

To His Coy Mistress

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
We would sit down and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side 5
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews. 10
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
A hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast, 15
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate. 20
But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found, 25
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust: 30
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires 35
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power. 40
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun 45
Stand still, yet we will make him run

"To His Coy Mistress" is an Andrew Marvell's lyrical poem.

"To His Coy Mistress" is an Andrew Marvell's lyrical poem.

Let's consider the title: the intelligent reader is wondering why the poet uses the adjective "coy" referring to his mistress.

The word "mistress" means poet's beloved and desired woman who doesn't correspond feelings. Moreover a "mistress" is a woman (married or not) having an affair with a married man. And, by "affair," one means sex.

On the contrary, most commonly, if a person is coy, he or she pretends to be shy, quiet, and reserved. Therefore the poem's title probably suggests that the speaker's mistress only pretends not to want to have sex with him. Either way, it explains why he says her "coyness" is a "crime." Because of this, the intelligent reader may think the association between the two words is an oxymora. If she's just toying with him, and he cares about her, then he has reason to be upset. On the other hand, if she really doesn't want to, then he's accusing her of a crime she hasn't committed, and playing games with her head. As a matter of fact, if the intelligent reader tie "mistress" and "coy" together, he can imagine a complicated relationship and complicated communications between the speaking voice and his mistress.

The poem is made up of 46 lines that can be organized into three sections; each section corresponds to a particular point of view of the speaking voice and a specific temporal sequence. Even if the speech follows a syllogistical organization, characterized by the conjunctions "if" (v. 1, 9), "but" (v. 21) "then" (v. 27), "therefore" (33), "thus" (45), the themes and objects of the poem are completely different from the medieval ones, since the reader can both find references to the courteous poetry and to the physical and sexual sphere.

The first section goes from lines 1 to 20. It is entirely dedicated to the poet's desires and expectations in front of his mistress. The semantic field has a coherence with the syntactical one. Indeed the poet uses the conditional, the time of probability, for example, at the third line, the reader can see "we would sit down and think".

Analyzing the second line, the reader can notice the key word "Coyness", that connotes the female figure of the poem in the social, psychological and sexual field. Moreover it refers to shyness or modesty and links together disdain and decency. "Coyness" is in parallelism with the word "crime" usually used in the juridic code but in this case it is used as a synonym of "offense". At the middle of the line, the word "Lady" has an important position since it is written with the capital "L" and it refers to the power of the mistress who handles the poet's heart.

The day of love is seen as a long one, in contradiction with the first line that focuses on the passing-by of the time and on the limitedness of human being's life. The contradiction may come from the poet's desire of love that cannot be settled with the reality. Referring to this, it is interesting to notice the use of the verb "to pass", that means both the passing-by of long loving days and of time and world.

From line 5 to line 7, there is a clear reference to a hypothetical paradise made up through the image of far places (Asia) and from the bible (specifically the book of the Genesis) with the universal deluge and the history of Judeans.

At lines 10 and 11, the poet compares his love with a plant, bigger and stronger than historical empires because more powerful than the passing-by of time. The intelligent

reader wonders what “vegetable love” may mean; the word “slow” in line 12, gives the reader a clue about the meaning. “Vegetable” may refer to the female anatomy, since some part of the women’s body are called like vegetables.

At line twelve begins the praise to the beloved lady. The poet uses the attributes of the courteous poetry “eyes”, “face”, “breasts” to combine his beloved woman and an angel. If the poet had more time to live with his lady, he would have spent his entire life staring at her. Moreover, by the sentence “the rest”, the poet makes reference to the woman’s private parts of the body. The expression conveys the reader the intimacy that links the poet with his Mistress.

In the second section (21-32) there is the poet’s pessimistic point of view about existence. It is interesting to notice the use of the future. The tone of the poem is more and more desperate; the poet thinks it would take many centuries for the woman to love him and applies again to the passing-by of time. Time is compared to a winged chariot which fast flies to faraway places while love is an eternal desert seen like the paradise. Time will delete every trace of the lovers’ love and even “beauty shall no more” since it is not eternal. Death is personified by worms, dust, cinder that makes virginity a pretty grave and a secret room. Furthermore this is an invitation to the mistress to love and lose virginity since she is still young and beautiful. The poet thinks the sexual union of the “lovers” is like a globe full of sweetness. Now, the two lovers are like two birds of prey and because of this, they must recover their forces to warn their pleasures with violence.

The third section, that goes from line 32 to 46, is an invitation to live the present, confirmed by temporal adverbs “now... while” (33, 37), “while” (35), “now” (38), “once” (39). The poet tries to persuade his mistress to abandon her virginity without wasting more time. By the sentence “Now therefore, while the youthful hue”, the poet is about to tell the mistress what she should do, since his argument is so successful. In the following lines, the poet brings his mistress back from the grave here. Just a minute ago, he imagined her dead in the crypt, and, now, he is telling her how young she is, and how her soul rushes around excitedly inside her, leaking out through her pores. The verb “transpire” has several meaning, for example: “to come to light”, “to happen” and, talking about plants, “to lose water”. So the verb creates a sort of link with the first stanza (see “vegetable love”). Between line 37 and 38, while the lady is transpiring, the poet asks her if she wants to play a game. He wants to play the game pretending to be birds of prey. It is interesting to notice the word “prey”, which means “hunted animal” and introduces violence, and therefore uneasiness, into the scene.

In line 42, comes the poet’s description of sex. The rolling up in a ball doesn’t sound so bad. “Strength” carries on the idea of sex as sport from line 37. The poet claims to believe that sex is the way to another world, a way to break out of the prison of time. This also suggests that he thinks that bringing the “strife” (line 43) of life into the bedroom will enhance the sexual experience. In the last two lines, the speaker seems calmer, talking about sun. “Sun” can be associated to time and death it cannot be stopped by sex. So, they will use it to make sun run.

Concluding, the theme of “to his coy mistress” is the latin “carpe diem”, that means to take the opportunities given by life. Every aspect and private moment of earthly life should be lived with the beloved person because life is short and everyone is going to die.