The Garden

POEM TEXT

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oak, or bays;
And their uncessant labours see
Crowned from some single herb or tree,
Whose short and narrow verged shade
Does prudently their toils upbraid;
While all flowers and all trees do close
To weave the garlands of repose.

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

No white nor red was ever seen
So amorous as this lovely green.
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;
Little, alas, they know or heed
How far these beauties hers exceed!
Fair trees! wheresoe'er your barks I wound,
No name shall but your own be found.

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

What wondrous life in this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

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

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

Such was that happy garden-state,
While man there walked without a mate:
After a place so pure and sweet,
What other help could yet be meet!
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

How well the skillful gard'ner drew
Of flowers and herbs this dial new;
Where from above the milder sun
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
And as it works, th' industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we.
How could such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers!

SUMMARY

How pointless it is when people strive to win military, political,

or artistic glory—to earn a symbolic crown of leaves from one lone tree, whose insufficient little bit of shade warns them against their folly. It's silly to seek one tree when *every* flower and tree can come together to offer you perfect peace.

Oh, lovely Quiet, I've found you here in this garden—and your dear sister Innocence! Once, I mistakenly looked for you among bustling crowds of people. But you, oh holy flowers, only grow among other plants. Civilization and company feel crude and rough compared to my lovely solitude here.

No one ever saw pale skin or a red lip as gorgeous as the green of this garden. Foolish lovers, harsh as the flame of the love that burns them, cut their beloveds' names in the bark of the trees. Alas, they can't see that the trees are far lovelier than their ladies are. Beautiful trees! If I carve any names into your bark, they'll only be your own.

Once people wear themselves out with passion, it's best to come to a garden to recover. That's just what the Greek gods did, finishing their quests for love by ending up with plants. Apollo ran after the nymph Daphne only so that she'd turn into a laurel tree, and Pan pursued the nymph Syrinx not because he wanted her, but because he wanted the reed she'd turn into.

What a glorious life I live in this garden! Ripe apples fall all around me. Juicy bunches of grapes press themselves into wine against my lips. The nectarine and peach push themselves into my hands. As I walk along, I stumble over melons and get tangled up in flowers, but I only fall down on soft grass.

In the midst of all these pleasures, the busy mind shrinks down and gets quiet. The mind—a place that mirrors and contains the whole world—can also create new things, moving beyond reality to build other worlds and other oceans. At last, everything in the world can become nothing but one thought, as green as the shade I lie in.

Here, resting beside a running fountain or sitting on the mossy roots of a fruit tree, my soul can throw off my body like an old jacket and soar into the branches. There, it sits and sings like a bird, then grooms its silvery wings. While it waits to be ready for a longer journey, it plays with the shifting beams of light in its feathers.

This is how the Garden of Eden once was, after God created Adam but before he created Eve. After experiencing a place so innocent and delightful, what company could Adam have needed? Alas, such a great pleasure as solitude in Eden is beyond the reach of any mortal: it would be like two paradises at once to live in paradise all alone.

A clever gardener made this excellent, sweet-smelling clock out of herbs and flowers that open to mark the movements of the gentle sun. As this clock marks the hours, the hardworking bee measures its time just as well as a person does. How could you mark times this healthy and delightful *except* with a clock made of herbs and flowers?

THEMES

THE DELIGHT, WISDOM, AND INNOCENCE OF NATURE

The speaker of "The Garden" finds that his deepest moments of delight and understanding come when he withdraws from the bustle of civilization to lie in the grass of a lovely garden. The natural world, in this poem, offers the end-all and be-all of earthly pleasures, providing everything a person could possibly need—and in a perfectly wholesome and innocent form, unlike the often corrupt or dangerous wider world. Sitting alone in a garden is as close to heaven as this speaker can imagine getting on earth.

The pleasure a person can find in nature, the speaker says, is the highest there is. His garden's "lovely green" is more "amorous" (more attractive, loving, and lovable) than the prettiest lady: nature offers an overwhelming aesthetic satisfaction that outclasses all human beauty. Nature also offers an innocent, simple response to the complex and sometimes dangerous pleasures of love. In this garden, the speaker can enjoy the sensuality of sweet, abundant fruits and cool shade without worrying about sex, sin, and heartache. Pleasure, in the garden, comes without pain.

