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**MARVELL'S "TO HIS COY MISTRESS":  
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THEME AND IMAGERY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper is essentially a stylistic analysis of Andrew Marvell's famous poem "To His Coy Mistress". This paper emphasizes the irrelevance of interpreting a literary text by isolating it from the biography of its author and the circumstances of its age. On this basis, the paper argues that the hedonistic speaker in Marvell's poem does not express the poet's views about the theme of physical love but represents the liberal materialistic attitudes of the Seventeenth century in England toward the male/female issues. Marvell's real voice appears in the poem in the shape of the conservative religious allusions which run counter to the hedonistic motifs of the poem confusing theme and imagery and undermining the major argument of the poem. The paper illustrates that Marvell wears the mask of hedonism in an attempt to try his hands in the hedonistic theme or the contemporary carpe-diem motifs which are at odds with Marvell's spiritual attitudes. This conclusion could not be reached without examining the available biographical and historical background of the poem. The paper also examines the text of the poem from stylistic, biographical and historical perspectives which were subordinated in traditional critical studies which targeted the text. As a whole, the paper aims to provide a stanza-by-stanza analysis, followed by an appendix which illustrates some significant stylistic issues which in their turn support the argument of the paper that a poem is an integrated entity which could not be separated from the history of its creation or the biography of its author.

In his comment on contemporary critical schools, Northrop Frye points out: "In our day an ironic provincialism which looks everywhere for complete objectivity, suspension of moral judgments, concentrating on pure verbal craftsmanship, and similar virtues is in the ascendant... the suggestion made here is that no set of critical standards derived from only one mode can ever assimilate the whole truth about poetry (62). Frye's argument is relevant because critics approach poetical works from different critical perspectives in order to reach specific conclusions. For example, critics such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren deny the existence of a relationship between the poet's biography and the text of his poetry claiming that: "autobiographical identification is not necessarily important: we are concerned with the fact that the speaker of the poem, whether historical or fictional is expressing an attitude through his particular use of language (183). Such a viewpoint is rejected by Charu Shell Singh who states that the new critics (such as Brooks and Warren) saw all literature especially poems, through one mode, is much too evident, and this exposes their

limitations (26). Equally, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., challenges the view that one should not look beyond the text itself when interpreting a literary work.

According to Hirsch, a literary text is not just "a piece of language" to be examined in isolation, but it "represents the determinate verbal meaning of an author" and the task of the interpreter is to find out that meaning by using all the available information. A literary text should be interpreted in different ways and in order to argue that one particular interpretation is more probable than another, the interpreter according to Hirsch, must attempt to "verify" it with "extrinsic data" in order to prove that it is consistent with the author's typical outlook, the typical associations and expectations which form in part the context of his utterance" (Hirsch 478). Hirsch's argument is supported by Raman Selden who points out: The literary work is the child of an author's creative life and, expresses the author's essential self: the text is the place where we enter into a spiritual or humanistic communion with an author's thoughts and feelings (52).

The poem starts with the following lines which could be considered as the thesis of the poem:

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 faster 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 a love at lower rate, (80 - 81)<sup>1</sup>.

The poem begins with a simple hypothesis: The speaker, in the poem tells his mistress that if their life were immortal, her coyness would no longer be a "crime". Stylistically, the first part of the poem shows an extensive manipulation of irony. The entire stanza mentioned above is ironic because of the speaker's sensual attitude and the mortality of the world. The above mentioned lines, in reality, connote the contrary of their literal meaning (which is ironic). The speaker's loves will never "grow faster than empires" as he claims because he is interested in enjoying the moment. Such an extended irony which runs through the first part of the poem attains a climax in the following lines:

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

In order to highlight the ironic structure of the poem we have to analyze the poem's literal meaning. In the beginning the male speaker assumes that his beloved has committed a fatal error against herself and her lover for being chased and coy in a world threatened by time and mortality. Marvell's speaker equally points out that if it was possible to control the motion of time, his mistress and he would find time to love, forsake and complain. She could even go to India "by the Indian Ganges side" and leave him alone singing his love poetry by the banks of the Humber River in England. The speaker in the poem equally states that both world and time limit their possibilities for making love. It would be lovely to sit and think and walk but there is not enough time for that luxury. Marvell's speaker imagines how coy the entire relationship would be, his mistress could delay and he could keep pleading almost indefinitely. He would praise her again and again while she would not yield.

