

If you are trying to seduce someone, is it a good idea to dwell on death? In Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress," the speaker meditates on how cold, worm-ridden, and empty the grave is. While this decision might seem a poor choice for someone who is trying to convince his conquest to acquiesce, it does emphasize the importance of "seizing the day": We will all age, then die. Our days, our youths, are short, and we do not have "world enough, and time" (line 1) to dawdle or wallow in indecision. The speaker of "To His Coy Mistress" is not being morbid so much as realistic.

In the first section of the poem, the speaker pretends not to pay any attention to the fact that he and his lover will not live forever. He tells her how they would linger in their lovemaking and parades her by vast and ancient scenes. Space and time are exaggerated here to the point that the lovers flirt over an enormous space, from "the Indian Ganges" (5) to England's own "Humber" (7). The speaker claims that he would spend "thirty thousand" (16) years adoring and lingering over her body, because, of course, she "deserves this state" (19).

Yet the speaker, who can flatter as well as anyone can, is at heart a realist, and the realism of the grave is at the heart of the poem. He confesses his anxiety: "But at my back I always hear / Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near; / And yonder all before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity" (21–24). This is a sobering image, and it is meant to scare the coy mistress into action. If she is not sufficiently repulsed by "Time's wingèd chariot," the speaker goes on to tell her in no uncertain terms that her beauty will fade, that "worms shall try / That long=preserved virginity" (27–28), and that her honor and his lust will turn to dust and ashes, respectively (29–30). This rhetoric is pretty harsh, and it would be hard for the speaker to return to his original tone of flattery and slow-paced exaggeration.

In fact, the speaker's tone again shifts in the final section. Although the poem has a strictly regulated meter, the speaker picks up his pace in the final twelve lines, trying almost desperately to convince the listener that they have *some* control over time: "though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" (45–46). In this final section, the speaker reveals the emotion that has been under the surface of the poem all along: passion. The speaker's flattery in the first section and his apparent fear in the second were really just covering

up his almost uncontrollable lust, and his rhetoric in the final section involves imagery that reflects his true feelings: “At every pore with instant fires” (36), “amorous birds of prey” (38), and “tear our pleasures with rough strife” (43). His progression of imagery may be unexpected, but it is no less effective for that.