

# Lucretius

## Some notes about his life and career:

*Titus Lucretius Carus (98 - c.55 b.c)*

*Poet and philosopher, author of De rerum natura, his only known work.*

One story tells of his madness which led to him taking his own life, but probably this is Christian reaction to his philosophical teachings.

The poem not finally completed, published after Lucretius' death, in middle of the century.

poem dedicated to Memmius, aristocrat and patron of Catullus (and Cinna, with whom he went on tour to Bithynia); extols Memmius as "excelling in all graces and helping his country in her hour of need" - though Memmius was banished in 53b.c for corruption during elections of 54b.c!

it is a didactic poem in six books of hexameters

is an exposition of the teachings of Epicurus which Lucretius admired and believed in.

the purpose of the poem:

*"to free men from a sense of guilt and the fear of death by demonstrating that fear of the intervention of gods in this world and of punishment of the soul after death are groundless: the world and everything in it are material and governed by the mechanical laws of nature, and the soul is mortal and perishes with the body."*

the poem expounds the atomic theory Epicurus adopted from Democritus and Leucippus (5th C.): that *an infinite number of atoms moving about in an infinite space collide and combine with each other to bring into existence the world in all its variety, and there is nothing in the world that is not material.*

man does have free will, made possible by the occasional 'swerve of the atoms'

the poem also deals with Epicurus' moral theory that *pleasure is the aim of life: pleasure and pain are the only guides to conduct.* But by pleasure, he means *the calm that proceeds from absence of pain and desire, and freedom from care and fear.*

Lucretius much influenced by Epicurus' great contribution to the alleviation of human suffering by *banishing superstitious fears, introducing*

*peace of mind, and teaching men how to face all the disasters of life with serenity.*

though the subject does not often make for easy poetic treatment, Lucretius shows *intense awareness of the world about him, especially of the beauty of the countryside, with warm sympathy for all living things and a compassionate understanding of humanity.*

he has a *strong moral sense* and drives his point home by reference to closely observed, homely images and similes. His sense of the ridiculous often tends towards satire.

he was acutely aware of the difficulty of treating such a subject in poetry but *poetry is important as the 'honey on the rim' of the cup containing the bitter draught of philosophy'.*

"felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas" - Virgil

## Epicurus

### Some notes about his life and career:

(341 - 247) - born in Samos - studied atomist doctrine of Democritus - founded his own philosophical circles at Mytilene and Lampsacus.

- settled in Athens in 307 - inspired affection and respect among his friends (cf Socrates) - his community (including women and slaves) lived in austere seclusion - attracted ridicule because of his philosophical hedonism - prolific writer but most of it is lost (substantial fragments of his *On nature* recovered from carbonised papyrus rolls found in villa at Herculaneum).

His aim: *the wise conduct of life, relying on evidence of the senses, elimination of superstition*; his philosophy: *atomism, which serves a moral purpose.*

*Happiness = tranquillity of mind, achieved by proper understanding of nature.*

*"We say that pleasure is the beginning and end of living happily"*

Mental pleasure is found in 'ataraxia', 'freedom from disturbance' and it is greater than physical pleasure. It can be attained by learning the nature of the universe and death, by withdrawing from the turmoils of public life, and by avoiding emotional commitments.

## SYNOPSIS

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THIS synopsis is intended, in conjunction with the use of spacing and italics in the text, to help the reader to follow the main thread of Lucretius' argument. It is not presented as a complete summary of his teaching or a precise analysis of the structure of the poem.

It will be noticed that the first three books form, with a few digressions, a continuous chain of reasoning, leading up to the elaborate demonstration (III 417-829) that men are mortal. In the later Books the connecting thread is less definite. Here the poet is mainly concerned to show how various phenomena that appear to conflict with the materialistic principles laid down in Books I-III can in fact be explained in terms of those principles.

The digressions (including the introductions and conclusions of the several Books), apart from their immediate relevance to their context, serve a double purpose. They relieve the strain of following a long argument. And they illustrate, in one aspect or another, the blessings that flow from acceptance of the Epicurean faith.

No titles are assigned in the original to the separate Books.

