



## [Lucan, The Civil War I.33-62](#)

Lucan's invocation to Nero

**Name of the author:** Lucan

**Date:** 59 CE to 65 CE

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Poetry

**Title of work:** The Civil War

**Reference:** I.33-62

**Commentary:**

The civil war between Caesar and Pompey from 49-45 BCE is the central theme of Lucan's *Bellum civile* (*The Civil War*). This epic reflects upon the end of the Republic and the way Rome degenerated due to the weakness of the Romans, their inclination towards internal dissent, and the ambitions of men like Caesar (Toohey, *Reading Epic*, p. 166-167). Even if he had been close to the emperor Nero, until his disfavour during the 60s CE, Lucan is very critical of the principate. In *Bellum civile* he wanted to show that a political system emanating from a civil war and the victory of a tyrant could not be a satisfactory regime. This text, known as the invocation to Nero, is an excerpt from the beginning of the first book. It appears just after Lucan's apostrophe to Roman citizens, who let the civil war between Caesar and Pompey happen ([Lucan, The Civil War I.1-32](#)). Nero's invocation is one of the most commented and debated passage of the work, and it has been variously judged. The way we appreciate Lucan's view influences directly the understanding of his depiction of the emperor and the date of the composition of the first book. François Ripoll gives a clear presentation of the main opinions. He distinguishes: (1) scholars who consider that Lucan is ironic and insincere, and that his praise is full of implicit critics so as to make fun of the emperor; (2) those who believe that his praise is sincere and uses all the traditional tools of the panegyric – for them this text would have been written when Lucan had good relations with Nero –; (3) those who think that Nero's praise has been artificially inserted at the beginning of a critical and subversive work, just in order to protect the poet; (4) finally those who believe that Lucan is sincere and ironic, his paradoxical praise of Nero and of the benefits of the civil war fits in with the spirit of the whole epic (Ripoll, "L'énigme du prologue," p. 150-151).

Verses 33 to 38 serve as a sort of "transition to panegyric" and mention the various consequences of the civil wars. They are presented as a "necessary precondition" to Nero's advent (v. 33-34) or as a threat to the universal and divine order (v. 34-36; see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 130-131). The sentence: *caelumque suo servire Tonanti non nisi saevorum potuit post bella gigantum*; "if heaven could serve its Thunderer only after wars with the ferocious Giants" (v. 35-36), clearly echoes Horace, *Odes* III.5.1-4: "Because Jove thunders in heaven we have always believed that he is king there; Augustus will be deemed a god on earth when the Britons and the deadly Persians have been added to our empire" (*Caelo tonantem credidimus Iovem regnare: praesens divus habebitur Augustus adiectis Britannis imperio gravibusque Persis*). But the role played by the emperor in Horace is very different from that of Nero in Lucan. First, the fact that Lucan refers to "its Thunderer" (*suum Tonans*) implies the existence of *noster Tonans*, that is Nero. In Horace as in Lucan, the emperor is equated to Jupiter but, in Horace, the fact that Augustus will conquer Britain or Persia is a prerequisite for such an association. With Lucan, the price for Nero's apotheosis was less glorious: it was the *scelera* and the *nefas*, "these crimes and guilt" (for the intertextuality, see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 132). Finally, the reference to the gigantomachy (v. 37) clearly echoes the fight between Pompey and Caesar, a fight which had threatened the universal stability and had led to cosmic disruptions, one of the main theme of the poem *Bellum civile*.

Then, from verse 38 to 45, Lucan lists the various battles and conflicts which led to Nero's accession and which made the cost of Romans' life in these troubled times so heavy. Concerning the civil war of 48-45 BCE, Lucan mentions the battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE, leading to Pompey's defeat (v. 38), the battle of Thapsus, in 46 BCE, between Caesar's troops and a Pompeian army led by Labienus and Cato the Younger (v. 39), and the final battle of Munda, in 45 BCE, opposing Pompey's sons to Caesar (v. 40). Then Lucan enumerates civil conflicts after Caesar's murder: the brutal siege of Perusia led by Octavian against Lucius Antonius, which ended in 41 BCE (v. 41); the battles of Mutina, the 14 and 21 April 43 BCE, opposing the forces of Marcus Antonius and of Octavian (v. 41); the battle of Actium on September 31 BCE (*Leucas*, v. 42-43); and the conflict between Octavian's forces and Sextus Pompeius on the coast of Sicily in 36 BCE – which is called *servilia bella*, as Sextus Pompeius and



Octavian had both conscripted thousands of freed slaves in their troops (v. 43). The enumeration ends with a short assessment: these sacrifices were a necessary evil that led to Nero's advent (v. 44-45). However, the amount of destructions, deaths and losses may seem to create an imbalance with Nero's positive actions during his rule, actions which are totally omitted by Lucan.

