

Horace



Short Bio

A lot more is known about Horace than many of other Roman poets, because his poetry is very autobiographical.

Horace was born in 65 B.C. in the town of Venusia in the Samnite region of southern Italy. **Horace is a descendant of a freedman** (person freed from slavery). His father was probably an Italian taken captive during the Social War (91-88 B.C.). This war was over providing equal citizenship rights to all Italians – before this there were Roman citizens and Latin (other Italian) citizenships; the latter had more rights.

Horace's father gained his freedom and became either a tax collector or auctioneer – he became very wealthy through the success of his career. He spent a lot of money on his son's education, eventually accompanying him to Rome. **Horace was very close with his father and wrote a poem as tribute to his father** (*Satire* 1.6).

Horace later, at the age of 19, moved to Athens and **joined *The Academy*** – a school of philosophy founded by Plato. At this time it was dominated by philosophers of the Stoic and Epicurean schools. These had a great impact on Horace.

While in Athens Horace spent time with young Roman men like Marcus Cicero (son of the famous Roman lawyer, republican politician, and orator).

When Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., Brutus – his assassin – came to Greece looking to gather supporters and young men for his army. He would attend lectures in the schools of philosophy and **while there recruited Horace into military service**.

Horace's good education allowed him to start military service at the high ranking position of **Military Tribune** (there are 6 per legion). This apparently caused his fellow officers of noble birth to become somewhat jealous of the son of an ex-slave in such a high ranking position.

Horace, however, chose the losing side and at the battle of Philippi in 42 B.C. he apparently ran away having thrown away his shield.

As soon as Octavian offered amnesty for his opponents, Horace accepted and returned to Italy. However, as with Virgil in north Italy, **his father's estate had been confiscated by Octavian to pay his veterans**. Horace claims this reduced him to **poverty** and he then took a job as a *scriba quaestorius* or civil servant.

At this time he began to write his *Epodes* and *Satires*. It took time, but as he began to publish his poems he gained some support from Octavian's supporters, and was eventually introduced to the inner circle of **Maecenas** via his close friend **Virgil**. Maecenas became Horace patron, and soon mutual respect led to a close friendship.

Horace seems to have accompanied Maecenas to various places on Octavian's campaigns. He journeyed with Maecenas and Virgil to **Brundisium** in 37 B.C. for very important peace talks between Mark Antony and Octavian. He journeyed with Maecenas on Octavian's campaigns against Sextus Pompeius – who had amassed a fleet to challenge Octavian and Mark Anthony – and he may also have been at **Actium in 31 B.C.**, when Octavian defeated his rival Mark Anthony and the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra.

By this time Horace had received the honours that of an *equites* or *knight*, and a gift from Maecenas of a **Sabine farm**, allowing Horace to either entirely or at least partially retire. Horace continued to compose more poetry during this period, composing his *Odes*, his *Epistles* (Letters), and his *Ars Poetica* (Art of Poetry).

Horace's early poetry is very apolitical; however, it becomes more political as Horace wrote more. As the name suggests, his *Odes* would often praise Augustus and his victories. However, this was as much due to the genre as anything else. **Horace most often praises a simple apolitical life of peace.**

He died in 8 B.C., apparently not long after the death of Maecenas, and was buried beside his patron and friend.

The Philosophies of Horace's Poetry

Epicureanism

As you saw with Virgil, **Epicureanism** follows the following principles:

- All things are made from matter.
- There is no life after death so there is no need to fear it.
- The gods are immortal but do not interfere with man.
- Man should try to emulate the life of the gods by seeking a state of tranquillity and a life free from physical pain. The Greek terms Epicurus used were *aporia* – absence of pain – and *atraxia* – absence of cloudy thoughts – to describe these states.
- The way to achieve these states was through seeking *pleasure*. **N.B. However, this did not mean indulging one's pleasures – like hedonism – but rather finding pleasure in these simple attainable desires of life and limiting one's wants.** Epicurus is coined as saying "Give me a block of cheese and I will party for a week." In other words, with just a bit of cheese he could find a week's worth of pleasure and joy.
- The best life according to Epicurus in order to properly appreciate these simple pleasures one had to live a life of isolation from the world of politics, wealth, military, and public life. These kinds of pursuits would interfere with the pursuit of *atraxia* and *aporia*. One ought to be content and happy with oneself.

