

Introduction

Lucretius' goal is simple: he wants to show his readers a way to achieve happiness. By helping them understand how the world works, he will also help them understand how best to live life; this in turn will allow them to achieve contentment and inner peace. Thus the title of his work, *On the Nature of Things* (Latin *De Rerum Natura*), indicates its impressively broad scope, for he chooses as his subject-matter: everything. As if that were not a great enough challenge, he sets it all to verse, for he appreciates the intrinsic attraction of poetry and understands that his readers will be more likely to keep reading if they are enthralled by the artistry of the material.

Lucretius' subject-matter

Lucretius divides his poem into six books. In Book 1, he establishes that the entire universe, infinite though it is, consists of just two fundamental components: atoms and void; in Book 2, he gives more details about the behaviour and properties of those atoms. Taken together, Books 1 and 2 thus look at the world in terms of atoms and their compounds, and show how the world works according to the laws of nature and independently of the gods. In Book 3, he discusses the atomic nature of the mind and the spirit; the book ends with the conclusion that death is nothing to be feared. In Book 4, he treats the processes of thought and sensation: since both are atomic, neither can take place after death. Thus together Books 3 and 4 look at the world in terms of its human inhabitants. In Book 5, he gives an account of how our world was formed and how life on it began, and also how civilization developed: he explains that our earth was formed by chance and was not created for us by a divine being, and that change and progress do not necessarily bring increased happiness. In Book 6, he explains various natural phenomena of the sky, the earth and below ground, and thereby shows that they are not caused by the gods. Books 5 and 6 thus look at the world in terms of earth, planets and sky.

Lucretius' times

Lucretius lived through an age of political upheaval in Rome, upheaval which may well have led him to shun public office and seek a recipe for happiness and inner peace. He lived in a period of Roman history we call the Late Republic: 'Republic' because Rome was ruled by a senate of noblemen but 'Late' because the Republic soon became an empire governed by a single man, the emperor, whose Latin title was *princeps* ('first person') and whose period of power is therefore known as the principate.

Rome, traditionally founded in 753 BC, gradually defeated her neighbours and then the other towns in Italy over a period of several centuries to become the dominant power on the Italian mainland by the middle of the third century BC. This dominance brought her to the attention of the other major Mediterranean power at that time, Carthage, and the two nations clashed. Rome defeated Carthage in a series of wars (known as the Punic wars), and in the process acquired her first province, the island of Sicily. This success led Rome to continue to expand her dominion during the second century BC and she conquered numerous lands around the eastern end of the Mediterranean; these newly acquired territories, in particular the cities of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), brought her great wealth. However, many of the troops involved in these campaigns were levied from subject-towns throughout Italy and these towns did not feel that the fruits of the campaigns were being properly shared out or that they enjoyed equal rights, so they revolted in what is known today as the Social War (91–89 BC). Rome only put down the revolt by granting citizenship to her allies. It was about this time that Lucretius was born.

Rome's political system – based on authority (Latin *imperium*) by election to political office – struggled to cope with administering her ever-increasing empire. The very generals who conquered these wealthy territories turned much of that wealth to their own ends, paying out bonuses to troops who officially owed allegiance to Rome but who often felt stronger ties to their commanders, who themselves then began to claim political power in Rome on the back of that loyalty. Rival generals vied with each other for political supremacy in Rome and the first century BC witnessed major political upheaval during the sometimes bloody transition from Republic to Empire. There were four major civil conflicts in which Roman killed Roman: in the 80s Marius fought Sulla, in the early 40s Caesar fought Pompey, in the late 40s Brutus and Cassius fought Antony and Octavian, in the 30s Octavian fought Antony. When he was a child or possibly in his teens, Lucretius witnessed both the civil war between Marius and Sulla and the political turmoil which followed; he may also have lived to witness the political tension before the civil war between Pompey and Caesar, if not the onset of civil war itself. There are no references to specific contemporary events in the poem, but it is against such a backdrop that Lucretius advocates the idea that the most effective way to achieve inner peace is to withdraw from public affairs.

Lucretius' biography

The poet of the *De Rerum Natura* is a mystery to us, for there is almost no independent evidence about his life. We can be confident that Titus Lucretius Carus lived during the first half of the first century BC, though we do not know the exact dates of his birth or death. The only reliable dated reference is found in a letter from the great orator and politician, Marcus Tullius Cicero, to his brother Quintus (2.10.3), dating to February 54, in which he praises Lucretius' poem for

its genius and artistry. Virgil almost certainly alludes to him in *Georgics* 2.490–2 and Ovid (*Amores* 3.15) mentions him by name, while other poets seem to allude to *De Rerum Natura* in their own works by quoting or adapting lines or phrases from the poem. All of this together provides a measure of his influence on his peers and successors.

