

TENSION IN TO HIS COY MISTRESS

You Jun

Research Scholar, School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

To His Coy Mistress is one of the most famous and highly acclaimed poems of Andrew Marvell, which has impressed many great critics. It is an excellent model of the union of wit and fancy, the alliance of force and grace, and the integration of motion and quietness. There is no doubt that To His Coy Mistress is an ideal masterpiece of metaphysical poetry which is best known for its tension. Thus, it is of great significance to analyze the tension in such great work in details and it would certainly bring a lot of inspirations for readers. This essay is going to start from the analysis of the tension in its themes and its structure and then turn into the further detailed analysis of its lines and hoping to find out the principles of the tension in this poem and wit of the poet.

KEYWORDS: *To His Coy Mistress, Tension, Metaphysical Poetry*

INTRODUCTION

Andrew Marvell(1621–1678) was one of the most famous poets of the English Renaissance in the 17th century and one of the representatives of metaphysical poets. He lived in the late Renaissance and witnessed a lot of ideological conflicts in literature, politics, and economy. Living in a period between the Renaissance and the neoclassical period, Andrew Marvell's poetry was characterized by the nature of mixture of the classic and theromantic.(E.S. Donno2002: 326) On the one hand, he paid attention to his accuracy of depicting integrate and chiseled images; on the other hand, he showed his emotion naturally in his poetry. Marvell was greatly influenced by John Donne from whom he inherited the metaphysical poetry creating techniques and then he developed them. Marvell was best known for his conceit, fancy imagination and philosophic connotation in his metaphysical poetry.

To His Coy Mistress is one of the most charming and highly acclaimed poems of Marvell and highly praised by critics for its lucid logic, unique and rhetorical pattern, and advancing themes. Harold John Massingham ever regarded To His Coy Mistress as "a perfect example of Marvell's 'witty delicacy.' Being a beautiful composite of various emotions all playing into one another's hands, it is more. Perfect gallantry, pathos, irony, reflective melancholy, reverence, buoyancy, passion, tact are all contained in a style of matchless purity and fitness. Wonderful too is the way the slight playful tone of the poem, like the plashing of a stream, expands into a river of full harmony!"(E.S. Donno2002: 349)

To His Coy Mistress is a typical metaphysically persuasive poem of love, with which the lover tried to seduce the inaccessible coy mistress to give up her useless virginity and accept his courtship. The lover tried to persuade his mistress to accept his passionate love by reminding her that life is short and time flies and everything become meaningless after death.

The poet designed a reasonable syllogistic pattern for the lover's persuasion, in which every part was allied with ingenious conceits. In the first stanza, with a presupposition of enough space and time, the lover drew a wonderful ideal picture for his mistress, in which the lover would enjoy the slowly growing vegetable love and would never blame the mistress's cruel rejection. The lover tried to comfort his mistress with his vegetable love, which was totally pure and true. It's very clear that the atmosphere in this picture was peaceful and comfortable. However, in the second stanza, there was a sudden change of the picture, in which the ideal presupposition of the first stanza was broken up. The lover revealed the fact to his mistress that life is extremely short but time flies. Since "time's winged chariot hurrying near", the mistress's honor and the lover's lust would all turn into dust and ashes and become worthless. What a pity ending! In this part, the atmosphere became very tense and gloomy, which set the stage for the lover's advice in the third stanza. In the third stanza, the lover finally expressed his ultimate purpose in the form of a plausible proposal. The lover suggested his mistress join the carnal love with him to resist the ravaging of time, like an "amorous birds of prey." The lover told his mistress that they could roll all their strength and sweetness up into a ball which might be able to run faster than the sun or could help them get their pleasures at least in this "sport". It's obvious that the atmosphere in this part became very positive and exciting. There is no doubt that readers could find some funny or contradictory details in *To His Coy Mistress*, however, they could not deny that the existence of these details make the poem get more shining lights and it is the wit of Marvell. Marvell had achieved a kind of "internal equilibrium" (E.S. Donno 2002: 17) in this poem with the proper tension, about which this essay is going to discuss in details.