- The only type of social contact that Epicurus encouraged was **friendship**. He believed that these informal and necessary human relations were vital to a life of contentedness.

Stoicism

Stoicism is very similar to Epicureanism and has a common root ideology to Epicureanism (both philosophies derive from Cynicism), but it differs on some fundamental principles – particularly with regards pleasure (the Stoics believed pain was inevitable) and regards public life (soldiers, politicians etc.) which they believed were the most virtuous life – one should sacrifice one's happiness for the good of the state.

Their beliefs were:

- All things are made of matter.
- The gods are not anthropomorphic (formed like people) but their image is symbolic of a divine function – weather, love, agriculture, death etc.
- They believe that all these gods are in fact part of a greater whole – and extension of Jupiter.
- This god is in all living things; he is an energy force throughout the universe.
- When we die the atoms return to the material system, and the divine energy returns to the “ether” or the greater whole: God/Jupiter.
- The greatest virtue in life is to dedicate yourself to public service (the greater good) – second to this is to study philosophy.
- They also believe that all things in life are **predestined**; death is inevitable and determined before birth, so there is no need to fear death.
- They also believed that pain was inevitable in life.
- They believed that the greatest virtue was to live life honestly and simply. Indulgence in pleasure was seen as unvirtuous and counterproductive.
- One also ought to control one's impulses and emotions – anger, lust, love etc. were seen as indulgent and unvirtuous.

Clear examples can be seen in Horace's writing of both philosophies. His attitude to death and fate is very similar to both – and can easily be interpreted as something **predestined** by God or simply **inevitable**. This is close to both philosophies. However, Horace's attitude of Carpe Diem – living in the present and “snatching the pleasures passing by” is very Epicurean. His attitude to a simple life in retreat away from public life, soldiery, or legal matters is very *unstoic*. However, his rejection of life spent at sea seeking riches is very Stoic. Both the life rejecting riches and the life rejecting the public life – seeking a life in quite rustic retreat – is very Stoic.

In the end, it is always unclear which philosophy Horace followed, was he Stoic or Epicurean? Or did he blend elements from two philosophies creating his own? As he was

writing poetry, it is also clear that he followed the conventions of poetry and of the genres of poetry he wrote in. For example, he includes mythological stories and references – something unStoic and unEpicurean. He also includes praising for his patron – Maecenas – and of the political allies of Maecenas – the Emperor Augustus – but this was a well-established convention of Roman poetry and doesn't necessarily mean it is the personal view of the poet.

As always in Classics, the best evidence is the texts themselves. By reading the poems we can more easily simplify Horace's attitudes to a good life and death – and understand the relationship of these attitudes to other philosophies.

Horace's Philosophical Principals

- Death is inevitable.
- The shortness of life – time is fleeting.
- Enjoy the present hour – *Carpe Diem*.
- The simple/quiet life is best.
- Friendship is important to a happy life.

Notes on Horace's Odes

Poem 1:

Gather ye Rosebuds



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- This poem is very simple and short.
- Horace asks his readers not to concern themselves with reading the will of the gods, not to concern themselves by consulting astrologers, or what bad things might happen. He is emphasising that the future is unpredictable and that all we can be certain about is the that we will eventually die, and so we should instead focus on enjoying the present.
- Horace asks his readers to “drink free” and “be wise!”. We ought to *seize the day* (*Carpe Diem*) or enjoy the present. “This day’s thine own: the next may be denied.” He asks them to not expect a long life because time is slipping by: “Whilst we are talking envious time doth slide.” All we have is the *now*.

Glossary:

- **Leuconoe:** this is the person to whom Horace is addressing the poem.
- **Tyrrhene waves:** this is one of the seas that surrounded Italy and is known for a volatile nature (storms).

Philosophy:

- This poem is heavily influenced by the Epicurean and Stoic Philosophies. Both emphasize that death is inevitable and thus not worth fearing; both encourage us to live in the present. This is Horace's philosophy of *Carpe Diem* or living for the present.
- Perhaps what is a little more Epicurean is Horace's encouraging his audience to drink and be free – or to enjoy one's life. Personal pleasure and happiness was more of a focus in the Epicurean philosophy.

