To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

POEM TEXT

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

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.

SUMMARY

Pick rosebuds while you still can. Old Man Time is always rushing, and the same flower that's in bloom today will be dying by tomorrow.

The beautiful light of heaven, the sun, is getting higher and higher. The higher he gets, the sooner he'll be done rising, and the closer he'll be to setting.

The best part of a life is the first part, your hot-blooded youth. But after that's over, life gets progressively worse.

So don't be evasive, but instead use your time well, and while you can, go get married. Because once you've lost the bloom of your youth, you may wait forever for a marriage that never comes.

THEMES

SEIZING THE DAY

In "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," a speaker encourages young women to seize the day and enjoy their youth—and, more specifically, to have plenty of sex and find a husband while they're young. Youth, the speaker insists, is the best part of life, and it's all too easy to waste one's limited time by being "coy"—especially in matters of sex.

The speaker begins by urging listeners (those "virgins" of the title) to gather a familiar image of both youth and sex: "rose-buds." Those new buds, emerging in the spring and summer, suggest fresh and blooming youth, and they're an old symbol of love and of the female body.

Also note that at the time of the poem's composition, the word "virgins" would have meant young women specifically, rather than just anyone who hasn't had sex. In encouraging "virgins" to gather their rose-buds, then, the speaker points this poem directly at young women and encourages them to take advantage of their youthful sexuality while they still can.

Those "rose-buds" also seem to represent both sexual experiences and the young women themselves: while they "smile" today, they'll be "a-dying" tomorrow. Both sex and youth, the image suggests, are limited-time opportunities for women.

The speaker then turns to bigger images that reflect the relentless passing of time, creating a sense of urgency: youth, sexuality, and life itself, the speaker implies, don't keep forever. The poem follows the sun as it moves through the sky, getting closer and closer to setting every second.

Then, the speaker gets more literal, stating flat out that "[t]hat age is best which is the first, / When youth and blood are warmer." The image of warm blood seems to link human bodies to the sun, which also comes to a peak of heat and then steadily diminishes. These lines sound downright ominous, and seem intended to scare the "virgins": the speaker's visions of time's remorseless passage suggest that things are only going to get worse for these young women.

Having made this broader point, the speaker returns to directly addressing the "virgins" in the final stanza—and the poem's language here hints that the speaker might have some skin in this game. When the poem urges the young women not to be "coy," the speaker's suggesting that they be sexually free and easy. The speaker follows this up with encouragement to go "marry"—the socially-approved way of channeling sexuality in the 17th century.

However, leading with a discouragement of coyness seems almost like the opposite of rushing people into marriage. There's a sly undertone here, even as the speaker seems to keep these recommendations strictly above board.

In the final lines, the speaker takes a frostier tone again, warning the young women that once they're past the prime of their youths, they might not have the chance to take all the sexual opportunities they're refusing now. In that back-and-

forth between encouragements to enjoy sexuality while it's freshest and warnings that youth doesn't last forever, the poem's speaker thus does something rather sneaky.

While the poem is making perfectly reasonable statements—youth doesn't last forever, sexuality is fun—it's also slyly doing a little arguing on the speaker's own behalf. After all, it takes two to gather the rosebuds the speaker has in mind!

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;

The title of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" lets the reader know what this poem is about right from the get-go. The speaker here has a clear audience, and a clear point: he's here to tell the young women of the world to use their time well. (Note that, at the time of the poem's writing, "virgins" was almost certainly meant as a reference to young women. For more on how the reader knows that these "virgins" are very likely women, and the speaker very likely a man, take a look at the Themes and Speaker sections of this guide.)

With that title, it's no surprise that the poem begins with a command: "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may." This apostrophe, pointed straight at the "virgins" of the title, lets the reader know that to "Make Much of Time" isn't a matter of, say, learning a new language or reading a good book or volunteering down at the soup kitchen.

The clue is in those "rose-buds." Roses are an ancient symbol of love, sex, and female beauty, and their early appearance here—plus the speaker's specific address to "virgins," women who haven't yet had sex—firmly places this poem in the realm of romance. There's also a general feeling of sensual pleasure here: think of the delicious smell of a new rose, and the warm summer weather that brings the flowers into bloom.

That the speaker encourages young women to gather "rose-buds," plural, also suggests that he's a bit of a libertine. He's suggesting that these ladies gather, not one perfect rose-bud, but whole bouquets of sexual experience.

