

“To His Coy Mistress”

An Interactive Exercise



Directions

- This isn't interactive in the usual sense; it's a series of questions that call for you to respond before going on to the next slide. You may even want to write down your responses so that you will remember them.
- First step: Read the poem aloud.



“To His Coy Mistress”

- You can read the entire poem in one piece here:
- <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/marvell/coy.htm>
- Or you can read it in pieces in the next few slides.



To his Coy Mistress

Andrew Marvell (lines 1-10)

- 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.



Lines 11-20

- 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.



Lines 21-32

- But at my back I always hear
Time's winged 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 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.



Lines 33-46

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 am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapp'd power.

Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball;
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.



Overall Argument

1. What's the speaker trying to accomplish here?
2. Is he trying to ask his mistress to marry him?
3. What is the nature of his argument?
4. How logical is it?

Answer these and move to the next slide.



1. He's trying to get his mistress to sleep with him.
2. Not exactly. Is the word "marriage" mentioned in the poem?
3. He structures his poem as a logical argument. See the next slide for details.



Carpe Diem

1. Look closely at the beginning of lines 1, 21, and 33. You can see his argument there:

1. IF we had world enough and time, I could court you forever.
2. BUT we do not.
3. THEREFORE we should make love now, before it is too late.

This type of poem is called a “carpe diem” poem. “Carpe diem” means “seize the day.”



Lines 1-10

1. Why does the speaker mention the Ganges and the Humber?
2. What is he trying to establish by talking about “ten years before the flood” and “the conversion of the Jews”?
3. What do these two ideas have in common?

Answer these and move to the next slide.



1. The two rivers are far apart geographically, thus representing a great or infinite amount of space.
2. The two events are far apart chronologically, thus representing a great or infinite amount of time.
3. Both are examples of hyperbole, or exaggeration for effect.



Lines 11-20

What does the speaker mean by “vegetable love”?

Hint: One possible meaning is suggested by the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Even into the Renaissance people believed in a fixed order of creation, a divinely ordained hierarchy known as the Great Chain of Being. See the next slide for the chart.



Great Chain of Being

- God (perfect reason and understanding)
- Angels (reason and understanding)
- Man (reason, emotion, sensation, existence)
 - Woman (emotion, limited reason, sensation, existence)
- Animal kingdom (emotion, sensation, and existence)
- Vegetable kingdom (sensation and existence)
- Stones and inanimate objects (existence)
- Picture at <http://www.stanford.edu/class/engl174b/chain.html>



Vegetable Love

1. Vegetative, fecund, flourishing.
2. Love at the level of sensation rather than reason and emotion, which should characterize human love.



Lines 11-20

- 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.



Catalogue of Beauty

- Look carefully at the next few lines:
“An hundred years should go to praise /
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze”
- What are the connotations of eyes
and forehead?

Answer these questions and move to
the next slide.



Catalogue of Beauty

- Eyes = window of the soul
- Forehead = intellect
- In another example of hyperbole, the speaker tells his mistress how much he appreciates her intellect.
- But there's more



Catalogue of Beauty

- “Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest;”
- Think about this:
 - Eyes/forehead/intellect = 100 years
 - EACH breast = 200 years
 - “The rest” = 30,000 years

Where does his interest in her REALLY lie?
If you guessed “not her brain,” you’re right.



Lines 21-32

- But at my back I always hear
Time's winged 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 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.



Lines 21-32

- To what classical figure is “time’s winged chariot” an allusion?
- What is suggested by words like “deserts,” “marble vault,” “dust,” and “ashes”?
- Why does the speaker say that “worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity”?
- Why does the poet repeat “no” and “nor”?
- What lines constitute an ironic understatement?

Answer these and move to the next slide.



1. Phoebus Apollo, god of the sun, drove his chariot across the heavens each day.
2. The dry, dead imagery of this section contrasts with that of the sections before and after it.
3. The contrast between his physical possession of her body and the worms' physical possession of it should make his taking of her virginity seem more attractive. This section focuses on waste and loss, and these lines focus on the waste of her (dead virginal) body.

In short, he's asking, "Whom would you rather have touching your body, me or the worms?"



- 4. “No” and “nor” complete the pattern of negation of life found in these lines.
- 5. “The grave’s a fine and private place/ But none, I think, do there embrace.”

This is understatement. Does he really mean he isn’t sure whether people embrace after death? Do dead people embrace? Of course not.



Lines 33-46

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 am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapp'd power.
Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball;
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.



Lines 33-46

1. What word is repeated three times in the first six lines?
2. How is the imagery in these lines different from that in the previous section?
3. What kinds of birds do you typically associate with love, and are those the birds evoked here?
4. What other images does he use to describe their love?

Answer these and move to the next slide.



1. “Now.” From the infinite time mentioned in the first section, the poem has moved on to an insistence on immediate action.



2. Note the words: “morning dew”; “youthful hue”; “transpires”; “instant fires.”
“Transpires” suggests a kind of breathing through the skin; the “morning dew” is moist and evanescent, not lasting until midday; “instant fires” suggests heat; and “youthful hue” again emphasizes her skin. The images suggest that youth is warm, moist—and transitory.

Previous section: dry and cold; death

This section: warm and moist; life



- 3. Most people would say doves or another such gentle bird. These lovers are “amorous birds of prey,” tearing at each other physically and devouring time.
- 4. Other images include the “ball” which the lovers create, which can penetrate the “iron gates of life” like a cannonball, a violent image like the birds of prey.



Last Lines

- The last lines bring the reader back to the idea of time again: the lovers' physical union has the power to change time by making the sun “run.”