Poem 2:

Enjoy The Present Hour



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- This poem, longer than *Gather Ye Rosebuds*, has more to analysis, but still remains focused on the same philosophy. Horace simply expands on it.
- Horace begins by describing a winter scene: "behold yon mountain's hoary height made higher with new mounts of snow... and streams with icy fetters bound..." This scene immediately reminds the reader of death – the inevitable end.
- However, rather than wallowing in pessimism, Horace suggests "with well-heaped logs dissolve the cold, and feed the genial hearth with fires: produce the wine that makes us bold, and love of sprightly wit inspire." Horace asks us to accept death, to enjoy what we have now, drink and be merry.
- The next stanza recalls that there is no point trying to figure out the gods or the gods' designs because "let Him alone, with what He made, to toss and turn the world below... He bids them cease and calm returns, and all is peace." In other

words, we cannot control our fate, and we cannot know what the gods intend. We can only enjoy our life.

- Horace then asks us to reject pondering *what may be*: “Tomorrow and her works defy” and rather “lay hold upon the present hour, and snatch the pleasures passing by.” For tomorrow may not be, and we can only enjoy today: “whate’er thou gettest today is gain.”
- Horace then behoves those who enjoy their youth to do so, because “the best is but in season best.” In other word, pleasures and love are only best when young – *in season*.
- His final stanza recalls that moment of the “half-unwilling, willing kiss”; that moment when two lovers are about to kiss. This is Horace’s way of emphasising the pleasure and pure happiness of the present, the moment. A fleeting thrilling moment which then passes.

Glossary:

- **Hoary**: greyish.
- **Fetters**: a chain or manacle. - **Genial**: kind, gentle.
- **Hearth**: fireplace
- **Sprightly**: full of energy
- **He, Tomorrow, Fortune, Love, Time**: these nouns with a capital letter are more about the personification of these things – the abstract thing is referred to as a person.

Philosophy:

- The philosophy of this poem is very self-explanatory: *Carpe Diem, seize the day*.
- Death is inevitable; old age is inevitable; we do not know what fate has in store for us – this is a particularly Stoic attitude. So, don’t worry about the future, enjoy the present and the opportunities life presents to you.
- Horace also may be emphasising the pleasure of friendship when he encourages us to light a fire, drink wine, and enjoy witty conversation. This is a very Epicurean attitude.
- Do this while you are young – before time and old age sour to taste of these pleasures. The seeking of pleasure (or rather simple pleasures) is a focus of Horace’s philosophy of life – something that was central to Epicureanism.
- Enjoy life’s fleeting moments like you would a first kiss. This is an analogy for the fleetingness of life, and of simple pleasures which we should always seize when opportune.

Poem 3:

We All Must Die



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- The language can be a little difficult in this poem. But once this is overcome, it's a very self-explanatory poem.
- It begins in a similar way to Horace's poem "Gather ye Rosebuds". Horace's emphasises the fleetingness of life and the pointlessness in trying to avoid death. "Alas, dear friend, the fleeting years in everlasting circles run, in vain you spend your vows and prayers, they roll, and ever will roll on."
- The first 5 stanzas reiterate this point, saying how death cannot be avoided and we all must face this end.
- The second last stanza emphasises another thing: whatever you have in life "your shady groves, your pleasing wife, and fruitful fields..." will be gone and no pleasure to you when you are dead.
- The last stanzas say that what we do not enjoy in life our heirs will instead once we are dead: "the wine you kept with so much care along the marble floor shall flow." Horace is encouraging us to enjoy the simple pleasures of life rather than hoarding them – because we may not have a chance to if we don't.

Glossary:

- **Pluto:** God of the dead, King of the Underworld.
- **Dye:** this is a reference to the blood from the sacrifice dyeing the altar. - **Inexorable:** impossible to stop.
- **Din:** noise
- **Main:** ocean
- **Sirius:** The brightest star in the sky, usual seen as an omen. - **Sultry:** hot, humid
- **Stygian:** deathly – from River Styx, river of the dead.
- **Danaus:** Danaus was a mythical king of Libya who had 50 daughters. King Aegyptus came with his 50 sons and forced the girls to marry them. Danaus ordered them to murder to new husbands on their wedding nights. The daughters were punished in the afterlife for eternity.
- **Cypress:** a tree associated with death and the Underworld.
- **Lavish:** rich, luxurious.