About Tension

Allen Tate (1899-1979) was the first critic who put forward the conception of tension, as terminology of literature criticism. Tate explained that the term tension" derived from lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension and intension. . . the meaning of poetry is its 'tension,' the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it. The remotest figurative significance that we can derive does not invalidate the extension of the literal statement. Or we may begin with the literal statement and by stages develop the complications of metaphor. . . "(ælls'áĹŽ 2001: 56) According to Tate, tension means the balance(organic unity) between connotation and denotation of words. And then tension was quoted by other critics, and gradually became a classic term of new criticism and the meaning of tension was also extended to the phenomenon of the unity of opposites among various contradictory factors in poetry in the meanwhile. Robert Penn Warren greatly admired the tension theory of Tate and he developed it. In his essay *Pure and Impure Poetry*, he mentioned that tension is the nature of poetry and "there is the tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech; between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language; between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between the beautiful and the ugly; between ideas (as in Marvell's poem); between the elements involved in irony; between prosisms and poeticisms."(R.Warren1943: 250) Tension exists at all levels of literature (from very words to ideas). Tension is such a useful and key term of literature criticism and it must be helpful to find new inspirations in *To His Coy Mistress*.

Detailed Analysis of the Tension

". . . My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and slower.
A 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;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart. . . "
(S. Greenblatt2006:1703)

In these lines, the lover described the speed in which his vegetable love grew. On the one hand, these lines conveyed both the permanence of the love and the difficulty and the slowness of the lover's growing love. On the other, these lines implied the amazing beauty of his mistress without depicting any detail or using metaphor which was commonly used when describing beauty. Beauty is abstract and it is difficult to describe beauty exactly with objective details because the taste of people varies from person to person and different people might have different comments on an objective detail, thus, beauty seems to be immeasurable. However, the verb "praise" and the nouns "hundred years" and "age" in these lines, had indicated the extreme beauty of the mistress without any doubts. That meant, beginning with these literal lines and by stages, readers could reveal the complicate connotations of these words. It's Marvell's wit that made the beauty of the mistress become measurable with the measurements of time. Although the denotation of these words did not show the beauty of the mistress directly, these statements had the connotations of the mistress's amazing beauty. The body deserving to be praised for thousands of years by no means was not being extremely beautiful and the details certainly needed people's imagination.

"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. . . "
(S. Greenblatt2006:1703)

In these lines, a few of intangible abstract conceptions had been presented in a visible, tangible and even audible state. In the first line, ". . . hear time's winged chariot hurrying near. . ." made the intangible time become not only visible but also audible and created a stressful atmosphere. The unstoppable cruel time seemed would roll over the dawdling people

immediately and made the mistress terrified. The winged chariot's figurative significance of the cruel and flying time did not invalidate the extension of the words "winged chariot" themselves. The denotation and connotation of the line had perfectly unified. In the last few lines, the abstract "long preserved virginity" could be tried by creepy worms; the intangible "quaint honor" could turn to concrete dust and the lust into ashes. The poet connected the graceful and honorable "virginity" and "honor" of the mistress with those creepy worms and dust, which created a great sharp contrast and thus the great tension. However, it was a great tension that let the mistress realize how worthless her long-preserved "virginity" was. What's more, the holy love of the lover in the first stanza turned into ashes, which let the mistress know that what she must face with after death was desperate "deserts of vast eternity" which did not worth any slight of expectation. The great contrasts and tension in these lines might hit a great stroke to the mistress's heart and falter her determination of preserving her virginity.

". . . Now, therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires."

(S. Greenblatt2006:1703)

In these lines, the lover turned the picture into the real situation in which the mistress was still young and beautiful. The lover portrayed his mistress with two conceits. He compared the intangible "youthful hue" of his mistress to "morning dew", which seemed a little farfetched but actually reasonable because both the "youthful hue" and "morning dew" were supposed to be glossy, pure and spotless. And then the lover described that the mistress's invisible "willing soul transpires at every pore with instant fires", which meant the mistress had shown her uncontrollable willing of accepting the lover's proposal and her ardor for being with him. The denotation and connotation of these words are perfect allied to show that the mistress's passion is burning like 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 power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball;
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run."

(S. Greenblatt2006: 1703-1704)

Here came to the climax of the poem by using a set of fierce verbs. The lover asked his mistress to play the sport "like amorous birds of prey" and to roll into one ball to break through "the iron gates of life" and finally even make the sun run. The movement was getting faster and faster and the passion grew stronger in the meanwhile and became quenchless. Comparing

with the slow and passionless movements in the previous stanzas, there seemed to be another tension of rhyme. The verbs of describing time here, "devour", "run", made the time personified and which meant that time might be conquerable.

