

## Similes in Empedoclean and Lucretian Didactic

In the ancient literary tradition, Hesiod stands as the original model of a didactic poet, and the philosophical works of Empedocles and Lucretius bear the indelible marks of their forebear in the didactic genre. Following the model established in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Empedocles and Lucretius both assign a named addressee for their poems and both poets emphasize that their mission is to instruct and guide their respective addressees. Though clearly indebted to mode of *Works and Days*, these poets make significant use of an epic technique largely abandoned by Hesiod. The use of an extended simile, prevalent in the epics of Homer, makes several appearances in the fragments of Empedocles' poem, and is ubiquitous in Lucretius' Latin epic. This poetic device helps bestow concreteness and clarity on the ideas of Empedocles and Lucretius. As this paper will demonstrate, extended comparisons are not simply useful didactic tools, but the similes are absolutely crucial to the mission of both poets. As the purveyors of complex philosophical concepts, these poets rely heavily on similes to ensure their ideas are understood, particularly ideas about the unseen elements that compose the universe.

Empedocles' poem *On Nature* explains that the world consisted of four elements (DK 31B6, 31B27, 31A49, 31A30) and these elements combine and separate under the influence of Love and Strife (DK 31B17.6-8, 31B36). Homeric similes are an important device for Empedocles as he describes these ideas. In explaining how the four elements can create all that exists in the world he compares it to the manner in which a painter uses a limited number of colors to paint many different subjects (DK 31B23). In another passage, he describes a young girl playing with a clepsydra in order to describe how respiration occurs (DK 31B100). With these kinds of Homeric similes, Empedocles is able to express the difficult aspects of his philosophical ideas in a concrete and accessible way.

Lucretius' epic explicating Epicurean philosophy follows the didactic style of Empedocles' work and owes much to his predecessor in philosophical poetry. The variety and vividness of Lucretius' modes of expression are essential for his instructive mission, and similes are some of the most commonly used and most effective tools in the poet's arsenal. The extended similes in Lucretius help build the readers' understanding by creating a picture that they can access, and thus similes make the philosophical concepts clearer and more understandable. In one famous example, Lucretius explains the unseen yet constant movement of atoms with a comparison to watching a flock of sheep at a distance (*DRN* 2.311-22). This simile illustrates an essential point of the atomic theory and also demonstrates a fundamental epistemological method for the Epicureans, analogizing from seen to unseen. The use of this analogy presents the reader with a visual image to grasp onto and to recall from his own experience. This poetic technique makes the difficult concept of unseen atoms more concrete and comprehensible. Gale asserts the suitability of poetry to express this aspect of Epicurean philosophy, "in some respects, then, the poetic form of the *DRN* is ideally suited to the exposition of Epicurean philosophy: the traditional use of metaphor and (especially) simile in Greek and Latin epic lends itself easily enough to the presentation of the kind of analogical reasoning which Epicurus recommends," (2001, 16). In Lucretius, the poetic technique of the simile performs a didactic function but also a crucial philosophical one. As Dalzell praises Lucretius' talent with imagery, he notes, "Very little in the poem is purely decorative," (1996, 62), because the poetics are at the service of the philosophical ideas.

Lucretius's poem could be described as imitating Empedocles in this philosophical use of similes. Since Empedocles was the target of Epicurean polemic, whether his philosophical ideas also had an influence on Lucretius is the subject of contentious debate among scholars.

Regardless of whether the *physical* theories of Empedocles are reflected in Lucretius' work, there are clear *epistemological* parallels. The similes indicate a correspondence in their methods of investigation (cf. Garani, 2007), since for both thinkers similes provide the essential tools for the investigation into and explanation of concepts that are difficult because they lie outside the visible realm. The detailed comparisons drawn from the Homeric model bring clarity and accessibility to the philosophical arguments of both poets.

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Dalzell, Alexander. *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry*. Toronto, 1996.

Gale, Monica. *Lucretius and the didactic epic*. London, 2001.

Garani, Myrto. *Empedocles Redivivus*. New York, 2007.