

Andrew marvell, "to his coy mistress" essay



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Andrew Marvell, " To His Coy Mistress" In ' To His Coy Mistress' the speaker carefully constructs a subtle and logical argument as to why his addressee should sexually unite with him. The speaker attempts this proposition through finesse in manipulating reason, form and imagery. The reasoning employed would be familiar to a reader educated in Renaissance England, as it is reminiscent of classical philosophical logic, entailing a statement, a counter-statement and a resolution. In line with this method Marvell's speaker codes his argument in classical imagery.

To understand this argument I will be approaching the poem in three clearly defined sections, which are denoted in the poem with indented lines. The first of these section runs from lines 1-20, here the speaker sets out his thesis that if ' Had we but world enough, and time' (l. 1) he would not rush the process of courtship and admiration. The speaker establishes a world unconfined by time and space by using the word ' had' to create the subjunctive tense. This passage is highly ironic however as the speaker is conscious that this is purely a theoretical state before he even speaks the words, he deviously lays out his persuasion knowing the impossibility of his proclamations.

The speaker aims not only to flatter but also to impress the mistress using rich imagery. To compliment, but also to amaze with his geographical knowledge, the speaker refers to the River Humber and the Ganges River (ll. -7) to emphasise the distance he would supposedly endure without her if time permitted. The exotic imagery of Asia is inline with British exploration and trade with the region and provides an escape from the relatively bland image of everyday life in England at the time even if the image of the East

was unrealistic. After he has dealt with the idea of space he goes onto confront the notion of time, using biblical references to mark the perpetual nature of reality. By using the Old Testament image of the great flood that purged the earth as a start point and then the image that Armageddon will ultimately occur at the conversion of the Jews as an end point, Marvell's speaker tries to show the vastness of predicted human existence.

At the same time however he subtly hints toward the second more nihilistic section of the poem. This imagery is interesting in two respects; firstly it acts to suggest to the mistress, almost subconsciously, that physical human life has been ended by God and will be ended by God again. Thus providing a backdrop for the speaker's argument that in reality life is temperamental and therefore procreation should not be delayed at the expense of morality. The image is interesting in a second way as it may be Marvell's way, as a Puritan, of condemning the speaker's attitude, suggesting that the speaker may be punished for sinfully trying to indulge in base luxury.

The speaker goes on to describe his 'vegetable love' (l. 11), many possible interpretations can be applied to this image. Firstly there is the sexual connotation whereby the vegetable operates as a phallic image, acting as a prelude to the speaker's suggestions. As The Norton Anthology of Poetry suggests in the footnote, the vegetable symbolises a slow unconscious growth of love, emphasising the 'sincerity' and power of his feelings as they grow 'vaster than empires' (l. 12). However the irony here lies in the fact that the speaker fully understands that he does not have time to spare and thus his 'love' has developed quickly, consciously and almost forcibly.

To finish the first section the speaker begins assigning years of devotion to each part of the mistress's body. It is notable that longer time is spent admiring the breasts, which seems a sexually motivated act as opposed to the shorter length spent on the eyes, which are often more associated with true love. The hyperbolic statements increase in unreality to an incomprehensible 'age to every part' (l. 17); it seems that the speaker is being generous in his admiration but he is cognisant of the lack of weight in his words due to their unattainable status. The next section runs from lines 21 to 32, here the speaker moves away from the hypothetical to reality but retains the melodramatic language used in the previous section to sustain the tenacity of his points.

Time here is portrayed as chasing the speaker as opposed to being something the speaker is in control of as in the end of the last section. This is done using the image of a 'winged chariot' (l. 22), this has classical associations with Greek mythology which relates to his form of argument. The meter of the poem is restrictively regular, this structure emphasises the idea that time is constantly progressing; reflecting the speaker's argument.

Space is no longer inhabited by images of movement and life like the rivers previously mentioned but instead: 'before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity' (ll. 23-4). The desert has strong connotations with deathliness, an issue that the speaker gruesomely develops upon and progresses within this section. The speaker implies on lines 26-7 that the only exploration of the mistress's body that will be undertaken will be by the worms that are decomposing her body if she remains in her coy state. This thought that her sexuality should not be wasted is elaborated upon with a crude pun on line 29: 'And your <https://assignbuster.com/andrew-marvell-to-his-coy-mistress-essay/>

quaint honor turn to dust' which, as the Norton Anthology of Poetry explains in the footnote, is a play on the Middle English noun queynte which means female genitals. These images of deterioration linked to sexuality are intended to shock the mistress into wishing to 'seize the day' and not waste her youth.

The speaker's sly and ironic tone is revealed to the reader in lines 31-2: 'The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace'. The tone here is clearly sarcastic; the reader enjoys these ironic statements due to the falsity and overacting involved in Marvell's speaker as he tries to woo the mistress. The purpose of this second section is to provide a counter-statement to the first section. Discord has been created within the poem; the first section sets out a space where the speaker has an infinite amount of time and space to engage with the mistress, but in the second, time and life are construed as being fleeting and temperamental.

This tension is intended to make the mistress feel uneasy and anxious about herself as a young single woman; prompting her to change her attitude towards courtship. To conclude the argument and disagreement between the two former opposite parts the speaker offers a resolution. The reader can easily predict what this will be as the speaker's suggestive tone throughout the poem points towards sexual unification. The speaker's intention is described using fantastic and abstract lexical choices and phrases. The passage is full of images and language related to movement, physicality and violence such as 'transpires' (l.

35), ' like amorous birds of prey' (l. 38) and ' devour' (l. 39). The speaker asserts his masculinity in these images, implying his sexual prowess in an attempt to better his offer. The speaker exuberantly expresses his carpe diem mentality suggesting that as a combined force, represented in the form of a ball in this section, they will be able to ' tear our pleasure with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life' (ll. 3-4).

This notion that together they can conquer life is emphasised on the last two lines where, in agreement with the classical imagery throughout the poem, the speaker admits although he cannot stop the sun together: ' we will make him run' (l. 46). The mistress is lead to believe that if she submits to her pursuer the ' winged chariot' (l. 22) of time from the previous section will be reversed, with the mistress and speaker in the dominant position.

Thus the speaker has concluded his logical progression, firstly operating in an unattainable hypothetical state, then switching to a morbid reality and finally concluding in copulation as a form of mastery over time. Although the reader can see faults in the reasoning employed, admiration is still felt towards the speaker for elaborately crafting his speech in his pursuit of the mistress. Words count: 1398 Bibliography Primary Text Andrew Marvell, To His Coy Mistress, pp. 478-9, The Norton Anthology of Poetry (W.

W. Norton & Company; 5th edition, 2004).