

To His Coy Mistress

By Andrew Marvell


1621-1678



To His Coy Mistress

What do we understand from the title of the poem?

coy

/kɔɪ/ 

adjective

1. (especially with reference to a woman) making a pretence of shyness or modesty which is intended to be alluring.
"she treated him to a coy smile of invitation"
synonyms: [arch](#), [simpering](#), [coquettish](#), [flirtatious](#), [kittenish](#), [skittish](#); [More](#)
2. reluctant to give details about something regarded as sensitive.
"he is **coy about** his age"

AO3:

C17th – 'To coy'
means 'to stroke/
caress'

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
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.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
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.

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;
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;
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
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.
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
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

A03: Context



1621-1678

Metaphysical poet

Andrew Marvell

Marvell was an associate of Donne. He was the son of a Church of England clergyman and attended Trinity College, Cambridge at the age of 13. His mother died in 1638 and his father drowned while crossing the Humber in 1640.

He lived during the *interregnum* – the period of time after Charles I's execution [1649] and before the reinstatement of Charles II [1660]. England, Ireland and Scotland were, at this time, under the 'protection' of Oliver Cromwell.

After leaving Cambridge in 1641, the first of many mysterious periods in Marvell's life occurred – he disappeared for six years. Some believe that he travelled abroad as a tutor; others believe that Marvell was on some "government business" in Europe, in other words, spying. A government afraid of a return to the Catholic religion used spies to seek out Catholic supporters in Europe and to inform on them.

This was not the only time he would take mysterious trips abroad.

Marvell and Politics

Marvell was a mysterious man. Although he lived through the English Civil War, the part he played in it and his affiliations are ambiguous. Some of his poems demonstrate a royalist attitude, however others portray Charles I as incompetent and celebrated Cromwell.

He kept his true allegiances a well kept secret, managing to gain the favour of both parliamentarian and royalist causes, in an age when so many lost their lives for backing the wrong side at the wrong time. Despite working for Cromwell, he avoided any punishment when the monarchy was restored, retaining his seat as an MP for Hull under both governments.

Many of his satirical works were seen as too controversial and dangerous to be published in his name until after his death. One such work saw the printer imprisoned and a reward offered for the identification of its author. Once again, he escaped punishment.

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. The epitaph on the monument erected to his memory pays tribute to his politics, not his poetry.



So what's all this got to do with a 'coy
mistress'?

#YOLO

Marvell lived in a time of upheaval and uncertainty. Much of his poetry deals with ideas of existence and truth. His poetry is also humorous, using satire to attack or mock others.

At the time this poem was written, Marvell was serving as a tutor to the daughter of the retired commander of the New Model Army, Sir Thomas Fairfax.

Even though he was a bachelor when he died, his housekeeper Mary Palmer claimed that they had been secretly married in 1667. However, her claims were believed to be dubious and motivated by a claim to his estate.

This poem is a famous example of 'carpe diem' – **seize the day** – poetry. These poems urge us to make the most of today, for who knows what tomorrow brings. We should not pointlessly wait for death to arrive. This idea clashes with the Puritanical ideals of the time, which emphasised the importance of denying personal pleasures in order to prepare oneself for meeting God in death.

AO2: Language

'Coy' - shyness, reserve, unwillingness – it was fashionable for women to behave in this way at the time – at least initially

How does this pronoun help to persuade his mistress?

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

Theme is immediately introduced – brevity of human life and pursuits vs time – *Carpe Diem*: seize the day

The speaker's argument begins by posing a problem.

- What is the problem?
- What is he trying to achieve?
- What is the effect of the words 'had we'? (i.e. what do they suggest straight away about the ideal world he is describing?)

What does the use of the word 'crime' imply here?

We would sit down and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day;

How does the speaker's use of language add to the idea of an ideal world?

Identify any words which suggest stillness or calm. Try saying these lines out loud, paying close attention to any vowel sounds – what is the effect?

c.1650 – time of exploration and discovery – the British Empire had spread to India. How does the idea of conquest add to the poem?

Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain.

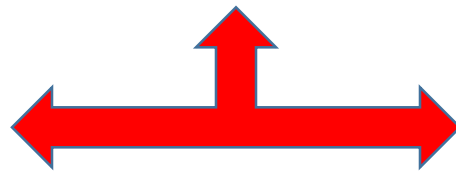
A03: The Ganges is considered sacred and holy. At this time it was also seen as (and was!) pure and pristine.

