

Logical form and formal logic in andrew marvell's 'to his coy mistress'



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Dialectical structure is probably one of the major characteristics of all Metaphysical poetry. Donne was the pioneer of this type of poetry, which was marked by erudite scholarship, and difficulty of thought. It is said that a whole book of knowledge can be compiled from the scholarly allusions in only Donne and Cowley. This, perhaps, often leads to obscurity, which has been regarded as one of the demerits of Metaphysical poetry, and many of Donne's contemporaries believed that " it confuses the pleasures of poetry with the pleasures of puzzles". Indeed, there are many who do approve of this type of complexity, for to them it is thought-provoking and novel. But critics generally agree that such poetry makes intellectual demands on the reader, forcing him to think logically. Moreover, the very fact that only an erudite audience can properly appreciate this poetry makes for a limited readership. The fact is that Donne and his contemporaries bring the mind into play, even when they are expressing deep emotional or spiritual themes. The very combination of spiritual and emotional subject matter, and intellectual and logical form, is the essence of the type of poetry that Donne evolved. Among all the Metaphysical poets, however, there is none, not even Donne, who adheres to the methodology of formal logic as much as Andrew Marvell. His poems therefore become as much speculative and imaginative poetry, as intellectual exercises based on copybook methods of argumentation and analysis. One of his most popular and representative poems in this regard is " To His Coy Mistress," a poem which can be used as the supreme example of the method of Metaphysical dialectics. The two logical methods that Marvell employs in this poem are taken from formal logic and philosophy. The first is the formal method of argumentation known as Syllogism. The second is a philosophical premise that is a part of ancient

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hedonistic doctrines, and has been popularly known as the Carpe-diem theme. Use of Syllogism Logic, basically, is of two kinds – inductive and deductive. Inductive logic is instilled into us by everyday experience, such the logic contained in the sentence : “ The sun rises in the east”. It disturbs our sense of logic to say that it rises in the west, for no other reason than that it is unnatural. Inductive logic, however, may change over time under the onslaught of deductive logic, such as when people changed their minds from saying “ The earth is flat” to “ The earth is round”. Deductive logic, however, forms the core of all treatises on logic, and consists of several methods and types of inferences. Syllogism is a component of deductive logic, in which there are three categorical propositions, consisting of two premises and one conclusion. The conclusion that emerges is true IF the two terms are true. A stock example is the following: All men are mortal; Indians are men; So all Indians are mortal. We have to accept the first two premises from inductive logic, that men are mortal and that Indians are men. Then only we may come to the conclusion that emerges from these premises. Often, when it is not clear whether the first two premises are true, the syllogism is represented by the If.... But..... Therefore structure, such as the following: If man could fly he would be a bird; But man cannot fly; So man is not a bird. It is this structure which is followed in To His Coy Mistress. To His Coy Mistress is a typically Metaphysical poem, which has been heavily influenced by Donne. Yet, there is no poem of Donne which is so rigidly logical in form. The poem is written totally from the point of view of the man, and the rigidly logical analysis centres almost totally on the desire of the lover, ignoring any analysis of the coyness of the lady. As such, being totally intellectual in nature, general readers find a lack of true and deep emotion, <https://assignbuster.com/logical-form-and-formal-logic-in-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress/>

even though it is a poem about love, and the nature of the love concentrates almost totally on the physical. In this respect it can even be regarded as coldly calculating. Being syllogistic in structure, corresponding to the If..... But..... Therefore format, the poem has three distinct parts - 1) What he would do IF he had enough space and time; 2) BUT time flies; 3) THEREFORE we must catch the moment while it lasts. Donne is also argumentative and persuasive, but never in such an extreme form. The first section of the poem is a speculation on what the poet would have done IF he had enough time and space. In fact, the whole poem is based on the space-time continuum, and every line has words or references to either space or time. If the poet did have enough time, he would have wooed his mistress ten years before the Flood (which, by the way, refers to both the Biblical flood in which Noah was saved by means of his ark, and the classical flood, in which Deucalion and Pyrrha remained alive amidst the general doom), and she would have time enough to refuse him till Doomsday. In other words, the whole gamut of time, from Creation till the Day of Judgment would be at his disposal, in which to extend his love-making at will. With so much time on his hands, he would have spent a hundred years to praise her eyes and forehead, and two hundred to adore her breasts. Thirty thousand years would be spent to adore the rest of her body. Similarly, if he had the entire world as his own space, he would allow his love to grow vaster and slower than great empires - in this case, the erstwhile Jewish empire. In this respect, his love is truly "vegetable love", which grows of its own accord, filling up all the surrounding space if not checked, and is totally Platonic and non-physical in character. BUT, says the poet in the second section, Time is unfortunately not so generous, and is always at his back, hurrying him along. Marvell here uses a telling conceit to <https://assignbuster.com/logical-form-and-formal-logic-in-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress/>

