



AP[®] Latin Literature 2002 Sample Student Responses

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Catullus does clearly mourn the death of the bird and may have written the poem to console his girl. He begins by commanding, "Mourn, O Venuses and Cupids". Since he often makes reference to the Venuses and Cupids in other poems about his beloved Lesbia, he is surely sincere in doing so. His repetition of "passer", l 3-4 is emphatically placed and draws attention to the description of the bird, "whom she was loving more dearly than her own eyes", l 5, "quem...amabat". By stating Lesbia's affections for the sparrow, he, by association, implies his own. He uses other means to show this familiarity. In l 6-7 ("suamque...matrem", "and it knew its own mistress as a girl knows her mother"), Catullus further develops the loving relationship. Catullus uses such a simile often, as he describes his life with Lesbia as similar to a father-son relationship. Later on in the poem, he goes into an elaborate description of the bird's journey to the underworld, "whence they deny that anyone returns", l 12, ("unde...quemquam"). He goes on to curse the shades, saying, "But may it go badly for you, bad shades of Orcus, you who devour all beauty: you have taken the beautiful bird away from me." (l 13-15, "At vobis...abstulistis") Catullus' irreverence toward death is also apparent in his later poems, such as when he cries out that his brother has been prematurely and undeservedly taken away from him. He continues to cry out in a apostrophe to the dead sparrow, "O miserable little bird!" (l 16 "O miselle passer") He ~~finished~~ finishes off the poem by remarking at the effects of loss on his girlfriend, "Now because of your deed, the dear little eyes of my girl are red, having been swollen from crying." ("Et tua...ocelli", l 17-18). By ~~em~~ emphasizing the pain of his girlfriend, and using tendencies common to his style, Catullus makes clear his own grief and/or sympathy.

The poem, a lamentation for Lesbia's pet sparrow, is marked by a tone that is at times mournful and at times playful. However, the occasional light-hearted line serves ultimately to increase the reader's sense of grief at the loss of the bird; thus, ~~the~~ Catullus' lament is indeed serious.

An air of seriousness is established at the very beginning by Catullus' invocation of the Venuses and the Cupids: "Lugete, o Veneres... Venustiarum" (Mourn, o Venuses and Cupids, and whatever there are of ~~the~~ charmer men). This begins the poem with an appeal to whatever their are of beautiful and good creatures, with the reference to the Venuses and Cupids heightening the gravity of the call. ~~the~~ Catullus proceeds to highlight the importance the sparrow held to its mistress, something that increases the reader's sadness at its sudden loss: "passer mortuus... sui amabat" (the sparrow of my girl is dead, the sparrow, delight of my girl, whom she was loving more than her eyes themselves). The poet continues to playfully illustrate the happy relationship between sparrow and mistress; however, the contrast of this to the fact that the sparrow is dead only makes the poem more serious: "Nam mellitus... usque pipiabat" (For it was honey-sweet, and knew its mistress so well as a girl knows her mother, nor was it moving itself from her lap, but hopping around in this way and in that way and chirping at its lovely mistress). Catullus creates cute, happy imagery to describe the sparrow; this contrasts heavily with the dark and foreboding imagery that proceeds:

"nunc it, redire quemquam" (Now it goes on that dark journey, ~~to~~ from whence they ~~may~~ deny anything ~~may~~ return). This, coupled with an equally menacing depiction of death, furthers the sense of serious and heartfelt lamentation permeating the poem! "maior tenebrae, passerem abstulisti" (dark shades of dread, you who devour everything beautiful! so beautiful a sparrow you have taken from me). Finally, Catullus concludes the poem with the image of Lesbia's eyes red from tears ^{shed} over her sparrow's death; this ends the poem on a somber note that cannot be anything but serious in nature!

"Tua nunc rabent ocelli" (Now, because of your work, the moist eyes of my girl are red from crying).

Thus, Catullus certainly interjects into his poem playful imagery and language, particularly that of the little sparrow happily hopping around its mistress's lap. However, this only ~~only~~ serves to heighten the contrast between the gentle nature of the sparrow and the darkness it now inhabits; consequently, the poem is ^{read as} serious in its lamentation and ^{is} all the more ^{moving} ~~moving~~ to the reader's senses of grief and sympathy.