“To His Coy Mistress” is a love poem: it celebrates beauty, youth, and sexual pleasure. However, the speaker of the poem is haunted by mortality. Though he imagines a luxuriously slow love that takes thousands of years to reach consummation, he knows such a thing is impossible: he will die before it can be accomplished. Death cannot be delayed or defeated; the only response to death, according to the speaker, is to enjoy as much pleasure as possible before it comes. He urges the woman he loves not to wait, to enjoy the pleasures of life without restraint. The poem draws a contrast between two kinds of love: the full, rich love that would be possible if everyone lived forever, and the rushed, panicked love that mortal beings are forced to enjoy.

The first stanza of the poem poses a question and explores a hypothetical world: what would love be like if humans had infinite time to love? In response, the speaker imagines a world of unlimited pleasure. For example, he describes his mistress finding precious stones on the banks of the Ganges; he describes himself spending two hundred years praising a single part of her body.

The key to this paradise, then, is that the normal limitations of human life have been removed. The sheer length of the mistress's and the speaker's lives allows them to delay consummation of their love indefinitely: the speaker announces that his mistress might “refuse / ‘Till the conversion of the Jews”—which, in the Christian theology of Marvell’s time, was expected to occur during the biblical Last Days. In this ideal world, the speaker feels no urgency to consummate their relationship.

The speaker has no questions about whether his mistress deserves this long courtship, but he does have qualms about its viability. He is, he notes at the start of stanza 2, always conscious of the passage of time—and thus of the fact that both he and his mistress will eventually die. Stanza 2 diverges from the beautiful dream of stanza 1, reflecting instead on the pressing, inescapable threat of death.

Death, as the speaker imagines it, is the opposite of the paradise presented in stanza 1: instead of endless pleasure, it offers “deserts of vast eternity.”

The speaker's view of death is secular; he is not afraid of going to Hell or being punished for his sins. Instead, he fears death because it cuts short his and his mistress's capacity to enjoy each other. In death, he complains, her beauty will be lost and—unless she consents to have sex before she dies—her virginity will be taken by worms. The language of this stanza is grotesque. This is a poem of seduction, but it feels profoundly unsexy. The speaker's horror of death overshadows his erotic passion, but it also makes the speaker seem more sincere: while at first it might seem that the speaker is saying all these things primarily because he just wants to have some sex, the despair in the poem implies that the speaker's arguments are not mere rhetorical statements but rather deeply held beliefs and fears.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker finally announces his core argument: since death is coming—and since it will strip away the pleasures of the flesh—his mistress should agree to have sex with him soon. What's more, he imagines that their erotic "sport" will offer compensation for the pain and suffering of life. "Our pleasures," he argues, will tear through "the iron gates of life." Though he does not imagine that their pleasure will defeat death, he does believe that pleasure is the only reasonable response to death. Indeed, he even says that enjoying pleasure is a way to defy death. However, the grotesque language of stanza 2 may overwhelm the poem's insistence on the power of pleasure. If sexuality is a way to contest the power of death, it nonetheless seems—even in the speaker's own estimation—that death is an overwhelming, irresistible force.

- See where this theme is active **in the poem.**