In this ideal world they are far apart.
How does the speaker represent himself? [Note: A 'complaint' is another word for a love poem.]

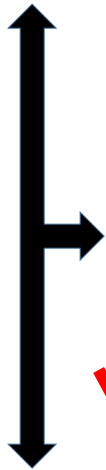
Her: by the side of the River Ganges in India with rubies

Him: by the side of the River Humber in Hull

What is the effect and purpose of this comparison?



AO3: Biblical Flood / Noah's Ark
Over 4000 years ago.



How
long?

HYPERBOLE?

If this is hyperbole, do you think Marvell might be mocking love poems that use such grand language?

I would
Love you ten years before the Flood;
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.

AO3: In Christian texts – just before the end of the world.

What is the speaker suggesting about his love for his mistress?

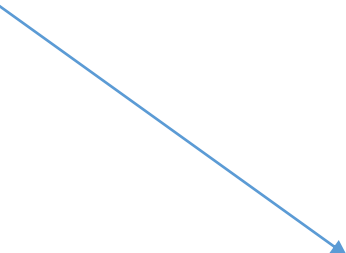
What is it she would be refusing?

Why does he compare his love to a slow growing vegetable?

Think about the different interpretations of this idea.



My **vegetable love** should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.



Why does he use the
phrase ‘vaster than
empires’?

“My vegetable love”

AO3:

Aristotle suggested that there are different kinds of ‘soul’. One of these is the ‘vegetative soul’ which governs nutrition and the growth of living things. This is linked to the idea of ‘natural love’, linking the earth to the heavenly bodies. It is an ideal form of love, in contrast to the ‘sensible’ [i.e. of the senses] love of physical and sexual attraction.

This suggests, then, that Marvell’s ‘vegetable love’ is a natural, organic love that grows without pressure or prompt. Their love will grow slowly, naturally, and in a pure, heavenly way.

It’s also a pun, referencing the penis.
“should grow/
Vaster than empires, and more slow”



AO4/5: An extract from Marvell's poem *The Garden*, in which the narrator wanders through a blooming paradise.

*What wondrous life is this I lead
Ripe apples drop about my head ;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine ;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach ;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.*

The garden is practically forcing its fruits on the poet, except that he's so willing: the tree fruits places themselves into his hands, the ground fruits trip him. This poem is part of a collage of art and poetry that imagine Eden as bursting with fruits, not with vegetables. Fruit is easy: if it's ripe, it's already ready to eat, already flavorful and sweet, no cooking or seasoning necessary. Vegetables require labor, which surely no paradise would require. So that's a possibility: perhaps Marvell was contrasting this vegetable love—slow-growing, requiring a lot of maintenance—to the ease with which he wished she could be plucked.

(Words to Eat By, by Ina Lipkowitz),

How is **time** used to praise and flatter her?

An **hundred years** should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But **thirty thousand** to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And **the last age** should **show your heart**.



In what way does he expect
that she will 'show her heart'?

He called her “Mistress” before.
Why does he now call her “lady”?