Alongside that physical delight, the garden is the perfect environment for imagination, insight, and spiritual wisdom. As he sits dreaming under a tree, the speaker's mind becomes as calmly present as the tree is, until he thinks nothing but "a green thought in a green shade"—a thought in perfect harmony with the world around him. Such thoughts are as fertile as the garden itself. In his "happy garden-state," the speaker is able to "transcend[]" the everyday world and dream up "far other worlds and other seas"; his soul can even take flight from his body like a bird, in a preview of his "longer journey" to heaven.

What's more, the physical, mental, and spiritual pleasures the garden offers are all innocent and enduring, as human civilization rarely is. The speaker rejects both romantic love and the pursuit of "the palm, the oak, or bays" (the leafy crowns that traditionally symbolize military, civic, and poetic triumph, respectively). Scrambling after these kinds of success, he feels, means giving up on nature's "Innocence" and "Quiet" in favor of victories that can only ever be "short and narrow." The garden, on the other hand, offers lasting pleasure and wisdom uncompromised by "toils" and striving. The speaker's retreat to the garden is thus rather like a return to the Garden of Eden itself, a place where all delight is innocent.

Resting in the garden, then, is the speaker's idea of an utterly fulfilling life. A thoughtful and happy person doesn't need to achieve big worldly success, this poem suggests, and perhaps should even avoid trying: they only need to take part in nature's innocent pleasure and wisdom.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-72

SOLITUDE VS. PUBLIC LIFE

In "The Garden," a speaker's delight in a lovely garden is only intensified by the thought that no one else is there with him. Ideally, he'd like to live that way forever, withdrawing from all the world's foolish bustle and enjoying perfect privacy among the trees. Other people, this poem rather misanthropically suggests, only get in the way of the pleasures of solitude, and too much company corrupts.

Out among "busy companies of men," the speaker says, one can never enjoy the pleasant company of "Quiet" and "Innocence." Civilization, he feels, is full of meaningless noise and bustle: people rush around trying to win the "palm, the oak, or bays" (leaves that symbolize military, civic, and poetic triumph, respectively) or to quench their "passion's heat" by romancing a beloved. In the speaker's eyes, this is a whole lot of fuss for no good reason.

Real happiness, the speaker feels, can only be found in solitary contemplation. Out among the trees, all by himself, a guy can calm down and hear himself think. Eventually, he might even find a peace so perfect that he becomes one with the garden he's alone in, thinking only "a green thought in a green shade," as a tree might. In such a state, his soul is as close to its eventual "longer flight" to heaven as it can get on earth.

This placid, thoughtful existence, of course, is only possible if there's no one else around to muck it up with their noise, ambition, and temptations. The speaker reflects that the only guy who got to fully enjoy the bliss of solitude was Adam before Eve was created: "Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone," he says wistfully. If one is altogether alone in a garden, there's no danger of, say, being talked into eating a forbidden fruit by your lady friend. Alone in his garden, if the speaker "falls" (an allusion to the story of the Fall of Man itself), he'll only "fall on grass," not into sin.

The speaker thus suggests that public life—whether in war, politics, art, or love—is a corrupt, corrupting, and foolish endeavor, one that has nothing on the kind of spiritual refreshment you can only find alone. The desire for achievement and relationships is just a distraction from what's truly best in life: private meditation in a green shade.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Lines 57-64

THE DANGERS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

One of the many reasons this poem's speaker chooses to reject the world and withdraw to a beautiful garden is because, in his eyes, the pleasure you can get from nature is much safer and more wholesome than the pleasure you can get from love. By persistently choosing plants over women, the speaker suggests that sexuality is a disappointment at best and a dangerous trap at worst.

Settling down into his garden, the speaker observes that "no red nor white was ever seen / So amorous as this lovely green." In other words, the colors of a pretty lady's complexion aren't nearly so attractive as the leafy beauty around him. In fact, he's happy to tell the trees that—unlike the thoughtless lovers who carve their beloved's names into tree trunks—he'd only ever adoringly carve the trees' *own* names into their bark.

Even the Greek gods agreed with his preference for a tree over a lady, the speaker continues. Alluding to myths in which beautiful nymphs transformed into plants to evade amorous gods, the poem's speaker claims that Apollo and Pan chased after Daphne and Syrinx, not because they wanted to have sex with them, but because they longed for the laurel trees and reeds the women would turn into.

