



Archetypal Elements in Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”

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Abstract

The present paper is concerned with examining Andrew Marvell’s Seductive Cavalier Lyric poem “To His Coy Mistress” with an eye to its archetypal contents. Marvell employed images and motifs that, intentionally or not, function as archetypes. The poem contains universal elements like the images of sun, garden and desert and motif of time and immortality which are manipulated by Marvell in his poem.

Key words: Archetype; Time and Immortality; Desert

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DEFINITION OF ARCHETYPE

The origin of the word ‘archetype’ comes from Greek arkhetupon ‘something moulded first as a model’ from arkhe- ‘primitive’ + tupos ‘a model’. It means an original model or a recurrent motif in literature. It is a basic model from which copies are made; therefore a prototype. In general terms, the abstract idea of a class of things which represents the most typical and essential characteristics shared by the class; thus a paradigm or exemplar. An archetype is atavistic and universal (Cuddon, 1982, p.55).

The term archetype stands for a recurring pattern of experience which can be identified in works of literature and human sciences. These can be identified in the form

of recurring actions, images, metaphors, analogues, figurative language, etc. These archetypes are the reflections of primitive, universal thoughts which are essentially poetic. They are the primordial images which reside deep in our psyche, and which seek an outlet in works of art (Nagarajan, 2006, p.142).

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung used the term archetype to refer to the experiences of our ancestors which get lodged in what he called the collective unconscious of the whole race. By collective unconscious is meant, the psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity. The contents of the collective unconscious are the archetypes. These buried experiences seek expression in myths as well as in literature (Nagarajan, 2006, p.142).

ARCHETYPES IN “TO HIS COY MISTRESS”

Superficially a love poem, “To His Coy Mistress” is, in a deeper sense, a poem about time, the poem concerns time more than love. As such, it is concerned with immortality, a fundamental motif and pattern in myth. Thus, the poem includes archetypes of time and immortality (Pishkar, 2000, p.228). Structurally, the poem constructed in three sections. Section one begins with: ‘Had we but world enough, and time’, in other words, ‘if we had lots of time then your reluctance to sleep with me would not be a problem’. Section two opens with: ‘But at my back I always hear/ Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;’, which suggests that ‘we do not have endless time because I can hear time hard on my heels’. Section three starts with: ‘Now therefore, while the youthful hue’, suggesting that the narrator has the solution in terms of how they should handle the situation: ‘we haven’t got lots of time so you had better sleep with me now’ (Miller, 2001, p.115).

Marvell’s narrator tries to explain to the object of his desire that, had they endless time, her reluctance to relinquish her virginity would be quite all right, and that he would indeed spend a great lengths of time wooing her.

However, he explains, this is not the case, and she should comply with his wish to consummate their relationship because time is passing quickly and if they fail to take the opportunity to enjoy such pleasures now they will miss out on them forever (Miller, 2001, p.114).

The poem is an illustration of the phrase of 'carpe diem' meaning "seize the day", is a Latin phrase from Horace's Odes (p. I., xi) which has become the name of every common literary motif, especially in lyric poetry. The lover emphasizes that life is short and time is fleeting in order to enjoin the beloved—who is often a reluctant virgin—to make the most of present pleasures (Abrams, 1971, p.20).

In the first two sections, we encounter inversion or a rejection of traditional conceptions of human immortality. The first section is an ironic presentation of the "escape from time" to some paradisaical state in which lovers may dally for an eternity. But such a state of perfect, eternal bliss is a foolish delusion, as the speaker suggests in his subjunctive "Had we put world enough; and time," and in his description of love as some kind of monstrous vegetable growing slowly to infinite size in the archetype garden, which indicates salvation in dream and mind:

"My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires; and more slow."
(Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, & Willingham, 2005, p.200)

The opening line of the poem, reveals the theme of time and space continuum, which lies throughout the poem. The first line can be paraphrased as follows: "If we had enough world and time" since it is a conditional sentence, it must be an impossible condition. The motif of time and space shows that the poem in a philosophical consideration of time and eternity. There are many time motifs like, "before the Flood, till the conversion of the Jews, an hundred years, two hundred, thirty thousand, an age at least, the last age, etc" (Pishkar, 2000, p.229). Suggesting what might happen if the two lovers had all the time in the world, and to make his point the poet imagines a ludicrously extended period of courtship (Stephen, 1984, p.103).

In dramatic contrast, the second section presents the desert archetype in terms of another kind of time, naturalistic time. This is the time governed by the inexorable laws of nature, the sun archetype imaged in time's winged chariot, the laws of decay, death and physical extinction. It is as extreme in its philosophical realism as the first section is in its impracticable idealization. It recognizes that humanity is mortal, and that time is always eating away at a person's life, bringing him nearer to death (Stephen, 1984, p.104).

