



Eduqas GCSE Latin  
Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources  
(Themes)  
Superstition and Magic



PLINY  
*An alarming dream comes true*

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the follow:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

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Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,

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Information about several of the pictures in this booklet, together with useful additional material for the Theme, may be found in the support available online for **Cambridge Latin Course, Book I, Stage 7** and **Book III, Stages 22-23**

## PLINY *An alarming dream comes true* (Letters 5.5)

*Pliny relates a story of an author who foretold his own death.*

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Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (61BC – c.112AD), commonly known as Pliny the Younger, was born in Comum in northern Italy. He was a lawyer and politician, and a prolific letter writer. His correspondence was curated and published in ten volumes, nine volumes whilst he was still alive and the tenth after his death. They give us a fascinating insight into the life of a remarkable man, including his famous description of the 79AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius letters and his communications with the emperor Trajan.

In this letter, Pliny is writing to his friend Novius Maximus. In letter 4.20 we learn that Novius has given Pliny some of his work to read; work which Pliny describes as 'beautiful'. By the time of this letter, however, Pliny has received the news that their mutual friend, the writer Gaius Fannius, has died. Apparently Fannius had been writing a work describing in detail the crimes of the emperor Nero, who was by now long dead – a work which Pliny describes as 'very beautiful'. In a disturbing twist, it seems that Fannius had dreamed – correctly, as it turned out – that he would die before his work was completed, and Pliny relates the dream in detail. Consequently Pliny urges Novius to work with all haste to ensure that he leave none of his writings unfinished.

This is the second half of the letter. The Latin is unadapted.

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### Notes

- 1 Gaius...Fannius:** a writer who composed three books of a work detailing the men executed or banished by the emperor Nero. He has died before finishing it.
- 2 visus est:** this tells us that we have entered a description of his vision.  
**nocturnam quietem:** night is a recurring theme as a time suitable for magical events.
- 3 compositus in habitum studentis:** Pliny says elsewhere that it was typical to lie down to compose, having either a scribe on hand or a small writing desk.
- 4 Neronem:** emperor from AD54 to 68. Whilst Nero's reign is an interesting topic to explore, it is enough for students here to know that it was characterised in later years by the execution of rivals and those suspected of conspiring against him.
- 4-7 venisse...resedissee, prompsisse...revolvissse...fecisse...absissse:** the whole vision is told in indirect statement (accusative and infinitive construction). The repetition of the perfect infinitives with very little embellishment and few conjunctions creates a fast and factual tone. The name **Neronem** is held back until after the verb to create a little suspense, then the whole dream is told chronologically. The plosive alliteration (p) of **prompsisse primum** adds to the dramatic brevity of the retelling.

- 6 **ad extremum revolvisse:** the books would have been individual scrolls on rollers. To ‘unroll [it] to the end’ would therefore be ‘to read it right through’.
- 7 **expavit:** Gaius’ reaction is sudden, the verb emphatically placed at the very start of the sentence to highlight this. The use of the prefix **ex-** on the verb also stresses that he was terrified ‘from his core’.
- 8-9 the translation is **tamquam** (as though) **scribendi finis** (the end of his writing) **futurus esset** (would be) **idem** (the same) **sibi** (for himself) **qui** (as that which) **fuisset** (it had been) **legendi** (of the reading) **illi** (for him *i.e.* Nero). The ghost of Nero read three scrolls because there would only ever be three: Gaius would die before he got any further. As Pliny states, this is exactly what eventually happened.
- 10-11 **quantum...quantum:** the *anaphora* (repetition) of **quantum** stresses Pliny’s despair at the events, emphasised by **frustra** delayed until the end of the sentence. The verb **exhauserit** is a vivid choice to imply the hard work which has ultimately, in Pliny’s eyes, been squandered.
- 11 **occursant animo:** inversion of word order, with the verb coming first, shows the thought leaping into the sentence and also into Pliny’s mind. The anaphora of **mea** puts the focus back on Pliny himself, the repetition adding an air of urgency. At the time of this letter, Pliny was about 43 years old.
- 12 **te:** this letter was written to Novius Maximus, also a writer, who has shared his work with Pliny. Novius seems to have been older than Pliny.
- 13 **pro istis quae inter manus habes:** Novius’ current work is unfinished.
- 14 **dum vita suppetit:** for ancient writers, their immortality was linked to the survival of their work. The emphatic superlative **quam paucissima** shows the strength of feeling which Pliny has on this.

### Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each sentence, clause, or phrase, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

#### Gaius...praesensit (line 1):

- Who is this letter about? What did he predict? How long before it happened did he make this prediction?

#### visus est...solebat (lines 2-4):

- Does **visus est** suggest this was really happening or not? If it wasn’t actually happening, what might it have been?
- What time of day is it in his vision? Where was he? How was he sitting? What was in front of him? Was this normal for him?

**mox...abisse (lines 4-7):**

- Who did he imagine had come in? (*this would be a good place to explain who Nero was*) What was the first thing this person did? What did he ask for? What was this book about? What did he do with this book? (*Students will need to know that these books are scrolls*). How many books did he read through in the same way? What did he do then?

**expavit...fuit idem: (lines 7-9)**

- How did Gaius feel after this vision? Did he ignore it or did he think it was significant?
- What did he think his vision was about (**scribendi finis**)? Think about the dream. What might it mean about Gaius' writing? What would the end of his writing be the same as? Did the vision come true?

**quod me...frustra (lines 10-11):**

- What emotion fills Pliny? What is he doing which makes him feel like this?
- He is thinking about Gaius and the effort he had put into his work. What does Pliny say which shows Gaius worked hard? Does Pliny think it was worth it?

**occursant...scripta (lines 11-12):**

- What two things come to his mind? Why exactly do you think Pliny is worried?

**nec dubito...habes (lines 12-13):**

- How does he think 'you too' (*his correspondant will need to be mentioned*) will feel? What will be terrifying 'you'?
- He is thinking about what his correspondant has **inter manus**. Think about the whole letter. What must this refer to?

**proinde...inveniat (lines 13-15):**

- When should his correspondant act? What should we try to act against? What is death able to do? What should we ensure that death finds?
- What does this mean that Pliny and his friend should try to do?

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**Questions on Content and Style**

1. (lines 1-9) How does Pliny through his style of writing create a sense of excitement in his description of the dream?
2. (lines 10-15) How does Pliny convey his worry through the style of his writing?

## Discussion

### Themes: dreams

Dreams were to be taken seriously in the ancient world. Ancient dream interpretation texts have a great deal in common with much more recent works on dreams, including seminal work by both Freud and Jung. Students could explore why dreams continue to be a focus for enquiry, and they could look at some common interpretations. This letter could be considered alongside Martial's poem in order to examine how seriously Romans took the contents of dreams.

Care should, of course, be taken when discussing Pliny's comments on mortality. It may be helpful to discuss alternative views of unfinished writing e.g. the completion of work by other authors (Stieg Larsson and JRR Tolkien are amongst a large number of writers whose work was completed and published posthumously).

### General questions on the passage and theme

Do you think that Martial and Pliny would have agreed over the importance of dream interpretation?

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### Further Information and Reading

See the Further Information and Reading for Martial for more on dreams and dream interpretation in the ancient world.

An article condensing different theories of dreams – may be useful for teacher reference (would require editing for students): <https://time.com/4921605/dreams-meaning/>

A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 1966)

Betty Radice, *The Letters of Pliny the Younger* (Penguin, 1963; 2nd edition 1969)

P.G. Walsh, *Pliny the Younger: Complete letters* (Oxford University Press, 2006)