Philosophy:

- The inevitability of death is a focus in all ancient philosophies: particularly in Stoicism and Epicureanism. The unchangeable nature of fate is a particularly strong idea in Stoicism.
- However, this poem also reminds us of Horace's emphasis that we should enjoy the simple pleasures of life rather than others (or our heirs). The wine is an important symbol of the pleasures of life. Pleasure is an Epicurean virtue – Stoicism was rather more anti-pleasure.

Poem 4:

Cease to Mourn



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- In this poem Horace reminds a morning friend that “Not always... from the bursting cloud on ruffled plain descends the rain.” Or not always are things sad – even if when we mourn it might feel so.
- Horace uses a lot of natural imagery as an analogy for the pain and it’s passing. He also makes some mythological references to the War of Troy to remind his friend that even those great heroes who lost someone in war did not mourn for long.
- Instead, Horace asks his friend to join the celebrations of the day – the triumphal celebrations of Caesar.

Glossary:

- **Valgius:** a friend of Horace’s
- **The Caspian Main:** the Caspian Sea
- **Armenian Shore:** Armenia – east of Turkey in the Caucasus mountains (very cold).
- **Mystes:** someone initiated in the mysteries (religious cult) referring to the woman (girlfriend, sister, daughter?) Valgius lost.
- **Hesper:** The evening star.
- **Phosphor:** the morning star.
- **Ilion:** Troy
- **Nestor and Antilochus:** Nestor was the oldest general in the Trojan war (with many sons), Antilochus was one of his sons who fought and died in the war.
- **Phrygian:** Trojan.
- **Troilus:** A Prince of Troy who was killed by Achilles.
- **Caesar’s Trophies:** Presumably the triumphal parades that celebrated Augustus Caesar’s campaigns.
- **Niphates:** mountains in Armenia.
- **Euphrates:** a river in the middle east (border of Roman empire with the Parthian Kingdom).
- **Median:** Persian or Parthian.

Philosophy:

- The philosophy is very similar to the previous poems. If death is inevitable, then why should we fear it? And when we lose someone, rather than wasting away with mourning, Horace encourages us to embrace the positives and enjoy life.
- This is related to the concepts of death in both Stoicism and Epicureanism.
- The emphasis on friendship (Horace’s address a friend directly) and on enjoying the pleasures life presents us is more Epicurean.

Poem 5:

The Good Man Need Fear Nothing



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- This poem is a very simple poem in many ways.
- Horace argues that if a man is happy and at peace with themselves – at peace with their own soul – then they need not fear tyranny or death. Even “if in fragments were shattered the world, him its ruin would strike undismayed.”

Glossary:

- **Auster:** the south wind and the wind of storms.

Philosophy:

- Ancient Philosophies, both Stoicism and Epicureanism, preoccupy themselves with overcoming fear by enlightening the soul. Stoicism in particular rationalises that death and pain are inevitable because they believe all life is pre-destined. So, there is nothing we can do about these evil things beyond our control.
- Epicureanism on the other hand focuses on the attainment of personal enlightenment and tranquillity of the mind/soul and body as a means to ensure pure happiness. If one does this one need not worry about tyranny or death.

Poem 6:

Enjoy Your Possession While They Are Yours



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- Similar to other poems of Horace, this poem argues that we must enjoy the pleasures of our lives while we may: “While age, and wealth, and the black fateful threads of the three Sisters join to suffer us.” These threads are the threads of life that intertwine while we live and will be cut by the three sisters, or Fates, when we die.
- Horace uses the delightful imagery of wine and the garden as a way to encourage us to enjoy what we can before we die “and he will seize upon the hoarded gold” that we neglected to use in life for our own pleasure and happiness.

