

Love in Tibullus 1.1
by Lillian Wheeler

Love is a constant theme in poetry, but its nature in the Latin love elegies is often ambiguous. Is it positive or negative? This uncertainty can be explained simply by realizing that love is both, and cannot always be defined as exclusively positive or negative. Through a close reading of Tibullus *Elegies* 1.1, we can see how love is represented as positive and negative, with this duality contained in and shown through the character of Tibullus, for love is positive within and for himself, but negative for his relations with society.

In this poem, there is a powerful statement of positive love in lines 45-46: "What pleasure to hear the fierce storm as I lie there / holding my sweetheart to my tender breast." These two lines convey a vivid image of Tibullus and Delia as safe and sheltered from the storm, lying together. The contentment is palpable, through such words as "what pleasure" and "tender breast." Tibullus' attachment to Delia shows through the caring action of his gentle embrace.

Other examples of love being positive for Tibullus are found when he begins to address Delia. "Just let me be / with you" (57-58) and "let me look at you, when my final hour has come, / and let me hold you, as I die" (59-60) are both lines which show what great comfort Tibullus feels having his girl beside him. When his love for Delia is strong enough that it will endure until his "final hour," where his only thought about his deathbed is a desire to hold her, and his only wish is to be with her, then there is no doubt that love is positive for Tibullus.

The description of Tibullus' imagined funeral is also touching, with direct future statements such as "you will shed tears" (63), depicting Tibullus' and Delia's love enduring all the way to his death and beyond. In these lines about Tibullus' future funeral, there is not even a shadow of a doubt concerning Delia's devotion, and Tibullus even after death is still lovingly concerned for Delia: "Don't harm my ghost, Delia, but spare / your loosened hair and soft cheeks" (67-68). He loves her so much that even when dead he would be pained to see her harmed. In all of these examples, love is extremely positive for Tibullus: he is devoted to Delia, obviously deeply in love with her, and confident in her devotion to and love for him.

However, love in this poem is not entirely positive, and the negative aspects are tied up in the notion of Tibullus sheltered with his love. Because he is alone with love, isolated from the rest of the world, Tibullus is alienated from society, and there lies the negative side of love in this elegy.

This separation from Roman society is demonstrated right from the beginning of the poem, in the first four lines. Tibullus describes things that other men do, such as collect money, own land, and be in the army (1-4). All these activities are ones that are right and proper for Roman male citizens to engage in, embodying the ideal of *Romanitas*, but Tibullus separates himself from this customary pattern of male activity by the simple

distinction "let another man" (1). He has no interest in these activities, designating them to others, and so is apart from society. Tibullus' love, which is so positive within himself, causes Tibullus to distance himself from Roman male activities, and therefore negatively impacts how Tibullus interacts with society.

This distance can also be seen in lines 53-54, where Tibullus speaks directly to his patron, Messalla. Here Tibullus agrees it is right for a Roman male (Messalla) to fight and to bring back riches and glory for his house. But Tibullus emphasizes that he is different with the distinction of it being "right for *you*," not right for men in general, in which number Tibullus could be included. Messalla is a figure "to be admired but not emulated" (Moore 423) standing as an *exemplum* of the traditional Roman military style of life, from which Tibullus wishes to stay apart.

Tibullus' words to Delia, especially these two lines, show that love is all that matters to Tibullus, and he does not care about society or its opinion of him: "I don't care to be praised, my Delia: just let me be / with you, and please let me be called slack and sluggish" (57-58). Being called slack or sluggish cannot be a good thing, and yet he prays to be called these names, since this would mean that he can spend or is spending all his time with Delia. Love has blinded Tibullus to all else except his beloved, and has caused Tibullus to withdraw himself from the expected pursuits of a Roman male and to stop caring what the members of society think of him. Because he is too focused on the positive feelings of love he has within himself, he neglects what is right and proper for him to do to fit into society.

In his writing, Tibullus often uses antitheses, or opposites. "Peace vs. war" and "the country vs. the city" are two examples visible in poem 1.1. It seems fitting with Tibullus' use of antitheses for him to show love as both positive and negative, and thereby create another set of opposites to be in conflict: a man's personal, private world (where love is positive), and the public world in which he lives (where love is negative).

Further Reading

Lyne, R. O. A. M., "Propertius and Tibullus: Early Exchanges," *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1998), pp. 519-544.

Moore, Timothy J., "Tibullus 1.7: Reconciliation through Conflict," *The Classical World*, Vol. 82, No. 6 (Jul. - Aug., 1989), pp. 423-430.

Palmer, Robert B., "Is There a Religion of Love in Tibullus?," *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Oct. - Nov., 1977), pp. 1-10.

Putnam, Michael C. J., "Virgil and Tibullus 1.1," *Classical Philology*, April 2005, Vol. 100, No. 2: pp. 123-141.

Tibullus 1.1: "The True Life," trans. A. S. Kline, 2001. Available online:
http://www.tonykline.co.uk/PITBR/Latin/Tibullus.htm#_Toc532635307