'Arma virumque' (Arms and the man)
Virgil, The Aeneid

The Aeneid is the most important literary work of ancient Rome and one of the most influential in world literature. This epic poem tells the story of its hero Aeneas and his followers, refugees from the city of Troy after its fall to the besieging Greeks. Following six years wandering, Aeneas and his Trojans arrive at the city of Carthage, presided over by its founder Queen Dido, herself a refugee from Tyre. However, the Trojans do not settle in Carthage, as a year later, Aeneas is compelled by the Fates to lead them to Italy and found a Roman civilisation.

The Writer
Publius Vergilius Maro or Virgil, as he is known today, was born in 70 BCE in Northern Italy. He had a good school education and went on to study further in Naples or Rome. In 37 BCE he published his first major work of poetry The Eclogues, followed by The Georgics, the subject of both being the Italian rural way of life.

In 30 BCE, Virgil was asked by the new ruler of the Roman empire, Octavian (later renamed Augustus by the Roman people), to write an epic poem on his achievements as ruler. Virgil accepted, but decided to write the poem in his own way using as inspiration the work of Homer. He died eleven years later in 19 BCE after becoming ill on a trip to Greece. The poem, the Aeneid, was still being revised by Virgil when he died, and although his dying wish was to have the manuscript destroyed, this advice was ignored and the poem was published posthumously, to great acclaim.

Summary of the Books of the Aeneid

| I      | The ships of Aeneas are driven to Carthage by a storm raised against them by the goddess Juno
| II     | Aeneas recounts at a banquet held by Dido the tragic fall of Troy and his escape
| III    | Aeneas recalls the wanderings of the Trojan refugees and the death of his father
| IV     | Dido and Aeneas in love
| V      | The Trojans journey to Italy, on the way, holding games in Sicily
| VI     | On reaching Italy, Aeneas visits the underworld
| VII    | Aeneas and his followers reach Latium in Italy
| VIII   | Aeneas visits the green-field site of Rome and is shown it’s glorious future
| IX     | While Aeneas is away Turnus leads an attack by Italian tribes against the Trojan camp
| X      | The army of Aeneas battles the Italians and Turnus is rescued by Juno
| XI     | An uneasy truce breaks out, fallen heroes are buried, an ambush is planned, fighting restarts
| XII    | Turnus and Aeneas confront each other for the right to marry Lavinia

The Poem
With The Aeneid Virgil wanted to equal if not surpass the great epics of Homer—The Iliad and The Odyssey. This was a daring ambition given the hallowed status of these epics in the ancient world. Virgil succeeded in writing a masterpiece of poetic style, rich in imagery and multi-layered in meaning. There were many reasons why Virgil wanted to do this, for example:
1 — The city of Rome was a relatively new power in the Mediterranean, but one which did not have the same cultural standing as that of the Greeks, who the Romans now ruled.
2 — Rome had just emerged from a long period of civil war and political turmoil, which culminated in the end of rule by the elites of Rome to be replaced by the rule of one man—the first emperor Augustus (Octavian). This new political system heralded the beginning of a long period of peace and a Roman renaissance in laws, culture and values.

The Poem's Structure
Virgil copied many aspects of the epics of Homer. In terms of structure The Aeneid is a combination of both epics.

Books 1-6: parallels The Odyssey in that these books are about the wanderings of Aeneas. Episodes that echo those of Odysseus include: Aeneas angers the goddess Juno, Aeneas storytelling, Aeneas’ involvement with strong women, Aeneas on a visit to the underworld and the revelation of his peoples future.

Books 7-12: parallels The Iliad in that it is essentially a titanic struggle, a bitter war of attrition between two great armies. Central to this struggle are the leaders of the armies, our hero Aeneas and his Italian rival Turnus. The prize is the hand in marriage of Lavinia, daughter of the king of Latium.
Roman destiny

Perhaps the most important theme of *The Aeneid* is the destiny and glory of Rome and the rise to power of the emperor Augustus. Although the story is set hundreds of years before the settlement at Rome is established it is made clear that Rome’s destiny is willed and shaped by the gods. It is also made clear that this destiny will include a duty of Rome to rule and civilise the known world. This will not be an easy process and the second part of the book emphasises the high price the people of Rome will have to pay. The book also serves to indicate that the rule by the emperor Augustus is also fated by the gods, vividly described in Book VI.

