

ROBERT HERRICK (1591–1634)

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

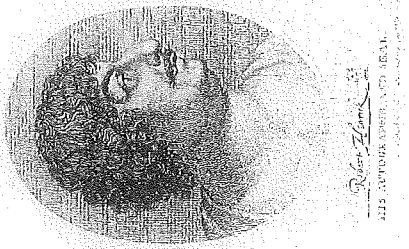
1634

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles today,
 Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
 The higher he's a-getting,
 The sooner will his race be run,
 And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
 When youth and blood are warmer;
 But being spent, the worse, and worst
 Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
 And while ye may, go marry;
 For having lost but once your prime,
 You may for ever tarry.




Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Would there be any change in meaning if the title of this poem were “To Young Women, to Make Much of Time”? Do you think the poem can apply to young men, too?
2. What do the virgins have in common with the flowers (lines 1–4) and the course of the day (5–8)?
3. How does the speaker develop his argument? What will happen to the virgins if they don’t “marry”? Paraphrase the poem.
4. What is the tone of the speaker’s advice?

The next poem was also written in the seventeenth century, but it includes some words that have changed in usage and meaning over the past three hundred years. The title of Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” requires some explanation. “Mistress” does not refer to a married man’s illicit lover but to a woman who is loved and courted — a sweetheart. Marvell uses “coy” to describe a woman who is reserved and shy rather than coquetish or flirtatious. Often such shifts in meanings over time are explained in the notes that accompany reprints of poems. You should keep in mind, however, that it is helpful to have a reasonably thick dictionary available when you are reading poetry. The most thorough is the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which provides histories of words. The *OED* is a multivolume leviathan, but there are also other useful unabridged dictionaries and desk dictionaries.

 Explore contexts for Andrew Marvell and approaches to this poem at bedfordsmartins.com/meyercompact.

Knowing its original meaning can also enrich your understanding of why a contemporary poet chooses a particular word. Elizabeth Bishop begins “The Fish” (p. 561) this way: “I caught a tremendous fish.” We know immediately in this context that “tremendous” means very large. In addition, given that the speaker clearly admires the fish in the lines that follow, we might even understand “tremendous” in the colloquial sense of wonderful and extraordinary. But a dictionary gives us some further relevant insights. Because, by the end of the poem, we see the speaker thoroughly moved as a result of the encounter with the fish (“everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”), the dictionary’s additional information about the history of *tremendous* shows why it is the perfect adjective to introduce the fish. The word comes from the Latin *tremere* (to tremble) and therefore once meant “such as to make one tremble.” That is precisely how the speaker is at the end of the poem: deeply affected and trembling. Knowing the origin of *tremendous* gives us the full heft of the poet’s word choice.

Although some of the language in “To His Coy Mistress” requires annotations for the modern reader, this poem continues to serve as a powerful reminder that time is a formidable foe, even for lovers.

ANDREW MARVELL (1621–1678)

To His Coy Mistress

1681

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°
 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:



Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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write love songs

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5 *Ganges*: A river in India sacred to the Hindus. 7 *Humber*: A river that flows through Marvell’s native town, Hull. 11 *My vegetable love . . . grow*: A slow, unconscious growth.

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 at lower rate.

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 honor turn to dust,

And into ashes all my lust.

The grave's a fine and private place,

But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now, therefore, while the youthful hue

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

And while thy willing soul transpires^o

At every pore with instant fires,

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^o power.

Let us roll all our strength and all

Our sweetness up into one ball,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife

Thorough^o the iron gates of life.

Thus, though we cannot make our sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

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35
*breathes forth*40
*slow-jawed**through*

45

6. This poem is sometimes read as a vigorous but simple celebration of flesh. Is there more to the theme than that?

The third in this series of *carpe diem* poems is a twenty-first-century work. The language of Ann Lauinger's "Marvell Noir" is more immediately accessible than that of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"; an ordinary dictionary will quickly identify any words unfamiliar to a reader. But the title might require a dictionary of biography for the reference to Marvell, as well as a dictionary of allusions to provide a succinct description that explains the reference to film noir. An *allusion* is a brief cultural reference to a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an idea in history or literature. Allusive words, like connotative words, are both suggestive and economical; poets use allusions to conjure up biblical authority, scenes from Shakespeare's plays, historic figures, wars, great love stories, and anything else that might serve to deepen and enrich their own work. The title of "Marvell Noir" makes two allusions that an ordinary dictionary may not explain, because it alludes to Marvell's most famous poem, "To His Coy Mistress," and to dark crime films (*noir* is "black" in French) of the 1940s that were often filmed in black and white featuring tough-talking, cynical heroes played by Humphrey Bogart and hardened, cold women played by Joan Crawford. Lauinger assumes that her reader will understand the allusions.

