Metaphysical and Cavalier Poets

To His Coy Mistress
Poem by Andrew Marvell

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time
Poem by Robert Herrick

To Althea, from Prison
Poem by Richard Lovelace

RL 2. Determine themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development. L.5a. Interpret figures of speech in context and analyze their role in the text.

Andrew Marvell
1621–1678

Andrew Marvell is often grouped with Robert Herrick and Richard Lovelace as one of the Cavalier poets. They regarded Ben Jonson as their literary father, and like Jonson, they tried to imitate the grace and polish of classical Latin poetry. The Cavalier poets even referred to themselves as the “sons of Ben” or “tribe of Ben.” Marvell combined the lighthearted and melodic style of Cavalier poetry with the intellectual depth and wit of metaphysical poetry.

During his lifetime, Marvell was known for his political activities rather than for his poetry. Unlike Herrick and Lovelace, he supported Parliament in the English Civil War of 1642–1651, and he served in Parliament from 1659 until his death. Marvell’s poetry was published posthumously; his true worth as a poet was not fully recognized until the 20th century.

Robert Herrick
1591–1674

Robert Herrick was an Anglican priest and an ardent admirer of Ben Jonson. An active member of London society, he was disappointed when assigned to a rural church in Devonshire in 1629. However, in 1646, under a parliamentary government, he was deprived of this post due to his loyalty to the king.

In 1648, he published his only book of poems, Hesperides. At the time, the English were caught up in a civil war, and they showed little interest in Herrick’s light, playful verse. In 1662, Herrick was able to return to Devonshire, where he again settled down as a country priest and enjoyed a quiet life, although he wrote no more poetry. Today, critics appreciate Herrick’s poetry more; he has been called “the greatest songwriter ever born of English race.”

Richard Lovelace
1618–1657

Richard Lovelace was a courtier, soldier, poet, and connoisseur of the arts. He was born into a distinguished military family, and from early on, he was associated with the extravagant court of Charles I. At age 15 he became a “Gentleman Wayter Extraordinary” to the king, and at 18, he received a honorary masters degree from Oxford University. When conflict erupted between Charles I and Parliament, Lovelace petitioned Parliament in the king’s favor and was imprisoned. While in prison, he wrote one of his most famous poems, “To Althea, from Prison.”

Authors Online
Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-530
TEXT ANALYSIS: THEME

The theme of a poem is the central message the poet wishes to convey. The Cavalier poets were known for their themes about love, war, honor, and courtly behavior. They frequently advocated the philosophy of *carpe diem*, a Latin expression that means “seize the day,” or live for the moment. A poem famous for its theme of *carpe diem* is “To His Coy Mistress,” in which the speaker beseeches a young woman to be his love now because life is short. As you read each of the following poems, note the imagery, figurative language, and other descriptive details that help convey the poem’s theme.

READING SKILL: INTERPRET FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Often in reading poetry, you will need to interpret figurative language, or language that communicates ideas beyond the literal meanings of the words. The words in a figurative expression suggest rather than state information, thus helping to create an impression in the reader’s mind.

Metaphors, similes, and hyperbole are among the types of figurative language used in these poems. Hyperbole is any expression that greatly exaggerates facts or ideas for humorous effect or for emphasis. For example, in “To His Coy Mistress,” the speaker says that he would spend a “hundred years” praising his beloved’s eyes, which would be literally impossible, but figuratively it expresses the depth of his adoration.

Use the following strategies to interpret figurative meaning:

• Read each poem first to grasp its overall meaning.
• Then, ask questions about comparisons that are implied or directly stated. What is being compared, and how are these things alike?

As you read the poems, use a chart like the one shown to list examples of hyperbole, metaphor, and simile, and to record your interpretation of their meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Figurative Language</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“To His Coy Mistress”</td>
<td>Hyperbole: “My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires and more slow”</td>
<td>The speaker’s love will not dissipate in the future but continue to grow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Should we LIVE for TODAY?

The Latin phrase *carpe diem* means literally “seize the day.” Many people subscribe to the idea that life is fleeting and that we should therefore focus on enjoyment of the present. But living for the moment can have its pitfalls too.

PRESENT

Working with a partner, ask several friends and family members to identify the pros and cons of living for today. List all the responses you gather in a chart, and present your findings to your class. Which side seems to win out? What conclusion can you draw about people’s attitudes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
To His Coy
Mistress

Andrew Marvell

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love’s day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An 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.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
But at my back I always hear
Time’s wingéd chariot hurrying near; A
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: B
The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
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,
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
Thorough the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

35 transpires: breathes.
40 slow-chapped: slow-jawed.
44 thorough: through.
To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Robert Herrick

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may; 
Old time is still a-flying; 
And this same flower that smiles today 
Tomorrow will be dying.