This pointed preference for nature over women comes from a general sense of disillusionment and exhaustion around sexuality (as well as from some general misogyny, by today's standards). Passion, to this speaker, is a burning "flame," an uncomfortable "heat" that leads nowhere good. This, he feels, has always been the way. The first man, Adam, enjoyed "two paradises" in one when he "live[d] in Paradise alone," the speaker says: everything was going great before Eve came along and complicated things. The implication here is that Eve's arrival led to the Fall of Man itself, the descent from paradise into sin.

Though the speaker withdraws to his garden to escape all the mess, discomfort, and corruption of sex, even here he can't totally get away. When all the fruits of his garden come to life and sexily press themselves against him, readers get the sense that passion follows him wherever he goes. His great hope is to enjoy an innocently fruity sensuality, not a perilous fleshy one.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-32
- Lines 33-40
- Lines 57-64

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

How vainly men themselves amaze

To win the palm, the oak, or bays;
And their uncessant labours see
Crowned from some single herb or tree,
Whose short and narrow verged shade
Does prudently their toils upbraid;
While all flowers and all trees do close
To weave the garlands of repose.

As "The Garden" begins, the poem's speaker sits back to cast a cynical, amused eye on the folly of humankind, as if he were watching a crowd from afar.

How silly it is, he reflects, that people run around trying to "win the palm, the oak, or bays"—that is, to earn the leafy crowns that symbolize military, civic, and poetic triumph, respectively. Such victories, in his view, can only satisfy for so long.

He makes that point through a surprising, witty leap from symbolic palms, oaks, and bays to literal ones. A quest for the glory of "the palm, the oak, or bays," he says, means committing yourself to "some single herb or tree": that is, to one little plant, whose "short and narrow verged shade" can offer only the most limited shelter. Public triumph, in other words, can't offer lasting satisfaction. Soon enough, people's victories fade away, and they have to scurry after yet another triumph to keep themselves going.

The trees that provide crowns of leaves, the speaker goes on, are wiser by far than the people who pursue those crowns. Punnily, even as a crown of palm, oak, or bay leaves *braids* around a victor's temples, the tree's inadequate shade *upbraids* (or rebukes) the person who pursues it.

The speaker has his own strong sense of what's worth pursuing, and it isn't any one symbolic shrub. Rather, it's the metaphorical "garlands of repose," wreaths that one can only weave from "all flowers and all trees." In other words, it's the rest and calm one finds in a garden. Only the real, live natural world offers the great and lasting reward of peace.

In this poem, the speaker will turn his back on all the sweating and striving that makes civilization look so petty and tiresome to him, retreating into an ideal garden in quest for those "garlands of repose." But this isn't a simple poem about the glory of nature, though that's part of it. Rather, this artful speaker will weave literal and metaphorical ideas about gardens together. His ideal garden, readers will discover, is at once a real place and a rich conceit, an extended metaphor for his dream of a perfect inner life.

Fittingly enough, Andrew Marvell here uses a form that feels manicured as a flowerbed:

- The poem is written in octets (or eight-line stanzas) of iambic tetrameter. That means that each line uses four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm (as in "To win | the palm, | the oak, | or bays").
- Those even, steady iambic lines are further divided into rhymed couplets, so that each new rhyme swiftly finds a match.
- The stanzas thus take on a square four-by-four pattern: four beats per line, four couplets per stanza.

Taken all together, this neat shape evokes a kind of deep, calm order—a sense that, in the speaker's garden, all is perfectly in balance.

LINES 9-16

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

In the second stanza, the speaker turns his back on all the poor fools who strive for glory and makes his own triumphal march: into a garden, all by himself. Here, "all flowers and all trees" together will offer him rest, refreshment, and beauty.

Here, too, he can enjoy the company of new friends:

> Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
> And Innocence, thy sister dear!

There's something more than a little ironic about this apostrophe. The only reason the speaker can address "Quiet" and "Innocence"—figures personified as lovely damsels—is because there's absolutely no one else in this garden with him. Outside in "busy companies of men," he could never find these ladies no matter how hard he "sought" (or looked for) them. The world of people, these lines imply, is corrupt—and loud, just so very loud.