picture Time as rushing up fast on a winged chariot, soon to overcome them. In front of them lies Eternity, like a huge desert, barren and stark, in which it is no use to run in order to escape from the hurrying chariot of Time. The idea is that even if the mistress does manage to preserve her virginity till death, she will not be able to escape the ravages of time, for in the grave her body will slowly crumble to dust, and her virginity, which she had so carefully preserved all these years, will be penetrated by worms. As such, she will not be able to keep her precious virginity after all, for even if she remains celibate in life, she will lose it to worms after death. It is a blatantly sexual image, but it is purposely used by the poet to instil a feeling of disgust for death, which is his aim. The space-time continuum is carried on here from a different viewpoint. The endless space and time of the first part of the argument, is closed down to the space of a small tomb and uselessness of time in death in the second part. The third section, dealing with the “THEREFORE” part of the argument, is devoted to convincing the lady that she must utilize whatever time she has at her disposal. The poet’s suggestion about the manner in which this fleeting time should be passed is essentially sensual, and is based on the fact that the mistress has the two things necessary for a sensual enjoyment of life – youth, which sits on her skin like morning dew, and burning fire of passion, with which every one of her pores transpires. The lovers are like birds of prey who “tear up” their “pleasures with rough strife”, thus devouring Time, which is posing so much of a problem – an image in which sexual connotations are uppermost. In this manner, says Marvell, they may perhaps be unable to make “the sun stop” – that is, lengthen out time; but they will certainly compel the sun “to run” – that is, utilize the time so thoroughly that the awareness of time itself may

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be minimized. Moreover, since the sun represents life and energy apart from time, to make it “run” also means to use life and energy to the maximum. The poem thus gives us a sense of the wide gulf between the ideal and the real, between what is imagined and what is actually possible. Syllogistic logic, though belonging to the deductive type, can be easily used for mockery or satire, by making the lines seem logical, while all the time logic is actually undermined. Such distortion of logic is common, and by the syllogistic method, false premises may be categorically stated, and conclusions may be drawn which do not directly emerge from them. False syllogisms have been the hallmark of many a conman, and also many a poet, and they have been widely used both by lawyers and by philosophers. Indeed, “State a false syllogism” was the twenty-fourth of Schopenhauer’s stratagems. From this point of view, it may safely be said that *To His Coy Mistress* is a prime example of false logic by the use of the syllogistic method. Ostensibly this poem is strictly framed according to the If..... But..... Therefore structure. However, the primary rule for an acceptable syllogism is that the conclusion must be drawn from the two premises which have been supplied before. In this poem the “If” section describes a speculation about what the poet would have done IF he had infinite space and time. The second section asserts the obvious - that he does not have this infinitude. The third section, however, does not automatically emerge from these two premises. Not having enough space and time, the lover advises his coy mistress that they will have to use the time they have in making wild love, and in tearing their “pleasures with rough strife” - which conclusion may be countered with several other conclusions regarding the manner in which a couple may pass their time. As such, the final section is totally individualistic,

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and not a general rule. The conclusion we as readers may, therefore, draw is that Marvell is basically a poet writing poetry, and not a logical treatise. The tone of the entire poem is light and bantering, aimed at mockery, rather than passionate and loving, aimed at true emotion. The logic, therefore, is mocking, too, building up an argument which is basically hollow. That is why the poem has always been enjoyed as one of the best examples of Metaphysical poetry, not Puritan logic. The Carpe-diem theme : Hedonism has always been couched in a cover of logic. There are several modes and strains of hedonistic philosophy, and all of them basically try to argue the case that pleasure is the only aim and purpose of man, as his life is short, and there is nothing much to expect after it is over. The Epicurean philosophy from the Greeks, for example, tries to analyse the truism of the proposition, " Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die". The very word " for" suggests logical analysis. We should enjoy life not because that is what we want, but because time is running away, and there will be no more time left to take in the pleasures of the world. Usually hedonistic philosophies are strongly materialistic, often rejecting any belief in the after-life, for the idea of heaven and hell are not very conducive to regarding pleasure as the ultimate good, for too much pleasure is usually discouraged by established religions. One of these various branches of hedonistic thought has given rise to the Carpe-diem theme, originally used from an ode by Horace, but being developed as a password to pleasure. The word loosely means " Seize the day", that is , catch the time before it passes away. This is, moreover, related to later such themes, such as Carpe-florem (" Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" from Herrick's famous poem), which all finally mean the same. All these have become popular motifs in lyric poetry. The speaker in a <https://assignbuster.com/logical-form-and-formal-logic-in-andrew-marvels-to-his-coy-mistress/>