Why? Because "Old Time is still a-flying." With the familiar personification of time as an old (but speedy) man, the speaker introduces the poem's major idea: life is short, and you've got to have fun while you can.

LINES 3-4

And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

Having efficiently laid the groundwork for his poem's themes, the speaker introduces a rather startling image. The "rose-buds" he encouraged young women to gather in the first line seem, through personification, to *become* those young women—and "this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying."

In connecting the young women to the flowers he's encouraging them to gather, the speaker emphasizes both their sensuous beauty and their fragility. As writers have always reminded readers, flowers start to fade as soon as they reach perfection, and that fading has always been symbolically linked to the brevity of youth and beauty—especially women's youth and beauty. (Just ask Count Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.)

But the speaker is also connecting women's very selves to their sexual experiences here. If the "virgins" *are* the "rose-buds," then their sexuality is their being. While it's possible these young women might object that there's more to their lives than that, this image plays an important role in creating the poem's mood. To this speaker, life is an all-encompassing banquet, people and nature are indistinguishable from each other, and youthful sexual energy *should* take up one's whole self—for as long as one has it. This stanza ends on the word "dying," and that's important, too. The reason to relish youth, in this speaker's view is that it ends, and ends fast.

LINES 5-8

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.

In the second stanza, the speaker again uses personification and metaphor to make an object, a human being, and a quality all seem to be the same thing. Here, the sun is "[t]he glorious lamp of heaven," but it's also a "he," a god striding across the sky. Again, the image seems to burst with energy: the sun's "glorious" role as a lamp is all part of its life as a human-like figure. But this vibrant, powerful, personified sun is always on the way toward death, in this image. Every instant of energetic life the sun lives brings him "nearer [...] to setting."

This is a good place to note how the poem's form fits in with its ideas. The bouncy common meter here—that is, lines of four iambic beats (four da-DUMs) alternating with lines of three iambic beats—joins with a sing-songy ABAB rhyme scheme to create energetic momentum in the poem.

Also note that this poem fits into a tradition: it's a classic *carpe diem* poem, a poem about seizing the day—and, more specifically, about having a lot of sex before you're too old for it.

Such poems have almost always written from the perspective of a man addressing a woman (or women!). But a lot of other poems in this genre are long, elegant, and philosophical, persuading through suave reasoning rather than lively energy. (See the Form section for some examples.)

The bouncy rhythms and cheerful rhyme here reflect not only the poem's theme of speedily-passing time, but the speaker's general *joie de vivre*. Yes, every sunrise hastens toward sunset, and time passes too fast—but the sun sure is beautiful.

LINES 9-12

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.

In the third stanza, the speaker turns to bare statements of the facts as he sees them. The first part of life, he says, is obviously the best part of life, "[w]hen youth and blood are warmer." That "warmer" connects hot-blooded youth to the summery energy of the sun and the rose-buds. The "age" the speaker refers to here almost seems like a season as much as a few years in one's life. Again, human beings and nature seem intimately connected.

But this "age" is also a currency: it can be "spent." And once youth is squandered, things only get worse: indeed, "the worse, and worst / Times still succeed the former."

The structure of those last lines demands a closer look. A lot of poetic devices new to the poem come into play here. Caesura and enjambment introduce pauses and stumbles:

But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Notice how those caesuras break the line up, and how the awkward enjambment means the concluding /t/ sound of "worst" collides with the initial /t/ sound of "[t]imes." These lines throw a wrench into the poem's works, breaking up the verse's smooth momentum just as they describe old age breaking up the hot-blooded partying of youth. The alliteration and polyptoton of "worse, and worst" similarly ask the reader to think about the gradual process of decline, as time carries one from the "worse" of faded youth to the "worst" of death.

LINES 13-14

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;

Having painted both a joyfully energetic picture of youth and a harrowing picture of how quickly that youth fades, the speaker turns back to the young women and addresses them again, summarizing his closing argument like a lawyer. In his final apostrophe, he warns:

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;

Notice the alliteration on /m/ there? With that repeating sound, the speaker is once again linking the temporariness of youth with the joys one can, in his view, only experience while one is still young.

The reader might well get a sense that the speaker is winking at the word "marry," too. He sure hasn't mentioned marriage up until now; his focus throughout has been more on having a good time than making a lifetime commitment. There's the strong sense here that recommending marriage just allows the speaker to place a screen of propriety over what he's *really* suggesting: youth is a good (and, indeed, the only) time to gather as many of the "rose-buds" of sexual experience as one can.

