



Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources
(Themes)
Travel by Land and Sea



SENECA
*Sea-sick crossing
the Bay of Naples!*

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the following:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

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Information about several of the pictures in this booklet, together with useful additional material for the Theme, may be found in the support available online for **Cambridge Latin Course, Book III, Stage 24, pages 66-69.**

SENECA, *Sea-sick crossing the Bay of Naples* (Letter 53)

Seneca had a bad time on a ship in bad weather

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BC – AD 65), known to us as Seneca the Younger, was a Stoic philosopher, and tutor and political adviser of the Emperor Nero. After being implicated in a plot against Nero, he was forced to take his own life. He was a prolific author, and among his many works were several philosophical treatises, including a collection of letters, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* (*Moral letters to Lucilius*), from which this extract is taken.

The letters were written late in Seneca's life, ostensibly to Lucilius, who was then procurator of Sicily, but they have evidently been crafted with a wider audience in mind. The letters often have two distinct parts: the first an episode drawn from daily life, the second a reflection on a moral issue arising from the first. This extract comprises the daily life part of letter 53. It describes Seneca's seasickness (a sickness of the body) while crossing the bay of Naples and his struggle to escape from it. He is quite self-deprecating, finding himself ridiculous. The second part (not included for study here) goes on to reflect on the need to pay attention to moral 'ailments' and to turn to Philosophy to rid oneself of them.

The text is unadapted but edited for length.

Notes

1-2 Seneca opens this letter dramatically with a **rhetorical question**. This engages the reader and also sets the tone: the author will be self-deprecating in this letter. The repetition (*polyptoton*) of the verb 'persuade' (**persuaderi ... persuasum**) coupled with the alliteration of **p** creates an engaging opening, encouraging us to read on and discover what events have had this impact upon Seneca.

facere needs to be added to complete the first sentence: it is typical of Seneca's brief style to omit words.

3 **sordidis nubibus**: literally 'dirty' clouds, a normal way of describing rain clouds in epic literature.

aut in aquam aut in ventum: this reflects one of the ancient beliefs that clouds dissolved to create either wind or rain.

4 **putavi tam pauca milia**: the alliteration of **p** and the sarcastic **tam pauca** draws attention to what Seneca, with hindsight, considers his own naïveté: to think the journey once seemed so straightforward!

a Parthenope tua: the old Greek name for the town which grew into Naples. By using this name, Seneca creates a romantic, epic tone. The **tua** refers to

Lucilius: as he was from Pompeii, this is a nod to the fact that he wrote about the town in his poems.

5 Puteolos: Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli) was a town on the Bay of Naples (see map below).

subripi: this verb is usually translated as ‘snatch’ or ‘steal’. Its use here creates a vivid image of Seneca trying to dart across the bay.

5-6 quamvis dubio et impendente caelo: ‘even though the sky [was] uncertain and threatening’, foreshadowing what will happen next.

6-7 protinus per altum...praecisurus omnes sinus: Seneca intends to cut straight across the open sea. Usually Roman sailors hugged the coastline, using landmarks on the land to navigate.

7 Nesida: Nesis was a peninsula on the Bay of Naples (see map below). It is actually not possible to head straight for Nesis from Naples – the headland obstructs the route. Perhaps this is Seneca again identifying his own ignorance and naïveté, or just carelessness about the actual geography!

8-9 mea nihil interesset utrum irem an redirem: Seneca is in the middle of the bay, equidistant from either shore. The *rhyme* of **irem** and **redirem** shows exactly how similar each option is.

9 quae me corruerat: the calmness is *personified* as a seductive liar. The verb **corruerat** is more commonly translated as ‘bribe, entice, or seduce’.

periit: this verb (‘die’ ‘perish’) signals a dramatic and sudden change in the weather.

10 nondum...iam...subinde: the words build up the impression of the weather steadily deteriorating. Seneca is self-aware enough to stop short of calling it a storm, however.

11 gubernatorem: the **gubernator** (‘helmsman’) steered the ship from the stern using a rudder shaped like a large oar, sometimes two of them. On large ships, these rudders were joined with a pole to make it possible for one man on his own to move both.

11-12 in aliquo litore: the use of **aliquo** shows Seneca’s desperation – he will take any location provided it is solid land.

12-13 aiebat ille aspera: the repetitive sound of these words and the imperfect tense show how persistent the helmsman was in refusing Seneca’s request to land. This is also shown in the *ascending tricolon* with *polysyndeton* (list of three, with conjunctions, growing in size/weight), listing all the reasons why he will not go to shore (**aspera...importuosa...quicquam se aeque in tempestate timere quam terram**)

13 peius...quam ut: ‘too badly...for’. This is a common use of **quam ut** with a comparative to signal ‘too much to...’