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### *Book I*

#### MATTER AND SPACE

##### INTRODUCTION

Prayer to the creative force of Nature (personified as Venus) to inspire the poet, to bless his patron Memmius and to bring peace to the world (1-49).	27
Exhortation to Memmius to listen to an exposition of 'true reason' (50-61).	28
Praise of Epicurus for delivering mankind from superstition (62-79).	29
Superstition, its cause and cure (80-145).	29

## SIX PRIMARY PROPOSITIONS

- (i) Nothing is ever created out of nothing (146-214). 31  
 (ii) Nothing is ever annihilated (215-64). 33  
 (iii) Matter exists in the form of invisible particles (atoms) (265-328). 35  
 (iv) Besides matter, the universe contains empty space (vacuity) (329-417). 37  
 (v) The universe consists of matter (with its properties and accidents) and of vacuity and of nothing else (418-82). 39  
 (vi) The atoms are indestructible (483-634). 41

## REFUTATION OF FALSE THEORIES

- (a) The theory that everything consists of fire (Heraclitus) or some other single element (635-704). 45  
 (b) The theory that everything consists of two elements or of four (Empedocles) (705-829). 48  
 (c) The theory that the component parts of everything are of the same nature as the thing itself (Anaxagoras) (830-920). 51

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## A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

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## Book II

## MOVEMENTS AND SHAPES OF ATOMS

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*Digression:* the world not made by gods (167-83). 65  
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 (vi) The apparent immobility of matter is an optical illusion (308-32). 69

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 (ii) The number of atomic shapes is large but finite (478-521). 74  
 (iii) The number of atoms of any one shape is infinite (522-68). 75  
 (iv) *Digression:* creation balances destruction (569-81). 76  
 (v) All visible objects are compounds of different kinds of atoms; with a *Digression* (589-660) on the worship of Mother Earth (582-699). 77  
 (vi) Only certain compounds can exist (700-29). 80  
 (vii) The atoms themselves are devoid of colour (730-841), heat, sound, taste, and smell (842-64), and sentience (865-990); only so can we explain the ever-shifting panorama of nature (991-1022). 81

## THREE GENERAL COROLLARIES

- (i) Our world is one of an infinite number (1023-89). 90  
 (ii) Nature is self-regulating, without interference from the gods (1090-1104). 92  
 (iii) The world had a beginning and will soon have an end (1105-74). 93

## Book III

## LIFE AND MIND

## INTRODUCTION

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 The fear of death, and of something after death, is the root of evil. (31-93). 97

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- (i) The mind is a part of the body, not a harmony of the whole; so is the vital spirit (94-135). 99  
 (ii) The mind (lodged in the breast) and the spirit (diffused through the body) compose a single corporeal substance (136-76). 100  
 (iii) This substance is a compound of wind, air, heat and a very mobile fourth element, combined in varying proportions (177-322). 101  
 (iv) Life depends on the union of mind-spirit with body (323-69). 106  
 (v) The quantity of mind-spirit in the body is comparatively small (370-95). 107  
 (vi) Mind controls spirit (396-416). 108  
 (vii) Mind and spirit were born and will die (417-829). 108

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## Book I

## MATTER AND SPACE

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MOTHER OF AENEAS and his race, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus, it is your doing that under the wheeling constellations of the sky all nature teems with life, both the sea that buoys up our ships and the earth that yields our food. Through you all living creatures are conceived and come forth to look upon the sunlight. Before you the winds flee, and at your coming the clouds forsake the sky. For you the inventive earth flings up sweet flowers. For you the ocean levels laugh, the sky is calmed and glows with diffused radiance. When first the day puts on the aspect of spring, when in all its force the fertilizing breath of Zephyr is unleashed, then, great goddess, the birds of air give the first intimation of your entry; for yours is the power that has pierced them to the heart. Next the cattle run wild, frisk through the lush pastures and swim the swift-flowing streams. Spell-bound by your charm, they follow your lead with fierce desire. So throughout seas and uplands, rushing torrents, verdurous meadows and the leafy shelters of the birds, into the breasts of one and all you instil alluring love, so that with passionate longing they reproduce their several breeds.

Since you alone are the guiding power of the universe and without you nothing emerges into the shining sunlit world to grow in joy and loveliness, yours is the partnership I seek in striving to compose these lines *On the Nature of the*