood of the moment." Plautus illustrates this in the *Rudens* when he says "facilius si qui pius est a dis supplicans / quam qui scelestust invenient veniam sibi". Thus the act of "approaching every altar," at least in the context of the *supplicatio*, was for the Romans a unique experience. No fixed ritual or formulaic prayers existed to sti.e the spontaneous outpouring of feeling to the gods. The gods were exposed for all to express personal heartfelt thanksgivings or unrehearsed petitions. In the mind of the Romans the act of "approaching every altar" would have been an especially pious one; certainly Lucretius' phrase, among other things, would have made the average Roman think of the *supplicatio*, and undoubtedly in that regard he would have felt deeply the import of *nec pietas ullast.*

At 1200-1201, the phrase "nec procumbere humi prostratum et pandere palmas / ante deum delubra" could again have many significations. In fact, it has been argued thus far that Lucretius intended to be vague, although the *supplicatio* may have served roughly

as the archetypal cultic practice. Nevertheless, some parallels shed light on how a Roman might have understood the phrase.

Stretching oneself out on the ground before the images of the gods provided the outward manifestation of the inward intensity of one's emotions. Ovid's wife falls prostrate before the Penates in an earnest plea for her husband: *Ante Lares sparsis prostrata capillis.* Similarly in Livy, the prostrate women, sweeping the temple floors with their hair, implore mercy from the gods to stop the pestilence.

Cicero also sheds light on the meaning of prostration, although his example is of a nobleman before the Roman people: "ut, cum minus valuissent suffragiis quam putassent, postea prolatis comitiis prosternerent se et populo Romano fracto animo atque humili supplicarent." This action accords with the Roman concept of piety: there is an understanding of one's role in an implied contractual relationship, as well as the expectation of a return. In other words, piety is the humble acknowledgement of reliance on the will of another, with an offer of devotion to gain favor; prostration, as a part of that piety, expresses humility and dependence.

A passage of Tibullus will illustrate the point. While writing about troubles with a certain girl, Tibullus complains of his innocence, but concedes that, if guilty of some crime, he will beg for forgiveness: "non ego, si merui, dubitem procumbere templis / et dare sacratis oscula liminibus, □ supplex □". Whereas Christian theology views worship as a response to the majestic nature of the deity, Romans prostrate themselves in worship to bargain with gods, asking them either to forgive a past crime (hence the sacrifice or vow) or to procure a future benefit. The Christian idea of glori.cation for its own sake was foreign to the Romans. A Roman did not prostrate himself to adore the gods, but to ask something from them.

Thus, since piety involved a certain amount of dealing and expectation, and since prostration was symbolic of the supplication, Lucretius rejected the prevailing concept of *pietas* by applying Epicurus' doctrine in a logical way. Epicureanism taught that the gods did not stoop to make bargains; therefore prostration was ridiculous.

Closely connected with the act of prostration is the act of praying, which Lucretius represents here through the phrase *pandere palmas*. Ovid reveals the meaning of the outstretched arms or open palms concisely when he writes *ad vatem vates orantia bracchia tendo*. The poet as *vates* performs a religious act. Seneca, in a strange mixture of Epicureanism and Stoicism, also combats this expression of Roman piety (though unlike Lucretius he means to retain the prayerful communication with an inner god): "Non sunt ad caelum elevandae manus nec exorandus aeditus, ut nos ad aurem simulacri, quasi magis exaudiri possimus, admittat; prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est". Aeneas prays in distress over the storm sent by Aeolus: "ingemit, et, duplicis tendens ad sidera palmas". Piety, Lucretius is saying, does not involve praying to the gods.

Little needs to be said about the act of sacrificing, since it was a common expression of piety in the ancient world. Possibly Lucretius continues to use the model of the

supplicatio, since Romans did sacrifice during that ceremony. He had already censured the sprinkling of altars with blood when he described the efforts of men to secure divine aid in making their wives pregnant

multo sanguine maesti conspergunt aras adolentque
altaria donis, ut gravidas reddant uxores semine largo.

Although the term *pietas* does not appear here, the concept is as much at issue as in 5.1201-2. Line 4.1239 begins with *nequiquam*, a hint of the *nec pietas ullast* to come. Sacrificing and other modes of ritual are not impious: they are vain, if not emotionally harmful, because they come from a misunderstanding of the nature of things. Taken together, then, these passages constitute a forceful denunciation of the Roman's view of reality, a conception that was reflected in the way they worshipped.

The offering and fulfilling of vows was a practice shared by most ancient Mediterranean peoples, yet for the Romans it had greater significance than for most: since they couched the language of their vows in juristic terms, which was for them "the strongest form of obligation," the vow served as a visible sign of their *iustitia* toward the gods. The hundreds of inscriptions in the *CIL* that contain the abbreviation *v.s.l.m.* (*votum solvit libens merito*) attest to the prevalence of the practice. Its importance within the Roman experience is evinced by its frequent mention in a wide variety of genres, including history, myth, poetic imagery, novel, satire, and autobiography. Cicero includes a provision for vows in his sketch of the ideal set of religious laws. In contrast, Lucretius believes that people make vows in vain. Striking evidence is that all the same they are driven onto the shallows by a sudden gale.