carpe-diem poem emphasizes that life is short, and that time is fleeting, in order to convince his mistress to make the most of the pleasures immediately available to her. Later, when carpe-diem comes to be associated with carpe-florem, the rose becomes symbolic of beauty and the transitoriness of life, as in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* – "Gather yet the rose while yet is prime". In Marvell's *Coy Mistress* the lover expresses a desperation to pursue pleasures, because of the sentence of inevitable death that is the sure end of man. The first section, in which the poet lists the ways in which he would utilize time and space if he had them in endless measures, serves as the prelude to the actual development of the carpe-diem theme. It is to be noticed that even if had all the time of the world in his hands, he would use it only to derive the pleasures of love – to praise and adore his mistress for as long as it is possible. It is the second section in which the true meaning of the theme becomes clear. Here, in contrast to the speculative endlessness of time and space of the first section, the other extreme is described – the narrowness of space and time. The image of the virgin lady lying dead in her coffin with worms eating into her, is purposely anti-Romantic, for it is the purpose of the poet to make death seem as unattractive as possible in comparison with life. In fact, the carpe-diem theme automatically brings with it speculations of what the lady will become when she grows old and ugly. Moreover, the space-time continuum is carried on here from a different viewpoint. The infinite and space and time of the first part of the argument is closed down to the space of a small tomb, and the uselessness of time in death, in the second part. It is also interesting that the view of death presented in the second part is in direct contradiction to the Christian doctrine of life after death. From a Puritan like Marvell this is <https://assignbuster.com/logical-form-and-formal-logic-in-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress/>

indeed astonishing. We may accept that such a view is purposely non-Christian for argument's sake, but it is positively Pagan in its celebration of life, totally ignoring the considerations of morality or faith. Death is shown to be the end, and as such, the value of life becomes greater - something which is usually the logic of all hedonistic doctrines. Instead of seeing death as a stepping stone to a better life, it is shown as fearful and disgusting. The concept of worms penetrating the mistress's virginity underlines the intense sensuality of the lover's argument. The third part deals with the present - the use the lovers may make of space and time as they are available now. In view of the fact that there is very little time at the disposal of the lovers, they will have to "tear" their pleasures "with rough strife", like "birds of prey". This image immediately brings to mind associations of wild passion, which is what the poet advocates as "pleasure". However, the outcome of this passion is closer to the Scholastic viewpoint, most commonly accepted by the Metaphysical poets in general. By consummating their love, the lovers will roll together all their strength and sweetness into a ball, which, it should be remembered, is also the traditional symbol of perfection - something attained by the union of the qualities of strength (Male) and sweetness (Female), both of which are required to make up the whole. The idea of these qualities coming together to create perfection is also to be found in Donne's *The Canonization* and other such poems. The whole poem is written in tetrameter couplets instead of the usual pentameter, which is done purposely to heighten the tempo and thus give the impression of great hurry. This suits the poem extremely well, for the incessant harping on time running away is the primary focus of the poem, and is also very much a part of the *carpe-diem* motif. The logical syllogistic structure of the poem is <https://assignbuster.com/logical-form-and-formal-logic-in-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress/>

strengthened by the hedonistic arguments. In this poem, particularly, Marvell is only interested in love as a given topic, which gives him the opportunity of performing exciting variations on an old theme. Donne is far more emotionally involved in his subjects, all the more because his poetry arises from real-life situations. Like Donne, however, Marvell's poem is extremely dramatic, for throughout we can picture the presence of the woman, even though the focus is mainly on the poet lover himself. The carpe-diem theme is essentially developed as a rhetorical theme, quite common in the time, but Marvell's originality lies in his ironical, almost burlesque treatment of the theme. This use of paradox and exaggeration to produce an effect of comedy has also been pointed out by T. S. Eliot as being characteristic of Marvell. All said and done, *To His Coy Mistress* is very much an intellectual poem using stock methods of logical analysis in a mocking way for a very special poetic effect.