14-16 enim (for) **haec segnis nausia** (this sluggish kind of seasickness) **et sine exitu** (without any result) **quae bilem movet** (which stirs up vomit) **nec effundit** (but doesn't get it out) **me torquebat** (was torturing me).

14 nausia: Seneca's description is vivid and meticulous: he really wants us to imagine his dry heaves in detail.

16-17 institi...coegi: Seneca implies through these verbs and the colloquial Latin phrase **vellet nollet** ('like it or not') that the helmsman is very much against landing but he forces him into it. This brings out the fact that the dangers of sailing were not only from the sea, but also from approaching unknown or unsuitable land.

17 peteret litus: by reversing the expected word order and putting **litus** at the end Seneca shows us what his mind is focusing on: 'the shore'.

18 exspecto: Seneca switches into the present tense (*vivid historic present*) in order to make these events more vivid, as though we are experiencing them alongside Seneca.

19 Vergilii: Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19BC) was a Roman poet. His most famous work is the *Aeneid*, an epic poem of almost 10,000 lines in 12 books, which charts the fates of the Trojan survivors following the war with the Greeks. The Trojan hero Aeneas, legendary ancestor of the Romans, charts a course across the Mediterranean, encountering many challenges before finally reaching Italy. The two extracts quoted here are from Book 6, when Aeneas sailed to the Naples area, landing first at Cumae where they 'turn their prows out to the sea' (**obvertunt pelago proras** *Aeneid* 6.3) – the normal way in which ships were prepared after landing, to ready them for a second voyage – then continuing along the shore to Caieta's harbour where 'the anchor is thrown from the stern' (**ancora de prora iacitur** *Aeneid* 6.901). For information on Roman anchors, see the note on ships in the *Introduction*.

By using epic references to show his reluctance to wait any longer than absolutely necessary before disembarking, Seneca is poking fun at himself and the ridiculousness of his own situation. He certainly has no wish to attempt a second voyage! The contrast that Seneca produces between the epic tone of his writing and his ridiculous situation continues until the end of the selection.

20-21 In letter 83, Seneca explains that, as a younger man, he was an enthusiast of cold water bathing, including plunging into the *Aqua Virgo*, the coldest of Rome's aqueducts, on New Year's Day. He explains ruefully that these days he prefers water which is a little warmer, but he still scorns the luxurious bathing of the Roman tradition. He uses the Greek term *psychrolutes* (**psychrolutam**) for 'cold-water bather'. The word **gausapatus** suggests that typical 'cold-water bathers' wore some type of special clothing (the translation of this word implies rough wool). Seneca here is painting himself as a ridiculous figure, plunging fully clothed into freezing sea-water: this is not how a dignified *psychrolutes* would take his cold bath.

22-23 the *alliteration* (**putas me passum**) forcefully emphasises this sentence and the *rhetorical question* continues to engage the reader.

dum per aspera erepo, dum viam quaero, dum facio: Seneca stresses the hardships he felt on land by employing a *tricolon* (list of three) with *asyndeton* (no conjunctions) and the *anaphora* of **dum** (repetition of a word at the same place in a clause or phrase). Of course he is exaggeration for comic effect, poking fun at himself and his own situation. The *alliteration* of **terram timeri** ('the land is feared') in line 23 builds on this.

24 **incredibilia sunt quae tulerim, cum me ferre non possem:** Seneca playfully uses part of *ferre* twice – he had to put up with terrible things, when he could hardly bear feeling so awful.

25 **scito:** an *archaic imperative* form of the verb ('take [this] from me') which maintains the epic tone.

Ulixem: Ulysses (the Roman name for Odysseus) was a hero from the mythical 10-year-long Trojan War whose journey home was told in Homer's *Odyssey*. Delayed for a further 10 years by adventures with monsters and shipwrecks, compounded by a long-lasting feud with Neptune (the god of the sea), he eventually sailed home after twenty years, a reference picked up here in line 27: **vincensimo anno perveniam** ('I will arrive in the twentieth year'). The phrase **irato mare** ('angry sea') recalls the hatred Neptune felt for Ulysses.

natum: this has the sense of 'fated from birth' – translated here as 'doomed'.