About Lucretius' social status we must make assumptions based on the poem itself. He appears to know one Gaius Memmius, in all likelihood the senator whose career flourished in the 50s. Lucretius addresses him in the opening lines and states he hopes to claim him as a friend. From the many literary and scientific allusions in the poem, it is fair to assume that Lucretius was one of the educated elite: formal education in general, and poetry in particular, were the preserve of the upper classes, for though many Romans were schooled to read and write, only the well-born and the wealthy continued their education beyond those basic skills and on to rhetoric, philosophy and literature, as well as the learning of Greek.

Literary influences

As part of the expansion of her eastern territories, in 146 BC Rome conquered Greece (which became the province of Achaëa). She quickly fell under the spell of Greek culture, learning and art: near the end of the century the poet Horace remarks (*Epistles* 2.1.156) that uncultured Rome, having conquered Greece, was herself conquered by Greek culture. The sons of wealthy Romans began to be sent to Athens to complete their education under the tutelage of the Greek philosophers and rhetoricians, as Cicero himself was, while Greek culture and language became fashionable among the Roman educated elite and some Romans with a strong interest in literature and philosophy began to build up their own collections of the works of the great Greek writers. In 85 Cicero's great friend Pomponius Atticus withdrew from Roman public life and chose Greece as his new home, where he lived a life of commerce and culture, free from the stresses and hazards of Roman politics.

The two epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were so well known and revered that almost all ancient literature seems to have been influenced by them in some way; the *De Rerum Natura* is no different. Lucretius writes in the same hexameter that Homer first used, he echoes Homer's elevated epic diction and he adopts his frequent use of simile. He differs, though, in his world-view and in his approach to the gods: Homer depicts them as interfering in human affairs and displaying human emotions and behaviour, whereas Lucretius rejects such a picture out of hand.

Composing poetry at around the same time as Homer was Hesiod: he too wrote in hexameters, but one of his surviving poems, *Works and Days*, is didactic rather than narrative, giving its audience practical advice on how to run a farm successfully, as well as advice on how to live life, and so Hesiod can be regarded

as the founder of a didactic tradition into which the *De Rerum Natura* falls. The ancients did not see philosophy and poetry as mutually exclusive, and in the next few hundred years several philosophers set out their ideas in verse, including Empedocles and Parmenides, both of whose works influenced Lucretius' poem greatly. In the third and second centuries didactic poetry experienced a revival, though poets of that era enjoyed the challenge of setting technical subject-matter to verse more than the chance to offer philosophical guidance. To judge from the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius seems to be familiar with both those early didactic poets and their later successors. Romans took up the didactic tradition: Cicero translated a Greek didactic poem on the movement of the stars and the causes of the weather (Aratus' *Phaenomena*) and later in the 30s Virgil himself in his *Georgics* would offer instruction on agriculture, horticulture and other farm-related activities.

It is easy to see from his poem that Lucretius was also well-read in other Greek writing: the tragic and comic dramatists of fifth-century Athens, the fifth-century Athenian historian Thucydides, the epigrams of third-century Greek-speaking Alexandria. In addition, Lucretius was familiar with the earliest works of Latin literature, which was still in its infancy in his own time (especially when compared to the long and rich tradition of the Greeks): the comedies of Plautus and Terence, the epic historical poem of Ennius, the love poetry of Lucretius' own contemporary, Catullus. In all cases Lucretius may echo their style and language but he will pointedly reject their philosophical, religious or mythological content.

Philosophical influences

In the seventh century BC Greeks living in Ionia (in modern Turkey) began to explore natural philosophy and ask questions such as 'What is the world made of?' They came to be known as philosophers – though to modern eyes the question might seem more one of science – and men like Thales and Pythagoras, and later Empedocles and Heraclitus (both mentioned by name in Lucretius' poem), answered that the world is made up of individual elements: some suggested earth, others air or water or fire, or a mixture of these. In the fifth century Leucippus and Democritus suggested the existence of a fundamental unit of matter which could not be divided, the atom. All these philosophers are known by the general term pre-Socratics, for in the fifth century BC Socrates shifted the focus of philosophy from questions of natural philosophy to ethics. He asked about man's place in the world, how we should consequently behave and what the ultimate purpose of life might be. The philosopher Plato recorded and developed many of Socrates' ideas, particularly his thoughts about the immortality of the soul and the nature of justice and good, and Plato's pupil Aristotle did likewise, though he wrote more widely on logic, ethics, physics, metaphysics and biology. However, the philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC) felt that philosophy should above all provide a guide to

life and he founded a school to teach his ideas: it is on Epicurus' teachings that the content of Lucretius' poem is based, though much of the poem's subject-matter had been addressed by those earlier philosophers.

