

**scripta 16.5: Love poetry**

*This is perhaps the most famous type of shorter poem and poets often wrote of the joy and pain found in the changing tides of love affairs. Often sexually explicit, many of the poems focus on the pain of betrayal and separation and the powerlessness often felt by a lover.*

*Catullus is perhaps the most famous Roman writer of love poetry: some of his love poems are addressed to a man and some are addressed to a woman. The most famous of his lovers is a woman he calls Lesbia. The Lesbia poems convey the range of feelings within this long-lasting affair, from powerless devotion to bitter contempt and resentment.*

*This section ends with an extract from a much longer poem by Tibullus: Tibullus' writing is more expansive in style and rich in descriptive detail, but covers similar themes of pain and betrayal.*

Juventius, if anyone were to let me keep kissing your honeyed eyes, I would keep kissing them right up to 300,000 kisses but don't think that I would be satisfied - never! - not even if the harvest of our kissing were greater than harvested corn.

**Catullus 48**

I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I do this. I do not know, but I feel it happen and I am tormented.

**Catullus 85**

Caelius, my own Lesbia, that Lesbia of mine, that Lesbia, the one girl whom Catullus loved more than himself and all the rest of his family, now, at the crossroads and in the alleyways, she gives sexual thrills to the descendants of great-hearted Remus.

**Catullus 58**

Lesbia says very many mean things to me when her husband is there: this is a great source of joy to him, idiot that he is. You fool, don't you understand anything? If, forgetful of me, she were silent, she would be in her right mind. As it is, because she snarls and contradicts me, not only am I on her mind, but - something which cuts deeper by far - she is angry. This is what it is: she burns and she talks.

**Catullus 83**

No woman is able to say truly that she has been loved as much as my Lesbia has been loved by me. No faithfulness ever existed in any pledge as great as mine has been proven to be, for my part, in my love for you.

**Catullus 87**

I was brusque and kept saying that I bore our separation well, but now that bold boast is far away from me. For I am sent flying just as a fast spinning top is driven with a strike over flat ground, a spinning top which a fast-moving boy spins with practised skill. Burn your wild lover, and torture him; let it not please him to say anything grand after this. Tame his horrid words. But be gentle to me, please, I beg you, because of the pact of our secret love-making, because of our love and because of the head you laid next to mine. ...

... Often I tried to drive off my pains with wine, but grief had turned all the alcohol into tears. Often I embraced another girl, but at the very moment when I was coming close to joy, Venus reminded me of my mistress and abandoned me.

**Tibullus 1.5 (lines 1-9; 37-40)**



- 1) Read the first two poems by Catullus (48 and 85). These poems give a different impression of how it feels to be in love. Describe in your own words how the poet is feeling in each poem.
- 2) Read the three poems about Lesbia (Catullus 58, 83 and 87).
  - a) Who is angry in these poems and why?
  - b) How do you interpret the tone of poem 87: do you think Catullus is angry or does this poem convey a different emotion? Explain your answer.
- 3) How does the extract from Tibullus' poem convey feelings of powerlessness and pain? You might like to discuss the imagery used as well as other details from the poem.
- 4) Think about these poems in the context of modern-day love poems or songs: how do they compare? Do you think attitudes to writing about love have changed over time or not?