For the first time we feel that Marvell is being, in quite an ordinary sense, 'serious'. This seriousness introduces a sober note, which prepares us for the impressive 'solemnity' of the next four lines:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,

And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Time is always catching up, and the eternity which faces the poet and his mistress is not an eternity in which he can love and praise her, but the 'vast eternity' that stretches after death. The nature of this eternity, so very different from the near-eternity extravagantly conjured up in the first section, is superbly suggested by the word 'Deserts', which is placed in the verse-structure with absolute mastery. There is a catch of the breath after 'lie', then the stress comes down on 'Desert' with an effect of awe and dread. This 'vast eternity' will hold, not opportunities for almost endless procrastination, but mere sterile emptiness (Mayhead, 1969, pp.146-47).

Radically altered in tone, the third section presents a third kind of time, an escape into cyclical time and thereby a chance for immortality. Again we encounter the sun archetype, but this is the sun of 'soul' and of 'instant fires' - images not of death but of life and creative energy, which are fused with the sphere, the archetype of primal wholeness and fulfillment:

'Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball' (Guerin, 2005, p.200)

The third section presents the conclusion. If we had all the time in the world we could take as long as we wished and as was proper to woo each other; we do not have much time; therefore we must act now,

And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the Iron gates of life.

Timelessness dominates the first section, and an awareness of how short man's life dominates the second section. The third section is dominated by images of violence and action (Stephen, 1984, p.104).

The time motif appears in its own right, and not only by means of imagery. The word itself appears once in each section: near the beginning of the first and second sections line 1 and 22: "Had we but world enough, and time / Time's winged chariot hurrying near;" and in the third section as a central section of the lover's proposition: "Rather at once our time devour". Clustering around this basic unifying motif are these phrases and allusions from the first section: the 'long love's day', the specific time spans spent in adoring the woman's body and the vaster if less specific 'before the Flood' and 'till the conversion of the Jews', and the slow growth of 'vegetable love' and the two uses of age in :

An age at least to every section
And the last age should show your heart.

At the beginning of the second section, the powerful image of time's winged chariot as it moves across a desert includes the words 'always' and 'eternity'. Other time words are 'no more' and 'long-preserved', there is also the sense of elapsed time in the allusions to the future decomposition of the lover's bodies. Although the third section delays the use of the word 'time', the word 'now' is placed so as to receive maximum stress. The word

appears thrice more in the section in:

Now therefore, while the youthful hue, and
Now let us sport us while we may;
And now, like am'rous birds of prey,

It is thought Marvell were saying let us delay no longer. We know we cannot live forever. Let us therefore take advantage of life while we still have it, now instead of having the victims of time, and allowing him to devour us in his slowly moving jaws, let us rather devour our time. The heavily stressed, truncated trochee turns the poem around its ultimate corner of haste and desire. Politeness falls away as the menacing images of time. It is strengthened by 'instant', 'at once', and 'languish in [time's] slow- chapped power': "Rather at once our time devour,/ Than languish in his slow-chapp'd power." The phrase 'thorough the iron gates of life', also may suggest the passing from temporal life into the not so certain eternity (Guerin, 2005, pp.113-14).

Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

The conclusion toward which the mortal syllogism drivers is one in which both the forms and the concepts indigenous to the poem of carpe diem are escaped from, transcended, by an imaginary act of overgrowing. If the sun cannot be made to stand still, as Joshua made it do, Marvell's lover will blunt the threat of time by making it run faster, loosening it's grip by interrupting it's relentless rhythm with human intensity (Corns, 1997, p. 295).

The inclination of the lady's heart may well be revealed by 'the last age', but the narrator presses her to yield before the extinction of passion on the day of judgment. Time does not redeem, it destroys; its 'winged chariot' rushes the lovers towards the prospect of 'deserts of vast eternity' and to a grave where the poet's song echo's in the vacancy. The last section attempts to counter these negatives with a reassertion of life and pleasure. Only here does the narrator insist that the lover's energy can try to outpace or stop time: by rolling their strength into a ball they can 'tear', like cannon-shot, through 'the Iron gates of life'(Sanders, 1999, p.239).

In representing the age-old dilemma of time and immortality, Marvell employed a cluster of images charged with mythic significance. His poet-lover seems to

offer the alchemy of love as a way of defeating the laws of naturalistic time; love is a means of participating in, even intensifying, the mysterious rhythms of nature's eternal cycle. If life is to be judged, as some philosophers have suggested, not by duration but by intensity, then Marvell's lovers, at least during the act of love, will achieve a kind of immortality by 'devouring' time or by transcending the laws of clock time 'time's winged chariot'. And if this alchemical transmutation requires a fire hot enough to melt them into one primordial ball, then it is perhaps also hot enough to melt the sun itself and 'make him run'. Thus we see that the overt sexuality of Marvell's poem is, in a mythic sense, suggestive of a profound metaphysical insight, an insight that continues to fascinate those philosophers and scientists who would penetrate the mysteries of time and eternity (Guerin, 2005, p.201).

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