

Notes on To His Coy Mistress by Andrew Marvell:

"To His Coy Mistress" is divided into three stanzas or poetic paragraphs. It's spoken by a nameless man, who doesn't reveal any physical or biographical details about himself, to a nameless woman, who is also biography-less.

During the first stanza, the speaker tells the mistress that if they had more time and space, her "coyness" (see our discussion on the word "coy" in "What's Up With the Title?") wouldn't be a "crime." He extends this discussion by describing how much he would compliment her and admire her, if only there was time. He would focus on "each part" of her body until he got to the heart (and "heart," here, is both a metaphor for sex, and a metaphor for love).

In the second stanza he says, "BUT," we don't have the time, we are about to die! He tells her that life is short, but death is forever. In a shocking moment, he warns her that, when she's in the coffin, worms will try to take her "virginity" if she doesn't have sex with him before they die. If she refuses to have sex with him, there will be repercussions for him, too. All his sexual desire will burn up, "ashes" for all time.

In the third stanza he says, "NOW," I've told you what will happen when you die, so let's have sex while we're still young. Hey, look at those "birds of prey" mating. That's how we should do it – but, before that, let's have us a little wine and time (cheese is for sissies). Then, he wants to play a game – the turn ourselves into a "ball" game. (Hmmm.) He suggests, furthermore, that they release all their pent up frustrations into the sex act, and, in this way, be free.

In the final couplet, he calms down a little. He says that having sex can't make the "sun" stop moving. In Marvell's time, the movement of the sun around the earth (we now know the earth rotates around the sun) was thought to create time. Anyway, he says, we can't make time stop, but we can change places with it. Whenever we have sex, we pursue time, instead of time pursuing us. This fellow has some confusing ideas about sex and time. Come to think of it, we probably do, too. "To His Coy Mistress" offers us a chance to explore some of those confusing thoughts.

Lines 1-2

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime

The speaker starts off by telling the mistress that if there was enough time and enough space ("world enough, and time"), then her "coyness" (see "What's up with the title" for some definitions) wouldn't be a criminal act.

This is a roundabout way of calling her a criminal, and makes us think of jails, courtrooms, and punishments.

Hmmm. What exactly is her crime? What is she being "coy" about?

Lines 3-4

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

In any case, he continues.... If they had all the time and space they wanted, they could Google everything, read guide books, and carefully consider where they might go next, while aimlessly strolling and resting whenever they pleased.

Line 5

Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

She could hang out on the bank of the "Indian Ganges" finding "rubies."

The Ganges River is considered sacred and holy by many people all over the world. In Marvell's time, the Ganges is pure and pristine. Now, many parts of it are incredibly polluted.

Lines 5-6

Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

Shouldest rubies find: I by the tide

And, he would be across the world at the Humber tidal estuary, skipping in the froth from the waves and whining. (Actually, he says "complain," which also means "love song.")

This would place them far away from each other, obviously.

The speaker doesn't sound thrilled at the idea of a long-distance relationship.

Lines 7-10

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.

He would go back in time to Noah and the Flood, and forward in time to the "conversion of the Jews," all the while loving her.

The speaker's grand, Biblical language mocks poems which describe love in divine terms.

Lines 11-12

My vegetable love should grow

Vaster than empires, and more slow;

Then, we get one of the poem's most famous lines. The speaker starts telling the mistress about his "vegetable love."

Much debate occurs over the meaning of this term.

The word "slow" in line 12 gives us a clue. We think "vegetable love" is "organic love" – love without the pressure of anything but nature, a natural process resulting in something nourishing – vegetables.

But, be careful. Since it's organic, vegetable love will cost a little more in the grocery store.

We can't neglect another connotation, either.

A certain part of the male anatomy is shaped like certain members of the vegetable kingdom. Vegetable love also refers to that.

Some literary critics think the "vegetable" in "vegetable love" refers to the female anatomy, as well.

Lines 13-17

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,

Anyhow, he says that, if he had time, he would give her compliments about each of her individual body parts, and he would spend a bazillion years doing it.

Line 18

And the last age should show your heart.

And then, finally, after all that complimenting, she would "show [her] heart," presumably by having sex with him.