No, he was a fool to look for Quiet and Innocence among people, the speaker realizes now:

> Your sacred plants, if here below,
> Only among the plants will grow.

This image presents the two maidens as both gardeners and "sacred plants" themselves. The only place that Quiet and Innocence can safely cultivate their virtues "here below" in this fallen world is "among the plants"—precisely because plants themselves are innocent and quiet, not noisy and depraved like humanity. If Innocence and Quiet are to flourish, they must do so alone.

Alone, that is, but for the speaker himself. The right number of people in a garden isn't zero, but *one*: the lucky speaker, who can relish "delicious solitude" here as if it were a plump

strawberry. Even the sounds of this stanza's closing couplet evoke his blissful relief at getting away from the noise and mess of society:

> Society is all but rude,
> To this delicious solitude.

Readers can savor the delicate /ih/ assonance and luxuriant sibilance of "this delicious solitude" just as the speaker savors solitude itself.

LINES 17-24

No white nor red was ever seen
So amorous as this lovely green.
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;
Little, alas, they know or heed
How far these beauties hers exceed!
Fair trees! wheresoe'er your barks I wound,
No name shall but your own be found.

The speaker has turned his back on the palm, oak, and bays of public triumph to withdraw into the innocent quiet of his garden. Now, he suggests that he's also turning his back on another thing one only finds among "busy companies of men": romantic love.

For who needs it? The garden provides more pleasures than love ever did:

> No white nor red was ever seen
> So amorous as this lovely green.

The white and red here are the colors a 17th-century English reader would associate with a beautiful lady's complexion. But these seductive colors aren't anywhere near so "amorous" as the "lovely green" of the garden. "Amorous" is a strange and striking choice of word here: it presents the garden's green, not just as lovely, but as *loving*. This garden's foliage is as happy to see the speaker as the speaker is happy to see it.

Not everyone, the speaker laments, can perceive the superiority of green to red and white. Tormented by passion, cruel as the metaphorical flame of desire that burns them, lovers go around spoiling the trees by carving "their mistress' name" into the bark—little realizing that the trees are far lovelier than any lady could ever be.

Here, the speaker makes his own passionate speech to the trees:

> Fair trees! wheresoe'er your barks I wound,
> No name shall but your own be found.

This apostrophe presents a vision that's at once funny, lovely, and mysteriously profound. Carving the trees' own names into their bark—*o Alder, o Ash, o Beech!*—the speaker is acting like a besotted lover, certainly. But he's also playing out a relationship that can only happen between the natural world and a person. He's doing one of humanity's first gardening jobs: like Adam in the Garden of Eden, he's *naming* the trees.

This idea might take readers back to the speaker's relief at finding the garden populated only by "Quiet" and "Innocence." Imagining himself alone in an innocent world with only the trees to love, the speaker returns to a biblical vision of humanity's very first days (and not for the last time, either).

The tree-naming also reminds readers that this poem takes place, not in wild nature, but in a cultivated place. This garden doesn't speak of the wild wisdom of nature as a later Romantic poet might. Rather, it speaks of a collaborative relationship in which humanity doesn't just learn from nature, but shapes it.

LINES 25-32

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

The speaker has been quick to reject all womankind in favor of the "amorous green" of his garden—but not because he doesn't see the appeal of womankind at all. Clearly, this is a man who's burned in plenty of passionate flames in his time. His withdrawal to the garden is a "retreat" from "passion's heat," an exhausted retirement from an intense love life.

A retreat, maybe, but not a defeat. Here, the speaker suggests that the cool, shady "amorous green" of a garden is what the right-thinking passionate man *really* wants, deep down in his heart—and he has divine precedents to prove it. Even the "gods, that mortal beauty chase" (that is, the Greek gods, notorious seducers) ended up with plants, not women:

> Apollo hunted Daphne so,
> Only that she might laurel grow,
> And Pan did after Syrinx speed,
> Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

The speaker alludes to two important Greek myths with similar plots:

- In the story of Apollo and Daphne, the god Apollo (patron of the sun, poetry, and medicine, among other things) falls for the nymph Daphne, who wants nothing to do with him. Still, he pursues her. Fed up, Daphne asks her river-god father to transform her into a tree so that Apollo will leave her alone. She

becomes a laurel tree; the laurel tree becomes sacred to Apollo.
- The story of Pan and Syrinx runs along much the same lines. Pan (the lecherous goat god, patron of flocks, shepherds, and woodlands) pursues the nymph Syrinx, who turns into water reeds to escape him. He then harvests the reeds and uses them to make his trademark musical instrument, the Pan pipes.