One final comment needs to be made on the idiomatic use of *necto* here. Lambin is uncharacteristically silent on the matter, whereas Munro (ad loc.) says "*vota* are here the *votivae tabulae* or *tabellae*, hung up on the wall of a temple or elsewhere," and equivalent to *votivas*, as in Vergil *Aeneid* 3.279: *votisque incendimus aras.* By this Bailey has understood Munro to mean "to string votive-tablets together," which he considers unlikely. But Munro's interpretation of *vota* (= *votivas*) makes sense if we take the following *votis* to mean "vows," and *nectere* to be Lucretius' poetic way of expressing obligation. Thus the whole phrase reads in English: "It is not piety to make oneself responsible for a votive-offering by making a vow."

The next line, "sed mage placata posse omnia mente tueri," sums up all that Lucretius has been trying to say thus far. The word *tueri* anticipates what follows in lines 1204-40, but no one to my knowledge has recognized how they link with 1198- 1203. Lucretius is proposing that the ignorance that he describes at 1204-40 is the reason for certain Roman religious practices, thus showing how futile they really are. In ignorance men and women veil their heads and prostrate themselves because they feel small in the face of what they presume to be the immeasurable power of the gods and their eternal natures; people sacrifice because they shiver before displays of their anger and want to win their favor; they pray and make vows because they imagine the gods can turn storms to calm, and generally that they govern the world. Again we find the word

nequiquam, which we may assume now sums up Lucretius' opinion on the activity of religion.

Thus, in stark contrast to Epicurus' tack, Lucretius has undermined theologically and rationally the reasons for performing customary rituals. And lest any Roman still not recognize his own religion in all of this, Lucretius adds,

usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quaedam obterit, et
pulchros fascis saevasque secures proculcare ac ludibrio
sibi habere videtur.

It is none other than Roman glory that religion diminishes.

As a final argument showing that Lucretius is attacking current religious practice in this passage, I adduce Lucretius' own anticipation of this passage at 5.73-75. Lines 55-90 serve as a unit in which Lucretius outlines the order of his arguments in book 5. He sums up 5.1193-1203 with the following:

et quibus ille modis divom metus insinuarit pectora,
terrarum qui in orbi sancta tuetur fana lacus lucos aras
simulacraque divom.

Clearly Lucretius has taken his criticism of specific ritualistic procedures further than Epicurus ever did. Rather than stressing the possibility of compromising with current practices, as Epicurus did, Lucretius points out in the strongest terms that mankind created the holy shrines, pools, groves, altars, and statues out of a false fear of the gods; his subsequent call to a "peaceful contemplation of the true nature of things" might take place in a holy place, such as a temple, but Lucretius never says so.

In analyzing this passage I have been attempting to reconstruct what a Roman would have thought when he read it. In some sense Lucretius' passage is general enough that it could have affected other peoples similarly, especially the Greeks, but not so thoroughly. A Greek, for example, would have agreed that veiling the head and prostrating oneself did not signify piety, since Greek religious practice did not entail either one. The fact is, Lucretius has aimed his attack on piety specifically at Romans and the way they practice religion. Nor should we underrate the force of Lucretius' passage: he hits right at the heart of Roman religion and everyday expressions of Roman piety.

Undoubtedly a contemporary Roman reader would have had a much different reaction to what Lucretius writes than we do today. He or she would have perceived much more of their own religious life in the very words and phrases that we now consider well-justified attacks on paganism. Yet because Lucretius' attacks seem less harsh today, many have resisted seeing the anti-religious elements of his poem. Lines 5.1198-1203 are the most open censure of Roman religion, but the poem is full of echoes of ordinary piety in late republican Rome and contains a redefinition of the conception of piety.

Lucretius considered his task to be one of liberation: "primum quod magnis doceo de rebus et artis / religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo." He wanted to free his captive compatriots from their own religion, which functioned for them as an ordering of life at home, in public, and in the individual heart. When they learned the ways of nature, he thought, they would see that there was no need for elaborate burial rites, because the self dies with the body. This, of course, has negative implications for the Lar familiaris: "certe ut videamur cernere eum quem / rellicta vita iam mors et terra potitast." No longer will the happy home and wife and children receive the father, because he feels nothing and craves nothing; he cannot even be a *praesidium* for his own.

Exposing false fears about death also removes the need for the *Parentalia*:

et quocumque tamen miseri venere parentant et nigras
reactant pecudes et manibu' divis inferias mittunt
multoque in rebus acerbis acrius advertunt animos
ad religionem.

But this worship of the dead was one of the oldest of the Roman rites, with both communal and private expressions. It was based on the notion that the ancestors continued to be a part of the family with a new life outside the walls of the city. For Lucretius these concerns over death and the dead were ridiculous misunderstandings of nature and a major cause of evil among men.

