

Sample bad essay: An Analysis of Propertius 1.1

Propertius' opening poem is a programmatic introduction to his *oeuvre*. It focuses on the poet's delight in his mistress, which is a theme of all his poems. The poem falls into three sections: an introduction, a myth, and a conclusion.

In the first section the poet tells us that until he met Cynthia he was unbearably arrogant, but that loving her has taught him humility, a gift for which he is grateful. He used to love only the best girls, because of his high opinion of himself, but now that he has met Cynthia he sees that he is not worthy of them. So he will stick with her, as he sees that he will be happier with her than with someone above him.

In the second section the poet mentions the myth of Milanion, who pined for Atalanta, the wife of one of his subordinates. Eventually he managed to get her husband killed by sending him into battle, at which point he married Atalanta, had a son who became a great king, and lived happily ever after. The myth means that Propertius thinks he will have a blissful and fruitful existence with Cynthia if only he can get rid of her husband.

In the third section the poet turns to Tullus, the poem's dedicatee, and the rest of his group of friends, and asks them to help him. Propertius is very unhappy in his unrequited love and wants to be out of it; he does not care whether this happens by Cynthia coming to love him or by his ceasing to love her.

Thus this poem shows Propertius' unhappiness in his relationship with Cynthia, his love of mythology, and his reliance on his friends. All these elements are common in the rest of the poems in this book.

This essay would have received a failing grade even if it were not much too short, because:

It makes no reference to any secondary literature on this poem. (Note that relying too heavily on secondary literature and paying insufficient attention to the text itself would be an even worse flaw.)

It uses unnecessary jargon (*oeuvre*).

It makes false claims without providing any evidence for them (poet's delight in his mistress).

It divides up the poem incorrectly (three sections: in fact there are six).

It misunderstands the theme of the lover's slavery, which is shameful, as humility, which is a virtue in Christian terms but was not one for pre-Christian Romans. Propertius shows no evidence of the gratitude that is alleged here.

It offers a bizarre interpretation of the 'shun decent girls' passage, with no evidence.

It misinterprets the myth (Milanion is incorrectly identified as another name for King David and Atalanta becomes Bathsheba), and hence the myth's meaning for the poem.

It misunderstands the plural 'you' in the latter half of the poem (which refers to witches) as a reference to the (singular) dedicatee.

It takes for granted that Cynthia was married, though this is a much debated point.

It fails to mention the didactic theme of the final stanza, which introduces an element important in Propertius' poetry and Roman love elegy in general.

There is no real argument: the first three paragraphs point in one direction and the last two go in the opposite direction, so that the conclusion contradicts the introduction. The conclusion also generalises an element (Propertius' reliance on his friends) that is not in fact found in most of Propertius' poems.

Note that this essay nevertheless has a clear structure and is clearly written and well presented. It would have been even worse had it had flaws in these areas.