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### **IMAGERY IN ANDREW MARVELL'S "TO HIS COY MISTRESS"**

#### **ABSTRACT**

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", a metaphysical poem, presents a familiar theme in literature - *carpe diem*. The term refers to a common moral in classical literature which offers the reader that they should enjoy life before it ends because life is too short. This theme was mostly employed in the Cavalier Poetry written in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Metaphysical Poetry emerged as a distinct type of poetry in English Literature. Though "To His Coy Mistress" takes *carpe diem* as a central motif as a Cavalier poem does, it presents more than this by a skillful combination of this motif and the metaphysical qualities. Marvell reflected, behind this epicurean idea, such themes as the inevitability of death, powerlessness of man in the face of time and the triumph of love over time and death on a philosophical level. The aim of this study is to reach the poem's philosophical level through a study of the imagery and their meanings in the poem and thus to reach the deep meaning of the poem.

**Keywords:** Andrew Marvell, To His Coy Mistress, The Metaphysical Poetry, Carpe Diem, İmageriy

#### **ANDREW MARVELL' IN "TO HIS COY MISTRESS" ADLI ŐİİRİNDE İMGE**

#### **ÖZET**

Andrew Marvell'in metafizik bir Őiiri olan "To His Coy Mistress" (Utangaç Sevgiliye) adlı Őiir, edebiyatta sıkça karŐılaŐılan *carpe diem* (günü yakala) motifini ieren bir Őiirdir. *Carpe diem* klasik edebiyatta ortaya ıkan ve okuyucusuna hayatın ok kısa olduėunu ve bitmeden nce tadına varmasını neren bir ğretidir. İngiliz Edebiyatında ise bu tema, daha ok 17. yzyılda Metafizik Őiirle aynı zamanda ortaya ıkmıŐ bir Őiir tr olan Cavalier Őiirde kullanılmıŐtır. "To His Coy Mistress" *carpe diem* temasını, Cavalier bir Őiir gibi ana motif olarak almasına karŐın bu motifle Metafizik Őiir zelliklerinin ustaca birleŐimi sayesinde bundan daha fazlasını sunmaktadır. Marvell bu Epikrc dŐncenin arkasında lmn kaınılmazlıėı, zamanın karŐısında insanın gszlė, zaman ve lmn karŐısında aŐkın zaferi gibi temaları felsefi bir dzlemde yansıtılmıŐtır. Bu alıŐmanın amacı Őiirdeki bu dŐnsel dzleme Őiirin ierdiėi imge ve anlam zmlenmeleri ile gidip Őiirin derin anlamına ulaŐmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Andrew Marvell, To His Coy Mistress, Metafizik Őiir, Carpe Diem, İmge



## 1. INTRODUCTION (GİRİŞ)

The poem "To His coy Mistress" written by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) and published in his posthumous collection, **Miscellaneous Poems** in 1681 is a metaphysical poem which presents a familiar theme in literature - *carpe diem* (seize the day) on the surface but, behind the surface, a philosophical and metaphysical theme: death. As it is known *carpe diem* is a term coined by the ancient Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known as Horace (65-8 B.C.). Till then the motif was employed in literature and adopted as a life philosophy. It was injected into the English Literature and began to be widely used by the Cavaliers - a school of English poets of the 17th century, who came from the classes that supported King Charles I during the English Civil War, and much of whose poetry is light in style, and generally secular in subject. The Metaphysical poets were, on the other hand, a group of British lyric poets of the same century, who shared an interest in metaphysical ideas, and whose style was characterized by wit, subtle argumentations and conceits. In "To His Coy Mistress", Marvell skillfully combines *carpe diem*, an epicurean or hedonistic idea with the metaphysical concerns. Though he employed, in his poem, the urgency of making love, taking pleasure from life, the brevity of youth and time and shortness of life, all of which are related with the *carpe diem* motif, he also employed more sophisticated themes such as the inevitability of death, powerlessness of man in the face of time and the triumph of love over time and death. For this reason, "To His Coy Mistress" should not be considered to be just a love and seduction poem. It is true that at first glance the poem seems to be a fairly typical *carpe diem* poem, in which the male speaker importunes his mistress to cease being coy and have a sexual intercourse with him. In the poem, Marvell employed the metaphysical themes behind the surface meaning of the poem, vivifying his lines with an abundance of imagery. The study aims to reach the metaphysical depth and the deep meaning of the poem through an analysis of the imagery and the meanings of the images. Believing that how Marvell says is as important as what he says in "To His Coy Mistress", we will attempt to explore the figurative language of the poem.

