“To His Coy Mistress” Strategic Writing Sample

Andrew Marvell’s poem, “To His Coy Mistress,” took me two reads in order to really understand it. The first time I read it, I was able to outline the general idea, although many details went over my head. However, by the second read, the material became clearer and I began having many more “ohhh” moments which helped me tackle the poem. The first thing that stood out was the repetition of the constant theme of running out of time. In fact, the very first line explicitly proposes the hypothetical situation, “had we but world enough, and time.” Immediately, I realized that the narrator invites the audience to sympathize for him. With powerful imagery, he paints himself as pitifully torn: impassioned with the desire to genuinely love his mistress but also pressed for time. The reader is immersed in a cry for rubies and vegetable love, only to be captured by Time’s winged chariot. This “if only” stanza is where the narrator seems the most honest. However, as we continue onto the next stanza starting with the line with a “but at my back,” his true colors begin to show. I would definitely highlight this segue out of the hypothetical into bitter reality. Again, with the intense imagery of vast, empty deserts and the disturbing suggestion of worms being the only things left to steal his mistress’s virginity, he is gently nudging us towards the truth. Beauty fades, life ends, and death is eternal. And it is eternally boring. Hence, since tombs aren’t exactly the most exciting setting for a Valentine’s Day dinner date, why not have some fun elsewhere while they still can? The narrator begins to come off as manipulative, attempting to woo his mistress into agreeing with his own will. Finally, I would analyze his last transition. Here, his main proposal is stated with a “now therefore.” Therefore he and his mistress should devour each other like birds of prey with so much lust and zeal that each pore is burning a wildfire. He contrasts this with “slow-chapt power” just to remind her again of their predestination and the certainty of death. The final couplet, beginning with “thus,” is also the last transition. It is the narrator’s ultimate point: time is limited, so carpe diem!

However, beyond the analysis of literary devices, what I find most interesting is the relevance of this poem even in our modern age. The narrator is essentially politely phrasing his proposal to have sex with his mistress without coming off as too forward. It is passive-aggressiveness at its finest, an art form that we use to this day. A social strategy perfected in our daily lives through human encounters, conversations, and online communication. It just goes to show how immortal literature can be.

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