

To His Coy Mistress | Andrew Marvell

Introduction

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is one of the most celebrated poems of the seventeenth-century metaphysical tradition. At its most immediate level, the poem presents a male speaker attempting to persuade a reluctant mistress to respond to his love and sexual desire. His argument is built upon a deceptively simple proposition: if the lovers possessed unlimited time, her coyness or reluctance would cause no difficulty; unfortunately, human life is brief, youth and beauty are temporary, and death is inevitable; therefore, they should make the most intense use of the present.

Yet this apparently straightforward argument conceals considerable intellectual and artistic complexity. "To His Coy Mistress" is not merely a seduction poem. It is simultaneously a poem about love, sexuality, time, mortality, beauty, persuasion, and the human desire to resist the limitations imposed by death. Its extraordinary effectiveness arises from the way Marvell turns erotic desire into philosophical argument. The speaker does not simply declare his love; he constructs a case for it. He uses hyperbole, paradox, personification, biblical allusion, grotesque imagery, geographical references, mathematical calculation, and metaphysical conceits to transform a conventional love situation into a meditation on the human condition.

The poem consists of 46 lines arranged in three unequal verse paragraphs, and its predominant metre is iambic tetrameter with rhyming couplets. The three sections correspond to three stages in the speaker's argument: an imaginary world of unlimited time, the frightening reality of mortality, and the conclusion that the lovers must therefore seize the present. This tripartite structure is perhaps the most important organizing principle of the poem. The first section begins with the hypothetical "Had we but world enough, and time"; the second turns sharply with "But at my back"; and the final section announces its conclusion with "Now therefore." The movement is consequently from hypothesis to reality to action.

The literary tradition behind the poem is principally *carpe diem*, or the injunction to "seize the day." The tradition has classical origins and was particularly influential in Renaissance and seventeenth-century poetry. Its central idea is that youth and life are transient, the future is uncertain, and therefore one should not indefinitely postpone present pleasure. Closely related to *carpe diem* is the *memento mori*, the reminder of mortality. Marvell combines the two traditions with unusual ingenuity. The speaker does not simply say, "Life is short, so enjoy yourself." He first constructs a fantasy in which life is effectively infinite, then destroys that fantasy through an intense confrontation with death, and finally converts the fear of mortality into an argument for immediate pleasure.

Analysis

The opening lines establish the hypothetical world on which the first section depends:

“Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.”

The conditional construction is crucial. The speaker does not initially criticize the woman for being coy. On the contrary, he declares that her reluctance would be perfectly acceptable if the lovers had unlimited time. The opening therefore creates an imaginary world in which delay has no consequences. The phrase “world enough, and time” suggests abundance on two scales. There is unlimited geographical space and unlimited chronological duration. The lovers could take as long as they pleased. This leisurely fantasy is reinforced by the speaker's relaxed description of courtship:

“We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.”

The verbs “sit,” “think,” “walk,” and “pass” all suggest leisurely movement. There is no urgency because there is no scarcity. The first section therefore creates a dream of love liberated from time. Marvell then expands this fantasy geographically:

“Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain.”

The contrast between the Ganges and the Humber is significant. The Ganges is distant, exotic, and associated with the riches of India; the Humber is an English river associated with the poet's own geographical world. The lovers can therefore inhabit opposite ends of the earth while their imagined love remains unrestricted. The enormous geographical distance reinforces the enormous temporal scale of the fantasy. In a world of infinite time, even separation by continents would not matter.

The Ganges also introduces the poem's language of luxury and abundance. The woman may find “rubies” beside the river, while the speaker waits by the Humber. Love is imagined as existing in a world of inexhaustible resources. This extravagant imagery prepares for the speaker's increasingly absurd declarations of devotion. He claims that he would:

“Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.”

These lines use biblical references to exaggerate the duration of courtship almost beyond imagination. The Flood evokes the story of Noah, while the “conversion of the Jews” is imagined as a distant eschatological event. The speaker's patience is therefore supposedly limitless. He would accept rejection for thousands of years.

The extravagance is comic, but it also serves a rhetorical purpose. The speaker first establishes himself as the perfect lover—one who would wait indefinitely. Only after constructing this image of infinite patience does he reveal the impossibility of such patience in the real world. His argument is therefore carefully staged. This is especially clear in the extraordinary statement:

“My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow.”

The phrase “vegetable love” is an exemplary metaphysical conceit. The comparison is surprising because love is rarely described as “vegetable.” Yet the metaphor has an internal logic. A plant grows gradually, naturally, and organically. The speaker imagines love as something that would have endless time to develop. At the same time, the phrase “vaster than empires” combines organic and political imagery. Love grows like a plant but expands like an empire.

The conceit illustrates a central characteristic of metaphysical poetry: the fusion of thought and emotion through unexpected intellectual comparisons. The speaker's passion is not presented simply as an emotional outpouring. It is subjected to imaginative and intellectual elaboration. The speaker then turns love into arithmetic:

“An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest.”

This passage is both comic and extravagant. The speaker divides the woman's body into parts and assigns enormous periods of time to the admiration of each. The absurdity of these calculations is part of Marvell's wit. Love, which ordinarily seems immeasurable, is transformed into a mathematical problem.

The passage also recalls the conventional blason, a poetic tradition in which the lover praises the physical features of the beloved individually. Marvell takes the convention to an extreme. The sheer scale of the imagined praise makes the speaker's devotion appear both immense and slightly ridiculous.

The first section concludes:

“For, lady, you deserve this state,

Nor would I love at lower rate.”

The speaker has constructed an ideal world in which his love can develop without limit. Yet the entire argument rests upon an impossibility: human beings do not possess unlimited time.

