‘To His Coy Mistress’ by Andrew Marvell

Content
The speaker attempts to seduce his mistress using the argument that life is fleeting and that they have no time for a long courtship.

Theme
Love, lust, passion, persuasion, mortality, passage of time.

Persona
The poem is written from the first-person perspective, as evidenced by the use of the collective pronoun ‘we’ in the opening line, and uses direct address to speak directly to the woman the speaker is trying to seduce, as seen in the line ‘This coyness, lady, were no crime’.

Context
The poem was written in the seventeenth century, when there were strict rules governing contact between courting couples and women were expected to guard their virginity and fend off the advances of their suitors. Marvell challenges the Puritanical ideas of his time, which taught the importance of denying earthly pleasures in order to prepare for the afterlife, by arguing the need to make the most of life and enjoy the transient pleasures it has to offer.

Form & Structure
- The poem is a dramatic monologue consisting of three stanzas, written in rhyming couplets of iambic tetrameter (eight syllables per line).
- The poem’s strong, regular metre serves to underscore the forcefulness of the speaker’s arguments about why he and his mistress should consummate their relationship by enhancing the direct, confident tone of his message. For instance, the steady iambic pentameter of the lines ‘But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near’ creates a strong sense of momentum which on a metaphorical level reinforces the speaker’s message about the need for urgency and haste.
- The use of rhyming couplets also invests the speaker’s argument with a sense of rightness and aptness and the sense that he is pointing out self-evident truths, due to the way the rhymes fit together. This effect can be seen in lines such as ‘Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run’, where the heroic couplets create a clinching feeling and a tone of resolution that enhances the persuasive force of the speaker’s arguments about making the most of the present moment.
- Marvell uses caesurae to control the pace of the poem and reinforce his message about the passage of time. The semi-colon at the end of the line ‘Thy beauty shall no more be found;’ creates a pause which invites the mistress (and the reader) to reflect on her impending death and emphasizes the finality of death in contrast to the brevity of life.

Language & Imagery
- In the first stanza, Marvell uses hyperbole and the conditional tense to convince his mistress of his devotion to her, assuring her that if they could live forever, he would devote unlimited time to wooing her, as seen in the line ‘An hundred years should go to praise / Thine eyes’.
- Marvell uses the metaphor of ‘Time’s winged chariot hurrying near’ to emphasise how quickly time is passing by representing it as a speeding vehicle. His use of the verb ‘hurrying’ adds to the sense of speed and urgency generated by this chariot metaphor.
• He uses death imagery to reinforce this sense of urgency by reminding his mistress of life’s brevity. The image of dust in the line ‘your quaint honour turn to dust’ provides a vivid reminder that human life is transient, while the image used to describe how ‘worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity’ creates a sense of horror at how time is running out by evoking an image of decay.

• In the following lines, he juxtaposes these images of death and decay with an image of youthfulness – ‘while the youthful hue / Sits on thy skin like morning dew’ – to impress upon his mistress the need to embrace the present moment.

• The simile used to describe the speaker and his mistress as being ‘like amorous birds of prey’ portrays them as feasting on all that life has to offer, yet also has underlying connotations of greed and slyness which suggest that the speaker’s impassioned speech is motivated by his own selfish desire.

• Marvell uses the imperative ‘Now let us sport us while we may’ to convince his mistress to surrender her virginity by creating a persuasive, authoritative tone which suggests that his arguments are common sense and that she ought to agree with him.

• In the final lines, Marvell uses a nature metaphor to present the consummation of his and his mistress’s relationship as the only rational response to the unstoppable passage of time, concluding that: ‘though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run.’ Through this metaphor, he acknowledges that while they cannot halt time, by making the most of their lives they will present the strongest possible challenge to its progress.

Tone

• In the first stanza, the speaker’s tone is courteous and measured as he seeks to convince his mistress of his love for her and assure her that if they had more time, he would devote hundreds of years to wooing her: ‘Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, lady, were no crime’.

• In the second stanza, it becomes more cautioning and solemn as he brings home to her the reality of their mortality: ‘And yonder all before us lies / Deserts of vast eternity’.

• In the final stanza, it becomes urgent and impassioned as he tries to impress upon her the need to make the most of their limited time together, aided by his use of imperatives and imagery: ‘Let us roll our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball’.