For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

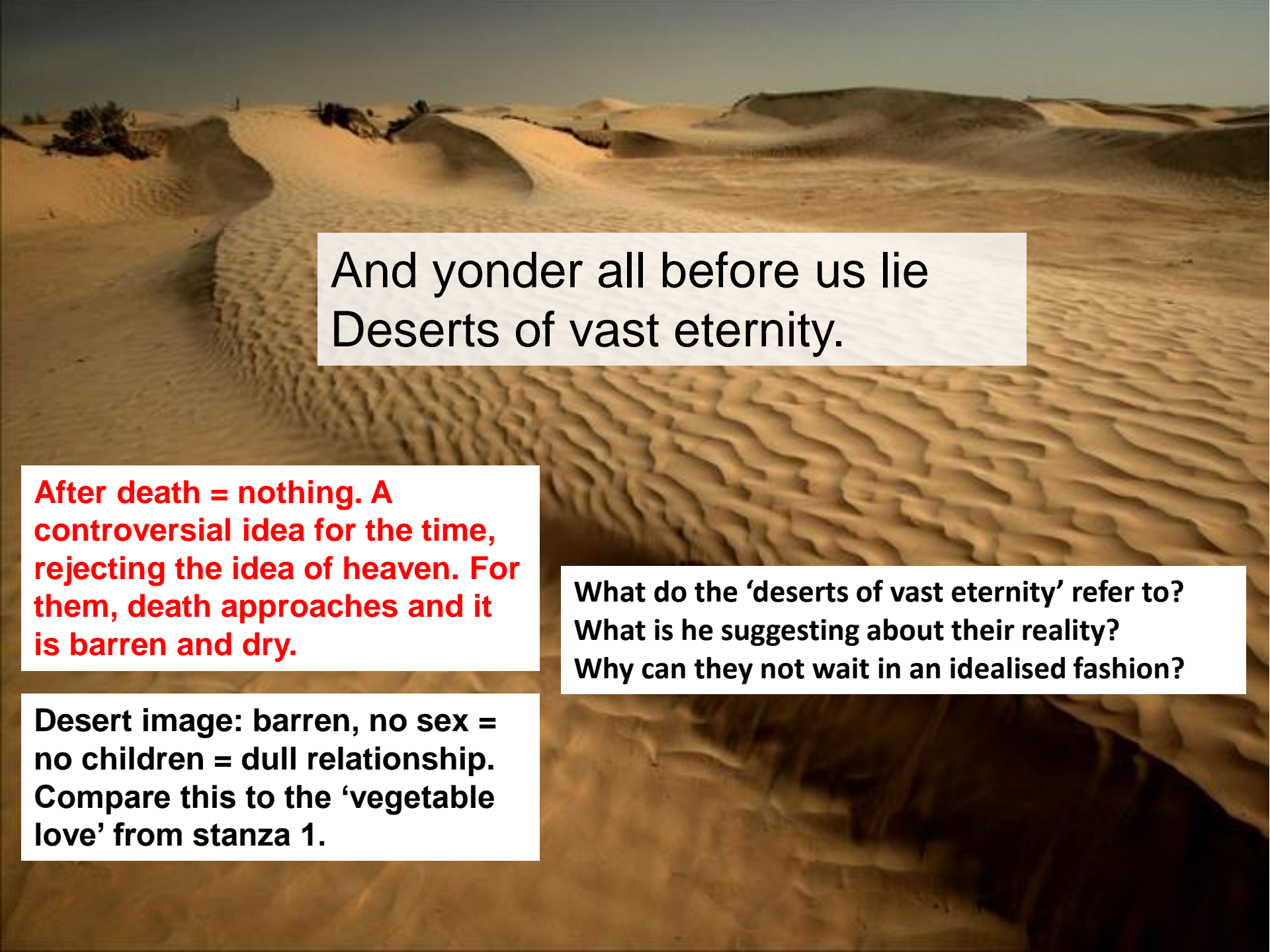
What is he saying here?

What is the significance of this 'But'? How does it change the tone and pace of the poem?

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;

Contrast this line to the slow pace of stanza 1. How and why has it changed?

Where have we seen such a personification of time before? What is the effect of this?



And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

After death = nothing. A controversial idea for the time, rejecting the idea of heaven. For them, death approaches and it is barren and dry.

Desert image: barren, no sex = no children = dull relationship. Compare this to the 'vegetable love' from stanza 1.

**What do the 'deserts of vast eternity' refer to?
What is he suggesting about their reality?
Why can they not wait in an idealised fashion?**



Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy **marble vault**, shall sound
My echoing song;

What is the 'marble vault' he is referring to?
What else does he suggest about his mistress?
What will happen to his praise ('song') from stanza 1?

What shocking image does he present to his mistress here?

then worms shall try
That long preserv'd virginity,
And your **quaint** honour turn to **dust**,
And into **ashes** all my lust.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

AO3:

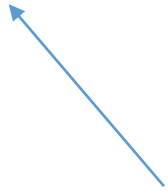
'Quaint' = charming or sweet. It is also a c17th pun for vagina.

What are 'dust' and 'ashes' reminiscent of?
How do they add to the picture the speaker is painting for his mistress?

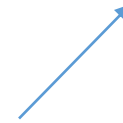
then worms shall try
That long preserv'd virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to **dust**,
And into ashes all my **lust**.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.

This **rhyming couplet** of 'dust' and 'lust' sets out the choice the mistress is presented with: death or sex. This is then summed up in the final couplet of the stanza.