Lucretius does not only attempt to alter the way Romans think about themselves; he also challenges the way they think about divine activity. The gods do not rule the universe, nor do they involve themselves in its development or destruction. The crops grow and creatures reproduce without them; and even the calendar itself precludes their interest in us. The gods do not send birds or lightning as omens of their will. To all such interpretations of reality, so deeply rooted in the Roman way of life and so much a basis of Roman religion, Lucretius throws down the gauntlet of his challenge. Death, crops, animals, seasons, weather, all have natural explanations and causes; the best religion is not traditional religion at all, but a contemplation of how the various phenomena of life and death .t into nature's great mechanism without divine involvement. It is a revolutionary proposition that no conservative Roman could have taken lightly.

Critical Essay #5

Lucretius' derisive stance toward cult at 5.1198- 1203 diverges so starkly from Epicurus' attitude about religion that many consider it a temporary aberration. Other passages in *De rerum natura* seem to reveal the poet's admiration for those same rites and ceremonies that he elsewhere despises, or, as Bailey said, to indicate "something like a personal affection for their details." Nevertheless, I will argue that none of those so-called religious passages provide evidence that Lucretius encourages his readers to continue participating in the traditional worship of the gods; instead, in each case the poet either follows his description of a religious practice with some qualification, or contrasts the fear that marks the practice to the *pax* that comes through the rational contemplation of nature.

Those who want to see in Lucretius a religious sensitivity most often turn to 6.68-79:

quae nisi respuis ex animo longeque remittis dis
indigna putare alienaque pacis eorum, delibata deum
per te tibi numina sancta saepe oberunt; non quo
violari summa deum vis possit, ut ex ira poenas petere
imbibat acris, sed quia tute tibi placida cum pace
quietos constitues magnos irarum volvere fluctus, nec
delubra deum placido cum pectore adibis, nec de
corpore quae sancto simulacra feruntur in mentis
hominum divinae nuntia formae suscipere haec animi
tranquilla pace valebis.

H. Scullard relies on this single passage to support his view of Lucretius: "Lucretius seems to envisage some continuation of traditional worship when he says that unless you reject all erroneous ideas from your mind, 'you will not be able to approach the shrines of the gods with quiet heart.'" Since Lucretius specifically refers to our state of mind when approaching shrines, it seems *prima facie* that Lucretius not only condones approaching the shrines, but encourages it. Yet the context cautions against such a conclusion, since the emphasis of the entire passage is on how religious fear disturbs mental tranquility (*pax*), not on the specific details of worship. In the immediately preceding lines Lucretius discusses how the events in the ethereal regions cause people to be afraid and to engage in old modes of worship (*rursus in antiquas referuntur religionis,*) that is, to appease the gods and win their favor, which is the core of Roman religious practice (as at 5.1161-1204). All such activity is based on the mistaken notion that the gods have regard for people and exercise an active sovereignty over the universe. Furthermore, the phrases *placido cum pectore adibis* and *suscipere haec animi tranquilla pace valebis* recall Lucretius' redefinition of *pietas* at 5.1203 (*sed mage placata posse omnia mente tueri*), which follows immediately upon his expression of scorn for specific rites. *Pax* and its cognates in these two passages are equivalent to Epicurus' concept of. . . something the gods possess (*pacis eorum,* 6.69; *placida cum pace quietos*), and Epicureans desire. Lucretius wants his readers to understand that they can never achieve the *pax* of the gods if they continue to harbor and act on false

notions about them. One of the false notions that causes the most harm, according to Lucretius, is the belief that the gods "roll forth great waves of anger" and are eager to exact punishment. After undermining the intent behind religious practice, he cannot then in line 75 be encouraging his readers to carry on their religion as before. Thus he must be underscoring the impossibility of approaching the *delubra deum*. . . since the rites to be performed there have their basis in fear.

Even if Lucretius advocates approaching the shrines here, he does not advocate prayer, repentance, or sacrifice. I do not think, however, that Lucretius imagines his followers will need to continue going to the shrines. He has argued already that *pax* is achieved through a correct understanding of physical laws (first and foremost of which is that the gods do not control them), which is hardly promoted by the rites in the *delubra*. In 5.1203, he envisions a kind of mental focusing (*omnia mente tueri*) as the surest means to *pax*. Likewise, the emphasis in 6.68-79 is on the peace that the mind itself can secure, even in respect to the gods. The *simulacra* of line 76 are not the solid images or statues of the gods inside the *delubra* of 75, which would create visual images directly affecting the outer senses of the worshippers. The *simulacra* spoken of here are brought directly *in mentes hominum*, a notion that mirrors Epicurus' [application of understanding] that is, the idea of a direct, mental apprehension of certain fine or subtle images, which in the case of the gods come to us directly from the intermundane regions during dreams or moments of meditation. This accords with an earlier statement of Lucretius, that the gods do not visit their own temples anyway.

In the major religious passages Lucretius continually shifts the focal point of truly pious activity away from the holy temples of the gods into a mental sphere. Other passages in Lucretius progressively reveal a similar contempt for the temples and statues of the gods. At 5.306-10 he tells how, like the wearing away of stones with time, *delubra deum simulacraque fessa fatisci*. At 6.417-20 he challenges the notion that the gods send thunderbolts since these bolts often smash the *bene facta deum simulacra* and shatter the *sancta deum delubra.* Finally, in his description of the Athenian plague at 6.1272-77, he describes how people hope for salvation from the gods, but in vain. The telltale sign of the impotency of their shrines and statues was when the reality of nature forced people to stop worshipping at the *caelestum templa* and crowd them instead with dying bodies, because *praesens dolor exsuperabat.* Rather than being a haven for life and health, they became, fittingly, a place of decay and suffering.