Epicurus was born on the Greek island of Samos, but after some travelling around the Greek-speaking world he moved back to the birthplace of his parents, Athens, where he bought a house and set up a philosophical school, which became known as the 'Garden' because that is where he did his teaching. He also wrote a great deal, but very little has survived down to modern times. Our main source for his work is the biographer Diogenes Laertius (third? century AD), who wrote about the lives and doctrines of the famous philosophers from Thales to Epicurus. Diogenes quotes in full several letters written by Epicurus in response to students who had asked for summaries of the main points of his various works. These are the *Letter to Herodotus*, which summarizes his natural philosophy, the *Letter to Pythocles*, summarizing his ideas on astronomy and meteorology, and his *Letter to Menoecus*, summarizing his moral doctrines. Diogenes also includes a list of philosophical maxims or *Principal Doctrines*. Parts of Epicurus' major work *On Nature* have also survived on charred scrolls salvaged from the excavations at Herculaneum, after being buried in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79.

Epicurus held that the purpose of philosophy is to offer a guide to life that will enable people to live a contented and peaceful life. His moral philosophy had the most important role to play in this, but Lucretius bases much of his poem on Epicurus' theories of physics and epistemology (what we can know and how we can know it). For Epicurus' atomic theory formed the starting-point for his moral philosophy: if we are composed of a mixture of atoms and void, then the aim of life or its highest good is to avoid disturbance to those atoms, disturbance which we call pain. He therefore held that the highest good is absence of pain, an absence which he called pleasure. It is from this belief that Epicureanism gained its reputation for luxury and indulgence, though they are far from what Epicurus himself advocated. Not only can pain affect the body but it can also affect the mind, which is itself composed of atoms: according to Epicurus two sources of pain to the mind are fear of what the gods may do to us and fear of punishment after death (and perhaps of death itself). He set out to dispel these fears by two means: first, to persuade his followers that the gods neither have any interest in human affairs nor can they affect them anyway and secondly, that at death the spirit, the mind and the body all break down into their constituent atoms, which then disperse far and wide.

Epicurus' ideas did not die with him. After his death his school in Athens continued to attract students from each new generation in turn. With the influx of Greek culture and learning into Rome, Epicureanism found a new audience. In his poem Lucretius regularly and vociferously acknowledges that he owes the entire philosophical content of the poem to the teachings of Epicurus, whom he worships like a god (see p. 109) and whose teaching he never fails to praise,

while at the same time dismissing explicitly or implicitly the teaching of all other philosophers, most particularly the Stoics, adherents of the one philosophical school to rival Epicureanism for popularity at the time Lucretius is writing. He begins each of the poem's six books with praise of Epicurus himself and the brilliance of his teachings.

Poet and Epicurean

Lucretius seems to have been the first to write any philosophical poem in Latin and the first to bring Epicureanism to a Roman audience in poetry; though the philosophy contained in the poem belongs to Epicurus (who himself borrowed ideas from previous Greek philosophers), its expression belongs wholeheartedly to Lucretius, as we can observe if we compare the *Letters* recorded by Diogenes to Lucretius' reworking of the same material. His are the elegance and artistry of the poetry, the teacher's intuitive use of analogy, the smorgasbord of literary allusions, the passionate commitment to the Epicurean cause. By way of comparison, while praising Lucretius' poetry, Cicero also mentions in his letter to Quintus (see pp. 2–3) a poem by one Sallustius based on Empedocles' teaching and says that Quintus is more hero than ordinary mortal if he has read it all the way through. Indeed at times Lucretius seems to contravene Epicurus' recommendation that all philosophy be expressed in simple and unadorned language: one critic called this contradiction 'anti-Lucretius within Lucretius' (French '*anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce*', H. Patin *Etudes sur la poésie latine*, 1868). Epicurus devised an all-encompassing philosophical system, but Lucretius' achievement was to coat it all in the 'honey' of the Muses (**1.947**; references to the text in bold refer to passages contained in this volume).

