

# Demons Aplenty

by [Joe Giordano](#) (October 2023)



*Demonic Puppets*, Paul Klee, 1929

**I ran, diving into a forest** shrouded with a canopy of heavy limbs that blocked sunlight. I waded deeper, farther from the source of my woes, until the sun sank into the underworld, and

I thrashed about in the inky darkness. Miraculously, I saw a sliver of light in the distance. Salvation. I headed toward the beam but was frozen by a chorus of ominous growls. The snarls grew louder, and I realized that I was surrounded by a pack of wolves. I'd contemplated death but not this way.

Suddenly, on my right, a hologram-like shape of a man wearing a white tunic appeared. Ghost or living, at that moment I didn't care. "Please," I said. "Help me."

Instead of frightening away the wolves, the spirit spoke a riddle.

"I was born in Mantua during the time of Julius and lived my life during Augustus's reign. A bard, I created the son of Anchises who left Troy after the city was destroyed, ultimately to lay the foundation for Rome."

"You're the epic poet Virgil?"

"None other," he responded.

Virgil's ghost radiated a light revealing the predators ready to pounce. My tears welled, and I had the strong urge to urinate. Hoping flattery would win his assistance, I said, "I've read *The Aeneid* with such awe that I think of you as my literary mentor."

Virgil smiled, encouraging me to implore. "Please, dispel this pack of wolves."

"They're hungry," he said matter-of-factly.

Eying the wolves, my voice quivered. "Don't you want to guide me away from here, through an eternal place, where I'll hear despairing cries of tormented spirits, then those who hope to rise and finally enter heaven?"

"Who do you think you are? Dante Alighieri?"

I gulped. "I'm Italian."

Virgil scoffed. "Not good enough."

"Why won't you help me?"

Virgil sat on a boulder. "I rather enjoyed the wild animal hunts we staged at our games."

"The gladiators were armed against the beasts."

"Sorry. I don't have a sword."

I blurted. "You're going to watch them eat me?"

"You could try running."

My mind whirred. I needed to become more than an amusement to Virgil, and praise hadn't worked. "Dante is revered," I said.

He raised a forefinger. "I was his inspiration."

"Perhaps, but that's all you're remembered for. Nobody knows your pastoral poems and although professors push college students to read *The Aeneid*, most only buy the Cliff Notes."

Virgil stiffened. "I don't believe you."

"On Amazon, *The Aeneid* sales are in the toilet."

"Insults? I'm going to enjoy what the wolves do to you. Anyway, what have Greek female warriors to do with the popularity of my work?"

"You're out of touch. Amazon is a company that profits from virtually every book read on Earth."

"Are they run by an emperor?"

"Close enough. The point is, your shot at eternal glory failed, unless ..."

Virgil's gaze turned suspicious. "Unless what?"

"Unless I help you remaster *The Aeneid* for current tastes, orchestrate a relaunch, and propel your work to an Amazon best seller."

"You could do that?"

"You'll probably snag a movie deal."

"Augustus commissioned *The Aeneid*. I can't rewrite it."

"Augustus is a dead despot who ended a republic. Nobody cares about him."

"What would I need to change?"

"Get rid of the wolves and I'll tell you."

Virgil kneaded his chin, then rose from his rock. With a broad sweep of his arm, he shouted, "Begone," sending the wolves scurrying away. He faced me. "Okay, let's hear it."

"Aeneas lost his wife carrying his father out of Troy. In the revision, he should save his mother."

Virgil looked stunned. "Respect for the paterfamilias was a high Roman virtue."

"Almost half the households in the U.S. are run by women."

"Wow."

"Another thing. Dido has to blow off her affair with Aeneas. Today, women have careers and are sexually liberated. She can't kill herself over some guy."

Virgil protested. "Aeneas and Dido's great love defiled foreboded the rivalry between Carthage and Rome."

"People today aren't interested in the Punic Wars."

"Don't they learn from history?"

"History is rewritten to reinforce current political beliefs."

"Extraordinary. What else?"

"Aeneas is too dark and angry. Killing the surrendering Turnus can't end the story."

Virgil's voice rose. "His destiny was to lay the foundation for Rome, and a land had to be conquered. Although flawed, Aeneas exemplified an adherence to duty overriding personal issues and concerns."

"Most readers are women and Aeneas is unsympathetic. We'll need to bring out his feminine side. Rome must come together more like a commune."

Virgil shook his head. "I'm not sure I can write that kind of story."

"Not to worry. That's where I come in. I'll be your guide."

"I don't know."

"Be forgotten or get back on center stage. What do you have to lose?"

"You want me to go backwards before I can go forward?"

"Just like Dante."

Virgil sighed in resignation. "You make a good point." He paused before asking, "When do we begin?"

"As soon as we get out of these woods."

Virgil brightened. "If you like, I could give you a quick spin through the Inferno."

"I've already done the 'abandon all hope' thing. Anyway, I think we'll find demons aplenty in the entertainment

industry.”

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**Joe Giordano** was born in Brooklyn. He and his wife Jane now live in Texas. His stories have appeared in more than one hundred magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Shenandoah*. Joe has a short story collection titled *Stories and Places I Remember*, and his novels include *Birds of Passage*, *An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story*, and the Anthony Provati thriller series: *Appointment with ISIL*, *Drone Strike*, and *The Art of Revenge*.

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