

**THE UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SANTAL PARGANAS COLLEGE
SKM UNIVERSITY, DUMKA**

Study Material for Bachelor of Arts (Honours) English | Semester II (2019-22)

Paper 201 (Early Modern Literature), Unit 4

Andrew Marvell, “The Garden”

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TEXT

The Garden

Andrew Marvell

Stanza 1

How vainly men themselves amaze		S1L1
To win the palm, the oak, or bays,		S1L2
And their uncessant labours see		S1L3
Crown'd from some single herb or tree,	crowned	S1L4
Whose short and narrow verged shade		S1L5
Does prudently their toils upbraid;		S1L6
While all flow'rs and all trees do close	flowers	S1L7
To weave the garlands of repose.		S1L8

In the first stanza, the poet talks about how men try to earn recognition or rewards for whatever they do. Marvell calls it a vain attempt. The word vain can mean either pride or wastage, and Marvell uses it aptly in the first line to highlight how our actions are driven by rewards which we wish to get. Trees like the palm, the oak or the bay are not trees of shade. Whatever pleasure one may derive out of these trees is shallow and superficial. Therefore, people who look only for fame, therefore, obtain such trees' "short and narrow verged" shade. However, when people work hard towards something, without caring about vain goals or shallow rewards, they find "garlands of repose (meaning: *rest, tranquility*)". These garlands are made by flowers, bushes, and voluminous trees gently closing into each other.

Stanza 2

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,	S2L1
And Innocence, thy sister dear!	S2L2
Mistaken long, I sought you then	S2L3
In busy companies of men;	S2L4
Your sacred plants, if here below,	S2L5
Only among the plants will grow.	S2L6
Society is all but rude,	S2L7
To this delicious solitude.	S2L8

In the second stanza, Marvell personifies Quiet and Innocence and views them as sisters. He says that he found peace (quiet plus innocence) not in the busy companies of friends and acquaintances, but in the solitude of a well-grown garden. He says that the gifts of the sisters Quiet and Innocence can only be found in the company of

plants. In the end, he concludes by claiming that society is simply indifferent or is ignorant towards this “delicious solitude”

Stanza 3

No white nor red was ever seen		S3L1
So am'rous as this lovely green.	amorous	S3L2
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,		S3L3
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;		S3L4
Little, alas, they know or heed		S3L5
How far these beauties hers exceed!		S3L6
Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound,	wheresoever	S3L7
No name shall but your own be found.		S3L8

In the third stanza, the poet's voice becomes both dramatic and romantic. He says no colours that are usually associated with love (white for wedding, red for passion) are as amorous (loving) as the colour green. Green, associated with plants, signifies steady growth, regeneration, and life. Marvell contrasts this steadiness with the passionate but fickle love that exists between lovers. He complains that these lovers are cruel when they carve their beloved's name on a tree's bark. They do not realise that the beauty of the tree is truer and much more than the beauty of their beloveds.

Marvell ends this stanza by heroically proclaiming that if *he* ever wounds a tree's bark to etch a name, then that name will simply be that of the tree.

Stanza 4

When we have run our passion's heat,		S4L1
Love hither makes his best retreat.		S4L2
The gods, that mortal beauty chase,		S4L3
Still in a tree did end their race:		S4L4
Apollo hunted Daphne so,		S4L5
Only that she might laurel grow;		S4L6
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,		S4L7
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.		S4L8

In the fourth stanza, Marvell begins by saying that when passion fades, Love retreats to the garden in the end. Here also Love is personified with the capital L and its corresponding pronoun “him” (S4L2). Marvell then cites (meaning: *gives*) examples from the ancient Graeco-roman (Greek and Roman) mythology and alludes (meaning: *refers*) to the stories of Apollo & Daphne and Pan & Syrinx. He says that gods, who are infatuated by mortal women on Earth and chase after them, stop when the women turn into trees. By using these allusions, Marvell lends a solid mythological support to his conceit of trees and gardens being the ultimate resting place for love. Please see the following links for the two stories:

Apollo and Daphne: <https://www.greeka.com/greece-myths/apollo-daphne/>
Pan and Syrinx: <https://www.greeklegendsandmyths.com/syrinx.html>

Cont.

Stanza 5

What wond'rous life in this I lead!	wondrous	S5L1
Ripe apples drop about my head;		S5L2
The luscious clusters of the vine		S5L3
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;		S5L4
The nectarine and curious peach		S5L5
Into my hands themselves do reach;		S5L6
Stumbling on melons as I pass,		S5L7
Ensnar'd with flow'rs, I fall on grass.	Ensnared, flowers	S5L8

In the fifth stanza, Marvell switches back into the present and adopts a contemplative, confessional and lyrical tone. He describes the perfection of his experiences in the garden. Ripe apples fall near him, creeping vines crush their sweet wine into his mouth, his hands also reach up to fruits easily. He describes how as he tries not to crush the melons by stomping upon them, he gets caught in the web of creepers and flowers and falls down. It is a pastoral setting in which nature and man exist peacefully together.

Stanza 6

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,		S6L1
Withdraws into its happiness;		S6L2
The mind, that ocean where each kind		S6L3
Does straight its own resemblance find,		S6L4
Yet it creates, transcending these,		S6L5
Far other worlds, and other seas;		S6L6
Annihilating all that's made		S6L7
To a green thought in a green shade.		S6L8

Like the transition from past to present in Stanza 5, Stanza 6 marks the transition from body to the mind. In the previous stanza, the events were tangible and experienced through body: the touch of the peaches, falling apples, falling to the ground. In Stanza 6, Marvell speaks about the workings of the mind, which, concerned less pleasure now, retreats into happiness. Marvell makes a distinction between *pleasure* and *happiness*. Pleasure is short-lived, while happiness is eternal. Pleasure is transient, while happiness is permanent. Marvell says that in the realm of minds, one mind can easily find a similar other. However, the mind also holds enough power to go beyond these friendships and create even newer worlds and newer oceans. In doing so, the mind brings everything down that existed before, but instead of destroying those things, the mind turns them into “green thoughts” (productive thoughts), in a “green shade” (a productive home).