'Now therefore' – the poet returns to reality. This stanza is the logical outcome of what he has presented to his mistress (If we had time... but we don't because death is approaching...). **How does he change the tone once more?**



Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,



How is a 'youthful hue' like morning dew? How does this link to the previous stanza?

The idea of perspiration is created here:

1. Morning dew
2. Your **'willing soul'** (i.e. a soul which is alive and obvious at **'every pore'**)
3. **'Transpires'** = 'to come to light' / 'to happen' / part of the process of photosynthesis where the flower loses water / rhymes with **perspires**



Why might the mistress be perspiring? (Or, more correctly, why might the speaker wish her to be/what does he think her soul is 'willing' to do?) How does this link to 'instant fires'?

What does 'sport' suggest about what he wants them to do?

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-chapp'd** power.

What effect do these images have? Do they fit with 'sport'?

The speaker offers the options:

1. We devour time like 'amorous birds of prey'
2. We 'languish' in the slow, devouring jaws of time

Slow devouring jaws of time.

What is he suggesting? How does this fit in with his overall argument so far?

Notice the use of the **plural pronoun**: highlight any use of 'us' or 'our'. Why does the speaker use this here? What is he trying to do?

The poet's use of **alliteration** links 'strength' and 'sweetness'. What is the effect of this? [Hint: is this more positive or negative language than before?]

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.

Break down the "iron gates" of time, i.e. death – together they can **control**

AO5: The idea of a 'ball' here is much discussed. Some critics see this as a reference to the enclosed space and intimacy of sex; others find an allusion to a cannonball, signifying a determination to succeed in a battle against time and death together. **What do you think?**

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.

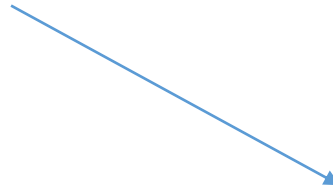
Even though the speaker emphasises the 'strength' and 'sweetness' of their union, which ultimately allows them to control time and death, look at the type of language used in these lines. **What could 'tear' and 'rough strife' refer to? Does your answer to the first question above affect your ideas?**

The speaker returns to the image of sun and time.

What is his final point?

[Hint: remember that the sun, in Marvell's time, was thought to control time – i.e. they thought it literally revolved around the earth. Its **personification** was also a metaphor for time itself. Time also represented death. What is the speaker suggesting they can do, here? And how?]

Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we **will** make him run.



What is the effect of the word 'will'?

On the surface, this poem is about the attempted seduction of a woman...what is the message underneath about how we should live our lives? [Hint: remember that Marvell is a **metaphysical** poet!]

AO2: Imagery

Tempus Fugit [Time Flies!] / Memento Mori [Remember Death!] / Carpe Diem [Seize the Day!]

Stanza 1:

Marvell uses a conditional statement [If... then...]. If time did not fly, then we could take all the time in the world to consummate our relationship.

Stanza 2:

BUT time is flying and we must act now. Death is nigh. Your honour will turn to dust and my lust to ashes.


Stanza 3:

Therefore, seize the day. We should attack each other like mating falcons, embracing our mortality: “at once our time devour”. “Thus, though we cannot make our sun/ Stand still, yet we will make him run.”

Time and Space

*The poem is repeatedly concerned with **time** and **space**.*

Stanza 1:

Had I but world enough and time
 **space**

Thou by the Indian Ganges side

Of Humber would complain. I would

There is a huge distance (space) between the Indian Ganges and the Humber in England. This distance will not affect the speaker's love for his mistress.

Time and Space

The poem is repeatedly concerned with **time** and **space**.

Stanza 2:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near

time

Deserts of vast eternity.

space

There are plenty more references to time and space: how many can you find?

AO2: Form / Structure

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
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.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
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.

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;
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;
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
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.
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
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

THESIS: The 'ideal' state ['HAD we...']

ANTITHESIS: The real situation ['BUT at...']

SYNTHESIS: What has to be done as necessary conclusion
['NOW therefore...']

Had we but world enough and time,
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To walk, and pass our long love's day.
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Rhyming couplets:

Stanza 1 – ten couplets

Stanza 2 – six couplets

Stanza 3 – seven couplets

Why this number?