1 The existence of atoms and void

Invocation to Venus

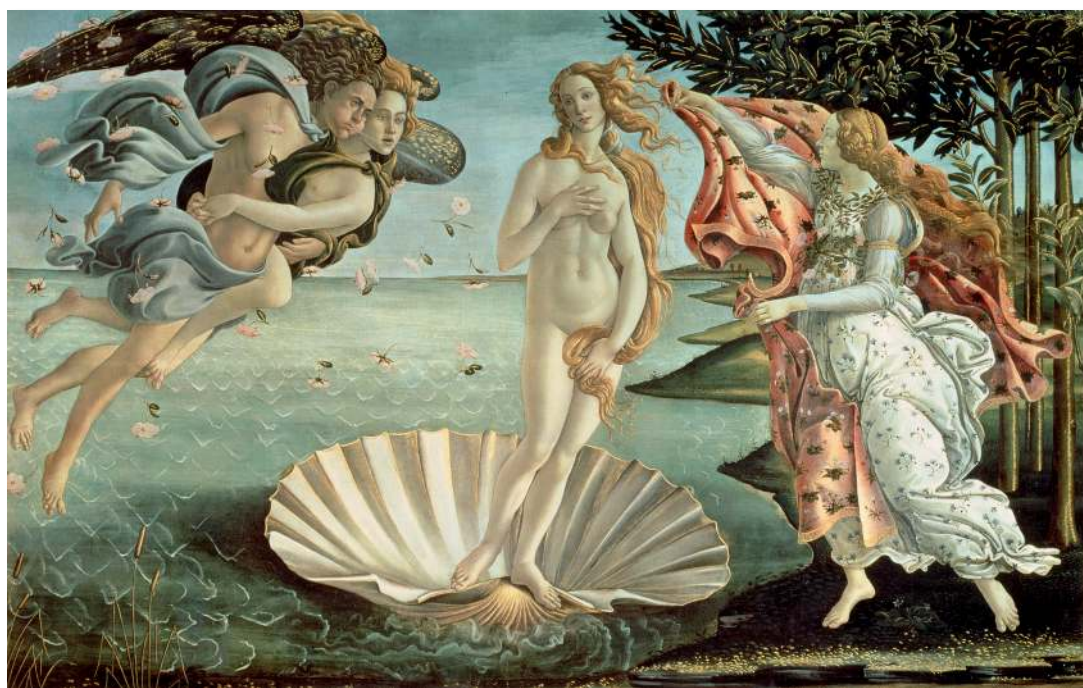
- 1.1–43 Mother of **Aeneas' line**, pleasure of men and gods, life-giving **Venus**, who beneath the wheeling stars of the sky fills with life both **ship-carrying sea and fruit-bearing land**, through you every species of living creature is conceived and emerges to see the light of the sun. **You, goddess**, it is you the winds flee, the clouds in the sky 5 run from you and your coming. The earth in her artistry sends forth sweet flowers for you, the waters of ocean smile for you and the sky is becalmed and shines resplendent all around. No sooner does the first day of spring show its face and the 10

Aeneas' line Aeneas, the son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan hero Anchises, was the mythical founder of the Roman people; he escaped Troy's destruction and led a band of survivors to found a new city in Italy. Julius Caesar himself claimed descent from Venus, adopted her as his protectress and invoked her as *Venus Genetrix* (Venus the Mother), a title which Lucretius uses here.

Venus the Roman goddess of beauty and love here represents the life-force present in the world, the force which urges procreation and so gives life to all creatures. The Greek philosopher Parmenides (c. 510–450 BC) opened his philosophical poem with a similar allegory.

ship-carrying sea and fruit-bearing land though such compound adjectives can sound awkward in English and are not common in Latin either, Greek lends itself to their coining; compare the frequency of compound nouns in German with their infrequency in French and other Romance languages. Sedley suggests that to find two such Greek-sounding compound adjectives in the same line is an indication that Lucretius is imitating an original by the Greek philosophical poet Empedocles (c. 492–432 BC), and he goes on to remark (p. 87) that 'Lucretius is the servant of two masters. Epicurus is the founder of his philosophy while Empedocles is the father of his genre. It is the task of Epicurus' first poet to combine the two loyalties.'

You, goddess both the *Iliad* (1.1–7) and *Odyssey* (1.1–10) open with a short invocation to the Muse of Epic, as does the *Aeneid* (1.1–11); each then provides the briefest of overviews of the action of the poem. Lucretius' extended invocation to a goddess is unique in extant hexameter verse, both for its length and for its direct address of an Olympian goddess rather than one of the Muses, the goddesses who inspired poets. This invocation contains some of the formulaic elements of an ancient prayer: the address to a god, compliments and praise, a list of his or her spheres of influence and a request for favour or help.



