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

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,

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

quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.     5
whom that girl loved more than her own eyes.

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

(continued on the next page)
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

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.

O factum male! Io miselle passer!
O evil deed! Farewell, poor little sparrow!

Tu~nunc oper~meae puellae
Now thanks to you, my girlfriend’s

flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.
little swollen eyes are red with weeping.
Catullus: Death of a Pet Sparrow - Worksheet

a. The questions below pertain to the forms underlined in the passage

b. When you’re asked to change a word from one form to another, change only that form of the word. For instance, if you’re asked to change habet to the passive voice, make habet passive but leave it in the 3rd person singular, present indicative.

1. What mood is lugete and why? ________________________________________________

2. What case is Veneres and why? ______________________________________________

3. Change hominum to dative. ______________________________________________

4. What case is mortuus and why? ______________________________________________

5. What case is deliciae and why? ______________________________________________

6. What case is quem and why? ________________________________________________

7. Make illa dative. __________________________________________________________

8. Change erat to a perfect infinitive. _____________________________________________

9. Make ipsam ablative. ______________________________________________________

10. Change matrem to genitive plural. ____________________________________________

11. What case is sese and why? ______________________________________________

12. What case is gremio and why? ______________________________________________

13. Make circumsiliens plural. _________________________________________________

14. Make solam nominative plural. _____________________________________________

15. Change pipiabat to future passive plural. _____________________________________

16. What case is iter and why? ________________________________________________

17. What mood is redire and why? ______________________________________________

18. What case is quemquam and why? ___________________________________________
19. Make *vobis* singular. ________________________________________________

20. Change *omnia* to nominative singular feminine. _______________________

21. Change *devoratis* to a future active participle (nom. pl. fem.). __________

22. Make *passerem* ablative plural. _______________________________________

23. Make *factum* plural. _______________________________________________

24. What case is *miselle* and why? _______________________________________

25. Change *rubent* to future second person singular. _________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Note/ Vocabulary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>lugete</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Veneres</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Cupidines(que)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>quantum</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>quantum est hominum</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>venustiorum</strong></td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>passer</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>mortuus</strong></td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>deliciae</strong></td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>oculis</strong></td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>mellitus</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>norat</strong></td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td><strong>suam ipsam</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>tam...quam</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td><strong>sese</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>gremio</strong></td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td><strong>circumsiliens</strong></td>
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<td><strong>modo...modo</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>huc</strong></td>
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<td><strong>illuc</strong></td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td><strong>dominam</strong></td>
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<td><strong>usque</strong></td>
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<td><strong>pipiabat</strong></td>
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</table>
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

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*)