Stanza 7

Here at the fountain's sliding foot,		S7L1
Or at some fruit tree's mossy root,		S7L2
Casting the body's vest aside,		S7L3
My soul into the boughs does glide;		S7L4
There like a bird it sits and sings,		S7L5
Then whets, and combs its silver wings;		S7L6
And, till prepar'd for longer flight,	prepared	S7L7
Waves in its plumes the various light.		S7L8

The scene shifts back to the garden in the beginning of this stanza. Marvell shows us the garden's fountain and the "mossy roots" of a fruit-bearing tree, and says that it is at one of such places where he can let his soul "glide" through branches, leaves, flowers. On one of the branches (boughs), he says, his soul "sits and sings", sharpens (whets) itself, and tidies up its wings. Then, while the poet's soul, like a bird, waits for a longer flight, sunlight is refracted through its feathers (plumes), creating brilliant flashes of colours.

Stanza 8

Such was that happy garden-state,		S8L1
While man there walk'd without a mate;	walked	S8L2
After a place so pure and sweet,		S8L3
What other help could yet be meet!		S8L4
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share	it was	S8L5
To wander solitary there:		S8L6
Two paradises 'twere in one	it were	S8L7
To live in paradise alone.		S8L8

At this point, we need to revisit the Christian mythology, especially the Garden of Eden from where Adam and Eve were expelled by God for eating the fruit of knowledge, an apple (and in some variations, a fig). Eve, after being persuaded by Satan in the guise of a talking snake, eats the fruit first and makes Adam eat it too. God discovers their disobedience soon after and both are thrown out of the paradise, the Garden of Eden. John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) is based on this story.

Marvell starts the stanza in a nostalgic tone, bemoaning the loss of the "garden-state". The phrase "garden-state" can have multiple interpretations. It can mean, first, the garden-like bright and positive state of life; second, a state of mind where thoughts and ideas flow easily; third, a garden which is also a political space (like the Garden of Eden, which was commanded by God and guarded by angels). Similarly, the word "mate" in S8L2 can also be interpreted in different ways. Marvell could be imagining Adam's past without Eve, and in doing so, blaming Eve for bringing Adam down with her. We need to remember here that Eve was created out of one of Adam's ribs after he complained to God about his loneliness in Eden. So, both Adam and Eve are tied to each other, not only through souls but also through the body. Alternatively, the word "mate" may also refer to a friend or a companion. Marvell suggests that it is only when man spends his time alone in the garden, with the birds, the flowers and the trees, that he realises how pure and sweet his happiness is. Man also realises that he does not really need anyone to make him happy in the garden.

Marvell tells us that the fantasy (something that is not real but is imagined in a grand, pleasing manner) of a man being alone in the garden is equal to paradise itself. Here paradise is used not as a location but an emotion. However, in Christian mythology, paradise is also a place, which propels Marvell to realise that it is beyond the scope of man to enjoy two paradises at the same time (the first paradise is man's solitude in the garden, the second is the mythical place formerly lived in by Adam and Eve). Man either does not deserve such indulgence, or he simply cannot handle it.

Cont.

Stanza 9

How well the skillful gard'ner drew	gardener	S9L1
Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new,	flowers	S9L2
Where from above the milder sun		S9L3
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;		S9L4
And as it works, th' industrious bee	the	S9L5
Computes its time as well as we.		S9L6
How could such sweet and wholesome hours		S9L7
Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!	reckoned	S9L8

In the final stanza of the poem, Marvell admires the skill of the gardener who has made a new dial out of flowers and herbs. The mild sun traverses through the zodiac (like twelve months, there are twelve zodiac signs too: Aries to Pisces) while shining over the dial. As the sun begins to set, the hard-working bee also calculates its time like humans do. The poet ends the poem by claiming that these “sweet and wholesome hours” can only be appreciated for their sweetness and wholesomeness in the company of herbs and flowers. In doing so, Marvell takes the idea of happiness and contentment and brings them back to the garden, where, according to him, they properly belong.

The word “gardener” (S9L1) is often interpreted as God, while the word “dial” (S9L2) is interpreted to mean the Earth, God’s creation. However, even without Biblical interpretations, the stanza works on its own too. The dial is one of the common features among gardens, and they are crafted with skill by the respective gardeners.

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THE PRINCIPAL CONCEIT

The poem rests on Marvell’s belief that a garden is the man’s natural home. It is in the garden that the purity of emotions is achieved, and it is also in the garden that the mind is able to free itself from the body and aspire towards higher ideals. The garden is a venue of creative and spiritual possibilities, and it is only when the man is left alone with the flowers, the trees, the fountains, that he is closest to accessing two paradises in one.

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FORM AND STRUCTURE

“The Garden” is a poem written in iambic tetrameter. It contains nine stanzas, each with eight lines. The rhyming scheme is defined by the use of heroic couplets (AA, BB, CC, DD, and so on) and there are four such couplets in one stanza. Heroic couplets are chiefly used in epics because they are easier to memorise and they lend a distinctive rhythm to the text.

While Marvell’s poem is neither an epic or a mock-epic, it does present his ideas in an elevated, epic-like manner. The transcendence of soul from the body, the sustained emphasis on the greatness of the garden, allusions to graeco-roman myths, and the many references to the Garden of Eden (Paradise) from the Christian mythology - all come together to support Marvell’s conceit in the poem.