Glossary:

- **Poplar:** a type of tree.
- **Unguent:** perfume.
- **Three Sisters:** the three Fates.
- **Threads:** the thread of life that the Sisters cut when we die.
- **Tiber:** the River that runs through Rome and Latium (land around Rome).

Philosophy:

- This poem is again another mix of Epicureanism and Stoicism. The Epicureans encourage us to enjoy the simple pleasures of life such as nature and wine to ensure our own happiness, while the Stoics remind us that all of us are fated to die and cannot avoid it.

Poem 7:

Ode to Spring



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- This poem is full of natural analogies for life and death – or pathetic fallacy (when the weather reflects a mood).
- Horace talks of Spring and contrasts it with the other seasons: “Treads of Summer sure to die, for hard on hers comes Autumn... then back to wintertide: when nothing stirs.”
- In contrast to the fleetingness of Summer and Autumn and the cold nothingness of winter (analogies for life and death), Spring is full of imagery of youth, nature, and life.
- Horace reminds us that the joys of Spring are temporary: “The swift hour and the brief prime of the year say to the soul, *Thou wast not born for aye.*”
- This reflects Horace’s previous poems and philosophy which discussed the shortness of life, inevitability of death, and how we must enjoy the present while we can.
- The second half of the poem primarily deals with the past – the mythological and legendary origins of Rome. He references the ancient kings and founders of Rome now “dust and dreams.” And the legendary hero of the republic Torquatus, now gone. Horace reminds us of the past, which is now passed, so he can encourage us to make the most of life: “Feast then thy hear, for what thy heart has had the fingers of no heir will ever hold.”
- Once more Horace reminds us that what we do not enjoy in life another may – for we cannot take these pleasure with us in death. “Not thy long lineage nor they golden tongue, no, nor they righteousness, shall friend thee more.” All that made us great men in life (politics and virtues) are no use to us in death.
- In the end we will be like Hippolytus or Pirithous: dead.

Glossary:

- **Nymphs and Graces:** Beautiful magical women.
- **Thou wast not born for aye:** You were not born to live forever.
- **Tullus and Ancus:** Kings of Rome.
- **Aeneas:** Legendary Trojan hero who fled to Latium, Italy, from Troy as it was sacked and whose descendants founded Rome.
- **Torquatus:** Famous and legendary Roman General from the Republic – idolised by the Romans for his virtue.
- **Hippolytus:** the legendary son of Theseus, King of Athens. He was a virgin follower of Diana (Artemis). He was killed when his father Theseus wrongly accused him of seducing his wife, Phaedra.
- **Theseus and Pirithous:** both were chained to seats in the Underworld by Pluto as punishment for attempted to steal Proserpina (Persephone) – Plutos wife.
- Theseus was eventually freed by Herakles but Pirithous was left behind.

Philosophy:

- The philosophy of this poem very nicely sums up the other poems (**N.B. This makes this poem very useful – it also comes up as a single poem question.**): Life (Spring) is short, Death (winter) is inevitable, so enjoy the pleasures of life (Spring) while you may, because in death you won't enjoy any of it – you'll be like Hippolytus or Pirithous. What you don't enjoy an heir will.
- This is a very Epicurean poem as Horace encourages us to seek pleasure but insists that the virtues of our lives (are political achievements) will not affect our death. Stoicism believed all virtuous returned to god. Epicureans believed the only virtue was joy in simple pleasures.

Poem 8:

A Quiet Life



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- Horace begins this poem by listing all those who desire a quiet life but have not one: the sailor: "Show me at sea the boldest there who does not wish for quiet here."; the soldier: "For quiet, my friend, the soldier fights."; Politicians and the rich: "since wealth and power too weak we find to quell the tumults of the mind". The images of storms and tumults (confused noise) is the opposite of the tranquil life that Horace believes all men strive for.
- "Happy the man with little blest." This man, who has little in life, has less to worry his mind and can more easily find peace.
- "What then in life which soon must end can all our vain designs intend? From shore to shore why should we run, when none his tiresome self can shun?" Nothing we do in life, such as running all over the world, can help us escape our problems "for baneful care will still prevail and overtake us under said."
- Instead Horace says we should "If then thy soul rejoice today, Drive far tomorrow's cares away. In laughter let them all be drowned; no perfect good is to found." We must strive for happiness and forget our worries.
- "One mortal feel fate's sudden blow, another's lingering death comes slow; and what of life they take from thee the gods may give to punish me." Death comes suddenly and unexpected. What you think is good is not good to Horace: One may enjoy "wealthy stock, a fertile glebe, a fruitful flock, horses and chariots for thine ease, rich robes to deck and make thee please." Some enjoy the rich luxuries. But Horace says that "For me, a little cell I choose, fit for my mind, fit for my Muse, which soft content does best adorn, shunning the knaves and fools I scorn." Horace means he rejects the rich and wealthy and chooses a simple modest life away from those who indulge in luxuries.

