

An analysis of to his coy mistress by andrew marvell essay

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The main theme of 'To His Coy Mistress' by Andrew Marvell is known by the Latin phrase 'Carpe diem.' This means 'Seize the day'; in other words, live life to the full now, because life is short and tomorrow we may be dead. It was a very common theme for poets to write about in the 16th and 17th centuries, perhaps because life and death were more unpredictable, life expectancy was shorter and medical knowledge very primitive. Another notable feature of this poem is its syllogistic structure: it is a carefully constructed argument. The first verse paragraph presents one possible scenario; the second proves it cannot happen like that: the third verse paragraph reaches a conclusion. This sort of logical progression is very typical of Metaphysical poetry.

Andrew Marvell was born in a village near Hull in 1621. He lived through very turbulent times. The 1640s were violent years in the history of England. A destructive Civil War between Parliament and the King was fought out with the King's forces finally being defeated in 1645 at the Battle of Naseby. Charles I was eventually put on trial, found guilty of treason and executed by parliament on January 29th 1649: England became a republic. Marvell was closely associated with the Parliamentary side: in the late 1640s he was employed as tutor to Mary Fairfax, the daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, Commander in Chief of the parliamentary army and then in the 1650s he worked in Cromwell's government. In 1659 he became MP for Hull and remained as MP until his death in 1678. This is relevant to the theme of 'Carpe diem' because when war is in the background you might be even more aware of death and its speed. In the final third of this poem the imagery becomes very violent.

The opening verse paragraph is full of hyperbole. Marvell tells his mistress how he would love her, if they had enough space and time. The rhythm is slow and sensual. If they had all the time in the world then they could sit and think how to “ pass our long love’s day.” (4) Note how those three words at the end of the line are all stressed and the way “ long” and “ love” alliterate and assonate. Even physical separation would not be a problem: the poet could be complaining on the banks of the Humber, while his lover could be finding rubies by the side of the Ganges. What would he be complaining about? Well, the fact that they are apart. This image very funny because it juxtaposes the very exotic (Ganges and rubies) with the very ordinary English river – the Humber. Marvell then uses hyperbole to suggest how long he would love her: from thousands of years ago (the Biblical Flood) to thousands of years in the future (Doomsday when all Jews will be converted to

Christianity, according to Christian belief). The next couplet is wonderfully suggestive in its imagery: “ My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow.” (11-12)The poet seems to be boasting that if he loved her for that length of time his physical size would become enormous. He then tells her how long he would praise and adore her: two hundred years “ to adore each breast.” (15) This is richly comic hyperbole – foreplay that would last for several millennia.

The second verse paragraph begins with the word “ But” (21) and Marvell reveals why they cannot spend so long building up to sex – because they will die. He says he is always aware of “ Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.”

(22) What awaits them are “ Deserts of vast eternity.” (24) Death will destroy her beauty and his “ echoing song” (27 - his poetry). The poet then gives a detailed picture of what will happen to her body when she is dead: then worms shall try that long-preserved virginity, and your quaint honour turn to dust. (Lines 27-29))

This is a gruesome image – the worms burrowing into his mistress, instead of him burrowing into her. The phrase “ quaint honour” could be argued to be the rudest, funniest pun in the whole of English poetry. Marvell is saying that her honour is old-fashioned and silly, but also it is also full of hilarious and shocking sexual innuendo. The word “ dust” (from the funeral service) deliberately rhymes with “ lust” (30) to underline the fact that they must seize the moment. The verse paragraph ends with this couplet: “ The grave’s a fine and private place/But none, I think, do there embrace.” (31-32) Of course, the idea of two skeletons embracing each other in the grave is gruesome and impossible, but what makes the reader laugh in this couplet is Marvell’s “ I think” – as though there were any doubt whatsoever about it!!

The final verse paragraph begins with the word “ Now” (33) – and Marvell reaches his conclusion: because they are going to die, they must make love immediately. The word now is repeated twice more before the end of the poem – an indication of the poet’s urgency and impatience. The word “ therefore” (33) reminds us that this is an argument. Marvell wants to make love while his mistress is still young: while the “ youthful hue” (33) colours her skin and while she is full of “ instant fires” (36) and capable of passion. The imagery Marvell uses to describe their love-making is full of oxymoron:

the simile “ like amorous birds of prey” (37) is especially striking. “ Amorous” means loving, but birds of prey tear the flesh from other creatures – this is love which is energetic, loving, but also wild and rough. Wilcher (43) speaks of the “ physical immediacy and desperate recklessness” of these lines. Marvell imagines that they will devour time rather than be slowly chewed up by time itself. This imagines time as a monster who chews us up by ageing us and eventually killing us

As the poem proceeds, the act of love is seen as pleasurable, but also painful in an enjoyable way. He promises her that they will “ tear our pleasures with rough strife/Through the iron gates of life.” (43-44) The word “ pleasures” is juxtaposed with “ tear” and “ rough strife” – an act of love which gives pleasure and pain. The final couplet means that by having sex, they will not be able to make time (here symbolized by the sun) stop (“ stand still” 46), but they will make time go quickly (“ run” 46). It also begins with “ thus” (45) and presents the final conclusion to the poet’s argument. As Purkiss (72) writes of the final section of the poem – “ the slowness of being deflowered by worms is to be pushed aside by the violence of lived heterosexuality.”

The rhythm of this poem is particularly effective. To put it briefly, it mirrors what it describes: the first verse paragraph is slow and leisurely; the second starts to speed up; and the final verse paragraph is very quick. Why? It is partly because the situation is urgent and pressing – they might die at any moment. Marvell is in a hurry and the rhythm of the poem reflects this. How does Marvell achieve this speeding up of the rhythm in the final third of the poem? And how does he create the slow rhythm of the opening section? The

first verse paragraph has a lot of sentences or uses colons to create heavy pauses; there is some enjambment but there are heavy caesuras which then slow the poem down.

By contrast, the third verse paragraph consists of only three sentences, there are very few caesuras and extensive use of enjambment – so when it is read aloud it has to be read more quickly and the words are largely monosyllabic so that there is a pounding, regular rhythm. This is the final couplet: Thus, though we cannot make our sun Stand still, yet we will make him run. (45-46)

The first line flows into the second through enjambment; alliteration then foregrounds “ sun stands still” which is followed by the caesura, causing the voice to pause before the determined and direct tone of “ we will make him run.”

This very famous and much-anthologized poem presents the inevitability of death in frightening images; celebrates the physicality of sex; uses outrageous humour and frankness to write originally on a stereotypical theme (carpe diem); matches its rhythm perfectly to its subject matter; and manages to be very funny and very serious at the same time.

Works Cited

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