Lastly, Diskin Clay has made an interesting observation on 6.68-79 that supports the thesis that Lucretius does not encourage his followers to approach the shrines and altars. The *tute tibi* of 6.73 strongly indicates a self-sufficient piety consisting of the contemplation of nature. This, I would add, to Lucretius' mind is best achieved apart from the gloomy and intimidating atmosphere of his native country's religious rites. The rites either foster fear or stem from it, thereby disturbing the mind and preventing it from discovering the true nature of the universe.

Critical Essay #6

Two other connected passages must be treated here, because they seem to indicate a use for traditional religious rites: 1.1-43 about Venus, and 2.600- 660 about Cybele. The former passage especially has generated much debate. Most arguments reveal a reluctance on the part of scholars to accept that Lucretius could advocate a form of [reverence towards the gods] that deviated from what Epicurus recommended. Indeed, Lucretius appears to be striking a religious chord from the prologue of his poem. Nevertheless, nothing in the invocation to Venus calls the reader to traditional religion, nor does the passage itself contradict Lucretius' overall teaching on piety.

Recently Diskin Clay has asserted that Lucretius introduces the goddess only to reject her later. Lucretius is, according to Clay, entering into the world of his audience and taking them on a journey from an incorrect conception of the universe to a right contemplation of nature. He points out that an uninitiated reader, reading the poem from start to finish, would need to be immersed in doctrines so unfamiliar gradually. Thus it makes sense for Lucretius to meet his audience where they are.

I agree with Clay's argument that Lucretius does not really reject Venus, but rather treats the same topic later in technical, atomistic terms. He couches his invocation in strikingly religious terms because that is what a Roman expects to hear. Religious language retains its value for Lucretius as a kind of vernacular observation on reality; it is simply the way a Roman communicates about the universe, and it is too deeply a part of the Romans' shared cognitive experience to disregard. Occasionally throughout the poem, Lucretius lifts the veil of this metaphorical, religious language to reveal certain truths about the nature of the universe that underlie it. In the end the language can remain the same, but the words must take on new significations.

In his invocation to Venus Lucretius is primarily concerned with Venus and Mars as symbols for constructive (or conservative) and destructive forces of the universe, respectively. The underlying Epicurean doctrine that informs Lucretius' representation of these creative and destructive forces through Venus and Mars is that of . . .equilibrium, a doctrine that Lucretius discusses at 2.569-80. There Lucretius calls the destructive forces *motus exitiales* and the conservative and constructive forces *genitales auctificique*. Usually the two forces balance each other, although in their war, as it were, sometimes one obtains the upper hand, sometimes the other. They do not influence the gods, but only the *creata*.

In 2.569-80 Lucretius shows that there are natural creative and destructive forces within the universe, but he is unwilling to attribute the activities to personal beings. Whenever he speaks of the forces of growth and decay, or conservation and destruction, he quickly adds that the immortal gods are free from such concerns. The gods are not responsible for the action of *servare*; the law of equilibrium is. The Venus whom Lucretius invokes can be no goddess at all since the gods are not influential forces. They are antisocial, inactive, and motionless; they do not engage in love affairs, nor is there any contention among them; they do not grow angry, they do not protect or give

aid, nor do they respond to prayers. When the poet invokes a Venus able to do all these things, some poetic personification of an insentient force must be at work. Lucretius hopes that the creative and conservative forces of the universe will predominate long enough for him to explain the teachings of Epicurus. In other words, in a time of civil strife, he prays for peace.

Certain parallels between Lucretius' opening invocation and his description of equilibrium further indicate that Venus stands as a symbol for the positive aspect of this principle. In the first 20 lines of the invocation Lucretius alludes to new life, creativity, and fertility in nearly every other genus omne animantum concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis. . . . Venus herself is called *genetrix, voluptas,* and *alma.* She fills (*concelebras*) the world with her presence, and by her "genus omne animantum concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis." Similarly at 2.571 the constructive forces are said to be *rerum genitales,* and at 2.576-77 the creative influence likewise brings children to the light of day: "miscetur funere vagor / quem pueri tollunt visentes luminis oras." The imagery of productivity is hinted at again in *navigerum* and *frugiferentis,* followed later by *frondiferas* in line 18. Lucretius pictures the world responding to the advancing Venus with light, warmth, and regeneration: the world basks again in the sunlight ("tibi rident aequora ponti / placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum"), as the life-giving springtime (*species □ verna diei*) returns and the productive (*genitabilis*) breeze of the west wind grows strong (*viget*). Likewise at 2.575 Lucretius says that a certain vitality takes hold of the world in the cycle of the constructive and destructive forces: "nunc hic nunc illic superant vitalia rerum." Finally, in the invocation we are presented with a string of sexually suggestive words and phrases: *capta lepore*, *cupide*, *virentis*, *incutiens blandum □ amorem*, and *propagent*, all of which are summed up at 2.571 in the one word *auctifici*.