Philosophy:

- Living a simple life is very much a concept in both Stoicism and Epicureanism. However, there is a slight difference. Stoics believed one should live in simple poverty (no pleasures) and dedicate oneself to philosophy or society. Epicureans believed one should live a simple life with simple pleasures. A Stoic would sit in poverty and say it is the most virtuous life; an Epicurean would instead say that you should find enjoyment in what little we have.
- Horace is probably favouring the Epicurean here: enjoy the quiet life and be happy. Life is short and the best way to enjoy it is in the simple things: the quiet life.

Poem 9:

Rustic Joys



Quotes – Add any quotes from the poem you feel are useful and relevant.

Notes:

- Similar to Horace's support for the Quiet Life, Horace believes that the country life is the better place to find this peace.
- "Blest as the immortal Gods is he who lives from toilsome business free, life the first race in Saturn's reign when floods of nectar stained the main;" Those who live of the land can live in peace like those in the Golden Age of man.
- "Whom no contracted debts molest, no griping creditors infest. No trumpet's sound, no soldier's cries, drive soft slumbers from his eyes... no boisterous tempest sweep the surface of the boiling deep, him no contentious suits in law from his beloved retirement draw, he ne'er with forced submission waits, obsequious, at his patron's gates." The man from the country can be free from debt, free from the toils of war and the sea, and free from law suits and from the need to work for their patron (local politician) – free from politics.
- Horace instead goes into a long description of the ideals of living in the country with nature: "Where rivulets gently purl along and, murmuring, balmy sleep prolong, whilst each musician of the grove lamenting warbles out his love, in

pleasing dreams he cheats the day unhurt by Phoebus' fiery rays." An image of a country man resting beneath a tree (grove) sleeping and listening to birds and the river. An ideal life of peace in contrast to the life of a soldier, sailor, or politician.

- Horace also discusses the joys of hunting in winter before coming home to the warm pleasures of "a frugal, chaste, industrious wife." Who will "heap the fire and milk the kine, and crown the bowl with new-pressed wine, and waiting for her weary lord."
- Horace rejects the "dainties" or luxurious foods favouring instead "herbs of which the forest nigh wholesome variety supply."
- He then talks of the feast days, when the farmer sacrifices the lambs killed by wolves to the gods and enjoys the meat left-over. And he talks of the farmer enjoying his cattle and working the fields with his slaves.
- The last verse, however, warns that not all who praise and live such a life really mean it – Alfius is the example given who praised the rural life, bought some land, "but still desires of sordid gain fixed in his cankered breast remain: next month he sets it out again." In other words, the country life can be abused by those who seek profit. Through happiness in the country life is for those who are seeking little but peace.

Glossary:

- **Saturn's reign:** Saturn (Cronos) was the father of Jupiter (Zeus). It is often believed that he ruled over the Golden Age of mankind when man suffered no pain, illness, or death.
- **Sabines:** a Italian people from just south of Rome in the Apennine mountains and who lived a rustic/frugal life.

Philosophy:

- The philosophy of this poem is very Epicurean influenced. Horace rejects all the political lives that Stoics say are best – those dedicated to the state – and instead says we should enjoy the simple life of the country, at peace and away from turmoil. Horace believes that the happiest life is one at peace in the country. It is no coincidence that Epicurus' school in Athens was called the *Garden*.
- The Stoics did also believe that a life of the country was an ideal life – but they also believed that a life dedicated to the state was the best and most virtuous life; Horace seems to reject this in favour of a life of quiet personal solitude.