That the speaker tells his listeners to "be not coy" only strengthens that sense of mischief: to be "coy" was to be sexually evasive, prim to a fault. (See: Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" for another example of poetry about such coyness.)

LINES 15-16

For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry.

Right at the end of the poem, the speaker gets in a jab: if the virgins he's addressing don't hurry up and get busy while they're in their "prime," they might *never* get the chance either to enjoy sex or to marry.

This would have meant genuine danger to a woman who lived in this poem's time and place: single women in 17th-century England had virtually no rights, and were treated as property—first of their fathers, then of their husbands. It was dangerous to be without a male guardian.

Sex was also more fraught for women than it was for men at the time, both because of the perils of pregnancy and because a woman who was known to have had sex outside of marriage would lose her social standing.

However, the hint of danger here doesn't overwhelm the poem's combination of lust for life and plain old lust. In touching on the threats of perpetual virginity, the speaker is really making his own case. After all, here *he* is, full of energy and good advice: perhaps he could help these poor virgins out with their coyness problems?

In the end, though, these exhortations to seize the day aren't just directed at pretty young women—not really. The speaker clearly feels the fleetingness of time, the brevity of youth, and the desire for pleasure just as acutely as he wants the "virgins" to feel these things. This is a poem that encourages *everyone* to eat life up, to breathe in pleasures like the smell of a new rose, and to be conscious of the delights of youth before they're

gone.

SYMBOLS

ROSEBUDS

The "rose-buds" of the poem's famous first line tap into an ancient tradition of treating roses as a symbol of love, sex, and womanhood. Here, the rosebuds seem to be images both of sexual experiences (perhaps suggesting kisses with their puckers) and of the "virgins" themselves, whose youth is as gorgeous and as temporary as the blooming flowers.

It's also important that the flowers here aren't full-blown roses, but *buds*. This image of a flower on the verge of bursting into bloom suggests the potential energy of the women's youth and beauty, but also looks forward to the sad fact that "this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying."

THE SUN

The sun symbolism in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" speaks to both the joyful energy of life and the ceaseless march of time. Human beings have always measured time by the movements of the sun and moon, so the sun has a clear connection to the idea of time's passage—and in this poem, this "glorious lamp" is always on its way toward setting. In other words, time is also moving forward, nearing its end.

But the sun here is still "glorious," a source of warmth, light, and life itself. In this poem's view, then, the beauty of life's metaphorical morning is perhaps only intensified by how quickly it fades into night.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "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."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is a poem about how terribly quickly time passes—a potentially painful topic that the speaker softens with lighthearted, joyful sounds. The alliteration here adds musicality to the poem's warnings, but also helps to emphasize the speaker's more serious point.

For example, take a look at the alliteration in lines 3-4:

> And this same flower that smiles **t**oday
> **T**omorrow will be dying.

The crisp alliterative /t/ sounds here, like the **t**icking of a clock, suggest just how quickly "tomorrow" follows on "today." Similarly, the repeated /r/ of "The sooner will his **r**ace be **r**un" speeds up the pace of line 7, hurrying the reader along as fast as the sunset the line describes.

Something similar happens in lines 10-11, where the lively "**w**armer" blood of youth transitions into "the **w**orse, and **w**orst / Times" of later life. Here, the alliterative link between those /w/ sounds makes it clear that there's a thin line indeed between summery **w**armth and the **w**orst times. (That echo on "worse" and "worst" is also an example of polyptoton—see the Poetic Devices entry on repetition for more on that.)

Another connection between the poem's ominous and cheerful moods comes in the final stanza, when the speaker decides to give some straightforward advice: "while ye **m**ay, go **m**arry." That /m/ link between a warning "may" and a celebratory "marry" is right at the heart of the poem's philosophy. There's plenty in life to be enjoyed, the speaker insists—but one's got to snatch one's pleasures while one can!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "today"
- **Line 4:** "Tomorrow"
- **Line 6:** "higher," "he's"
- **Line 7:** "race," "run"
- **Line 10:** "warmer"
- **Line 11:** "But," "being," "worse," "worst"
- **Line 14:** "may," "marry"

APOSTROPHE

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" spells out its apostrophe right in its title. This is a poem explicitly directed at young women, and it begins and ends with direct addresses to its audience.