From this beautiful personification of the productive forces, Lucretius can turn in the next verses to appeal for a measure of poetic creativity. Significantly he uses the word *gubernas* in line 21 to describe Venus' activity, a word that he will later apply to the productive activity of nature contrasted with the inactivity of the gods:

praeterea solis cursus lunaeque meatus expediam qua
vi flectat natura gubernans, ne forte haec inter caelum
terramque reamur libera sponte sua cursus lustrare
perennis, morigera ad fruges augendas atque animantis,
neve aliqua divom volvi ratione putemus.

Crops grow and animals reproduce apart from some plan of the gods, because the gods pass their time without caring for our reality: *deos securum agere aevom*. The correspondence with 1.44-49 is close. A failure to understand this law of how "heaven and earth traverse their yearly courses" and how things grow and animals reproduce, leads one to return again *in antiquas □ religiones* and to take to oneself *dominos acris,* that is, to look for help in the forms and gods of traditional religion.

To Lucretius, myths reflect a popular wisdom and owe their origin to ignorance of the nature of reality:

cetera, quae fleri in terris caeloque tuentur mortales,
pavidis cum pendent mentibu' saepe, et faciunt animos
humilis formidine divum depressosque premunt ad
terram propterea quod ignorantia causarum conferre
deorum cogit ad imperium res et concedere regnum.

The fears of mankind stem from the belief that the gods are active in the universe, when in fact they are not. Lucretius' message is that people will find peace only when they attribute to the natural interchange of atoms and void what they previously imputed to divine intelligence. Even so, he still views myth as a colorful and even useful shorthand for talking about natural phenomena, as evidenced by his frequent reliance on it. Also, the well-known passage on the symbolic uses of names like Neptune, Ceres, and Bacchus indicates that he allowed the allegorical use of myth under certain conditions.

In his poem, Lucretius slides between mythological glitter and bitter philosophical medicine with a remarkable dexterity. He has found a way to retain some of the outward linguistic trappings of religion. Lucretius may have been trying to give a temporary impression of religiosity by his invocation of Venus, as Clay suggests, but every other use of myth and every other mention of religion in the poem is either clearly allegorical or sharply negative. Since the *prooemium* corresponds so closely to Lucretius' own teachings about the creativity and destruction in the universe, it is safe to assume that he is allegorizing those principles through myth rather than promoting traditional religion.

Critical Essay #7

The invocation to Venus has many interesting parallels with the description of the Magna Mater cult at 2.600-660. Lucretius applies the term *genetrix* to describe both Venus and the Great Mother at 1.1 and 2.599 respectively, although he does not exactly equate the two. He views Cybele as an agent or instrument of the constructive force of Venus. Mother Earth produces her fruit in response to the approach of Venus (*tuum initum*) and because her body holds *primordia,* the first beginnings of things. She provides the material through which Venus works. Therefore she can be called *una genetrix,* but only in the sense that she is the parent *nostri corporis*.

The idea of agency connects the Magna Mater passage with Lucretius' major discourse on the forces of equilibrium in the previous lines. His argument from line 522 onward has been that there must be an infinite number of any given type of atom in order to supply various objects in the universe. Without this unlimited abundance of each kind of atom, he says, there would be no chance that in this vast universe like atoms could meet and make shapes. He concludes at lines 567-68: "esse igitur genere in quovis primordia rerum / infinita palam est unde omnia suppeditantur." From this passage Lucretius will move on to argue that every object depends on a supply of atoms that is both infinite and varied. It follows, then, that a major supplier of this great variety of atoms is the earth (*tellus habet in se corpora prima*), since so many different things come from her body. So while there is an in.nite number of these *primordia,* the variety, so far as it is important for our existence, comes from earth herself: "terra quidem vero caret omni tempore sensu / et quia multarum potitur primordia rerum / multa modis multis effert in lumina solis".

Lucretius interrupts these two passages on the supply of the *primordia,* in one instance infinite, in the other various, with the description of the constructive and destructive forces. These kinetic forces are distinct from mother earth in that they act to combine and dissolve *primordia,* whereas she only supplies the needed material. Earth's role as a material supplier is clearly defined in lines 2.589-96:

Principio tellus habet in se corpora prima unde mare
immensum volventes frigora fontes adsidue renovent,
habet ignes unde oriantur; nam multis succensa locis
ardent sola terrae, ex imis vero furit ignibus impetus
Aetnae. tum porro nitidas fruges arbustaque laeta
gentibus humanis habet unde extollere possit, unde
etiam fluvios frondes et pabula laeta montivago generi
possit praebere ferarum.

Those words and phrases, which draw their meaning from the notion that mother earth "holds in herself the first bodies (i.e., the atoms)," deserve special note. It is because she is a storehouse of different atoms that we have springs, seas, fires, crops, animals, and people (the source being indicated by the *unde*'s of 590, 591, 595, and 596). She has the ability or the means (*possit,* 595 and 597) to raise up and produce these things.

