

Catullus 68.51.86

While there are those like Lyne who believe Catullus 68 is an extraordinary poem¹, as Godwin addresses there is a great deal of controversy with this poem² with conflicting opinions over if there is unity in the poem or not. Addressed here is that Catullus is flaunting his clever use of words, he has crafted a multi-layered piece that combines the themes of love and death, pain and pleasure and interacts with poem 61.

Catullus in this poem uses language and specific word choices in order to add another layer of immersion to the poem. Firstly, the word choice of *'tabescere'*³ while translated by Lee as 'wasting away' Godwin notes that it can be translated as 'melting away'⁴. Melting does seem both more appropriate and more evocative, especially as it is involving the liquid motion of tears. This invoking of the water moving continues as Catullus has the sentence running over, like water, into the next line⁵. This sequence of water moving is further conjured by the use of the alliteration used in line 59, *'prona praeceps...valle volutus'*⁶ this helps create the idea of water tumbling down from the high hill to the middle of the road⁷. It is also reminiscent of poem 65 when again Catullus uses alliteration to phonetically invoke the tumbling motion of the apple⁸. It's not only water that gets this treatment as Catullus is also able to use word choice to put emphasis on the heat and the thirst of the traveller, the phrase *'exustos aestus hiulcat'*⁹ Godwin notes has expressive *u* and *st* sounds¹⁰ this makes the reader sound as though they are panting. By these deliberate word choices Catullus creates an effect that heightens his similes.

Word choice is also carefully chosen to fit themes of the poem. Later in the poem Catullus uses the word *"barathrum"*¹¹ to mean deep with the feeling of love, but more commonly the word is used to mean destruction with a connection with the underworld as we see from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*¹². Godwin notes that by Catullus using a death word for love it unites his two themes of love and death¹³. This then also helps connect the story of the death of his brother with the story of Lesbia entering the house, as Catullus when talking about the death of his brother mentions 'the threshold of death'¹⁴ and we see Lesbia on the thresholds of the house¹⁵. This brings understanding to his similes. The love Paris had for Helen brings death by causing the Trojan War¹⁶ which in turn causes the doomed lovers Laodamia and Protesilaus to have a 'shared tomb of Asia and Europe'¹⁷. Therefore, this unity of themes brings unity to the poem.

¹ Lyne 1980: 52

² Godwin 1995: 203

³ Catull.68. 55

⁴ Godwin 1995: 214

⁵ Catull.68.55-56

⁶ Catull.68.59

⁷ Catull.68.57-60

⁸ Catull.65.23

⁹ Catull.68.62

¹⁰ Godwin 1995: 215

¹¹ Catull.68.108

¹² Lucr.6.606

¹³ Godwin 1995: 206

¹⁴ Catull.68.4

¹⁵ Catull.68.71

¹⁶ Catull.68.87-88

¹⁷ Catull.68.89

The theme of death and love being united is used though with an almost masochist approach as a theme of pain and pleasure also arises. Lines 51-66 has a constant turning between pain and pleasure or perhaps pain and relief that makes it seem as though the pain makes the relief or pleasure greater. Mount Aetna's fires should be countered by the waters of the springs but instead they are both made to be hot¹⁸, this heat is compared to the heat of a hot summer's day which Catullus then tells us is cooled by the irrigation that mountains cause¹⁹. So, the same elements, the mountain and the spring, brings both pain from the heat and pleasure or relief from the 'sweet refreshment'²⁰ they can provide. Tears of pain from 'sad eyes'²¹, the pain of which emphasised as it makes us think of the Homeric passage²², become the water that refreshes the thirsty. The personification of the alter also helps this idea as the alter is 'hungry' and 'yearns' for blood²³, the same way lovers have 'greedy passion'²⁴, creating the idea that there is a link between the pain of sacrifice and the pleasure of passion.

The sailors who while in distress pray to Castor and Pollux for safety²⁵ also has erotic undertones, as Roisman explains that a common metaphor for sex was the image of ships coming into harbour as it conveys sex as being a homecoming or a refuge²⁶. Allius is compared to a favourable breeze for sailors because he gives Catullus and Lesbia refuge by providing a house which they can use for erotic purpose²⁷. Again, the pain of distress can lead to erotic pleasure.

Perhaps then this poem is exploring the idea of thresholds, that how one thing can change to another. Lesbia is about to cross the threshold of the house but is left frozen for 60 lines²⁸, this is like Catullus 61 when Junia lingers in the threshold for 50 lines and Catullus as narrator must summon her to pass through²⁹. Junia goes through one threshold, goes through procession and enters another threshold where she has finished her transformation and is now a wife³⁰. Lesbia only has one threshold. She is frozen entering it, Wasdin puts forward that the lines that continue while she is frozen is like her procession³¹, then when she can move again, she is still crossing the same threshold. While Catullus may want to put on the appearance that Lesbia is a wife, as then Lesbia can be the idealisation of chastity and desire³², her transformation is not like Junia's.

Both Junia and Lesbia go without description. Wasdin implores that while Junia must be visible to the internal spectators but she is hidden to the external audience³³, Lesbia also is never described only compared to myth so Wiseman argues that she is like an illusion³⁴. From this Lyne is agreeable when he says that Catullus freezes Lesbia's entrance not to make her comparable to a bride like

¹⁸ Catull.68.53-54

¹⁹ Catull.68.57-61

²⁰ Catull.68.61

²¹ Catull.68.55

²² Hom.//.9.13-15

²³ Catull.68.79

²⁴ Catull.68.83

²⁵ Catull.68.63-65

²⁶ Roisman 2013: 365

²⁷ Catull.68.64-68

²⁸ Catull.68.70-132

²⁹ Catull.61.92-93

³⁰ Catull.61.160-164

³¹ Wasdin 2018: 38-39

³² Wasdin 2018: 39

³³ Wasdin 2018: 37

³⁴ Wiseman 1985: 162-183

Junia but to prolong her own transformation³⁵ from this illusion of a '*diva*'³⁶ to a real, unfaithful, woman³⁷.

In summary, this poem has been purposeful crafted to not only flaunt Catullus' use of language and the way he can create immersion. But also explores the idea of change and how through perception or life events things can evolve into something else. Ending with the notion that, that change may not be positive as Lesbia does not become the wife he wants.

³⁵ Lyne 1980: 55-56

³⁶ Catull.68.70

³⁷ Catull.68.143-146

Bibliography:

Ancient Sources-

Catullus, *Complete Poems*. G. Lee (trans.). 1990. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Homer, *The Iliad*. E. V. Rieu (trans.). 1950. London: Penguin

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*. W. H. D. Rouse (trans.). 1924. Loeb

Modern Sources-

Godwin, J. (1995). *Catullus Poems 61-68*. Aris and Phillips: Warminster

Lyne, R. O. A. M. (1980). *The Latin Love Poets From Catullus to Horace*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Roisman, H. M. (2013). 'Sexuality in the Extant Greek and Roman Tragedies', in Hubbard. T. K (ed.). *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*. Wiley Blackwell: Chichester

Wasdin, K. (2018) *Eros at Dusk: Ancient Wedding and Love Poetry*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Wiseman, T. P. (1985). *Catullus and his World A Reappraisal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.