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*Carpe Diem* in “To His Coy Mistress,” and “Ulysses,”

Living in the moment and utilizing one’s remaining time is a common theme in all literature. Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” and Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” are both prime examples of this recurrent subject because of the situational commonalities they have. Both delineate a character’s struggle to seize the time to do what fulfills their lives and aspirations; however, they vary in how each speaker plans to spend that time. Furthermore, on the exterior, both poems seem to unmistakably contrast in theme and moral, but upon additional examination, basic similarities become apparent. In both “To His Coy Mistress,” and “Ulysses,” one sees a mutual sense of *carpe diem*; however, their *carpe diem* natures differ immeasurably in the fundamental essence of how one should spend the time he or she seizes and how it will affect the lives and futures of the speaker and reader.

“To His Coy Mistress,” unlike “Ulysses,” presents an attitude of taking time to pursue lustful urges that ultimately lead nowhere and do not make a permanent difference in the speaker’s life. The poem deals with the passing of time as an obstacle for a man chasing what he thinks is love and makes that apparent in the first few lines:

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. (Marvell 382)

Marvell makes it clear that the object of the speaker's lustful affections is this lady. He also goes as far to say that in the case of infinite time the speaker would make every effort to persuade the woman to fall in love with him. Later in the poem, the speaker makes his argument to win his mistress over, "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" (Marvell 383). The speaker makes his plea that if the lady does not give in to his desires now, death will take both the speaker and woman, along with her virginity, which he desires. The speaker is expressing the importance of seizing the time that he has left with the woman and making the most of it even if she is reluctant. He gives a best case scenario of having infinite time to persuade her to love him, but on line 21, the word "but" signifies a change into a realistic situation. The desperation of the speaker to have this woman's virginity and love is evident throughout the whole poem, but when he makes his argument a *reductio ad absurdum* about death separating him from her, his desperation becomes clear as day along with his objective. The speaker essentially plans to spend his life in relations with this lady, but it is not a worthwhile use of his time because of his motivation: lust. Marvell shows the adverse effects of a lustful longing and how it warps the mind of the speaker, as well as prioritizing an unfruitful ambition.

"Ulysses," shows a different perspective on how the speaker wishes to spend the time he has left which is in a manner that is constructive and fulfilling to the human nature of adventure. Tennyson shows an alternate sequence of events of Odysseus's return to Ithaca when Odysseus begins to yearn for the sense of exhilarating endangerment he feels on the sea with his crew. Odysseus addresses his crew and makes his case on lines 49-52:

Free hearts, free foreheads — you and I are old; / Old age hath yet his honor and his toil. /  
 Death closes all; but something ere the end, / Some work of noble note, may yet be done.

(Tennyson 590)

It is evident that Odysseus believes that even though he and his crew are old, there are still great feats to be done on the open sea that may quench their thirst for a risky and unexpected undertaking. He tells the crew to accept the fact they are not what they once were, but to make the most of their lives anyway. At the end of the poem he states:

We are not now that strength which in old days / Moved earth and heaven, that which we  
 are, we are: / One equal temper of heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong  
 in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (Tennyson 590)

Odysseus emphasizes that these men have been worn down by time and experience, but that it is never enough to stop the inherent will they have to “strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” A stark connection between “Old age hath yet his honor and his toil,” and “We are not now that strength which in old days,” brings to light the realistic view Odysseus has on the situation of himself and the crew. This is a revealing contrast to the speaker’s unrealistic fantastical expectation in “To His Coy Mistress.” Odysseus’s mind is not clouded by lust or any other emotion, and it is his lucidity in aspiring to live life to its fullest which brings a great significance upon the drive for adventure. However, even amid this disparity, there is one necessary parallel to draw, which is the notion to never stop or give up in the pursuit of what gives an individual satisfaction. The speaker of “To His Coy Mistress,” clearly shows his intention to persistently harass this woman for eternity, and Odysseus’s words “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” imply a never ending search for a new journey to launch out on.

While indeed, both poems express both an urgency through *carpe diem* and the sense of a perpetual endeavor, they are very much different at their fundamental levels. Each speaker is trying in his own capacity to achieve what fulfills their heart's desire, whether it be a lustful longing on the surface or a deep passion to be out on the open sea. Beyond the poetry, Marvell and Tennyson are trying to convey an intrinsic concept of pursuing happiness through taking immediate action and living to the fullest extent. However, Marvell accomplishes this in a method that is inverse to Tennyson's optimistic form of striving for contentment. Marvell portrays the ordeal from a perspective of futility that is doomed to begin with, but the reader grasps the same notion from both poems. These differences on the surface but similarities deeper down come together to paint the same picture, but in different colors, so that the reader may come to appreciate the message both authors are communicating.

#### Works Cited

Lord Tennyson, Alfred. "Ulysses." *Literature to Go*. 2nd ed. Ed. Michael Meyer.  
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Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." *Literature to Go*. 2nd ed. Ed. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014. 382-383. Print.