This, the speaker drily suggests, was the gods' plan all along. They didn't want their beloveds so much as they wanted the laurel trees and water reeds their beloveds would turn into.

Readers might perceive a little tongue-in-cheek humor there, and perhaps the merest hint of sour grapes: *Who wanted those women, anyway?* But take the speaker at his word, and these lines unfold into rich, strange meaning. Besides reflecting the speaker's own development from passionate, frustrated young lover to solitary garden sage, these metamorphoses relate natural creativity to artistic creativity:

- Daphne's laurel tree, also known as a bay tree, is the source of the "bays"—the bay leaves that honor poetic triumphs. Poets are awarded laurel crowns precisely because the laurel tree is the poetry-god's lady love.
- And Syrinx's water reeds become a musical instrument.

The frustrated consummation of sexual relationships here becomes the source of natural and artistic fertility.

A relationship with a garden, then, is anything but sterile. By choosing to love the "amorous green" of the garden over the red and white of a sexy lady, the speaker also chooses to embrace an artistic creativity that grows as organically as a leaf or a reed.

LINES 33-40

What wondrous life in this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

In preferring leafy green creativity to the pleasures of sex, the speaker might at first seem to be making a rather monk-like choice, withdrawing from human company to devote himself to private art-making and contemplation. In this stanza, however, passion finds a new garden-form.

At first, it sounds as if the speaker is just relishing his garden's abundant fertility:

> What wondrous life in this I lead!
> Ripe apples drop about my head;

The garden, here, provides all the nourishment the speaker could want without labor. Apples simply fall to his side, begging to be eaten.

But the wonders of this "wondrous" place have only begun:

> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarine and curious peach
> Into my hands themselves do reach;

Suddenly, startlingly, the garden's fruits are anthropomorphized—and seductive. The "luscious clusters" of grapes press themselves to the speaker's lips in a juicy kiss; the plump, soft, feminine forms of nectarines and peaches push themselves into his hands. This is an "amorous green" indeed.

The garden, then, doesn't just offer the speaker calm "garlands of repose," but lavish sensual pleasure. He doesn't even have to run after the fruits of the garden like Apollo ran after Daphne: the "curious peach" thrusts itself upon him. This is a fantasy of effortless fulfillment. Perpetual fulfillment, too: if apples and peaches (autumn and summer fruits, respectively) are ripe at the same time, then the seasons have no bearing on this garden's fruitfulness. Every delicacy is there for the taking, all the time.

Better yet, all this pleasure comes without cost or risk:

> Stumbling on melons as I pass,
> Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

There's such an abundance of glorious fruit to enjoy here that you might well trip on it, the speaker says—but if you fall, you'll only "fall on grass."

Pause for a moment on that imagery. The word "fall," in one sense a straightforward verb, also chimes with ideas the speaker introduced earlier in the poem. Back in the second and third stanzas, the speaker was wandering around the garden like Adam himself, naming the trees and enjoying the company of "Innocence" and "Quiet." The innocent "fall" here might therefore pun on a bigger and more dangerous garden Fall: the Fall of Man, in which Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, become self-conscious, and are cast out of Eden.

Alone in his garden, this line hints, the speaker is living like Adam before Eve. Here, fruit is unforbidden and falls are innocent. Sensual pleasure isn't corrupted, dangerous, or disappointing. Unlike a nymph, the fruit never runs away; unlike

Eve, the fruit never invites you to disobey God. Pleasure is divorced from sin.

This stanza carries the poem into a new and fantastical place. Up until now, everything the speaker has said about his garden could be true of a real live literal place: the garden is a peaceful retreat from corrupt civilization, an inspiring place of beauty, and so on. Here, though, the garden becomes more obviously symbolic. The kind of abundant, lush, fertile, sensual, self-fulfilling pleasure the speaker finds here suggests that he's exploring an inner landscape, a fantasy of what his very soul could be like—if only everyone would leave him alone.

