**Introduction to Elegiac Poetry**

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| Catullus –  poems | Latin A Level – Verse Set Text  Catullus – poems 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 17, 40, 70, 76, 85, 88, 89, 91, 107 |

**Background**

* **Greek poetry**:
* 8th century B.C.: epic (Homer) and didactic (Hesiod)
* c750 - c300 B.C.: Hellenic – public/political interest, straightforward style
* 3rd century B.C.: Hellenistic – poets (Callimachus) under patronage of powerful monarchs (especially Ptolemies of Egypt – Alexandrian Library) keen:
* to avoid dangerous political subjects;
* to display learning (mythological and other);
* to concentrate on private and personal matters (love, loss);
* to write in a refined and elaborate style.
* **Influence on Roman poetry**:
* **Catullus** (84–54 B.C.): highly influenced by Callimachus and Hellenistic poets, writes about love – intense, personal
* **Augustan Age**: **Virgil** (70–19 B.C.) and **Horace** (65–8 B.C.):
* experienced turmoil of Civil War and were keen to praise Augustus’ achievements in securing peace;
* reversion to public/political themes;
* more direct style – but also showing technical polish and obscure learning of Hellenistic poets;
* awareness of personal cost of public events.
* As Augustan peace became taken more for granted, poets turned away from patriotic involvement in public affairs back to more personal themes:
* **Tibullus** (50-19 B.C.): 2 books of love elegies, melancholic, pastoral
* **Propertius** (50-16 B.C.): 3 books of love elegies, neurotically passionate, and a 4th book of aetiological elegies on Roman subjects
* **Ovid** (43 B.C. – A.D.17): elegiac poetry on many themes, showing learning, wit, elegant cynicism and penetrating psychology

**Catullus – Background Notes**

Catullus was born around 87 BC in Verona, a prosperous town but it was not part of the Roman state until after Catullus’ death in 54 BC (dates are approximate as they can only be worked out from references in his poetry). However, Catullus’ family were part of a provincial elite and despite being from Verona, he was probably a Roman citizen. We know that Julius Caesar was entertained by Catullus’ father at their home on more than one occasion. This privileged upbringing meant that Catullus had enough money to live his life as a poet without financial worries, despite his implications to the contrary in some of his poems. He clearly spent time with a group of “aristocratic” friends of similar rank, wealth and interests.

Many of Catullus’ poems are love poems, the theme of which arose from his life. Catullus used poetry as a medium of communication and thus the style is informal, conversational, influenced by Greek lyric poetry and very different from the grand epic of Virgil, who was writing later than him. One of the reasons why Catullus is so important in the development of literature, not just in the Ancient World but in the modern world also, is that he is (as far as we know) the first poet in Greek or Latin who decided to write about a particular love affair in depth – his affair with a woman whom he calls “Lesbia” but whose real name was probably “Clodia”.

Catullus was deeply influenced by the Greek poet Sappho, who, living on the island of Lesbos (the inspiration for the pseudonym of his lover, Lesbia), wrote a number of poems addressed to fellow women, expressing her love for them. In total Catullus wrote 119 poems: most are not about Lesbia, but those that are about her express his feelings of love and rejection vividly, full of intense passion and bitter despair.

As a poet, Catullus belonged to an informal group of friends known as the ‘neoterics’ or ‘New Poets’, who enjoyed meeting and experimenting with poetry and metre. Unfortunately, little of the work of the other poets survives, but it seems clear that they wrote in a variety of styles and metres on erotic, obscene, humorous or satirical themes. Despite the epic feel of some longer poems, such as Catullus 64, which tells the story of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (Achilles’ parents), the new poets generally avoided the style of grand epic and followed the lighter, more intimate style of the Greek lyricists, of early Roman satirists such as Lucilius and of the early Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence.

**Traditional Roman attitudes to love & marriage**

Traditionally upper-class Roman marriages in the 1st Century BC were not primarily concerned with love. Marriages were generally arranged by the parents – the girl often being much younger than her husband. The wife’s role was to support her husband – a famous epitaph written by a husband to his deceased wife commends her for being able to weave well. For an upper-class man it was accepted that he would be able to indulge his “passions” with slave-girls and prostitutes, both before and after marriage. The traditional Roman “Matrona” was given no such freedom!

However, this was beginning to change in Catullus’ time and many upper-class women had begun to achieve some emancipation and as such were embarking on pre- and extra-marital affairs. As the Republic broke down and Augustus established a new order within the Empire, he passed laws against adultery to try and restore traditional “family values”.

However, this was after Catullus’ death and we have a number of examples of Roman matronae acting as courtesans during his life time. One was Sempronia, a member of the Gracchi family and, in 77 BC, the wife of a consul. Her “immoral” behaviour was recorded by Sallust.

Clodia (Lesbia) herself is vividly recalled by Cicero in a speech he made in defence of her ex-lover Caelius. He describes her as attending orgies, embarking on affairs and visiting Baiae, a very scandalous resort! Cicero refers to Clodia as a “penny Clytemnestra” – ‘Clytemnestra’ because she tried to kill Caelius; ‘penny’ because she accepted money for sex.

**Clodia (Lesbia)**

Clodia was married to Q. Metellus Celer, who was governor of Northern Italy in 63 BC. Her brother P. Clodius Pulcher was an enemy of Catullus (and indeed of Cicero). She was probably an aristocratic woman in a dull marriage who sought amusement with younger men!

It is clear from Catullus’ poems that he was completely in love with Clodia and eventually he manages to break away and “get over her”. We know that Catullus went to Bithynia with a friend Memmus, who was Praetor in 58 BC: Catullus did not have an official posting there, so it is possible that he went there purely to try and “get over” his relationship with Clodia. When Clodia’s husband died she was a young widow and enjoyed her newfound freedom. After she rejected Catullus, she began an affair with Caelius Rufus. He was later accused of trying to poison her and was successfully defended by Cicero – a defence recorded in his “Pro Caelio” speech.

**Catullus – background notes**

Read the introduction to the text – pages 2-12 – and make brief notes on the following:

Life: dates, origins, education/political involvement

Attitude to power-struggles between generals and aristocrats in Rome (direct preoccupation or generic ‘outspoken bluntness’/irritation?):

Mocking of contemporaries: who and why? (Poems mentioned which are in our prescription: 6, 10, 17, 88-91)

Portrayal of himself:

Influences of Greek literature:

What is *doctrina*?

How does Catullus define ‘good poetry’?

Assess what these terms mean in connection or contrast with Catullus’ poetry: *poeta tener, venuste, tumido, lepidum*:

Who was Lesbia? Do we know, really? Does it matter?

From what you have read in the introduction, assess the concluding statement that *The poems of Catullus, above all, impart the feeling that poetry matters… It demands everything and can change lives.*