

Andrew Marvell: Metaphysical Poet



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

**- “To His Coy
Mistress” (ll. 1-2)**

1621-1678

The Metaphysical Poets are known for their ability to startle the reader and coax new perspective through paradoxical images, subtle argument, inventive syntax, and imagery from art, philosophy, and religion using an extended metaphor known as a conceit.

Andrew Marvell, along with similar but distinct poets such as John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughn, developed a poetic style in which philosophical and spiritual subjects were approached with reason and often concluded in paradox. This group of writers established *meditation*—based on the union of thought and feeling sought after in Jesuit Ignatian meditation—as a poetic mode.

To His Coy Mistress

Background

Due to the inconsistencies and ambiguities within his work and the scarcity of information about his personal life, Andrew Marvell has been a source of fascination for scholars and readers since his work found recognition in the early decades of the twentieth century. Born in 1621, Marvell grew up in the Yorkshire town of Hull where his father, Reverend Andrew Marvell, was a lecturer at Holy Trinity Church and master of the Charterhouse. At age twelve Marvell began his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. Four years later two of Marvell's poems, one in Latin and one in Greek, were published in an anthology of Cambridge poets. After receiving his B.A. in 1639, Marvell stayed on at Trinity, apparently to complete an M.A. degree. In 1641, however, his father drowned in the Hull estuary and Marvell abandoned his studies. During the 1640's Marvell traveled extensively on the Continent, adding Dutch, French, Spanish, and Italian, to his Latin and Greek—missing the English civil wars entirely.

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Background (cont.)

A well-known politician, Marvell held office in Cromwell's government and represented Hull to Parliament during the Restoration. His very public position—in a time of tremendous political turmoil and upheaval—almost certainly led Marvell away from publication. No faction escaped Marvell's satirical eye: he criticized and lampooned both the court and parliament. Indeed, had they been published during his lifetime, many of Marvell's more famous poems—in particular, "Tom May's Death," an attack on the famous Cromwellian—would have made him rather unpopular with Royalist and republican alike.

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Background (cont.)

Marvell used his political status to free Milton, who was jailed during the Restoration, and quite possibly saved the elder poet's life. In the early years of his tenure, Marvell made two extraordinary diplomatic journeys: to Holland (1662-11163) and to Russia, Sweden, and Denmark (1663-1665). In 1678, after 18 years in Parliament, Marvell died rather suddenly of a fever. Gossip of the time suggested that the Jesuits (a target of Marvell's satire) had poisoned him. After his death he was remembered as a fierce and loyal patriot.

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Background (cont.)

Andrew Marvell, now considered one of the greatest poets of the seventeenth century, published very little of his scathing political satire and complex lyric verse in his lifetime. Although Marvell published a handful of poems in anthologies, a collection of Marvell's work did not appear until 1681, three years after his death, when his nephew compiled and found a publisher for *Miscellaneous Poems*. The circumstances surrounding the publication of the volume aroused some suspicion: a person named "Mary Marvell," who claimed to be Marvell's wife, wrote the preface to the book. "Mary Marvell" was, in fact, Mary Palmer—Marvell's housekeeper—who posed as Marvell's wife, apparently, in order to keep Marvell's small estate from the creditors of his business partners. Her ruse, of course, merely contributes to the mystery that surrounds the life of this great poet.

To His Coy Mistress

Summary

If there were enough time, the speaker and his mistress could go on courting forever, but time is fast disappearing. Therefore, they must squeeze their joys into today; there is no time to be coy or aloof.

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Imagery

The exotic, distant, flowing Ganges is contrasted with the down-to-earth, hometown, tidal Humber. The rich and majestic ruby, which is to gems what the sun is to the planets and the king to the rest of society, is contrasted with the lowly, pastoral love complaint. “Vegetable” love refers to the vegetative, or growing, capacity of the soul of plants or animals, which must take time to reach normal growth and would need much longer to grow “Vaster than empires.” The most celebrated image of the poem, “Time’s wingéd chariot,” combines the image of speed with harassment and gains even more power by being contrasted with the sterility of “Deserts” and the stark stillness of “vast eternity.” The propriety of the image of devouring worms in a love poem (as well as the possible allusion to Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Miller’s Tale” in “quaint honor”) has been questioned, but the worms certainly work well in the creation of a sense of urgency in the poem. So also does the contrast in the images of eating: the eager appetite of the “amorous birds of prey” pitted against the slow, trapped, defeated helplessness of being devoured, slow bite by slow bite, in the lazy-but-powerful jaws of time.

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Imagery (cont.)

There is a declaration of unity and even mutuality, should the hoped-for culmination of his pleading be reached, in the image of their sweetness and their strength (not her sweetness and his strength) being rolled up tightly into one ball. The image increases in vitality and strength (hinting at a more fitting end to virginity than a congregation of politic worms) as this ball tears through the gates of life. There is power in the oxymoronic mixing of toughness, strife, and iron with pleasures and the fertility of the gates of life. The final image of the sun standing still could possibly be an allusion to Joshua's commanding the sun to stand still so he could finish the day's slaughter in battle but is more likely an allusion to Zeus performing the same feat to extend by twenty-four hours his night with the lovely Alcmene in the pleasant task of engendering Hercules. Perhaps this final couplet, which some editors separate from the last section of the poem, merely suggests, "Time flies when you're having fun."

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Language

Other technical felicities include Marvell's creation of sounds to fit the sense of the poem. The alliteration of "long love's day" combines with the use of long vowels and diphthongs to create the feeling of slow time in the first section of the poem, despite its quick succession of images. The repeated, aspirated *h* sounds and the *ch* sound in "chariot" almost make the reader feel the rushing of wind that accompanies the beating of wings. In the last section of the poem, the combination of liquid *l*'s and the long back-of-the-mouth vowels suggests the action of rolling something up: "Let us roll all our strength and all/ Our sweetness up into one ball." The sudden shift to frontal vowels and the onomatopoeic "tear" provides an abrupt shift as the ball takes on the characteristics of a cannonball. The effective use of variations in the rhymed iambic tetrameter rhythm also adds to the experience of meaning by correlating sound with sense. Note the use of spondees in "Love you ten years," "last age," "roll all," "rough strife," and "Stand still." Another rhythmic effect that underscores the meaning of the words is the use of an occasional accented first syllable coming after an enjambment ending in a long vowel that crescendos into the accent. Especially effective are "I would/ Love you" (ll 7-8), "should grow/ Vaster" (ll 11-12), "I always hear/ Time's" (ll 21-22), and "before us lie/ Deserts" (ll 23-24).

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Theme

“To His Coy Mistress” is the best example of a *carpe diem* poem. *Carpe diem* is a Latin phrase meaning *seize the day*. Seduction is the theme of most *carpe diem* poems.

What distinguish Marvell’s poem from other *carpe diem* poems is the careful integration of time and seduction so that it is not clear which is the predominant theme. Time hovers over the first section of the poem in its slow counting of the years ideally available for one to express love. Time threateningly enters the second section of the poem, relentlessly reminding those who would love that a long postponement of joy means no joy at all. Time moves into the present tense in the third section, obliterating a dried-out past and a sterile future in the intensity of now, the only time in which willing lovers discover themselves and achieve fulfillment. In the final couplet of the poem is its final reversal: Time no longer controls lovers, but they gain dominion over time—not as fully as a god such as Zeus perhaps, to make it stand still, but time speeds through its course at the command of lovers.

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Bibliography

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