In the second part of his praise, Lucan forecasts the apotheosis of Nero, or more precisely his catasterism after his death – a passage which is modelled on Augustus's catasterism in the proem of the *Georgics* (Virgil, *Georgic* I.24-39; Casali, "The *Bellum Civile*," p. 90). In his forecasting of Nero's actions after his apotheosis, Lucan writes that Nero will have to choose which god he wants to be. Thus, the poet identifies him with gods which were central in the Neronian imagery, as he imagines Nero wielding the sceptre, a symbol of power and sovereignty which was one attribute of Jupiter (v. 47, see Fears, "Jupiter and Roman," p. 74), or driving the "flaming chariot of Phoebus" (v. 48-50). The association of Nero with Phoebus and the god Sol – Lucan writes that on his chariot, Nero would "circle with moving fire the earth entirely unperturbed by the transference of the sun" – were very common images of Nero's propaganda. Suetonius wrote that Nero was acclaimed as the equal of Apollo, regarding his singing, and as the equal of the sun god, regarding chariot driving (Suetonius, *Life of Nero* LIII.1). His association with Apollo was also a frequent iconographic theme on many of his coins, and his association with Sol was obvious with the Colossus erected nearby the Coliseum. Nevertheless, the act of driving a divine chariot has also been interpreted as a critic of Nero's power, which could be dangerous for his subjects. Actually, Lucan's depiction of the chariot may echo Ovid, *Metamorphoses* II.31-328, a passage describing how Phaeton, the only mythological figure who usurped the sun's chariot, led the Earth to a sort of conflagration (for the bibliography, Wheeler, "Lucan's Reception," p. 369-370, n. 26). Even if Lucan acknowledges that, despite the "transference of the sun" made possible through the circle made by Nero's chariot, the earth will stay "entirely unperturbed" (v. 49), the image of the sun's chariot racer may have been still a reminder, for a contemporary reader, of Phaeton's ambitions (this image can also be discussed in [Statius, \*Silvae\* IV.3.135-138](#)).

After the comparison between Nero and Jupiter, Apollo and the sun god, Lucan imagines that every god will give precedence to the dead emperor and that he will be able to choose where he will settle himself in the "kingdom of the universe" (v. 50-52). Lucan asks Nero not to settle himself on the extreme North or South, a position which could prevent him from directly protecting Rome (v. 53-55). He adds that Nero has to stay in the centre of the universe so that the ether would not be unbalanced (v. 56-59). This passage has been variously interpreted by scholars. The image of Nero's domination over the universe can be perceived as a normal way of praising the capacity of an emperor to impose his domination and peace on the entire world, a world in which Rome would be its main centre (Pogorzelski, "Orbis Romanus," p. 151; the author recognizes that it could also be ironical). However, quoting Suetonius who insists on Nero's obesity and on the fact that his eyes were weak (Suetonius, *Life of Nero* LI), some scholars believe that the mention to the "star aslant" (v. 55) and the highlight on Nero's supernatural weight would be an ironic reference to Nero's squint and obesity (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 141-142; against this interpretation, see Dewar, "Laying it on," p. 199-202).

After his description of Nero's catasterism and of his supernatural, perhaps risky, domination over the Earth, Lucan comes back to the idea expressed at the beginning: Nero's apotheosis could lead to the advent of universal peace and to the closure of the temple of Janus (v. 60-62). With the image of the closing of the "gates of war," Lucan echoes a motif often used in Augustan time, especially by Virgil, Horace or in the *Res Gestae* (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 143-144). More generally, the message expressed by Lucan in his invocation to the emperor – namely that the civil war of 49-48 BCE had been a disastrous but necessary event leading to Nero's advent – may recall the *Aeneid* of Virgil, when the fall of Troy is presented as a necessity for Rome's foundation and the emergence of a Roman *gens* whose destiny was to rule the world ([Virgil, \*Aeneid\* I.257-296](#); Ripoll, "L'énigme du prologue," p. 151). But, as François Ripoll rightly remarks, there is a difference between Virgil and Lucan. In the *Aeneid*, Augustus's advent is presented both as a providential goal and as a final end: his reign is seen as the beginning of a period characterized by stability and universal peace. In Lucan's *Bellum civile*, the idea that Nero's time could lead to stability and peace is expressed not through future tense, as is the case in the *Aeneid*, but with subjunctive verbs expressing a wish (*consulat, amet, conpescat*, v. 60-62). In addition, this hope for a life in a pacified empire is clearly not associated by Lucan with Nero's reign, but with the time coming after his death (Ripoll, "L'énigme du prologue," p. 151-152). If we agree with such a way of reading Lucan's invocation, Nero's advent would be implicitly presented as "the ultimate outcome of the civil war," and his apotheosis would thus be a "precondition of peace" (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 130). Even if there is still a debate on these interpretations of the text and on Lucan's intentions, the obvious ambiguity of this poem could actually explain why the invocation to Nero was not suppressed from Lucan's work after Nero's fall in 68 CE.



Keywords in the original language:

- [aether](#)
- [arma](#)
- [astrum](#)
- [axis](#)
- [belliger](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [caelum](#)
- [civilis](#)
- [currus](#)
- [deus](#)
- [flammiger](#)
- [genus humanum](#)
- [lanus](#)
- [ignis](#)
- [Leucas](#)
- [Munda](#)
- [mundus](#)
- [Mutina](#)
- [nefas](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [numen](#)
- [obliquus](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pax](#)
- [Perusia](#)
- [Pharsalia](#)
- [Phoebus](#)
- [pondus](#)
- [proelium](#)
- [regia](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [sanguis](#)
- [scelerus](#)
- [sceptrum](#)
- [sider](#)
- [sol](#)
- [tellus](#)
- [Tonans](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Apollo](#)
- [apotheosis](#)
- [catasterism](#)
- [civil war](#)
- [cosmic balance](#)
- [gigantomachy](#)
- [Janus](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [Nero](#)
- [peace](#)
- [Phaeton](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)



- [sun god](#)
- [Universe](#)

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