## 2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE (ÇALIŞMANIN ÖNEMİ)

Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" employs a hedonistic idea, *carpe diem* as a central motif and seems to be offering its readers an epicurean way of life including making love. However, Marvell combines, through the imagery, the themes of love and death in a skillful way. This study aims to explore the meanings of the images, and thus to reach the philosophical level of the poem, i.e. the deep meaning of the poem.

## 3. THE TEXT AND PARAPHRASE OF "TO HIS COY MISTRESS" ( "TO HIS COY MISTRESS" IN METİN VE AÇIKLAMASI )

The first thing that strikes the audience in "To His Coy Mistress" is that the lines of the poem were embellished with the figurative language in relation to the use of imagery. But it is considered that it would be useful to look at the poem with regard to its construction and subject matter before analyzing the imagery in the poem. To this end, what the argument of Marvell's speaker in the poem is and how this male speaker creates, develops and ends his argument can be studied.

"To His Coy Mistress" is a poem which was constructed in the form of syllogism, a logical pattern and a reasoned argument in which there are two statements leading to a third statement, i.e. conclusion. There are three stanzas in the poem, in the first stanza,



the speaker starts his argument, in the second he develops the argument, and in the last he concludes it. Thus the poem can be divided into three parts, which "may be held together by the binding power of statements or premises leading to a conclusion" (Hancock, 1972:97). Each of the three parts of the poem presents a step in the argument. Here it would be useful to give the text of the poem stanza by stanza to remind the lines to the reader though it is a widely anthologized poem. The first stanza of the poem reads thus:

*Had we but world enough, and time,  
This coyness, lady would 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  
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 you at lower rate.*

The two opening lines of the poem seem to be an effective way of initiating the argument of the speaker in that the lines reveal an impossible unreal condition. If the world were large enough and the time long enough, the modesty of the speaker's beloved would not be a crime. "The lover then gives detail after detail to indicate how he would approach the lady if there were enough time and space to match the depth of expansiveness of his love." (Hancock, 1972:97) In this part of the poem, the speaker imagines what would happen if he and his lover had much an unlimited time in a vast world. He imagines a highly extended period of courtship which one cannot attain in real life. They could sit down and debate which way they would walk and how they would spend their "long love's day". She could hunt for rubies in India by the Ganges River; he would sit and complain by the Humber River. He would have loved her from before the Flood - the biblical story of Noah's ark - and she could, if she wished, go on refusing him until the Jews were converted to Christianity - an event which is, in the Bible, supposed to happen just before the end of the world. The speaker also says that his love would be like vegetable in growth, becoming bigger than empires, but even more slowly. He could spend a hundred years, praising her eyes and gazing on her forehead; two hundred, adoring each of her breasts; and thirty thousand years, devoting to the rest of the lady's body. An age could be devoted to each part of her, and only at the end of time would she show him her heart because this is the ceremony she deserves and he would not love her less worthily.

In the second stanza of the poem, i.e. the second part, the speaker goes on his argument, turning from the imaginary time to the real time. Marvell's lines in the second stanza:



*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-preserved 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.*

The first two couplets of this stanza argue that there is not, however, "world enough and time". Then the speaker gives the details of what will occur if the action is not taken. As has already been observed, the impossible conditions in the first twenty lines are not continued in the second part. The first word of the second stanza is "But", which shows that the speaker would say, in the second part, the things contrasting with the things in the first part. In other words, he would refute what he has said in the first part. From now on, the speaker, as a realist man, accepts the shortness of time. It is obvious that in the real world, the speaker is always conscious of the rapid passing of time, and that before him and her lover there is nothing but the emptiness of eternity. Then, her beauty will no longer exist, nor in the vaults where her body lies, will his song echo. The speaker also argues that only worms will attack the virgin body whose chastity has been preserved for so long, a proud chastity which will itself be dust, as the poet's desire for her will be reduced to ashes. The grave presents a gracious and private setting but there will be no one to embrace the lady there.