The first stanza of the poem, as we see, strikes the thematic note or the thesis of the poem. The male speaker, here, announces the mutability and impermanence of our world in order to justify his materialistic pursuits. Thus, the opening lines offer a certain philosophical position which will be undermined by the appearance of a contrary attitude which is running as an undercurrent stream throughout the structure of the poem. In other words, the poet fails to fuse theme and imagery because he employs religious imagery when he expresses his hedonistic theme. The confusion of theme and imagery occurs in the following lines: I would love you ten years before the flood / And you should, if you please, refuse till the conversion of the Jews. The

<sup>1</sup>All the quotations from "to His Coy Mistress" are taken from A Book of Love Poetry, ed. John Stallworthy, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1973, p. 80-82.

allusions to "the flood" and "the conversion of the Jews" come from the Bible. "The flood" here connotes Noah's Flood and according to the Bible, the Jews will be converted to Christianity, just before the end of the world, before the Day of Judgment. The speaker means that if he had control over time he would love his mistress from the time of Noah's flood which had happened a long time ago until the conversion of the Jews which will take place just before the Day of Judgment. This in itself is an exaggeration or a hyperbole which reveals the speaker's love feeling, but, it is expressed through religious allusions which confuse the poem's theme and imagery.

Moreover, the reference to the "Ganges River" has religious connotations because the Ganges is worshipped and considered a sacred river in India. In fact, the blending of religious allegories with the carpe-diem motifs and the expression of secular modes through religious terminology are striking, yet, damaging to the poet's hedonistic theme and to the cohesion between theme and imagery. What Marvell does in his poem is considered as some sort of "register deviation". According to G.N. Leech register deviation happens when the poet employs language from other registers (religion for example) which violates the poetic register of the poem (50). Within this context, the first part of the poem reveals a kind of disharmony between theme and imagery resulting from the choice of religious images and lexical items which run counter to the theme of physical love in the poem. This also weakens the theme of the poem because the speaker's hedonistic stance is handicapped by the appearance of religious images and lexical items suggesting that the speaker is fully aware of a spiritual realm of attitudes which runs counter to his hedonism.

The poet's style in the first stanza of the poem is characterized by an extensive use of symbolism. The poet, for example, associates his mistress with (the Indian Ganges), a sacred river, which symbolizes her purity and respect. Such an association contradicts with the physical description of the poet's mistress. The word "rubies" is equally symbolic because it is an emblem of the soft emotions of the poet's mistress. There is also a symbolic analogy or parallelism between the calmness of "the Ganges" and the calmness of the mistress' emotions on one hand and the violence of the 'Humber river' as well as the violence of the poet's sexual desires on the other hand. The speaker's "vegetable love" is symbolic in the sense that his love is physical. By establishing such a correspondence between the speaker's concept love and the world of vegetation, the poet makes us aware of the physical nature of his love which runs counter to the religious images of the poem which are associated with spirituality. Taken Together the first part of the poem In spite of its errors still reveals powerful images such as "my vegetable love" which underlines the hedonistic attitude of the male persona and shows his lustful desire for the flesh. The parallelism between the liberal sexual attitude of the male speaker and the highly conservative attitude of his beloved is beautifully worked out through Contradictory River imagery. "The Ganges is associated with conservatism and exoticism whereas "the Humber" is associated with modernization and liberty.