However, her quality of *genetrix* rests solely in her being a "storehouse" or a "supplier." Allegorically speaking, then, Venus, the universal *genetrix,* acts upon and through mother earth, the materialistic *genetrix* of our immediate reality, to generate the creatures and objects (*creata* of 2.572) on earth.

Other echoes between the hymn to Venus and the Magna Mater passage support their connection. In addition to the *pabula laeta,* the passages share descriptions of wild beasts (1.14 *ferae pecudes* and 2.597 *ferarum*), mountains (1.17 *montis* and 2.597 *montivago*), rivers (1.15 *rapidos amnis,* 1.17 *fluviosque rapacis* and 2.596 *.uvios*), seas (1.17 *maria* and 2.590 *mare immensum*), and green leaves (1.18 *frondiferas* and 2.596 *frondes*). Finally, line 2.654 "multa modis multis effert in lumina solis" corresponds to the words in 1.4-5: "per te quoniam genus omne animantum / concipitur visitque exortum lumina solis." Taken together these parallels reveal an earth who is responsive to the constructive forces of Venus by virtue of her great variety of *primordia.*

Lucretius describes the cult of the Magna Mater in a way that the Romans would have known well. He did not simply copy from a Greek source now lost. Coins of the late Republic that depict various aspects of the Cybele cult and iconography bear a striking resemblance to his description of the cult. Lucretius intended to show his reader that, while the cult of Cybele that he or she observes illustrates beautifully and allegorically many of the truths about the earth that he has been discussing, it reveals nothing about the nature of the gods ("Quae bene et eximie quamvis disposta ferantur, / longe sunt tamen a vera ratione repulsa," 644-45). In fact, the cult functions primarily to terrify and coerce the crowds into, among other things, respecting their parents and defending their motherland. In his description of the historical development of religion the only time that there was an ideal understanding of the nature of the gods was before religious rites started, when people depended on the gradual influx of the divine images during their sleep for their knowledge about them. The sacred rites began, and temples and altars were erected, when people could not discover the causes of certain phenomena, and therefore were afraid. Likewise here Lucretius emphasizes over and over again the fearsomeness of the Cybele cult. At 610 he speaks of the dreadful nature of her procession (*horrifice fertur divinae matris imago*). He says she is accompanied by threatening music (*raucisonoque minantur cornua cantu,* 619) and by attendants who brandish weapons (*telaque praeportant, violenti signa furoris,* 621) and strike fear in the hearts of the spectators (*conterrere metu,* 623); they rejoice in the blood from the castration that their goddess demanded, and shake their helmets to add to the terror (*sanguine laeti, / terrificas capitum quatientes numine cristas,* 631-32). It is this use of intimidation, which to his mind is a main feature of all cultic practice, that invalidates religion.

The words that occurred at 1.44-49 reappear at 2.646-51 for the same reason as before. Again, the gods, who are called *semota* and *seiuncta,* could not be part of the creative activity that Mother Earth engages in, since they neither create nor provide the material of our creation. Furthermore, within the confines of their *intermundia* their needs are always met and their loss of atoms continually replaced (*ipsa suis pollens opibus* and *nil indiga nostri*), thus they have no need of our votive offerings, or sacrifices, or incense, inasmuch as these are seen to be *nourishment* for the gods. So,

although he concedes that the mythic names of gods may be used as a colorful way of referring to natural concepts (as in the prologue he used the name "Venus" for "constructive force"), he advises his reader not to disturb their peace with terrifying cultic practices: "dum vera re tamen ipse religione animum turpi contingere parcat".

Critical Essay #8

The idea that fear is inherent to religion pervades, as we have seen, all Lucretius' poem. Not surprisingly, then, in the programmatic passage of the whole poem, a passage that sets the tone for the rest of the work, Lucretius treats religion as a tyrant to be deposed: "Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret / in terris oppressa gravi sub religione □" Fundamental to the understanding of the passage is the exact sense of *religio* here: it may mean either a feeling of awe or dread, or the established routine of rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. Because Lucretius assails *religio* so vigorously and crushes it so utterly in this passage, scholars have traditionally preferred the former meaning. They emphasize that here Lucretius disparages the fear of the divine, while remaining consistent with Epicurus' views on piety, that is, the actual worship of the gods. Cyril Bailey, for example, introduces this section by noting that the lines "introduce the main purpose of the poem, to free men's minds from the *terrors* of religion" (ital. mine). He admits that elsewhere *religio* signifies the rites of worship, but in this passage Lucretius means "the dread of the intervention of the gods in the affairs of the world, and the fear of death and the punishment of the soul after death." Similarly H. Munro substitutes "fear of the gods and fear of death" for *religio* in his discussion of the passage.

These interpretations weaken the impact of the passage by separating religion from the fear it propagates. Lucretius makes no such distinction. The imagery he attaches to *religio* here is that used of the original giants or monsters of primitive mythology. In a similar vein Vergil described *Fama,* the last child of Mother Earth and sister to Coeus and Enceladus, as striding the earth and burying her head among the clouds (*ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit, Aen.* 4.177). Mother Earth bore her because she was angry at the gods for slaying her children. She is a *monstrum horrendum*, who feeds on fear and *magnas territat urbes.* Lucretius, like Vergil, probably draws on Homer's description of Eris [the goddess Strife] at *Iliad* 4.440-45 Thus *religio,* which has its origin in mankind's primitive misunderstanding of the nature of the universe, is herself the terrorizing giant.

