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Words on "To His Coy Mistress"

Either you have sex with me or you die. This is a very strong statement which, when said, has to get someone's attention; and that is exactly what Andrew Marvell intends for the reader in this poem. He wants the undivided attention of this mistress so that he can scare her and rush her into making a decision the way he wants and in due time. Filled with time flavored symbolism, this carpe diem poem, "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, exemplifies the seize the day theme.

The cyclical, life symbolizing river, the water flowing by like time, is the first place Marvell places the characters. And even though they are very far apart, time still flows by for them both. As the water flows, this concept begins to hint at the shortness of time, for them to have sex, the source of new life. He then proceeds to claim that he could love her ten years before the flood, something already ancient, and up to the end of the world, using the juxtapositioning of the two views of time enhance his argument and to convince to accept his offer by telling her of his long-term commitment for her in the short-term. This flood also symbolizes life in the fresh start of the new covenant. Because time keeps going, with or without them, they must be active participants and not just the static spectator. Otherwise, the fate Marvell relates would become their reality.

Marvell's vegetable love is rather oxymoronic. Love is not normally like the uncaring, thoughtless, and noncommunicating plant. And yet his love is vegetable in that it is not adaptable. She is the water, food, and light for his love; and as long as she is there, he will love her. She is everything that supports his love, and if she is not there, his vegetable could not be supported and would die. His idea of love seems to just be to say that he loves her for the possibility that he can share carnal knowledge; however, this is why he tries to convince her to seize the day. And because of this love he felt they must take advantage of what time they have.

Next comes the threat of punishment if she happens to continue down her dark path of stubborn unwillingness to engage with him. Suddenly the desert is before them and beauty is gone forever. The life giving and symbolic water is gone. She's dead and the worms are her only company. These worms are symbolic of two different ideas. First they are phallic in shape and do stand as phallic symbols. They are also another cyclical representation of time, in that they are part of the cycle that will break her body down into soil, feed the trees, feed an animal, etc. So he tries scare her and to force her into the decision to seize the day.

Marvell then stresses the youth she still possess and his plan to save them. He talks about her youthful hue and the morning (of life / youth) glow to remind her what she needs to save from the imposing grip of her grave. He gets very aggressive and speeds up the meter to add effect and urgency to his pleas. Then he talks about birds of prey, Schmidt3

hurrying, and devouring to really twist the proverbial knife and to convince her. After adoring her body for ages and wading through innuendo, he says let us roll all our strength and all our sweetness

into one ball and says he wants to spend the rest of time with her making the sun run.

Although the message in this poem is universal, throughout time, Marvell's methods are unique for his time. The fact that he used death to persuade a less than eager woman is not new. The way he does it, is. According to Paul Brians, from the English Department at Washington State University, Marvell's imagery of death is so powerful, that the poem transcends the cliched 'lines' of more frivolous writers to become a stirring meditation on the importance of living fully during the brief span allotted us (Brians).

Andrew Marvell tries in this carpe diem poem, "To His Coy Mistress," to use time and symbols to convince her to seize the day. He uses the river, the worm and many direct references to time to express the urgency of the situation. He then says that his love is vegetable and that this coy mistress is the only one that can sustain this living love. Then he threatens death, gets aggressive, and shows her that her youth is fleeting, and that if she does not change, she will be miserable.

Works Cited

Brians, Paul. "Study Guide for Classic English Love Poems," Paul Brians' Homepage. n. pag. On-line. Internet. 3 Sept. 1996. Available: http://www.wsu.edu:8000/~love-in-the-arts/classic_english_love-poems.html