In the third stanza beginning with "Now therefore", the speaker reaches a reasonable argument, which is the evidence of the poem's syllogism. The words initiating this part reveal that the speaker sums up his argument. Having made it clear that "under the existing circumstances of life there is not world and time enough" (Hancock, 1972:98), the speaker reaches the conclusion that the lady should not be so shy and should accept the speaker's love because the time is not as long as the time supposed in the first stanza, in other words, as they have a limited time. The speaker goes on in the third part as such:

*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,  
And now, like the 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 into 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.*

It is evident that in this part of the poem the speaker concludes that while his lover is young and beautiful and while her body and spirit respond with desire, they should make love. Now, like



"birds of prey", they must devour time rather than be slowly chewed to pieces by time itself. All their strength of purpose and their happiness must be summoned up so that the force of their pleasure will tear them through the restraints of life. Thus, while the lovers cannot make the time stop, they can triumph in the only way possible by making the sun move to their pace.

This paraphrase of the content of the poem has enabled us to see what the poem says on its primary level. Thus we can conclude that "To His Coy Mistress" is a poem in which the male speaker proposes his lover a sexual intercourse, in the form of an argument in three distinct parts. It can also be said that the poem masquerades as a syllogism, a three-part argument with a major premise, a minor one and a conclusion. The argument of the speaker on the poem's primary level can be summed up in Guerin's own words of paraphrase of the speaker's argument:

1.If we had all the time in the world, I could have no objection to even an indefinite postponement of your acceptance of my suit. 2. But the fact is we do not have much time at all; and once this phase of existence (that is, life) is gone, all our chances for love are gone. 3. Therefore the only conclusion that can logically follow is that we should love one another now, while we are young and passionate, and thus seize what pleasures we can in a world where time is all too short. After all, we know nothing about any future life and have only the grimmest observations of the effects of death (Guerin, 1979:33-34).

#### **4. THE IMAGES AND THEIR MEANINGS IN "TO HIS COY MISTRESS" (TO HIS COY MISTRESS'DE İMGELER VE ANLAMLARI)**

In this part of the study, the images in the poem will be attempted to be analyzed to reach the poem's darker theme behind the surface. Imagery as a general term "covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience" (Cuddon, 1999:413). The poem is full of images, metaphors, similes, allusions and puns, all of which contribute to the overall form and the seep meaning of the poem. In the poem the speaker's argument begins with a supposition and its effect, that if he and the lady he addresses had "but world enough, and time" they would surely love at some point. There is, of course, a fallacy in his statement. The fallacy is that space and time are both always finite. However, as Brackett notes, "he continues to imagine, playing with this fantasy to place both him and his love at specific points of geography during specific eras". (2008:399) After this precise statement, Marvell creates, in the reader's mind, a mental picture in which the speaker and his lover "sit down, and think which way / To walk and pass" their "long love's day".

The first stanza contains a range of images revealing a vast time. They are "long love's day", "ten years before the Flood", "Till the conversion of the Jews", "An hundred years", "two hundred [years]", "thirty thousand [years]", "An age" and "the last age". All these time expressions present a series of extravagant impossibilities, in other words, hyperboles. Through these time expressions presenting an expanded time, the speaker says in hypothetical conjecture that if he had enough time, he would praise his beloved mistress forever. John Larson argues that "to begin to slow the passage of time in his poem, Marvell makes reference to past and future events on a grand scale". It is evident that these images



are all abstract images which appeal to the intellect; and they convey a mood of majestic endurance and stress how the speaker wishes his love to be "tranquil and drawn out" as Larson calls it. Two of these images, "ten years before the Flood" and "till the conversion of the Jews" are biblical references and the period between these events crosses a massive amount of time. Through this allusion, Marvell turns the focus away from "impending death to an ideal world without it" (Larson, 1).

In the first part Marvell also employs images revealing a vast setting. The speaker imagines his love in India beside the Ganges River, where she might discover rubies, while he would pass his time by the Humber River in England, complaining their separation. In this dream world, distance does nothing to mar the speaker's love for his mistress. The speaker chooses to glorify the position of the lady, who can find rubies where she dwells; on the contrary, the speaker's dwelling place by the Humber seems dull and lowly, where he can only complain of the lady's cruelty. The speaker's forcing the mistress to pity his position by describing a state of separation strengthens the argument of the speaker.

