Catullus and the Beatles

Ruth Breindel
Retired, Moses Brown School

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

Recommended Citation

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.
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 Italorum  
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,
ec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,
se x obstinata mente perfer, obdura.
vale puella, iam Catullus obdurat,
ec 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

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 acquinoctialis
iucundis Zephyri silescit aureis.
linquantur Phrygii, Catulle, campi
Nicaeaeque ager uber aestuosae:
ad claras Asiae volemus urbes.
iambic pentameter

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

Cat. 46
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.  

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

Cat. 5
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.