When Epicurus makes his assault on the heavens he does not do so to tame religion or a part of religion that causes fear (*superstitio*); he "conquers" the mysteries of nature herself, and brings back the truth about nature as a prize. To scale the heights Epicurus had to learn to ignore (or escape from) religion altogether: He ignores the myths about the gods (*fama deum*), their supposed power (*fulmina*), and their warnings (*minitanti murmure*), all of which in the following passage lead to the sacrifice of Iphigenia (*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*). Traditional religion, which encourages mankind to appease the gods with sacrifices, to invoke their aid through prayer, and to learn their will through signs, is challenged *in toto*. Significantly, Lucretius does not cause Epicurus to revitalize or reorganize religion upon his return: giants have to be crushed under volcanoes or chained in Tartarus. In the end Epicurus achieves victory by replacing traditional religion with the truth about nature. Therefore, Lucretius advises his readers that if they hope to contemplate rationally and calmly the workings of nature, they will have to abandon the religious rites that distort the truth.

Commentators have exerted so much effort into making *religio* mean "fear" or "superstition" in this passage that they have obscured its total annihilation. The word *vicissim* in line 78 creates a ring structure for the entire passage: the situation of lines 62-63, "Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret / in terris oppressa gravi sub religione," is reversed in 78-79, "quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / obteritur." Epicurus has turned the tables, so to speak, on religion. Therefore, the key to understanding the annihilation of religion lies in the nuances of the terms used to describe the former state when religion dominated and before the situation was reversed: *ante oculos, foede, iaceret, oppressa,* and *gravi.*

Scholars have ignored the phrase "humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret," except to point out that it means "plain for all to see" and to draw weak parallels to 3.995 and Sen. *Controv.* 1.1.16. When the phrase occurs with a form of *iacere,* as in this passage, it invariably connotes humiliating defeat and subjugation, hence, "to lie humiliated before" (Curtius Rufus *Alex.* 3.9, Cic. *Fam.* 4.5.4, cf. Verg. *Aen.* 11.310-11; Sen. *Troad.* 238, cf. Verg. *Aen.* 2.531-32). *Foede* heightens the aura of mankind's disgrace and subjugation, while also adding irreligious undertones to the act of domination by *religio.* It signifies that *religio* herself is the impious polluter of mankind's existence. *Foede* at *DRN* 1.62 anticipates the impious act of pollution at lines 1.84-86:

Aulide quo pacto Triviai virginis aram Iphianassai
turparunt sanguine foede ductores Danaum delecti,
prima virorum.

The repetition of *foede* links the two passages together, so that Agamemnon's immolation of his daughter is viewed, not as an anomaly caused by fear, but as the natural consequence of the domination of *religio.* Agamemnon performed properly what *religio* demanded of him and Diana was pleased with the sacrifice: *exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur* (1.100). By the term *oppressa* Lucretius conjures up an image of a *religio* that threatens, pollutes, and cruelly subjugates human life like a despot lording it over his subjects.

Fittingly, Lucretius makes intimidation the *modus operandi* of tyrannous *religio*. Before Epicurus mankind feared to raise its eyes, for *religio* towered threateningly overhead with frightful visage (*horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,* 1.65). The words of the prophets strike terror in men (*vatum /terriloquis victus dictis,* 1.102-3), and the deafening cracks of lightning make men cower and fear the gods' anger (*fulminis horribili □ plaga,* 5.1220). For Lucretius, what is currently believed about the gods causes fear. Never is *religio* distinct from its fear, and never is the possibility of a *religio* free from it entertained; rather, fear is a natural consequence of the tyrant *religio*. The following lines, often used to show that Lucretius is only interested in destroying fear and superstition, actually prove the opposite:

quippe ita formido mortalis continet omnis, quod
multa in terris fieri caeloque tuentur quorum operum
causas nulla ratione videre possunt ac fleri divino
numine rentur. quas ob res ubi viderimus nil posse

creari de nilo, tum quod sequimur iam rectius inde
perspiciemus, et unde queat res quaeque creari et quo
quaeque modo .ant opera sine divum.

Fear ends when mankind learns that *religio*'s lessons are false. The gods do not really create, or become angry, or communicate through lightning.

Thus, when Epicurus dares to ignore the teachings of religion and to contemplate the true nature of reality, the tables are turned on *religio,* so that she is deposed and crushed the way she once crushed mankind. *Vicissim* creates the ring structure. The phrase *religio pedibus subiecta* *obteritur* of lines 78-79 recalls its counterpart *oppressa gravi sub religione* in line 63, while *nos exaequat victoria caelo* counters the humiliation indicated by *Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret / in terris* in lines 62-63.