The first stanza of the poem ends with two hyperbolic statements expressed through a couplet: "For lady you deserve this state / Nor would I love at lower rate". On one level, the hyperboles in the first part of the poem such as: "two hundred to adore each breast" according to C.R. Reaske "reveal a blend of humor with serious love statements. Stylistically, it is very difficult to establish this blend because violent poetic transgression leads to the breakdown of the poem (128). It is consequently obvious that the poet fails to reconcile theme and images. Therefore, the poet, in the coming section, moves away from the humorous references to his beloved's body and starts a logical argument as we will see.

In the second stanza of the poem, the male speaker declares that he cannot love his mistress the way she deserves and the way he should do because: "... at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near, /and yonder all before us lie/Deserts of vast eternity. In his attempt to convince his beloved to shed her coyness, the male persona in the poem tells her that time is menacing and youth will not last forever. The poet here speaks about time as "a chariot" which has wits. Time is chasing the lovers robbing them of their youth and lust and pushing them ahead towards vague destination where nothing exists except eternal wilderness. The insinuating voice of the male speaker reaches a climax when he tells his mistress: " Thy beauty shall no more be found, / Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound/My echoing song".

The male speaker, equally, reminds his mistress of death and decay which are inevitable; she will lose her beauty, fascination and sexual appeal with the progression of time and age. Then death will come and she

will be buried in a small grave where no love poetry can be recited anymore. The male speaker not only warns his innocent beloved of death but he also visualizes a fearful image of what will happen to her in the grave:

"... Then worms shall try/That long preserved virginity/and your quaint honor turn to dust and into ashes all my lust: / The grave is a fine and private place / But none, I think do there, embrace". The liberal speaker points out that his beloved is wasting their life by insisting on being virgin and conservative. He reminds her that her beauty and virginity will be useless and his lust will die once the years of youth are gone.

Technically, the poet employs logic as an artistic device to reinforce the argument of his male persona. The speaker tells his beloved that "since they are mortals, desirous of enjoying mortal love, they must rationally express and partake of that love now", for soon they will no longer be mortals. "And since worms will inevitably feed on his lady's virginity, it is logical that she might as well let him have it now". In this part of the poem, the poet succeeds in "blending logic with flirtatious wit and these two facets of his appeal" are integral to "the thematic development of the poem." (Reaske 128).

Stylistically, the word "honor" in the line "and your quaint honor turn to dust" is inappropriate and thus ambiguous. It is difficult to figure out any correspondence between "honor" and "dust" because "honor" is not a peculiar quality of the vain mistress. The line might be understandable if the poet uses a word like "desire". The second part also has some symbolic implication. "Time's chariot" which has wings is a symbol of the speed and quickness of time. "Marble vault" is an emblem of death, grave and decay. Equally the words "dust"; and "ashes" symbolize nothingness and decay. There is an obvious irony in the line "the grave is a fine and private place". Obviously the grave is neither a fine nor a safe place but it is a place of death, ghosts, decay and absolute silence.

In the third stanza of the poem, the male speaker urges his mistress to join him in a sexual liaison while they are young: "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". These lines are confusing in style and images and in the choice of words. This is because the supposed-to-be materialistic and pleasure-seeking speaker shows an awareness of certain spiritual and transcendental values which he ignores in first two parts of the poem. For example, in the middle of his physical and sensual description of his beloved, the speaker mentions the word "soul" which aborts the sexually-oriented description. Stylistically, the word "transpires" is ambiguous because it carries two meanings. On one level, it indicates the perspiration which accompanies sexual activity. On the other hand, the words "soul transpires" indicate a state of the soul issuing forth, an echo of certain attitudes of transcendence. The second meaning serves as an ironic counterpart to the first one which reflects a materialistic view of life.

Then, the liberal speaker concludes the poem with the following lines: "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 hate 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" (81-82).