General Analysis of to His Coy Mistress and It's Tension

Tension of Time

"For the men of the Renaissance, time is a great discovery-the antagonist against which they plan and plot and war, and over which they hope to triumph." (R. J. Quinones 1972: 55) To seize the day was an important theme in Renaissance literature, and the main theme of *To His Coy Mistress* obviously has reflected it. In the first stanza, the lover wished to have infinite time to appreciate the beauty of his mistress and to bear her cruel rejection. Time in this stanza seemed to be so helpful and precious that could give the lover courage to love in a vegetable way and the chance to enjoy this pure love and also help him to heal the injuries to his heart. However, in the second stanza, the time suddenly changed another face; it became so cruel and heartless that brought the lover and his mistress all to death (to dust and ashes) and let the warm try the beauty. "Time's winged chariot hurrying" made the lover feel nervous and terrified, which was quite different from the time of kindness in the first stanza. Although these two kinds of characteristics of time seemed to be conflict, it was reconciled by the first line in the first stanza, "had we have enough time", which made the conflict between two kinds of characteristics of time become the acknowledged conflict between the ideal and the reality. And by presenting the sharp contrast between the ideal and the reality, the mistress probably could suddenly realize that she should seize the day and not be coy anymore, which meant the lover had broken the first psychological defense line of his mistress and set stages for the persuasive suggestion in the third stanza. However, in the third stanza, the lover persuaded the mistress accept his suggestion of sporting and making the sun (time) "run", instead of letting it stop and enjoy this moment with his mistress. Considering the information the lover had provided in the previous two stanzas, it's very clear that the lover tried to inform his mistress that life is so precious and so short that she should seize the day (enjoy this moment). Therefore, it seemed to be extremely confusing that the lover suggested making the sun "run". However, after some deep thinking about what the lover had desired, the suggestion could be reasonable. What the lover had desired was to enjoy eternal love with his mistress; he wished to enter into the eternity "through the iron gates of life". When they get into the eternity, they would have the power to manipulate the time and let it "run". The tension between the lover's fears of the time's going by and his suggestion of making the sun "run" thus was reconciled by a higher pursuit of the lover.

Tension of Love

There was an obvious contrast between the lover's attitudes to love for his mistress of the beginning and that of the end. In the first stanza, the lover was willing to pay thousands of years to praise and worship his mistress's beautiful body and did not worry about his mistress's rejection and he even told his mistress that "you should, if you please, refuse till the conversion of the Jews" (if she please, she could not accept his love until the end of the world). What a sincere man and how pure love it is! The lover seemed to be extremely patient and generous to express his unrequited love to his mistress in such

a tender way. This kind of love seems to be very platonic. However, in the stanza, the tone of the poem changed and became serious. The lover stated that since they did not have so much time they would lay in the gloomy tomb and the beauty and virginity of his mistress would be tried by creepy worms and not be enjoyable anymore, and his vegetable love would turn into inorganic dust which means his love would have vanished. What's more, in third stanza, the lover asked his mistress to do the carnal sports with him while she is still young and beautiful like amorous animals. In this way, his vegetable and platonic love completely turned into animal and sensual love. The purity and nobility of love were suddenly reduced to a level of profanity and playfulness. Although the lover's love finally seemed to be just carnally, no one could deny that the lover also has his pure love to his mistress. It's true that there were great tensions between these two kinds of love and between the lover's levity and seriousness, but the tensions could be reconciled by rethinking the eternality the lover ultimately desired. The purpose of the carnal sports the lover suggested was not only tear their sensual pleasures but also broken through the "iron gate of life" and entered into the eternality in which the lover could enjoy love with his mistress forever. It became quite reasonable that the lover asked his mistress to join the carnal sports with him out of his pure and intense love to his mistress. Although the lover has used some levity words to convince his mistress, the essence of his proposal was respecting the utter seriousness of love. Thus, the tensions were reconciled wittily.

CONCLUSIONS

To His Coy Mistress is an excellent metaphysical poem and worth to be appreciated carefully in details. After the detailed study of tension in this poem, it's certainly sure that tension is omnipresent in this masterpiece. The tension in this poem has made the poem become an organic whole, of which every word can't be omitted or neglected. The poet's contradictory attitudes to the time, the quite different kinds of love and those seem to be farfetched metaphors actually all can be reconciled in this poem and it's the existence of them that makes the poem perfect. Tension is an important source of the charm of To His Coy Mistress.

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