Line 19-20

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

You're worth it, too, he says, and I wouldn't give you anything less than that first-class love. The word "rate" cleverly links with the word "heart" of the previous line, making us think of "heart rate."

Lines 21-22

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

And, then, he gives her a huge gigantic "BUT." Ouch. You see, the speaker hears something behind him: "Time's winged chariot," to be exact.

He's being chased down by Time's hybrid car!

He doesn't say who's driving, but we can assume it's probably Time.

Lines 23-24

And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Then, he seems to have a hallucination.

Look, he tells the mistress, look at all this sand. The future is just endless sand.

We're all going to die.

Line 25

Thy beauty shall no more be found,

And you won't look so pretty there, missy.

Lines 26

Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound

You sure won't be able to hear my pretty song when you are in a "grave."

Lines 27-28

My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,

This next part is even creepier.

The speaker tells the mistress that, in the grave, worms will have sex with her.
According to the line, she's a virgin.

Line 29

And your quaint honour turn to dust,

In the grave, her "quaint honor" will completely disintegrate.

According to The Norton Anthology of English Literature, "quaint" is a euphemism that means "vagina."

So, he's telling her that she can't take her virginity with her into the afterlife, and making icky jokes about her vagina.

Line 30

And into ashes all my lust:

Next, he tells her that if they die without having sex together, his "lust" or desire, will all burn up, with nothing left but the "ashes."

Interestingly, he seems to imply that, if he can't have sex with her, he won't have sex at all.

Lines 31-32

The grave 's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

He rubs in the whole thing by telling her that coffins are great: they have lots of privacy, but no hugging!

Line 33

Now therefore, while the youthful hue

Luckily, he leaves all that morbidity behind, and gives us the old "now, therefore." By this, the speaker suggests that his argument is successful, and that he's about to tell the mistress what she should do, since his argument is so successful.

Lines 34-36

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,

He kind of brings her back from the grave here. Just a minute ago, he imagines her dead in the crypt, and, now, he tells her how young she is, and how her soul rushes around excitedly inside her, leaking out through her pores.

"Transpire" has a few fun meanings that you can ponder.

The first is "to come to light."

The second is "to happen."

The third actually has to do with plants. If a plant "transpires," it loses water vapor through its stomata (little pores on a plant's leaves), a crucial part of photosynthesis.

Line 37

Now let us sport us while we may,

Since you are transpiring (rhymes with "perspiring") and all, let's play some games, he tells her. Then, he gets a brilliant idea.

Line 38

And now, like amorous birds of prey,

They should pretend to be birds of prey, mating!
(Sounds a little dangerous to us.)

Also, the word "prey" introduces violence, and therefore uneasiness, into the scene.

Line 39

Rather at once our time devour

But, before the games begin, we should have a little pre-mating dinner. Here, honey, try this seared fillet-o-time, on a bed of vegetable love. And for dessert – time capsules! See, time deserves to be eaten.

Line 40

Than languish in his slow-chapt power.

Time exerts its "slow-chapped power" over the speaker for far too long. According to the Norton Anthology of English Literature, "slow-chapped power" means "slowly devouring jaws."
In short, he feels like he's dying in Time's mouth, and that time is slowly eating him up. He wants to turn the tables, and thinks that sex, or so he tells his mistress, is the way to get time under his control.

Lines 41-42

Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,

Next comes his actual 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. Come to think of it, "ball" works that way, too.

Lines 43-44

And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:

But, what's with "tear" and "strife"?
It makes sense from the speaker's perspective.

He 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" of life into the bedroom will enhance the sexual experience.

Lines 45-46

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

In this final couplet (a couplet is a stanza made up of two lines, usually rhyming), the speaker seems a little bit calmer.

He talks about the sun now, instead of time.

In his time, the sun is thought to control time.

In the end, he admits that sex is a compromise.

They can't use it to stop time, but they can use it to make time go faster.

What? If time goes faster, won't the speaker and the mistress die sooner?

Not if he's in control.

And, not if, as we suggest in "Symbols, Images and Wordplay" under "The Great Beyond," the sun and time, also represent death.

If they can make time run, it won't have time to kill people.

It's not necessarily the most rational argument, but it has its charm.

And, the speaker isn't the first person to think that sex is the answer to all problems.

In any case, the final couplet can give you food for thought for years.