The Birth of Venus, c. 1482, by Sandro Botticelli. Compare this to Lucretius' portrayal of Venus: the flowers appearing, the Zephyr blowing, the hint of eroticism.

life-giving breeze of the **zephyr** blow strong upon its release, than straightway the birds in the sky proclaim you and your arrival, goddess, their hearts invigorated by your power. Then the beasts, both wild and tame, frisk in the rich pastures and ford the fast-flowing streams; so captivated are they by your spell that they follow 15 you eagerly wherever you proceed to lead them. In short, across mountain, rapid river and sea, in luxuriant meadow and bird's leafy home, you drive the allure of love into all hearts and cause each generation eagerly to propagate the next. Only 20 you govern the nature of things: without you nothing springs up into the bright realm of day and nothing can be happy or lovely. So I desire you, goddess, as my companion as I write a poem attempting to set forth **the nature of things** for my 25

zephyr the wind from the west that disperses the clouds and brings warmth after winter; it has been released by Aeolus, god of the winds, from its imprisonment in its cave during the winter months.

the nature of things this phrase (Latin *de rerum natura*) provides our name for the poem. Epicurus had written a work with the title *About Natural Science* (Greek *peri physeōs*), on which Lucretius draws heavily for his subject-matter.



A coin minted by Lucius Memmius in 106 BC; the obverse shows the head of Saturn crowned with a laurel wreath; the reverse shows Venus driving a biga (two-horse chariot) and reads L MEMMI GAL = Lucius Memmius Galeria.

Memmius, whom you wish to excel in all things and to be honoured at every opportunity. For that reason too, grant my words everlasting appeal, divine one.

Meanwhile, make the **brute business of war** come quietly to rest across all land and sea. For only you can bestow serene peace on mankind, now that warlike

Memmius Gaius Memmius (c. 90–c. 48 BC), a contemporary of Lucretius: the only one mentioned in the poem. He is a typical example of a Roman with political ambition: he made important political connections by marrying the daughter of the dictator Sulla (138–78 BC) and then embarked upon a career in politics. In its early stages he spoke against Caesar but was later reconciled with him. He went on to become the governor of the Roman province of Bithynia. (Lucretius' contemporary, the poet Catullus, travelled there too and seems to have taken a violent dislike to him.) He was later found guilty of electoral bribery and went into exile at Athens. Memmius' up-and-down political career, his administrative experience and his fickle political allegiance are typical of politics in first-century Rome: his stressful experiences are just the sort that Lucretius will later (2.1–19) recommend be avoided. It is a bold move on Lucretius' part to choose Memmius as the addressee of his poem and his target for conversion to Epicureanism, for he would be unlikely to sympathize with a philosophy that advocated the rejection of political ambition. What is more, Cicero records that Memmius had the opportunity to preserve the remains of Epicurus' house in Athens by organizing the handover of the site to the head of the Epicurean School, but planned instead to put up a building of his own there (*Letters to Friends* 13.1). Venus was featured as 'protectress' on coins minted by Memmius' family, when the minting of Rome's coinage was in the hands of private families who could choose what was stamped on them.

brute business of war Lucretius has already experienced the bloody civil war between the generals Sulla and Marius in the 80s BC and Rome is now on the brink of an equally terrible civil war between the politically ambitious generals Caesar and Pompey – if it has not already started, for the exact years of the poem's composition are unknown.



Mars disarmed by Venus, 1824, by Jacques-Louis David.

Mars is directing the brute business of battle. At those moments when his incurable **love-wound** overpowers him, he flings himself into your lap: arching his smooth neck as he looks up, staring as he feasts his eyes on you, greedy with love, he lies back with his breath hanging on your lips. Lean down, goddess, and embrace him with your sacred body as he lies there; pour sweet words from your lips and request an untroubled peace for the Romans, sublime goddess. In these harrowing days for my country I cannot go about my work with an untroubled

Mars the Roman god of war and the supposed father of Rome's founder Romulus. Here he may represent strife, destruction and war, just as Venus did love, creation and peace. The military-minded Romans took pride in their descent from Mars, but here he is pictured at his most unwarlike and in thrall to Venus, who was also a divine ancestor of the Roman race through her son Aeneas.

love-wound Roman religion was polytheistic and its gods were anthropomorphic. Gods and goddesses enjoyed the pleasure of many relationships, both with each other and with mortals, and these relationships feature frequently in Greek and Roman literature. Mars and Venus were traditionally lovers: the story of their affair is told in *Odyssey* 8.255–366. Lucretius' description, reminiscent of the erotic Roman love elegy of the poets Catullus or Ovid, illustrates the difference between ancient and modern Western ideas of what is acceptable in the portrayal of divinity.