After the images of an expanded space, the speaker moves to the image of "vegetable love". Though there are plenty of ways to interpret the lines "My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow", we will limit our interpretation with the most striking ones. Within the context of Marvell's time theme, the most apparent interpretation is that it takes a vegetable plenty of time to grow large and ripe. For this reason, time acts as nourishment for his love. The phrase is also oxymoronic in that it contains two contrasting ideas. Love is not normally like the uncaring, thoughtless and non-communicating plant. Yet the speaker's love is vegetable which can grow without care. It can be said that the speaker sees her lover as the water, food and light for his love. Without her, his "vegetable" could not be supported and thus would die. In other words, the growth of his love would be possible as long as she supports. It should also be noted that "vegetable love" implies plant more than garden vegetable. This image is an of all-conquering vine, i.e. climbing plant which insidiously works its way through a forest or field, overtaking incredible spaces until it becomes "Vaster than empires". It is evident that through the image Marvell implies the idea of a long time as time is not important for the plant.

The speaker's "vegetable love" may also be "an allusion to an erect penis" (2008:400) as Brackett points out. His "vegetable love", a reference to eroticism, could continue to outgrow empires and move with slow luxury. Including such an image, the first part of the poem emphasizes the sensual. This emphasis is also evident in the references to the mistress's "breast" and "the rest" of her charms. The image of "heart" in the line "And the last age should show your heart" may imply the idea that the lady would show her love toward the speaker if they had enough time. As the word "heart" is used just after the images implying eroticism, it would not be wrong to think that "heart" may also be an allusion to the lady's sexual organ. Here Marvell praises the woman's body parts, reducing her to an object of admiration. But combining these images with the images of vast time and place, he appreciates the lady. He ends this part telling "For, lady, you deserve this state, / Nor would I love you at lower rate". The speaker pays her the delicate compliment that she deserves such love, and he will give only what she deserves.

In contrast with the first stanza of the poem, the second stanza includes images revealing the brevity of time. Marvell, employing an image such as "Time's winged chariot hurrying near", which refers to



the rapid passage of time, moves from warm fantasy to cold reality. The image recalls Phoebus Apollo, "god of sun and of light" (Hamilton, 1969:30) and his fiery chariot. The image is a reference to "Apollo's crossing the heavens each day pulling the sun behind him and symbolizing the unstoppable passage of time" (Brackett, 2008:400). The word "winged" suggests speed and thus implies the idea that time is running out. The image of the sun itself emphasizes the passage of time, the cycle of the day from dawn to dusk. Guerin notes that "Time's winged chariot" is "the traditional metaphor for the vehicle in which the sun, moon, night and time are represented as pursuing their course" (1979:35). Marvell making the winged chariot come behind the speaker suggests that both time and death are inescapable and they are something that haunts man. While time is hurrying and death draws nearer behind the speaker, in front of him, lies eternity like "a desert, empty and inhospitable, vast and devoid of human comfort" (Emden, 1986:79). The couplet including the phrase "deserts of vast eternity" suggests "the desert is all that is before us, it is the whole of eternity, it is before us all" (Emden, 1986:79). With the line 25, we are faced with great enemies: time and death. The speaker describes his mistress in her "marble vault", in which the speaker's "echoing song" will never be heard. Both "marble vault" and "echoing" are as cold as death. Christine Rees argues that in these lines, Marvell conjures "two opposite but related phobias: terror of wide open spaces, heightened by the fear of pursuit, and terror of confined spaces [...] In both environments, human action and pleasure cease" (1993:97). Thus the speaker amplifies the frightening aspects of being alone in time and space and he hopes his mistress to take action. He becomes more intense as the stanza continues with these lines: "then worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity, / And your quaint honour turn to dust, / And into ashes all my lust:" Her body will be deflowered not by the heat of love, but by worms. The "worms" may be symbolic in that they are phallic in shape and stand as phallic symbols. "Quaint honour" suggests both her chastity and "the female sexual organ" (Emden, 1986:80). Her chastity will be dust and the speaker's desire for her, ashes. Here the speaker asserts the idea that if the lady does not choose to experience sex with the speaker, who loves her, she will experience it for the first time with worms as a corpse. Here Marvell again draws, in the mind of the reader, a powerful mental picture, in which the severest side of death: being buried in the grave and being eaten by the worms. Marvell also combines the word "grave" and the words "fine" and "private" in a sardonic way, which appears with the use of the expression "I think". In conclusion, we can say that the imagery employed in section I reminds one of eternity but it abruptly stops in section II and it reminds one of the finite time and space, and that the images in the second stanza of the poem are all related with reality of time, space and mortality, and the cold reality of death.