26 **nausiator erat:** a comic reinterpretation of the story of Ulysses and a fitting end to Seneca's epic description of feeling sea-sick.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each line, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

quid non...navigarem (lines 1-2):

- What has Seneca been persuaded to do? What is the meaning of the whole sentence?

solvi...caelo (lines 2-6):

- What did he set sail with? What was without doubt? What are dark clouds usually released as?
- What did he think could be covered quickly? From where? As far as where?
- How does he describe the sky as being?

itaque...sinus (lines 6-7):

- Where did he head? What place did he head towards? What did he intend to do? Why was he doing this?

cum iam...fluctus (lines 8-11):

- How far had he gone? How does he describe the first calm? What happened to it?
- What was it not yet? But what was there already? What was there soon?

coepi...terram (lines 11-13):

- What did he begin to do? Who was he asking? What was he asking him to do? Where?
- What was the helmsman saying about the coastal areas? Why could he not land? What did he say he feared nothing more than?

peius...effundit (lines 13-16):

- What was he too badly distressed for?
- What was torturing him? How does he describe the seasickness? What was it without? What does it do? What does it not do?

institi...litus (lines 16-17):

- What did he do to the helmsman? What else did he do to him? What does **vellet nollet** mean? What did he force him to do? Do you think that the helmsman wanted to do this?

cuius...iacitur (lines 18-20):

- When they reached the vicinity of it, what does Seneca not do? What is he not waiting for?
- What is the first example of a quote from Virgil? What is the second example?

memor...gausapatus (lines 20-21):

- What did he remember? What was he an old believer in? What does he do? What does he lower himself into? In what manner does he do this? How is he dressed?

quae putas...possem (lines 21-24):

- He asks 'what do you think I suffered'. What was the first thing he was doing? What was the second? What was the third?
- What did he realise?
- What were unbelievable? When did he put up with them?

illud...perveniam (lines 24-27):

- What does **illud scito** mean? What was Ulysses not doomed to face? What was the result of such an angry sea?
- What was Ulysses?
- When would Seneca arrive? Whenever he had to do what?

Questions on Content and Style

1. (lines 1-2)

How does Seneca make this an engaging and interesting opening to the letter?

2. (lines 2-7)

a) How does Seneca foreshadow the storm in his description of setting sail?

b) How does Seneca show us through the style and content of his writing that he was keen to get this journey over as quickly as possible?

- c) Do you think that Seneca's decisions at the beginning of his journey are sensible? Explain your opinion.
3. (lines 8-11)
 - a) How does Seneca through the style and content of his writing emphasise that he was in the very middle of the sea?
 - b) How does Seneca show us the storm building up through the style of his writing in these lines?
 4. (lines 11-13)
 - a) How does Seneca show us his desperation to be brought to land in these lines?
 - b) How does he make the arguments of the helmsman seem persuasive here?
 5. (lines 13-17)
 - a) Explain why the helmsman's arguments have no effect on Seneca.
 - b) Describe in detail how Seneca is feeling at this point in the story.
 - c) How does Seneca show us, through his style of writing in these lines, that he is even more desperate to be brought to shore?
 - d) Do you think that Seneca is behaving sensibly here?
 6. (lines 18-20)
 - a) Why do you think that Seneca uses the present tense here (**exspecto**)?
 - b) Why do you think that Seneca quotes Virgil here?
 7. (lines 20-21)
 - a) What hobby did Seneca have which he refers to here?
 - b) What makes this a humorous scene?
 - c) How does this moment make you feel about Seneca as a person?
 8. (lines 21-24)

How does Seneca, through the style and content of his writing, show us that his suffering continued on the land as well?
 9. (lines 24-27)
 - a) Who was Ulysses and why is he relevant here?
 - b) How do we know that Seneca is not being entirely serious here?

Discussion

Themes: travel by sea, sea-sickness

This engaging piece of writing is full of self-mocking humour and vivid description. It can easily be turned into a 6 scene storyboard (lines 1-7; lines 8-11; lines 11-13; lines 13-17; lines 18-21; lines 21-27), including the literary thoughts of Seneca as well as his real-life surroundings.

Students could compare Seneca's description of a journey by sea with the Ovid source, looking at how each author describes a storm. Both authors make use of dramatic language: which piece of description do they think works the best?

Students could also rewrite the episode (in English or Latin) from the point of view of the helmsman, an experienced sailor. What would he say about Seneca, the trip, and the weather?

General questions on the passage and theme

1. How serious do you think the storm described in this passage was? Explain your answer by referring to the text.
2. Based on this letter, what kind of person do you think that Seneca was?
3. Do you think that the helmsman did a good job here?
4. Do you find this text entertaining? Explain your opinion.
5. For each method of travel you have studied, draw up a list of benefits and drawbacks. Which method do you think sounds best?

Further Information and Reading



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9918806>

Seneca starts from Naples. Naples. He says that he headed across the open sea towards Nesis, intending to sail from there to Puteoli and then on to Baiae, where he was staying.

Roman ships would more usually hug the coastline. This was safer, especially for ships which were not built to withstand storms on the open sea, but also allowed for more straightforward navigation using landmarks.

E. Mauger *Seneca, Letters, A selection* (Bloomsbury 2016)

W.C. Summers *The Select Letters of Seneca* (Macmillan 1968)