**To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time**

BY [ROBERT HERRICK](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-herrick)

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.

A Short Analysis of Robert Herrick’s ‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’

**‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may’: Herrick’s classic *carpe diem* poem**

‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may’ has become synonymous with the Latin sentiment expressed by Horace: *carpe diem*, ‘seize the day’. Don’t tarry or waste time: you get just one life, so grasp the nettle and make the most of it. In his poem ‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’ – often known by that ‘Gather ye rosebuds’ first line – Robert Herrick brilliantly captures the ‘seize the day’ sentiment. Here is the poem, with a short analysis of it:

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.

The poem’s meaning or message is relatively straightforward: as mentioned above, the poem is an example of ‘*carpe diem*literature’, enjoining the addressee to ‘seize the day’ and make the most of life. We say ‘addressee’ but, as the poem’s title makes clear, Herrick is really addressing more than one person: ‘the virgins’. This provides another clue as to what he is driving at: [**like Andrew Marvell’s seduction lyric ‘To His Coy Mistress’**](https://interestingliterature.com/2016/10/13/a-short-analysis-of-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress/), Herrick is advising the virgins to ‘make much of time’ by enjoying themselves before their youth and beauty fade. This is hinted at by the imagery employed in the first stanza:

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

Gathering flowers can be seen as a metaphor for sex or wooing here, for plucking the flower and enjoying it while it’s still in the bloom of youth. The tautness of the quatrain (i.e. four-line verse or stanza) is reinforced by the rhyme, both at the end of the lines (*may/today*, *flying/dying*) and within the lines (*while/smiles*, *still/will*). This lends the lines a purposeful and decisive feel: make no mistake, the poet says, even *your* youth will fade, the flower will wither, and – eventually – die. The internal rhymes are delicately balanced, so that *while* and *smiles* come at the same point in the first and third lines respectively (the sixth syllable in the line) and *still*and *will* come at the same point in the second and fourth lines (the fourth syllable in each case). Not only do these pairs of words rhyme internally with each other, but they also cross over and echo the *other* pair of words: *while*and *will*, *smiles* and *still*. This is, technically speaking, highly efficient and tightly constructed verse – and this is important because the poet wants to convince us of the certainty of what he says. Note how ‘may’ becomes ‘will’.

The other three stanzas of the poem extend the central sentiment so pithily and perfectly expressed in that opening stanza. They are less remarkable than the first verse, but they do display a similar use of repetition of contrasts and opposites: *higher/sooner/nearer* in the second stanza, *best/first/worst* in the third (leaving that missing complement, *last*, unspoken but lurking ominously behind the lines), and *time*/*prime* (not simple opposites, though it is the passing of time which will lead to the passing of one’s prime) in the final stanza.

‘To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time’ is, in the last analysis, a carefully constructed poem expressing a fairly straightforward sentiment. It says what it wants to say with extraordinary technical proficiency, yet without sacrificing the simplicity of its central message.

**The author of this article, Dr Oliver Tearle, is a literary critic and lecturer in English at Loughborough University. He is the author of, among others,**[***The Secret Library: A Book-Lovers’ Journey Through Curiosities of History***](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/1782435573/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=1782435573&linkCode=as2&tag=intereslitera-21&linkId=44120bd5790c670fe7db423f7798d1cd)**and**[***The Great War, The Waste Land and the Modernist Long Poem***](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/1350027014/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=1350027014&linkCode=as2&tag=intereslitera-21&linkId=82b35f704a33f74647c35a87514ecddf)***.***