That impossibility is exposed abruptly by the opening of the second section:

“But at my back I always hear
Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.”

The word “But” is one of the most important words in the poem. It destroys the fantasy that has occupied the first twenty lines. Suddenly, time is no longer an abstract possibility; it becomes an active force pursuing the lovers.

The personification of time as a “wingèd chariot” is especially powerful. The image gives time physical speed and direction. It is coming from behind, relentlessly approaching the speaker. The lovers may imagine infinite time, but reality is moving rapidly in the opposite direction.

The contrast between the first and second sections is therefore fundamental. In the first, time is abundant and leisurely. In the second, it is scarce and threatening. In the first, love grows slowly. In the second, life itself is running out. The speaker now confronts mortality:

“And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.”

The word “deserts” reverses the imagery of abundance in the first section. Earlier there were rubies, rivers, empires, and limitless possibilities. Now the future is pictured as barren and empty. Eternity does not promise an extension of earthly pleasure. It becomes a desert in which earthly desires have no place. The speaker turns specifically to the woman's beauty:

“Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song.”

The phrase “marble vault” refers to the tomb. The beautiful woman who has been celebrated in the first section is now imagined as dead. His elaborate poetry of praise will have no value because the woman will no longer be alive to hear it.

This is the poem's great conceptual reversal. In the first section, the speaker had imagined spending hundreds and thousands of years praising the woman's body. In

the second, he acknowledges that death will destroy the very possibility of such praise. The language now becomes deliberately grotesque:

“then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity.”

This is one of the poem's most shocking images. Virginity, traditionally associated with purity, honour, and sexual self-restraint, is placed beside the physical reality of decomposition. The body will eventually decay regardless of the ideals attached to it while alive. The speaker develops the same point in the next couplet:

“And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.”

The rhyme of “dust” and “lust” is especially effective. The woman's honour and the speaker's sexual desire appear to belong to opposite moral categories, yet both are ultimately reduced to the same physical condition. Death equalizes them.

This is one of the poem's deepest philosophical insights. Social distinctions, erotic desires, ideals of purity, and physical beauty all become insignificant when confronted with mortality.

The famous couplet that follows combines the serious and the comic:

“The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.”

The observation is brutally simple: the grave may be private, but it is useless as a place for sexual love because the dead cannot embrace. The humour is dark, but that humour is typical of Marvell's metaphysical wit. A profound philosophical truth is expressed through an almost conversational understatement. The grave is therefore the final enemy of erotic fulfilment. The speaker cannot stop death from coming, but he can attempt to persuade the woman not to waste the time remaining before it arrives.

At this point, the poem's apparent logic has become clear. Its first movement establishes the hypothetical condition of unlimited time. Its second establishes the reality of limited time and death. The third will draw the practical conclusion. The transition is announced explicitly:

“Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew”

The words “Now therefore” reveal that the poem is constructed like an argument. The speaker moves from premise to conclusion.

The image of “morning dew” is particularly appropriate. Dew appears briefly and then disappears. Youth, like dew, is beautiful because it is temporary. The woman's “youthful hue” will not remain indefinitely.

The speaker's language now becomes increasingly sensual:

“And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires”

The image of “fires” suggests sexual energy, passion, vitality, and physical desire. The phrase “instant fires” also contrasts strongly with the “vegetable love” of the first section. Earlier love was imagined as slow-growing; now desire is immediate and urgent.

The speaker's imperative becomes explicit:

“Now let us sport us while we may”

The phrase “while we may” captures the essence of *carpe diem*. The opportunity is temporary. The present must be used before it disappears.

Marvell then introduces one of the poem's most striking comparisons:

“And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour”

The lovers are compared to “birds of prey.” The image is surprisingly violent for a love poem. Yet it perfectly expresses the speaker's new attitude toward time. Rather than allowing time to consume them, they will symbolically consume time.

The phrase “our time devour” produces a powerful paradox. Time normally devours human beings: it consumes youth, beauty, energy, and eventually life. Marvell reverses the relationship. The lovers cannot destroy time, but they can refuse to be passive victims of it. They can consume as much experience as possible within the limited time available.

This idea is developed in the phrase:

“Than languish in his slow-chapped power.”

Time is imagined as a creature slowly chewing through human existence. The lovers would rather act intensely than allow themselves to decay gradually under the power of time.

The poem's final movement becomes increasingly energetic:

“Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball”

This is another extraordinary metaphysical conceit. “Strength” and “sweetness” are abstract qualities, yet the speaker imagines them as physical substances that can be rolled together into a single ball. The image suggests concentration and compression.

The lovers cannot increase the quantity of time available to them, so they can attempt to increase its intensity. Their “strength” and “sweetness” can be concentrated into an intense experience.

The poem's language becomes even more forceful:

“And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life.”

Life is imagined as a prison with “iron gates.” Pleasure must struggle to get through them. The metaphor suggests that human existence itself imposes limitations upon desire. The lovers are therefore not simply enjoying themselves; they are symbolically struggling against the conditions of mortality.

This helps explain the poem's unusual mixture of eroticism and violence. The lovers' struggle is not against each other but against time, mortality, and the limitations of existence.

The final couplet provides the poem's ultimate paradox:

“Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.”

The sun represents the passage of time. The speaker admits what human beings cannot do: they cannot stop the sun. They cannot stop ageing. They cannot prevent death. Yet he immediately transforms this admission into an assertion of agency. If they cannot stop time, they will “make him run.”

The ending therefore does not promise immortality. It offers something more subtle: intensity in the face of mortality. The lovers cannot make life longer, but they can make their experience of it more concentrated and passionate. This is the deepest

meaning of the carpe diem principle. It is not literally an attempt to defeat death. It is an attempt to respond creatively to the fact of death.