

## Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

1. The poem is composed in three unequal "verse paragraphs": the first has 20 lines, the second 12, and the third 14. You'll notice that together they make up an argument: "Had we but world enough and time," a supposition contrary to fact; "But at my back I always hear," which offers us the countervailing fact; and "Now therefore," recommending action in consequence of the previous statements. This is a syllogistic arrangement. Think about why a poet might arrange his love-request as a syllogism. Make up a brief one-sentence paraphrase of each part, just to get straight your sense of the speaker's utterance. Include in your paraphrase one adjective describing the tone of voice of the speaker in each part.
2. In Part I, how long is the first sentence? the second? (continue with the same exercise throughout Parts II and III). Can you account for the varying length of the sentences when you connect them with the speaker's argument? Which is the longest? Which the shortest? What sorts of moments bring out the longer sentences? the short ones?
3. In Part I, what is the extent of space envisaged? the extent of time? How do these compare with the space and time in Part II? and in Part III? Can you make up one brief sentence summarizing what happens to time and space in this poem?
4. The poem rhymes in 4-beat (tetrameter) couplets. These lines have 8 syllables, but only 4 beats. A beat carries an accent: "But at my back I always hear" is read, "But *at my back* I *always hear*." This is a brisk march-rhythm rhyme-form—"and One and Two and Three and Four"—often used for martial or peremptory purposes. The first couplet is end-stopped: it ends with a period. Then the lines begin to be enjambed—that is, the sense roves over from the end of line 1 into line 2. (*Enjambrer*, in French, means "to throw a leg over," since *jambe* means "leg.") When do the first lines of the couplets begin to be end-stopped again? Why? Track Marvell's practice of enjambment through the rest of the poem, and be prepared to state what moments call up enjambment and which call up end-stopped couplets.

5. Track the pronouns throughout. For example, Part I begins with “we,” and progresses to “thou” (the more familiar 2nd-person form) to “you” (the more formal 2nd person form) and “I.” Why do you think “we” and “thou” disappear as Part I progresses? What replaces them? (Answer: pronominal adjectives—“my love,” “thine eyes,” etc.) Why? What happens to the pronouns in Part II? In Part III, what has happened to “I” and “thou”? Why?
6. How does Marvell imagine Time in Parts II and III? How does he imagine Eternity? How does he imagine his beloved in Part I? In Part II? In Part III?
7. Which images strike you as the strangest? (you might begin with “deserts of vast eternity,” “amorous birds of prey” and “the iron gates of life”) When you get to the most individual images of a poem—such as these—you are being afforded a rare glimpse of the idiosyncratic imagination of the writer, prompted by his strongest feelings. The violence in Part III—embodied in words like “birds of prey,” “devour,” “slow-chapped power,” “tear,” “rough strife”—conveys what feelings on the part of the speaker? What violence from without has prompted this violence within?
8. All poems aim at a form of beauty—for which another word is “aesthetic practice.” For humor, the right aesthetic practice could be either lightness and grace (Hayden’s “A Musical Joke”) or, on the other hand, broad coarseness (Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale”). Forms of beauty can be modulated throughout a poem: you might admire the humor, lightness, and grace of Part I of this poem, while finding that “humor, lightness, and grace” would be entirely the wrong words with which to describe Part III. What sort of beauty is being aimed at in III? Do you know which lines of this poem have become most famous? Take a guess if you don’t know, and speculate why these lines have become memorable.