These lines are programmatic and forebode further invectives against *religio.* Nothing in them causes the reader to believe that only superstitious fear is at issue; at stake is traditional religion as practiced before the temple altars, at home before the hearth, and at the ancestral graves. Lucretius promises that this religion, deeply embedded in the Roman way of life, will be eliminated and replaced, but it must not have been clear to the average Roman what would take its place. Even so, Lucretius retains a genuine religious sensibility throughout his poem. Yet instead of capitulating in matters of practice, as Epicurus did, he directs his feelings of devotion and awe toward the knowledge of nature's workings and principles, and toward its vaunted discoverer, Epicurus. His religion, if such it can be called, is full of caveats and qualifications, and his piety characterized by redefinitions. Certainly there is nothing in Lucretius to merit Cotta's taunt, *novi ego Epicureos omnia sigilla venerantes*. Lucretius has set aside Epicurus' justification of continued traditional worship and resculpted his master's piety into what may seem a more consistent call to a mystical-transcendental contemplation of the workings of atoms, void, and swerve.

Source: Kirk Summers, "Lucretius and the Epicurean Tradition of Piety," in *Classical Philology,* University of Chicago Press, Vol. 90, No. 1, January, 1995, pp. 32-58.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct general research on what modern-day physicists know about atoms (size, properties, visibility, etc.). Compare your findings to Lucretius' version of atomic theory. In what ways was he correct? In what ways was he mistaken? What can you conclude about Lucretius' ability as a scientist and observer of the world?

Choose a partner. Think about a subject matter about which you are knowledgeable. Teach your partner about this topic using three analogies, just as Lucretius uses analogies to clarify his points to his readers. Then trade roles, with your partner acting as teacher and yourself as student.

Review the passage in Book Five that begins with Line 852. What parallels can you draw between Lucretius' statements and evolutionary theory? Also, Lucretius writes, "And many have been entrusted to our care, / Commended by their usefulness to us." Is there anything in this passage that reminds you of the creation narrative in Genesis?

In Book Five, Lucretius states, "But if true reason governs how one lives, / To have great wealth means to live sparingly, / With a clear heart: small wants are always met." Consider the philosophies of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Could you say that Lucretius was a Romantic or a Transcendentalist? Why or why not?

Take into account Lucretius' views on death and write an Epicurean eulogy for him.

Compare and Contrast

First century B.C.: Lucretius' *De rerum natura* describes atoms as the invisible, solid, indivisible building blocks of all matter.

Sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Experimental science gains popularity, and atomic theory begins to make important strides. Chemists discover that matter can be identified by its separate components. For example, water can be identifi ed as being composed of hydrogen and oxygen.

1930s: The electron microscope is developed, a tool that would eventually allow scientists to see particles as small as atoms.

First century B.C. Rome: Most Romans believe that gods and goddesses govern natural occurrences and manipulate human affairs. In order to appease the gods and goddesses and win their favor, worshippers must create altars and, sometimes, make sacrifices.

Twentieth-century United States: Statistics compiled in 1996 by the United States Census indicate that 56% of Americans practice Protestantism, 25% practice Roman Catholicism, and 11% practice no religion. These numbers suggest that most modern Americans believe in a single god.

First century B.C.: Rome is under an unstable republican government.

1789: The United States ratifies its Constitution, establishing a constitutional republic. The Constitution continues to form the basis of American government today.

What Do I Read Next?

Aristophanes' *The Complete Plays*, c. 300 B.C., compiles the humorous plays of the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes. These plays demonstrate the satire and humor that delighted playgoers in ancient Greece.

Mike Corbishley's *What Do We Know about the Romans?*, 1992, gives students a cultural and social context for studying Roman arts and literature.

Dante's classic *The Divine Comedy*, 1307, offers a thorough, unique, and compelling look at the afterlife. Guided first by Virgil and then by Beatrice, Dante travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven, witnessing the consequences and rewards of decisions made in life.

The Iliad, c. 850 B.C., is one of Homer's great epics. In the spirit and form of a classic epic, it is a story of adventure, the Trojan War, the gods, and great heroes.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, 1599, is one of The Bard's greatest plays. It is the story of the rise and fall of Julius Caesar in Roman politics.

Further Study

Grant, Michael, *Greek and Latin Authors, 800 B.C.-A.D. 1000: A Biographical Dictionary*, H. W. Wilson, 1979.

Provides pro.les of 376 early Greek and Latin authors.

O'Hara, James J., "Venus or the Muse as 'Ally,'" in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 93, No. 1, 1998, pp. 69-76.

Explores the influence of the Greek poet Simonides
on Lucretius' *De rerum natura*.

Summers, Kirk, "Lucretius and the Epicurean Tradition of Piety," in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 90, No. 1, January, 1995, pp. 32-58.

Lucretius' religious stance, central to his great epic,
differs from that of his master Epicurus.

Thomas, Edmund J., and Eugene Miller, *Writers and Philosophers*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1990.

Offers information on 123 writers who are frequently
anthologized, and explains their literary in.uence.
Also, seventy-five philosophers are profiled with brief
explanations of their teachings.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

EfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Epics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the EfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from EfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Epics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Epics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of EfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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