

Catullus, Poem 3: On the Death of a Pet Sparrow

One of Rome's best-known and best-loved poets, Catullus wrote on a wide range of topics, using various styles, tones, and meters. He was equally comfortable with and skillful at writing erotic or satiric lyrics, witty or abusive epigrams, polished hymns and learned *epyllia* ("little epics").

Born around 84 B.C. to a wealthy family from Verona, Catullus soon settled into the fashionably elegant and educated circles in Rome and fell in love with a rich married woman, Clodia, whom he refers to as "Lesbia" in many of his poems. Although not mentioned by name in the following poem, she is likely the *puella* of this poem and the loss of her pet sparrow, the topic.

Perhaps the scene of his recitation might be in the company of his admirers (*Veneres Cupidinesque*) who have pleaded with him to sing a little song for their entertainment. If so, what is Catullus' tone and what creates it? Is this simply about the death of a pet or does it hint at something more complex, even provocative?

Text and Translation

Lugete, O Veneres Cupidinesque

Mourn, O Venuses and Cupids

et quantum est hominum venustiorum.

and however great (the number) is of people (who are) rather charming.

Passer mortuus est meae puellae,

The sparrow of my girlfriend is dead,

1. **lugete:** *lugeo, -ere, luxi, luctum:* mourn
Veneres: *Venus, -eres, f.:* Venus, goddess of love, wife of Vulcan, mother of Cupid; here, plural perhaps referring to the women present
Cupidines(que): *Cupido, -inis, m.:* Cupid, god of love; here, plural perhaps referring the young men in the gathering
2. **quantum:** *quantus, -a, -um:* how great
quantum est hominum: literally, how much of people there is = however great the number of people (who are)
venustiorum: *venustus, -a, -um:* full of Venus; here, charming
3. **passer:** *passer, -eris, m.:* sparrow (a bird sacred to Venus)
mortuus: *mortuus, -a, -um:* dead

passer, deliciae meae puellae,
the sparrow, delight of my girlfriend,

quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.
whom that girl loved more than her own eyes.

5

Nam mellitus erat, suamque norat
For it was sweet-as-honey, and knew its own

ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem;
mistress herself as well as a girl (knows) her own mother;

nec sese a gremio illius movebat,
nor was it moving itself from that girl's lap,

sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc
but jumping around now here, now there

4. **deliciae:** *deliciae, -arum*, fem. pl.: delight
5. **oculis:** *oculus, -i*, m.: eye
6. **mellitus:** *mellitus, -a, -um*: sweet-as-honey
norat: *noverat* (from *nosco, -ere, -novi, notum*: to be acquainted with; in perfect tenses = know)
7. **suam ipsam:** its very own (mistress) herself
tam...quam: as...as
8. **sese:** *sese = se* (acc.)
gremio: *gremium, -ii*, n.: lap
9. **circumsiliens:** *circumsilio, -ire, -ivi, -itum*: jump around
modo...modo: (adverb) now...now
huc: (adverb) from this place; here, here
illuc: (adverb) to that place; here, there

ad solam dominam usque pipiabat. 10
and was constantly chirping to its mistress alone

Qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
Now it goes along the shadowy path

illuc unde negant redire quemquam.
to that place where they say that no one returns from.

At vobis male sit, malae tenebrae
But may it be bad for you, evil darkness(es)

Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis;
of Orcus, you who devour all beautiful things;

tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis. 15
you took away from me such a pretty sparrow.

10. **dominam:** *domina, -ae, f.:* mistress
usque: (adverb) constantly
pipiabat: *pipio (1):* chirp
11. **qui nunc:** (relative pronoun + adverb) who now; here, now it
it: *eo, ire, ivi or ii, itum:* go; *it* is third singular present.
iter: *iter, itineris, n.:* path
tenebricosum: *tenebricosus, -a, -um:* shadowy
12. **unde:** (adverb) whence; here, from
redire: *redeo, redire, redii, reditum:* return (*red-* + *eo*)
quemquam: *quisquam, quaequam, quidquam:* anyone, anything; here, no one
13. **sit:** present subjunctive of *sum*, third person singular = may be (the subjunctive mood expresses a wish or uncertainty)
tenebrae: *tenebrae, -arum, fem. pl.:* darkness
14. **devoratis:** *devoro (1):* devour
Orci: *Orcus, -i, m.:* Orcus, the underworld
15. **abstulistis:** *aufero, auferre, abstuli, ablatum:* irregular verb (*ab* + *fero*); carry off; here, took away

O factum male! Io miselle passer!

O evil deed! Farewell, poor little sparrow!

Tuā nunc operā meae puellae

Now thanks to you, my girlfriend's

flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.

little swollen eyes are red with weeping.

16. **Io:** exclamation of pain; here, Farewell!
miselle: *misellus, -a, -um*: poor little (diminutive of *miser*)
17. **opera:** *opera, operae, f.*: effort; *tu_ oper_*: literally, your efforts; here, thanks to you
18. **flendo:** *fleo, -ere, flevi, fletum*: weep; here, the form is ablative gerund (verbal noun) = with weeping
turgiduli: *turgidulus, -a, -um*: slightly swollen (diminutive of *turgidus*, “swollen”)
rubent: *rubeo, -ere*: to be red
ocelli: *ocellus, -i, m.*: little eye (diminutive of *oculus*)