

# Catullus: The Lesbia Cycle

By Julia Pan

Is it better to have loved and lost than not to love at all? Catullus expresses another opinion: “*Odi et amo*” (I hate and I love).<sup>1</sup> In just four simple syllables, the late Roman Republic poet Catullus is able to convey the raw, inner turmoil that love and passion wreak upon him. Like many disillusioned people, Catullus hoped that love would make him whole in some way, but through his tumultuous relationship with Lesbia, he discovers that being in “love” only makes him insecure and obsessive. Throughout his lyric poetry, especially in his polymetra and epigrams, Catullus poignantly captures the insecurity that stems from the vicious cycle of falling in love, betrayal of *foedus*, and heartbreak.



Godward painting of Lesbia with her Sparrow-1916

While falling in love, the line between passion and obsession is often blurred. Catullus’ concept of love is similar to Plato’s theory “divine madness,” which presents love as an uncontrollable part of human nature. David Konstan details: “Amor was a spell of overriding passion, a fit of madness, and the

1. Catullus, *Epigramma* 85  
trans. Julia Pan.



*A Modern statue of the roman poet Catullus in Sirmione*

2. David Konstan, "Two  
Kinds of Love in Catullus,"  
*The Classical Journal* 68  
(1972): 102.

lover was regarded as the subject of temporary insanity."<sup>2</sup> In Catullus' case, he placed an incredible amount of value on Lesbia's beauty, so much that he began to put Lesbia on a pedestal. Catullus finds Lesbia to be the most beautiful girl in the world: "*Lesbia formosa est, quae cum pulcherrima tota est*" (Lesbia is beautiful, not only is she all of these things and still the most beautiful. She is so attractive that she is, "*Tum omnibus una omnis subripuit Veneres*" (So much so that

she stole all the Venuses from all together).<sup>3</sup> By comparing Lesbia to Venus, Catullus is using a standard of comparison that would have been considered very high, because Venus is the standard of beauty for the Romans.<sup>4</sup> Catullus continues to construct this pedestal when Catullus asks for “*da mi basia mille*,” (give me a thousand kisses).<sup>5</sup> At first, a thousand kisses may seem undyingly romantic, but Catullus wants to give Lesbia even more kisses: “*deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum*”(then immediately a thousand then a hundred). Is this basial affection coming from an outpouring of affection or an unhealthy attachment? It seems like Catullus is leaning more towards obsession and codependency. He calls Lesbia his “*mea vita*” (my life) and hopes that their love will be “*perpetuum*” (everlasting).<sup>6</sup> Co-dependent people often subvert their own needs, which put them in the position of trying to receive love from a very difficult person.<sup>7</sup> Catullus is idealistic in his relationship with Lesbia, however, his obsession with her could easily turn their relationship unpleasant.

Catullus believes that each relationship has a contract of trust, a *foedus*. The person breaking the contract has more power in the now unbalanced relationship than the other, and the other person in the relationship is subjected to betrayal and confusion. Patrick McGushin explains *foedus* further: “the concept of married love as a *foedus*, a contract which depends for its validity and permanence on the observance by each partner...that is the essential ingredient of such a union.”<sup>8</sup> Catullus writes: “*aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae*” (our whole life this eternal pact of holy friendship). Many themes of Catullus’ writing appear in this phrase. For instance, there is the mention of *aeternum*, or eternal. Forms of *aeternum* or *perpetuum* occur frequently throughout Catullus’ poems, which demonstrates the ongoing trust and faith that Catullus has in his relationship with Lesbia.<sup>9</sup> He thinks that their *foedus* is holy and will never be broken.<sup>8</sup> Also, the usage of *amicitiae* in this phrase indicates that their relationship right now, according to Catullus, is a balanced one. In true friendships,

3. Catullus, *Epigramma* 86  
trans. Julia Pan.

4. H.D. Rankin, “Catullus  
and the ‘Beauty’ of  
Lesbia (Poems 43, 86,  
and 51),” *Latomus* 35  
(1976): 8.

5. Catullus, *Polymetra* 5  
trans. Julia Pan.

6. Catullus, *Epigramma*  
109 trans. Julia Pan

7. Feifei Sun, “Are You  
in A Codependent  
Relationship?” *WebMD*.

8. P. McGushin, “Catullus’  
Sanctae Foedus  
Amicitiae,” *Classical  
Philology* 62 (1967): 86.

9. Catullus, *Epigramma* 64,  
101 trans. Julia Pan.

10. Cicero, *De Amicitiae* 19  
trans. E.S. Shuckburgh.

11. Catullus, *Polymetra* 2  
trans. Julia Pan.

12. Catullus, *Epigramma* 87  
trans. Julia Pan.

13. Catullus, *Polymetra* 8  
trans. Julia Pan.

14. Keith Sanford and K.L. Wolfe, "What married couples want from each other during conflicts: An investigation of underlying concerns," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 32 (2013): 674.