By the third stanza the speaker has finished flattering his love, leaving his lover scared of dying without experiencing a physical love. He obviously feels confident as he begins the third stanza with a strong "Now therefore". The speaker makes note of the lady's "youthful hue" by comparing its effect on her skin to that of "morning dew". He supposes she possesses a "willing soul", a soul that "transpires / At every pore with instant fires". As they are both young, they have still desire and passion for love symbolized by the word "fire". With the line "Now let us sport while we may", the language and tone change drastically from a loving grandiose one to an animalistic and rugged one. Then the speaker compares himself and his lady to "amorous birds of prey" to suggest that his desire for sex



involves wildness; because what "birds of prey" suggest are birds like hawks and eagles. The speaker wants the lady to make love fiercely. After showing human powerlessness in the face of time and the destruction time causes in the second stanza, the speaker now says invigoratingly that they should "devour" time before time "devours" them. Here Marvell devalues the power of time through the personification in which time's power is shown as slow-chapped. The choice of the word "devour" suggests the idea that the speaker desires a fierce sex from the lady. The mistress has to give in to sex, and not just passively so that they could "devour" time. The lines "Let us roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball" suggest the act of physical love. The speaker believes that by rolling "into one ball" and molding together, they can destroy any fear that time and space instill within them. The image "one ball" may also be of a cannonball of a sphere and a symbol of perfection, "the archetype of primordial wholeness and unity" (Guerin, 1979:175-176). "The gates" in the line "Through the iron gates of life" may be an allusion to the gates through which Christ's followers are led into an immortal life. Christ advises his followers:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew, 7:13-14).

Though the speaker sees the broad way to destruction in the "deserts of vast eternity" and in the "grave" in the second stanza of the poem, in the last stanza he prefers the narrow way to life and knows where to find it - "through her iron gates that have been chastely closed to him for so long" (D'Avanzo, 1978: 18). Marvell ends the poem with another reference to Apollo by concluding "Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run". They cannot stop time and hold back death but "they can use time in a way that will leave the lovers victorious". It is clear that the speaker believes that they can defeat time and death by making them "subservient to their desire" (Emden, 1986:80). The final lines of the poem can be treated as a celebration of love and life victorious over time and death because the feelings that arise in the reader are that the speaker wishes to reduce time's gradual consuming effect; and that the speaker and his lover can do this insofar as much they act, i.e. behave like time and death.

##### 5. CONCLUSION (SONUÇ)

At the end of this study it has been observed that, in "To His Coy Mistress", the form and content are combined so well that one should study both of them to reach the deep meaning of the poem. Written in the form of syllogism, the poem proposes the argument that the lady should give up her coyness and make love with the speaker because life is too short and at the end of life there is death. At first glance, the poem seems to be presenting the epicurean idea, *carpe diem*. Yet through the analysis of the imagery in the poem, it has been observed that Marvell did not employ *carpe diem* just to mean that man should seize the day and lead a hedonistic life. Having an abundance of imagery, the poem presents the reader the ideas of brevity of life and youth, the inevitability of death and the victory of love over life and death. It should also be noted that Marvell changes the tone of the poem in each stanza to lead the speaker to the bitter reality of death and love's triumph over time and death. The



employment of the images of a vast time and space and of the improbable conditions gives way to a playful and fanciful tone in the first stanza. In the second stanza this tone is substituted for a pessimistic and realistic tone and in the last, a resolute and determined one. From the beginning till the end of the poem, the reader encounters the allusions taken from the Bible and Greek mythology. The imagery especially in the second part of the poem is so powerful with the images of the rapid passage of time, death and grave that, in the reader's mind, the bitter realities of the shortness of life and youth and of the inevitability of death are created with their severest dimensions. Marvell also combines the theme of love and death skillfully and gives the reader the feeling of the transience of time and human's limitation in front of time and death. Therefore it can be said that the poem focuses on time rather than love. The imagery in the third stanza of the poem presents the urgency of action. Marvell creates the feeling of urgency through the allusions of time from Greek mythology. Love is shown as urgent because death threatens, love is drawn as action because time devours. Marvell's alternative is that love may triumph over time and death. Employing a hedonistic idea as a central motif in "To His Coy Mistress", what Marvell actually does in the poem is not giving his reader an offer of seizing the day as life is too short but rather presenting an idea, on a philosophical basis, that man can defeat his great enemies, time and death by means of love. It can be said that "To His Coy Mistress" is a poem which concerns time more than love and in which love-making is chosen as a symbol for any activity that involves living intensely and thus makes man triumphant over time and death.

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