Early on, there's a funny balance between the lighthearted and the stern in the speaker's apostrophe. The speaker is making a serious point that applies, not just to the "virgins," but to everyone: life is short, youth is brief, and you've got to enjoy yourself while you can. But he couches his warnings in fresh summery images of roses and sunlight, and lightens them with a bouncy meter and singsong rhymes. (See the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections for more on that.)

At the end of the poem, he's just plain blunt. The last stanza is one long apostrophe, and it gives straightforward instructions:

"be not coy, but use your time, / And while ye may, go marry," the speaker says, and goes on to warns his listeners that there may only be a small window of opportunity in which they can do that marrying. There's still wit here, though. As the Speaker section of this guide notes, context and tradition suggest that the anonymous and genderless speaker of this poem is pretty likely to be a man. By casting himself as wise counselor to all the world's "virgins," he also seems to volunteer as someone who could perhaps assist those young ladies in discarding their coyness for the pleasures of love.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "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."

ENJAMBMENT

There are only a couple of enjambments in this poem—but one in particular plays a really important role in the poem's sound and sense. While most of the lines here break at natural pauses in sentences, lines 11-12 split a sentence in a notably awkward spot:

> But being spent, the worse, and worst
> Times still succeed the former.

This enjambment creates a metrical stumbling block. When the reader comes to the final "worst" of line 11, they're likely to feel that an idea has come to a resting place, as it has in every previous line. But the next line just rushes on, without even a little pause in sound or thought, and the concluding /t/ sound of "worst" runs right into the starting /t/ sound of "Times."

For a comparison, consider the gentler enjambment in lines 3-4:

> And this same flower that smiles today
> Tomorrow will be dying.

Notice how the sentence splits neatly into two clear parts of an idea at the line break? In contrast, the enjambment at lines 11-12 trips the reader up, as if they're being rushed through a door and stumbling over the threshold.

This makes perfect thematic sense! Lines 11-12 are all about time rushing onward, and the enjambment here makes the poem's sound support its meaning. Hurried from one line to another, the reader feels the speaker's urgency.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "today / Tomorrow"
- **Lines 11-12:** "worst / Times"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" sees human faces everywhere in nature. His frequent personification weaves humanity and the natural world together.

In the first stanza alone, the speaker personifies both time itself (as an old man, a familiar image even today) and the flowers he encourages young women to gather while they can. In personifying the flowers, the speaker seems to suggest that the young women *are* the very flowers he wants them to pick, weaving the idea of fleeting natural beauty right into the fabric of these women's being.

The whole second stanza is built around a personified sun. But here, again, the personification is complex. The speaker suggests that the sun is both a "he" and a "glorious lamp," again weaving objects and people together. In this image, the sun is both a godlike human figure, racing across the heavens, *and* the blazing lantern that human figure carries on his journey.

The interweaving image of the woman-flowers and the sun-lamp-god both speak to a feeling of vibrant natural energy that lives right at the poem's heart. The speaker's zest for life is such that he feels the power of nature bursting through the things he sees around him. Humans really are one with nature, in this view, and that's the source of both the beauty and the tragedy of life.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying."
- **Lines 5-8:** "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."

METAPHOR

For a brief, simple poem, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" uses complex metaphor. That complexity is there from the beginning in the poem's most famous image: the "rose-bud."

Rosebuds have long been a symbol of love and of female beauty. But here, they play a few metaphorical roles at the same time. In instructing the "virgins" to "[g]ather ye rose-buds while ye may," the speaker seems to cast the rosebuds as sexual or romantic experiences, good times to be collected like so many flowers. But when he goes on to say that "this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying," he seems to transform the rosebuds into the young women themselves.

This metaphorical fusion between young women in their sexual prime and sexual *experiences* creates a mood of wild abandon.

It's as if he's encouraging the women to so completely inhabit their sexuality that they *become* sex. Of course, there's a dangerous side to that view, too; the "virgins" might well object that there's more to their lives than having sex and being sexy.

But this is a poem about hedonism (that is, living life for pleasure), and one of the poem's other big metaphors reminds the reader of that. Casting the sun as "[t]he glorious lamp of heaven," the speaker envisions a world in which the very light of day is a glory, carried by a benevolent sun-god. (The speaker also personifies the sun here—more on that under the "personification" entry.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying."
- **Line 5:** "The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,"

REPETITION

The repetition in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" is fairly subtle, but it serves two distinct (and opposite) purposes: to lighten things up at the beginning, and to weigh things down at the end.