there is a power balance, because friends do not need each other to "complete" each other's lives. Cicero supports this general sentiment from his essay *De Amicitiae*: "But here is another golden rule in friendship: put yourself on a level with your friend".<sup>10</sup> Relationships, on the other hand, lead to one person depending on another for a fulfilling life. In a clever, but painful analogy that Catullus makes between Lesbia's bird and himself, he reveals that, "*digitum dare appetenti/ et acris solet incitare morsus, / cum desiderio meo nitenti / carum nescio quid lubet iocari*" (she is accustomed to give the top of her finger, / And to provoke sharp bites, / Whenever it is pleasing for my shining sweetheart / To make some dear joke);" and this demonstrates the dangerous situation in which Lesbia takes advantage of and takes him for granted, like her bird.<sup>11</sup> The pain that Catullus feels is expressed here: "*nulla fides ullo fuit umquam foedere tanta, / quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperta mea est*" (there was no treaty with as much trust / as was found in that of my love for you).<sup>12</sup> It is evident that Catullus trusted and loved Lesbia very much, thus his later pain stemmed from a relationship built upon a foundation of co-dependence and an uneven power dynamic because of the betrayal of their *foedus*.

Betrayal and heartbreak aside, was the relationship between Catullus and Lesbia truly love? Catullus is more self-aware of this issue in later poems. He bemoans: "*cum ventitābās quō puella ducēbat*" (when you would always come where the girl led).<sup>13</sup> This sentence clearly demonstrates the power imbalance in their relationship. He always followed Lesbia, even though following "the girl" may not have been the happiest path for him. Many psychologists often say that relationships are built on compromise; therefore one-sided relationships are doomed to fail.<sup>14</sup> There's something so alluring about Lesbia that makes Catullus remind himself that what's over is over, but he can't stop thinking about her: "*Miser Catulle, dēsinās ineptīre, / et quod vidēs perisse perditum dūcās*" (Wretched Catullus, stop being a fool, / and what you

see has perished, consider perished). Typically in Catullus' poetry, the word *miser* is seen in the phrase *me miserum* (o wretched me),<sup>14</sup> but perhaps Catullus uses the third person in poem 8 to emotionally distance himself from the situation. It helps to talk about one's relationships through the lens that one is a character instead of a real live person. The heartbreak that comes from solely obsessing over love is the ultimate destruction. This destruction or *excruciare*, to torture, is central to the themes of both poems 76 and 85. In poem 76, he knows that Lesbia is ungrateful and asks himself, "*quare iam te cur amplius excrucies?*" (So why do you keep torturing yourself further?).<sup>15</sup> Then in poem 85 he laments, "*nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior*" (I do not know, but I feel it being done and I am tormented).<sup>16</sup> Notice the difference in the person of the verbs. 'Excrucies' is in the second person, while 'excrucior' is in the first person. It is possible that by using the second person, Catullus the poet, who strives to approach love rationally, is scolding Catullus the character. When he later writes *odi et amo*,<sup>17</sup> he uses first person because both Catulluses have finally accepted the torment of love.

The transition from third to second to first person is very deliberate, and also reflects Catullus' innermost thought process and his transition to acceptance. Simply put, his feelings towards Lesbia are ambivalent. While he hates and loves at the same time and is tormented, it is better to have loved than to not have loved at all because Catullus believes that the grand purpose of life is to experience this relentless cycle of love. Moreover, Catullus transformed the pain from this cycle into art, which is attractive to humans because its pain and sorrow are intimately relevant to personal experiences.<sup>18</sup> No one can reveal the richness of life as a whole, but artists can unveil personal wisdom that they have gained from their own life. For example, Catullus laments, "*qui illius culpa cecidit uelut prati / ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam / tactus aratro est*" (which, by her fault, like the flower at / the farthest meadow, dies after it was touched by the plow / passing by).<sup>19</sup>

15. Catullus, *Epigramma* 76  
trans. Julia Pan.

16. Catullus, *Epigramma*  
85 trans. Julia Pan.

17. Catullus, *Epigramma* 85  
trans. Julia Pan.

18. Ted Gracyk, "Hume's  
Aesthetics," *Stanford  
Encyclopedia of  
Philosophy*, (2003).

19. Catullus, *Polymetra* 11  
trans. Julia Pan.

This is such a startling image of pain and loss that can only be comforted through artistic expression. Catullus' pain from his relationship of falling in love with, being betrayed and heartbroken by Lesbia has been turned into poetry that expresses emotions that are timelessly transcendental.

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