- This poem is a **dramatic monologue**
- The silent listener (the mistress) is addressed but we do not hear her voice
- There is the sense that we, the reader, are eavesdropping on an intimate conversation
- The speaker is anonymous and we are given no information about him or his mistress
- The poem is written in iambic tetrameter [i-AM x 4]
I do not like green eggs and ham
I do not like them Sam I Am
- The regular “sing-song” rhythm and rhyme creates a “comic” feel which contrasts strongly with the underlying theme of life and death

A04/5: Links and Interpretations

Marvell's speaker, who apparently has been searching for the meaning of existence, has determined that life is transitory, that there is no afterlife, and that the only option left is for him in his life is to fully indulge in carnal pleasure.

The poem is an ironic statement on sexual seduction. The speaker's argument that sex will help him control time is meant ironically and ultimately comments on the fleeting nature of sexual pleasure.

For the speaker, dying is the ultimate lack of control.

Which, if any, of these statements do you agree with?

His Coy Mistress to Mr. Marvell

by [A.D. Hope](#)

Since you have world enough and time
Sir, to admonish me in rhyme,
Pray Mr Marvell, can it be
You think to have persuaded me?
Then let me say: you want the art
To woo, much less to win my heart.
The verse was splendid, all admit,
And, sir, you have a pretty wit.
All that indeed your poem lacked
Was logic, modesty, and tact,
Slight faults and ones to which I own,
Your sex is generally prone;
But though you lose your labour, I
Shall not refuse you a reply:

First, for the language you employ:
A term I deprecate is "coy";
The ill-bred miss, the bird-brained Jill,
May simper and be coy at will;
A lady, sir, as you will find,
Keeps counsel, or she speaks her mind,
Means what she says and scorns to fence
And palter with feigned innocence.

The ambiguous "mistress" next you set
Beside this graceless epithet.
"Coy mistress", sir? Who gave you leave
To wear my heart upon your sleeve?
Or to imply, as sure you do,
I had no other choice than you
And must remain upon the shelf
Unless I should bestir myself?
Shall I be moved to love you, pray,
By hints that I must soon decay?
No woman's won by being told
How quickly she is growing old;
Nor will such ploys, when all is said,
Serve to stampede us into bed.

When from pure blackmail, next you move
To bribe or lure me into love,
No less inept, my rhyming friend,
Snared by the means, you miss your end.
"Times winged chariot", and the rest
As poetry may pass the test;
Readers will quote those lines, I trust,
Till you and I and they are dust;
But I, your destined prey, must look
Less at the bait than at the hook,
Nor, when I do, can fail to see
Just what it is you offer me:
Love on the run, a rough embrace
Snatched in the fury of the chase,
The grave before us and the wheels
Of Time's grim chariot at our heels,
While we, like "am'rous birds of prey",
Tear at each other by the way.

To say the least, the scene you paint
Is, what you call my honour, quaint!
And on this point what prompted you
So crudely, and in public too,
To canvass and, indeed, make free
With my entire anatomy?
Poets have licence, I confess,
To speak of ladies in undress;
Thighs, hearts, brows, breasts are well
enough,
In verses this is common stuff;
But—well I ask: to draw attention
To worms in—what I blush to mention,
And prate of dust upon it too!
Sir, was this any way to woo?

Now therefore, while male self-regard
Sits on your cheek, my hopeful bard,
May I suggest, before we part,
The best way to a woman's heart
Is to be modest, candid, true;
Tell her you love and show you do;
Neither cajole nor condescend
And base the lover on the friend;
Don't bustle her or fuss or snatch:
A suitor looking at his watch
Is not a posture that persuades
Willing, much less reluctant maids.

Remember that she will be stirred
More by the spirit than the word;
For truth and tenderness do more
Than coruscating metaphor.
Had you addressed me in such terms
And prattled less of graves and worms,
I might, who knows, have warmed to you;
But, as things stand, must bid adieu
(Though I am grateful for the rhyme)
And wish you better luck next time.

**What point is this poet making?
Is it a valid one?
Does it add anything to your
understanding or appreciation of
Marvell's poem?**

AO1: What kind of love is presented in this poem?

Think about:

- The characteristics of love
- The representation of the people involved
- The feelings of the speaker
- Any imagery or language used
- The way the structure and form reflects this

You can either:

Write a side of A4 to explain your answer.

Write a detailed plan of your answer.

Make sure you include and analyse quotations from the text.

C**L****I****F****S****Other
notes**

**Fill in your CLIFS sheet for
this poem. Remember, this
will be a revision aid!**