Early on in the poem, the speaker adds a bit of colloquial flair with the words "a-flying" and "a-getting" in lines 2 and 6. In Herrick's time, these words would have sounded slangy and familiar, making it sound like the speaker was addressing the "virgins" as a friend. (Starting those words with "a-" also adds a syllable, which helps keep the meter steady!) These words appear at the same point in their respective stanzas—the second line—and thus clearly link the ideas the speaker lays out in the first stanza with the way he develops them in the second.

But later in the poem, repetition—specifically, polyptoton—adds to a feeling of weighty warning. Take a look at line 11-12:

> But being spent, the worse, and worst
> Times still succeed the former.

The movement from "worse" to "worst" evokes the decay and decline of age. Moving from "worse" to "worst" might even lead the reader to think about what that absolute "worst" consequence of lost youth might be: perhaps death itself?

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a-flying"
- **Line 6:** "a-getting"
- **Lines 11-12:** "the worse, and worst / Times"

CAESURA

There's not much caesura in this poem. Most of the time, the verse gallops speedily on, moving as swiftly as the time it describes. But toward the end, the speaker starts slowing his lines down with commas. For instance, consider lines 11-12:

> But being spent, the worse, and worst
> Times still succeed the former.

Notice how those commas insert two little pauses where before there's only been galloping speed? Those caesuras help to set up another of the poem's important effects: the enjambment that makes the reader stumble over the line break here. (See the Poetic Devices entry on enjambment for more on this.) As the speaker gets more serious, thinking less of the joys of youth and more of the pains of old age, his lines slow down and stumble—just like an old man does.

Similarly, the beginning of the final stanza uses caesuras to lend weight to its advice:

> Then be not coy, but use your time,
> And while ye may, go marry;

Here, the commas slow the lines down again, but they also give the speaker's wise words their own little bubble of space. Using caesura to set off the words "use your time" and "go marry," the speaker makes his most urgent points clear.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "spent, the worse, and"
- **Line 13:** "coy, but"
- **Line 14:** "may, go"

VOCABULARY

Ye (Line 1, Line 14) - An old-fashioned word for "you."

A-flying, a-getting (Line 2, Line 6) - The initial "a-" on these words simply adds a friendly, colloquial tone to the lines—and also makes them fit the meter!

Succeed (Line 12) - Follow.

Coy (Line 13) - Evasive or reserved (especially sexually).

Prime (Line 15) - The best part of one's youth.

Tarry (Line 16) - Wait around.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" encourages its

audience to seize the day, and belongs to a genre of *carpe diem* poems in which the kind of day-seizing being advocated for is pretty specific: these are poems addressed to women on behalf of men who want to sleep with them. Andrew Marvell and John Donne, contemporaries of Herrick, also wrote famous and beautiful examples of the genre.

Where Marvell's and Donne's *carpe diem* poems are long, lyrical, and philosophical, Herrick keeps things comparatively straightforward and cheerful. "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" uses 16 lines broken into four quatrains, each with a simple ABAB rhyme scheme and a jaunty, informal common meter. These choices present even the poem's weightier points about the inevitable decline of youth with a light touch.

METER

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" uses common meter. This is a metrical pattern that turns up everywhere in English-language poetry, from hymns to nursery rhymes, so it has a familiar air—and makes the speaker's advice sound friendly and jaunty. This is an upbeat meter for a witty poem.

Common meter uses alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter: in other words, lines of four da-DUMs and lines of three da-DUMs. The trimeter lines (all the even-numbered lines in the poem) have feminine endings thanks to an extra dangling unstressed syllable. Look at the third stanza as an example:

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

These even-numbered lines thus can alternatively be defined as more iambic tetrameter but with catalexis, which just means that their final beat is missing (note how, if there were another stressed beat at the end of each of these lines, they'd become regular iambic tetrameter). Regardless of terminology, the effect is the same: the lines fade out, echoing the fleeting nature of time.

The poem has some substitutions throughout to keep things interesting. The speaker even mixes things up a little in the first line. Take a look at how the stresses work here:

> Gather | ye rose- | buds while | ye may

Notice that the first word of the first line, "Gather," is a trochee (DUM-da) rather than an iamb. The third foot is then a spondee (DUM-DUM). This grabs the reader's attention just as the speaker tries to grab the attention of the "virgins" to whom he speaks.

RHYME SCHEME

"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" uses a simple rhyme scheme, with each stanza running:

ABAB

This easy back-and-forth pattern fits with the poem's simple meter and simple message, making the speaker's advice to young women feel friendly in spite of his more ominous ideas about aging and decline.