Allusions imply reading and cultural experiences shared by the poet and reader. Literate audiences once had more in common than they do today because more people had similar economic, social, and educational backgrounds. But a judicious use of specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference tools can help you decipher allusions that grow out of this body of experience. As you read more, you'll be able to make connections based on your own experiences with literature. In a sense, allusions make available what other human beings have deemed worth remembering, and that is certainly an economical way of supplementing and enhancing your own experience.

Lauinger's version of the *carpe diem* theme follows. What strikes you as particularly modern about it?

ANN LAUINGER (B. 1948)

Marvell Noir

2005

Sweetheart, if we had the time,

A week in bed would be no crime.

I'd light your Camels, pour your Jack;

You'd do shiatsu on my back.

When you got up to scramble eggs,

I'd write a sonnet to your legs,

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Do you think this *carpe diem* poem is hopelessly dated, or does it speak to our contemporary concerns?
2. This poem is divided into a three-part argument. Briefly summarize each section: if (lines 1-20), but (21-32), therefore (33-46).
3. What is the speaker's tone in lines 1-20? How much time would he spend adoring his mistress? Is he sincere? How does he expect his mistress to respond to these lines?
4. How does the speaker's tone change beginning with line 21? What is his view of time in lines 21-32? What does this description do to the lush and leisurely sense of time in lines 1-20? How do you think his mistress would react to lines 21-32?
5. In the final lines of Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (p. 612), the speaker urges the virgins to "go marry." What does Marvell's speaker urge in lines 33-46? How is the pace of these lines (notice the verbs) different from that of the first twenty lines of the poem?

And you could watch my stubble grow.
 Yes, gorgeous, we'd take it slow.
 I'd hear the whole sad tale again:
 A roadhouse band; you can't trust men;
 He set you up; you had to eat,
 And bitter with the bittersweet
 Was what they dished you; Ginger lied;
 You weren't there when Sanchez died;
 You didn't know the pearls were fake . . .
 Aw, can it, sport! Make no mistake,
 You're in it, doll, up to your eyeballs!
 Tears? Please! You'll dilute our highballs,
 And make that angel face a mess
 For the nice Lieutenant. I confess
 I'm nuts for you — but take the rap?
 You must think I'm some other sap!
 And, precious, I kind of wish I was.
 Well, when they spring you, give a buzz;
 Guess I'll get back to Archie's wife,
 And you'll get twenty-five to life.
 You'll have time then, more than enough,
 To reminisce about the stuff
 That dreams are made of, and the men
 You suckered. Sadly, in the pen
 Your kind of talent goes to waste.
 But Irish bars are more my taste
 Than iron ones: stripes ain't my style.
 You're going down; I promise I'll
 Come visit every other year.
 Now kiss me, sweet — the squad car's here.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How does Lauinger's poem evoke Marvell's *carpe diem* poem (p. 613) and the tough-guy tone of a "noir" narrative, a crime story or thriller that is especially dark?
2. Discuss the ways in which time is a central presence in the poem.
3. Explain the allusion to dreams in lines 28–29.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Compare the speaker's voice in this poem with that of the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 613). What significant similarities and differences do you find?

This fourth love poem is a twentieth-century work in which the speaker's voice is a woman's. How does it sound different from the way the men speak in the previous three poems?

SHARON OLDS (B. 1942)

Last Night

The next day, I am almost afraid.
 Love? It was more like dragonflies
 in the sun, 100 degrees at noon,
 the ends of their abdomens struck together, I
 close my eyes when I remember. I hardly
 knew myself, like something twisting and
 twisting out of a chrysalis,
 enormous, without language, all
 head, all shut eyes, and the humming
 like madness, the way they writhe away,
 and do not leave, back, back,
 away, back. Did I know you? No kiss,
 no tenderness — more like killing, death-grip
 holding to life, genitals
 like violent hands clasped tight
 barely moving, more like being closed
 in a great jaw and eaten, and the screaming
 I groan to remember it, and when we started
 to die, then I refuse to remember,
 the way a drunkard forgets. After,
 you held my hands extremely hard as my
 body moved in shudders like the ferry when its
 axle is loosed past engagement, you kept me
 sealed exactly against you, our hairlines
 wet as the arc of a gateway after
 a cloudburst, you secured me in your arms till I slept —
 that was love, and we woke in the morning
 clasped, fragrant, buoyant, that was
 the morning after love.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How is your response to this poem affected by the fact that the speaker is female? Explain why this is or isn't a *carpe diem* poem.
2. Comment on the descriptive passages of "Last Night." Which images seem especially vivid to you? How do they contribute to the poem's meaning?
3. Explain how the poem's tone changes from beginning to end.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. How does the speaker's description of intimacy compare with Herrick's and Marvell's?
2. Compare the speaker's voice in Olds's poem with the voice you imagine for the coy mistress in Marvell's poem.