

**scripta 14.1: Dido's love for Aeneas**

Love is a central theme of epic poetry and the great love affair between Aeneas, the father of the Roman race, and Dido, queen of Carthage, is seen by many as one of the most tragic stories in Western literature.

Virgil uses this love affair to explore themes of powerlessness, pain and conflict. Aeneas and Dido both have a traumatic past: Aeneas is fleeing from Troy after seeing his city destroyed by the Greeks. Dido also has fled her home town, Sidon, after her brother killed her husband, Sychaeus. Aeneas meets her while she is leading her followers in building a new city, Carthage. Dido has sworn to be loyal to her husband's memory, but when the gods decide to make her fall in love with Aeneas, she is unable to resist.

Virgil focuses on the inner turmoil this causes: Dido tries to deny her love, but it consumes her. Virgil uses fire and wound metaphors as symbols of love's power to destroy and to foreshadow Dido's decision at the end of Aeneid, Book 4, to commit suicide when she realises that Aeneas has left her, compelled by the gods to pursue his destiny in Italy.

Extract 1: Dido is tormented by her love for Aeneas

The text below is taken from the opening lines of Aeneid, Book 4. At the end of Book 1, Venus had sent her son, Cupid, to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas; Book 1 ends with a description of Dido's passion spreading through her body, like a fire.

At Dido's request, Aeneas tells her his life-story and his account of his past fills Books 2 and 3. Aeneas focuses on the fall of Troy and the difficulties he has faced on his voyage since then.

At the start of Book 4 we return to Dido and the pain her love is causing her. Dido had sworn to be faithful to the memory of her dead husband; the passion she feels for Aeneas troubles her and she feels torn between her previous loyalty and the pull of this new love.

But the queen had been hurt for some time now by her heavy love; she kept feeding the wound with her life-blood and she was troubled by her blind passion. Aeneas' great talent and the high status of his family kept coming back in her mind; his face and his words stayed with her, imprinted on her heart, and her love did not allow any peaceful rest for her body.

The next day's dawn was moving over the earth with Phoebus' light and it had removed the damp mist from the sky when Dido - scarcely in her right mind - spoke to her sister, her soulmate, in this way: 'Anna, my sister, oh the bad dreams which terrify me and leave me on edge! Who is this new man who has come into our house as a guest? Oh the look he has on his face! How brave he is in his heart and in battle! Indeed - and this is no empty belief - I think that he is born from the gods.

**Extract 2: Dido confides in her sister**

Dido admits her feelings to her sister, Anna, and tells her she is determined to stay faithful to her dead husband Sychaeus.

Anna - I will admit it - after the death of my wretched husband, Sychaeus, and after our household gods were soiled with the murder committed by my brother, this man alone has changed my feelings and sent my heart reeling. I recognise the traces of a passion I felt long ago. But I would wish that the bottom of the earth would gape open for me first or that all-powerful Jupiter would drive me down to the darkness with his thunderbolt, the pale darkness in Erebus, and into the deep night before I violate you, my conscience or before I break your laws. The man who first joined me to him took my love; he should hold it with him and keep it safe in his tomb.'

Dido spoke in this way but she filled her heart with tears that had welled up.

Extract 3: Dido is wounded by her love

Virgil continues his description of Dido's love and uses an epic simile to deepen the wound imagery, already established as a metaphor for her love for Aeneas. The epic simile compares Dido to a wounded deer; the details in this simile remind us that Dido did not expect to fall in love and that Aeneas is unaware of what is happening to her.

After the simile has finished, Virgil returns to Carthage and we see Dido showing Aeneas her city; the implication is that - despite her pledge of loyalty to her former husband - she is trying to persuade Aeneas to stay. She is unable to stop thinking about Aeneas and she feels wretched without him.

Meanwhile Dido's wound lives silently within her heart. Unhappy Dido burns and wanders all over the city, mad in her passion, just like a deer when an arrow has been fired, when a shepherd, hunting from afar with his arrows, has struck the deer off-guard in the Cretan groves. He has left his flying arrow there, without realising what he has done; the deer roams through the woods and the glades of Mount **Dicte** in flight, but the deadly arrow is embedded in her side.

Now Dido leads Aeneas with her through the city and she shows him her **Sidonian** wealth and the city which is ready for him. She begins to speak and then stops in mid voice.

Now, as the same day is ending, she calls for banquets, and - not in her right mind - again she begs to hear about his efforts in **Troy**; she clings - again - to every word as he speaks. Afterwards, when her guests have left and when, in turn, the faint moon is withdrawing its light and the falling stars are calling for sleep, she grieves alone in her empty house and lies on the abandoned couches. He is not there and she is not with him, but she hears and sees him still. At other times, she keeps hold of Ascanius in her lap, captivated by his likeness to his father, and tries to deceive the love she will not admit to.



- 1) In Extract 1 Virgil focuses on Dido's pain: find three details which convey her pain and explain your choice.
- 2) In Extract 2 Virgil tells us that Dido does not want to betray her former husband, Sychaeus. Do you think she is right to feel so guilty?
- 3) Read Extract 3 and describe in your own words what Dido is doing and why.
- 4) The story of Dido is often compared to a Greek tragedy; which elements of the Dido and Aeneas story are tragic?