5 The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun, 
The higher he’s a-getting, 
The sooner will his race be run, 
And nearer he’s to setting.

That age is best which is the first, 
When youth and blood are warmer; 
But being spent, the worse, and worst 
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time, 
And, while ye may, go marry; 
For, having lost but once your prime, 
You may forever tarry.

Text Analysis

1. Summarize What argument does the speaker make in “To His Coy Mistress”?

2. Clarify In lines 9–12 of “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” what ideas does the speaker express about age?

3. Compare Styles In what ways are Marvell’s poem and Herrick’s poem similar in style? How do their styles differ?

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To Althea, from Prison

Richard Lovelace

When Love with unconfinèd wings
Hovers within my gates,
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;
5 When I lie tangled in her hair
And fettered to her eye,
The gods that wanton in the air
Know no such liberty.

When flowing cups run swiftly round,
10 With no allaying Thames,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,
15 Fishes that tipple in the deep
Know no such liberty.

When, like committed linnets, I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my king;
20 When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.
25 If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

7 wanton: sport; play.
10 with no allaying Thames: The Thames, a famous river running through London, is used here poetically to mean “water.”
14 healths and draughts: toasts and drinks.
17 committed linnets: caged songbirds. A linnet is a type of finch.
After Reading

**Comprehension**

1. **Clarify**  How does the speaker feel when Althea comes to visit him?
2. **Summarize**  What activities in prison give the speaker a sense of liberty?
3. **Summarize**  Reread the last stanza of “To Althea, from Prison.” How does the speaker regard his imprisonment?

**Text Analysis**

4. **Interpret Figurative Language**  Interpret and explain the following lines from the poems:
   - lines 38–40 from “To His Coy Mistress”
   - lines 3–4 from “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”
   - lines 25–26 from “To Althea, from Prison”

5. **Analyze Theme**  In “To His Coy Mistress” and “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” which images of nature do the poets use to express the passing of time and the theme of *carpe diem*?

6. **Make Generalizations About Speakers**  Think about the ways in which women are described in “To His Coy Mistress,” “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” and “To Althea, from Prison.” How would you characterize each speaker’s attitude toward women? What generalizations can you make about this aspect of Cavalier poetry? Use a chart to make your responses.

7. **Compare Texts**  In your opinion, what would each of the speakers of these poems think of the kind of love described in Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (page 518)? Support your answer with evidence from the poems.

**Text Criticism**

8. **Different Perspectives**  Some critics have stated that female and male readers are likely to respond differently to “To His Coy Mistress.” Do you agree with this observation? Explain why, and cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

*Should we LIVE for TODAY?*

Because time is fleeting, Herrick and Marvell encourage us to seize the day, or live for the moment. What are some ways to actively do this?
**Wrap-Up: Metaphysical & Cavalier Poets**

**Metaphysical Conceits**

The metaphysical poets and, to a lesser extent, the Cavalier poets who followed them shared a love for elaborate conceits—extended metaphors that make a surprising connection between two very dissimilar things. John Donne was the master of this technique. Reread this example of one such conceit from Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.”

“*If they be two, they are two so*  
*As stiff twin compasses are two;*  
*Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if th’ other do.*”

Donne compares the souls of two separated lovers to the feet of a compass that turn in sync with one another; when one moves, so does the other, for they remain attached. Metaphysical conceits require imagination on the part of the reader, who must think carefully to understand the connection being made by the comparison.

**Writing to Evaluate**

The metaphysical poets’ use of such fanciful and extended conceits led the writer and critic Samuel Johnson to complain about their “violent yoking together of heterogeneous ideas.” What is your opinion of metaphysical conceits? Do you agree with Johnson that the comparisons are artificial and forced? Or do you find the comparisons add depth or complexity to your understanding? Cite specific lines from Donne’s writing to support your argument.

**Consider**

- the nuances of each comparison
- the choice of words and images Donne uses in making each comparison
- whether, in your opinion, the conceits add to or detract from the work’s overall theme

**Extension Online**

**INQUIRY & RESEARCH**

Samuel Johnson was only one of many literary critics who commented upon the work of John Donne and the metaphysical poets. Many critics did not care for the elaborate conceits and rough meter characteristic of metaphysical poetry, while others praised the poets’ complexity of ideas. Search the Internet for literary criticism on the metaphysical poets. Then, with your classmates, create a classroom poster with the most intriguing critical comments, positive and negative.

**COMMON CORE**

**W 7** Conduct short research projects to solve a problem.  
**W 9** Draw evidence from literary texts to support analysis.