Aeneas as a hero

When reading the Aeneid it can seem to modern readers that Aeneas himself is absent from the story, and when he is there he seems to lack personality or is practically a bystander. However, to Virgil and many Romans he embodied Roman ideals exemplified by the philosophy of stoicism. Aeneas accepted all that fate threw at him – impassively continuing on towards his own greater destiny, through much suffering and many trials and adverse conditions. Aeneas was also formidable in battle, led from the front and respected traditions.

Queen Dido

The main character of the first half of the book, and serves to incorporate a huge element of tragedy to the story. Dido can be seen as an allegory for the fate of the enemies of Rome, in this case the recent demise of Cleopatra, defeated by Augustus and the overcoming of Rome’s chief enemy in past centuries, the city of Carthage itself. Dido also serves as a foil to the stoic virtues of duty and the denial of passionate love.

Turnus

The great warrior enemy, the nemesis of Aeneas and the chief figure in the second half of the book. He serves the purpose of allowing Aeneas to act out the part of the warrior hero that he is. The shock ending of the book serves to emphasise the paramount nature of tradition and duty of a Roman above all else.

Stoicism

A philosophical school which reached its height of popularity in the Roman period where it chimed with traditional Roman values

It is named after a painted and colonnaded building – *Stoa Poikile* - in Athens where it was originally taught and established in c.300 BCE.

Stoic philosophers believed strongly in moral and intellectual perfection which could only be achieved through indifference to the emotions, such as fear, envy, passionate love, anger that could rule the reason of the mind.

Stoicism, therefore stressed the importance of reason, public duty and the endurance of suffering in order to reach happiness, something which may only be reached in the afterlife.
Some key quotes

Aeneas as stoic Roman
Then, as they mourned, he comforted them, saying:
‘My friends, this is not the first trouble we have known. We have suffered worse before, and this too will pass. God will see to it. You have been to Scylla’s cave and heard the mad dogs howling in the depths of it. You have even survived rocks thrown by the Cyclops. So summon up your courage once again. This is no time for gloom or fear. The day will come, perhaps, when it will give you pleasure to remember even this. Whatever chance may bring, however many hardships we suffer, we are making for Latium, where the Fates show us our place of rest. There it is the will of God that the kingdom of Troy shall rise again. Your task is to endure and save yourselves for better days.’
These were his words, but he was sick with all his cares. He showed them the face of hope and kept his misery deep in his heart. I.198-209

Jupiter on the Romans
‘On them I impose no limits of time or place. I have given them an empire that will know no end. Even angry Juno, who is now wearying sea and land and sky with her terrors, will come to better counsel and join with me in cherishing the people of Rome, the rulers of the world, the race that wears the toga. So it has been decreed. There will come a day, as the years glide by, when the house of Assaracus will conquer and rule the city of Argos. From this noble stock there will be born a Trojan Caesar to bound his empire by Oceanus at the limits of the world, and his fame by the stars. he will be called Julius, a name passed down to him from the great Iulus.’ I.278-289.

Dido in love
Sometimes she would take Aeneas through the middle of Carthage, showing him the wealth of Sidon and the city waiting for him, and she would be on the point of speaking her mind to him but checked the words on her lips. Sometimes, as the day was ending, she would call for more feasting and ask in her infatuation to hear once more about the sufferings of Troy and once more she would hang on his lips as he told the story. Then, after they had parted, when the fading moon was dimming her light and the setting stars seemed to speak of sleep, alone and wretched in her empty house she would cling to the couch Aeneas had left. IV.75-83.

The towers she was building ceased to rise. Her men gave up the exercise of war and were no longer busy at the harbours and fortifications making them safe from attack. All the work that had been started, the threatening ramparts of the great walls and the cranes soaring to the sky, all stood idle. IV.87-89.

Roman duty and destiny
‘Others, I do not doubt it, will beat bronze into figures that breathe more softly. Others will draw living likenesses out of marble. Others will plead cases better or describe with their rod the courses of the stars across the sky and predict their risings. Your task, Roman, and do not forget it, will be to govern the peoples of the world in your empire. These will be your arts—and to impose a settled pattern upon peace, to pardon the defeated and war down the proud.’ VI.849-53

Anger, and honouring tradition
Aeneas feasted his eyes on the sight of this spoil, this reminder of his own wild grief, then, burning with mad passion and terrible in his wrath, he cried:
‘Are you to escape me now, wearing the spoils stripped from the body of those I loved?
By this wound which I now give, it is Pallas who makes sacrifice of you.
It is Pallas who exacts the penalty in your guilty blood.’
Blazing with rage, he plunged the steel full into his enemy’s breast.
The limbs of Turnus were dissolved in cold and his life left him with a groan, fleeing in anger down to the shades. XII.939-952.