

8-2017

## Catullus and the Beatles

Ruth Breindel

*Retired, Moses Brown School*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Breindel, Ruth (2017) "Catullus and the Beatles," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 3 , 219-225.  
Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol44/iss3/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

## *Catullus and the Beatles*

**Ruth Breindel**

*retired, Moses Brown School*



Love of life! Love of women! Friendship! Hatred! Catullus and the Beatles have them all in their songs. Just as Catullus was sung, so the Beatles' songs add to their poetry. A 2,000 year span does not matter; in our age, a span of 50 years (for the Beatles) is almost as long as Catullus'!

So many of the songs have parallels. To begin, Catullus 1 (*qui dono lepidum novum libellum*) is a match for the Beatles' *Paperback Writer*.

Cui dono lepidum novum libellum  
arida modo pumice expolitum?  
Corneli, tibi: namque tu solebas  
meas esse aliquid putare nugas  
iam tum, cum ausus es unus Italarum  
omne aevum tribus explicare cartis  
doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis.  
quare habe tibi quidquid hoc libelli  
qualecumque; quod, patrona virgo  
plus uno maneat perenne saeclo.

Cat. 1

Paperback writer, paperback writer.  
Dear Sir or Madam, will you read my book?  
It took me years to write, will you take a look?  
It's based on a novel by a man named Lear,  
And I need a job,  
So I want to be a paperback writer,  
Paperback writer...  
It's a thousand pages, give or take a few.  
I'll be writing more in a week or two.  
I could make it longer if you like the style.  
I can change it 'round,  
And I want to be a paperback writer,  
Paperback writer.

Catullus writes his poem to introduce his work and to poke fun at his friend Cornelius Nepos. Paul McCartney used his song to poke fun at John Lennon, who had just had his book published. There is joking and also some sharp jabs at each of their friends.

Catullus 8, lamenting a lost love, is mirrored by the Beatles' *Yesterday*. Feelings of loss, confusion and anger are in both poems. Unrequited and betrayed love are timeless:

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,  
et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.  
fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,  
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat  
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.  
ibi illa multa cum iocosa fiebant,  
quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat,  
fulsere vere candidi tibi soles.  
nunc iam illa non vult: tu quoque impotens noli,  
nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,  
sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.  
vale puella, iam Catullus obdurat,  
nec te requiret nec rogabit invitam.

at tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.  
scelesta, vae te, quae tibi manet vita?  
quis nunc te adibit? cui videberis bella?  
quem nunc amabis? cuius esse diceris?  
quem basiabis? cui labella mordebis?  
at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura.

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away  
Now it looks as though they're here to stay  
Oh, I believe in yesterday  
Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be  
There's a shadow hanging over me.  
Oh, yesterday came suddenly  
Why she had to go I don't know she wouldn't say  
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday  
Yesterday, love was such an easy game to play  
Now I need a place to hide away  
Oh, I believe in yesterday  
Why she had to go I don't know she wouldn't say  
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday  
Yesterday, love was such an easy game to play  
Now I need a place to hide away  
Oh, I believe in yesterday  
Mm mm mm mm mm mm mm

Hatred is another strong emotion, especially when a person has been betrayed by his friend. Catullus rages against someone he had trusted in poem 74; John Lennon, in his *How Do You Sleep*, rages against his former friend Paul McCartney.

Desine de quoquam quicquam bene velle mereri  
aut aliquem fieri posse putare pium.  
omnia sunt ingrata, nihil fecisse benigne  
immo etiam taedet obestque magis;  
ut mihi, quem nemo gravius nec acerbius urget,  
quam modo qui me unum atque unicum amicum habuit.      Cat. 74

So Sgt. Pepper took you by surprise  
You better see right through that mother's eyes  
Those freaks was right when they said you was dead  
The one mistake you made was in your head  
    Ah, how do you sleep  
    Ah, how do you sleep at night  
You live with straights who tell you, you was king  
Jump when your momma tell you anything  
The only thing you done was yesterday  
And since you're gone you're just another day  
    [refrain 2x]

A pretty face may last a year or two  
But pretty soon they'll see what you can do  
The sound you make is muzak to my ears  
You must have learned something in all those years  
    [refrain 2x]

Actually, the poetry of Catullus is much more elegant than Lennon; Catullus uses wonderful elisions, especially in the last line, to show his anger when his words slur together. Additionally, his use of legal and religious terminology (*bene velle, mereri, pium, ingrata, fecisse benigne, unum atque unicum amicum*) and his almost hieratic curse (*quoquam quicquam, unum atque unicum*) are more effective. This is one place where Catullus' rein on his emotions allows his poetry to shine.

In these poems, friends go on a trip together and then separate. In 46, Catullus remembers the fun he and his friends had in Bithynia (despite the fact, as he says in poem 10, that there were no riches to be had), but they must now part. The Beatles' song *Two of Us* deals with this same theme of travel and friendship, although more aimless.

Iam ver egelidos refert tepores,  
iam caeli furor aequinoctialis  
iucundis Zephyri silescit aureis.  
linquantur Phrygii, Catulle, campi  
Nicaeaeque ager uber aestuosae:  
ad claras Asiae volemus urbes.

iam mens praetrepidans avet vagari,  
iam laeti studio pedes vigescunt.  
o dulces comitum valete coetus,  
longe quos simul a domo profectos  
diversae varie viae reportant.

Cat. 46

Two of us riding nowhere  
Spending someone's  
Hard earned pay  
You and me Sunday driving  
Not arriving  
    On our way back home  
    We're on our way home  
    We're on our way home  
    We're going home  
Two of us sending postcards  
Writing letters  
On my wall  
You and me burning matches  
Lifting latches  
    refrain  
You and I have memories  
Longer than the road that stretches out ahead  
Two of us wearing raincoats  
Standing so low  
In the sun  
You and me chasing paper  
    refrain  
You and I have memories  
Longer than the road that stretches out ahead  
Two of us wearing raincoats  
Standing so low  
In the sun  
You and me chasing paper  
    refrain

Finally, for sheer joy in love, there is Catullus 5 and the Beatles' *Eight Days a Week*. Here we see the fun, not to mention obsession, that love can bring.

Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus,  
rumoresque senum severiorum  
omnes unius aestimemus assis!  
soles occidere et redire possunt:  
nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,  
nox est perpetua una dormienda.  
da mi basia mille, deinde centum,  
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,  
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.  
dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,  
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,  
aut ne quis malus invidere possit,  
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

Cat. 5

Ooh, I need your love, babe  
Guess you know it's true  
Hope you need my love, babe  
Just like I need you  
    Hold me, love me  
    Hold me, love me  
I ain't got nothing but love, babe  
Eight days a week  
Love you every day, girl  
Always on my mind  
One thing I can say, girl  
Love you all the time  
    refrain

I ain't got nothing but love, girl  
Eight days a week  
Eight days a week  
I love you  
Eight days a week  
Is not enough to show I care  
Ooh, I need your love, babe  
Guess you know it's true  
Hope you need my love, babe  
Just like I need you, oh  
    refrain  
I ain't got nothing but love, babe  
Eight days a week  
Eight days a week  
I love you  
Eight days a week  
Is not enough to show I care  
Love you every day, girl  
Always on my mind  
One thing I can say, girl  
Love...

Two sets of poets, separated by time and space but not by brilliance or emotion.