In this concluding stanza, the poet abandons images of love and devotion, and the speaker and his beloved are seen as "birds of prey" an unfamiliar image which underlines the violence and sadism of the sexual act. This image, no doubt, suggests the intensity and sexual sensation the speaker longs for but it is still a cruel, violent image. Paradoxically, the phrase "youthful hue" symbolizes beauty and attraction which parallels, "Birds of prey" as a symbol of sexual violence. The time motif is crucial here and is emphasized because it is connected with the major theme of the poem which deals with physical love. The speaker's sexual persuasion reaches a zenith when he urges his beloved to "roll all our strength" into "one ball". Here, the ball is a symbol of oneness and sexual union. The manner in which the ball will penetrate through the iron gates of life signifies the violence and savageness of the sexual act.

"The iron gates of life" phrase symbolizes the difficulty of enjoying one's worldly pleasure in a world governed by time, space and traditional, conservative values. However, the sexual ecstasy makes time go faster and brings about a temporary eternity. The sexual intensity here perpetuates life and it is, in a sense, a triumph over mortality. This attitude, according to the poetic context, obliterates the awareness of time which is important to the lovers who can only defeat time by hurrying toward death. The tearing of pleasure images

and the eat -or-be- eaten imagery such as "devour time" and "languish in his slow chapped power" are illustrative of such an attitude these images though inappropriate stylistically, are necessary because they enforced the argument of the poem by contrasting female coyness with an urgent and aggressive masculinity which are fused into one ball of sweetness and strength. Stylistically, the image of "birds of prey" is a sadistic image of aggressive sex. Stylistically, the hedonistic speaker affirms his urgent passion for sexual contact through the verbal repetition of the lexical item "now". He says: "now therefore", "Now let us sport" and "Now like amorous birds of prey". Equally the male speaker used the logic technique which he developed in the concluding section of the poem. The major logic in the concluding section is that the speaker and his beloved should beat time at its own game. They should devour time rather than let time devour them. Time must not only be used now but conquered now as well. The notion that the lovers can only conquer time by making the sun run would be an expression of time's flying in retreat from the force of their violent love-making. Thematically and structurally, the poem shows a gradual development of incidents, a kind of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Stylistically, the poet fails to fuse theme and imagery because he employs religious images when expressing sexual motifs. He also fails to fuse humor and flirtatious in the first part. The poet used violent love images which reflect sadistic sexuality. The speaker, in the poem, who is supposed to be the liberal voice of Seventeenth century materialism, expresses an awareness of spiritual realm of attitudes which contradicts with his liberal sexual morality.

### Conclusion

After analyzing "To His Coy Mistress", one can draw the conclusion that the hedonistic speaker does not reveal Marvell's own attitudes toward love because in most of Marvell's poetry innocence and spirituality are given the highest possible value and love is glorified in situations where it can be separated from sexuality. The real voice of Marvell is that one which intrudes upon the materialistic speaker and thus confuses most of the poem's imagery. As we mention, the pagan speaker surprisingly shows an awareness of certain ideals which are contradictory with his own concept of morality. With the progression of the poem, we discover that the second voice does not belong to the speaker, but to the poet himself. In this sense, it is obvious that Marvell wears the mask of hedonism in an attempt to try his hands in such a theme or rather to make fun of these carpe-diem themes which are at odds with Marvell's spiritual attitudes. Nevertheless, the poet weaves in his tapestry images and ironies which confuse the poetic fabric of the poem by mixing hedonism with spirituality. A look at the title of the poem would affirm such a viewpoint. The title is "To His Coy Mistress" and subsequently a question arises: why did not Marvell call the poem "To My Coy Mistress"? The answer is that because the speaker in the poem does not reveal the poet's own consciousness neither does it reflect his own moral attitudes. Within this context, the carpe-diem motif in Marvell's poem could be taken as a reply or even as an ironic imitation to existing literary traditions, a conclusion which could not be reached without making use of the available biographical and historical information about the poet and his age.

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