In most cases here, the B rhyme in each stanza is specifically a feminine rhyme. It rhymes multiple syllables, the last of which is unstressed—for example, "a-flying" and "dying." This might seem insignificant—except that, traditionally, monosyllabic rhymes are called "masculine" and polysyllabic rhymes are called "feminine." The poem thus sneakily creates a dance between the male and the female in its rhymes.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous. On one level, this helps the poem feel universal in its message; this could be anyone encouraging young women to seize the day.

At the same time, when the reader considers the broader context of the poem, there's a lot they can deduce about the speaker. For instance, the reader can guess that this speaker is probably a "he." This poem belongs to the *carpe diem* tradition, a genre of poem in which men cajole women into sleeping with them through some combination of flattery and warnings about everyone's inevitable death.

The poem itself doesn't specify a gender for its speaker, and readers don't have to interpret it this way! Still, knowing this context can be helpful in understanding what's happening here.

This speaker's address to "the Virgins" might suggest that he's one man among many to give this scheme a shot. The way the poem is shaped also tells the reader that this fellow is witty, philosophical, and pleasure-loving. While he's got one eye on the grave, he doesn't let that stop him from having a good time. In fact, the thought of death only makes him celebrate life more. Youth, he says, is there to be relished—and there's a sense that he wants to enjoy himself as much as possible, just as he's encouraging these "virgins" to do the same. (And, of course, the "virgins" having a good time might play a pretty important role in his own good time.)

SETTING

There's no specific setting in "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," but the natural world still plays an important role here. This is a landscape of rosebuds, brilliant sunlight, and the warmth of summertime—images of a youth that passes all too quickly. In this poem's landscape, people are closely connected

to nature, and women can gather flowers and *be* flowers at the same time. This summer-world of hot-blooded youth also foreshadows a faded winter of old age.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English Robert Herrick (1591-1694) was the liveliest and lustiest of the pleasure-loving Cavalier poets. Writing much of his best work during the English Civil War, Herrick remained an ardent Royalist all through his life, and composed verse in praise of the deposed Charles I and the restored Charles II.

Along with his fellow Cavalier poets Richard Lovelace and Andrew Marvell, Herrick wrote poems of exuberant, life-affirming pleasure, often focused on the joys of sex and romance. Herrick considered himself one of the "Sons of Ben," disciples of elder poet and playwright Ben Jonson (a friend and rival of Shakespeare). Jonson's wry perspective on human nature shows up all through Herrick's witty, energetic work.

Because of its sexual frankness, much of Herrick's verse fell out of favor in the 18th and 19th centuries, but today he's considered one of the most important and influential of the Cavalier poets. Some of his poems—"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" among them—have never gone out of style, and are often quoted even now. (See the "Resources" section for just one famous example, from the movie *The Dead Poets Society*.)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Herrick lived and wrote in the midst of unprecedented English political turmoil: the chaos and carnage of the English Civil War, which ran from 1642 to 1651. In this long and bloody conflict, English anti-monarchist Parliamentarians (also known as Roundheads) clashed with monarchist Royalists (aka Cavaliers) over the governance of the kingdom.

Only a year after "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" was first published, the Roundhead forces, led by Oliver Cromwell, deposed, tried, and beheaded King Charles I. This was an earthshaking shock to a country that had long believed in the divine right of kings (and a serious personal blow to Herrick, a Royalist to his core).

The government that Cromwell established in the aftermath of the king's execution was unstable. England remained war-torn until the Restoration—that is, the return of the monarchy with the 1660 coronation of King Charles II, Charles I's son. But the nature of English governance had changed for good, and the monarchy's power had begun its slow decline.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Herrick's Memorial — See Robert Herrick's memorial in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey—where visitors can find some familiar words in the stained glass. (https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/robert-herrick)
- A Musical Version — Hear the poem performed as a song. (https://youtu.be/b1jw-5D_rG4)
- A Short Biography — Read the Poetry Foundation's background on Robert Herrick, with links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-herrick)
- The Poem in Pop Culture — Watch a clip from the movie "The Dead Poets Society," in which Robin Williams famously quotes (and interprets) the poem. (https://youtu.be/U4Hz2pg4sdU)
- A Reading of Another Herrick Poem — Read an analysis of another of Herrick's poems—a rather sweeter one! Readers might compare and contrast the way the two poems deal with love and sex. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/may/25/poem-of-the-week-robert-herrick)

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