LINES 41-44

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness:
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;

The poem's sixth stanza begins with some complex, ambiguous language. While his body revels in a fantasyland of seductive fruits, the speaker looks inward:

> Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,
> Withdraws into its happiness:

There are two ways to read these lines, both meaningful here:

- The speaker could mean that his mind withdraws into a private happiness because it's enjoying less obvious pleasure than the body is. While the body rolls around in the melon patch, the mind goes on its own private adventure.
- Or the speaker could mean that pleasure makes the mind itself *less*: sensual enjoyment calms and quiets the noisy mind, allowing it to reach a private and happy place. Just as the speaker physically takes himself away to a private garden, the mind psychically "withdraws" from its surroundings.

With both these readings harmoniously in play, the speaker dives into a complex metaphor:

> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find;

Presenting the mind as an ocean, the speaker suggests that, alone in his garden, he has a whole world to himself: land around him, sea inside him. He also suggests the mind's awesome power of *reflection*:

- When he calls the mind a place where "each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find," he alludes to an old belief that the ocean contained an analogue of every land animal.
- So, for instance, if there's such a thing as a land-elephant, there must also be a sea-elephant. Milk a land-cow, and know that a sea-cow is mooing out there somewhere; ride a land-horse, and be sure a sea-horse gallops somewhere beneath the waves.
- Through this allusion, the speaker suggests that the mind, like the sea, contains a little version of all creation.

If this is a case, the mind is a microcosm of a macrocosm. Contained by his garden, the speaker also *contains* his garden in the form of an idea, a mind-garden, full of mind-trees and mind-fruits.

These dizzying images of reflection create a moment of green infinity. Reflecting on his own mind, the speaker also reflects on the whole world; reflecting on the whole world, the speaker reflects on his own mind. Inner and outer begin to look like long-lost twins.

LINES 45-48

Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

The speaker has just created a dizzying metaphor in which world and mind reflect each other endlessly. But the vast ocean of the mind isn't merely reflective. It's also creative:

> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other worlds, and other seas;

The echoing diacope of "other" there stresses that the mind has the power to "transcend[]," to reach beyond what it knows, to generate as well as to reflect. This, too, is part of its "happiness." Mirroring and containing the world, it can also leap beyond the world.

Paradoxically, that creativity is destructive. As the speaker loses himself in imagination, the mind begins "annihilating all that's made": his creativity carries him beyond the mirror of the world that is his mind, and thus undoes creation.

But in a paradox on a paradox, that destruction is a new creation, too:

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

In these famous lines, all grand images of seas and mirrors and lands-beyond collapse into a single still point. All that's left of the speaker and the world alike is a "green thought in a green shade": a working brain almost indistinguishable from the leaf-shadow it rests beneath.

The imagery here merges a vivid, tangible, recognizable

experience—the utter peace you can sometimes reach as you rest beneath a summer tree—with an image of the mind's ideal relationship to the cosmos. "Green thought" brings the speaker's mind into perfect harmony with the world around him. Like green nature, his mind is creative and fertile; like green nature, it's without struggle and toil; like green nature, it's innocent of sin. The mind becomes a mirror reflecting only leaves.

Even the meter here evokes perfect balance:

> To a | green thought | in a | green shade.

The change from pulsing iambic da-DUMs to the ponderous DUM-DUM of two spondees, "green thought" and "green shade," gives thought and shade the same green weight.

This is the consummation of the relationship the speaker has courted with the garden. In this hushed moment, he and the green almost merge.

LINES 49-56

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

The garden has satisfied the speaker's body and mind. One more aspect of his being remains: his soul.

The first lines of the seventh stanza are grounded in the physical world:

> Here at the fountain's sliding foot,
> Or at some fruit-tree's mossy root,

The imagery here draws attention to the *bottoms* of things: the foot of the fountain, the root of the tree. From these low-down, fundamental places, the water and the tree spring up—and teach the speaker's soul to do the same. As the water of the fountain leaps up into the air, as the tree reaches skyward from its roots, the speaker's soul leaves the body on the ground like a "vest," an old suit of clothes, and glides lightly into the treetops. Perhaps, the juxtaposition suggests, it's the body's very rootedness, its solid planting on the green earth, that lets the soul rise up so freely.

In the boughs above the speaker's head—the same that made the absorbing "green shade"—the soul sits "like a bird," and an elegant one. With "silver wings" and luxurious "plumes," this soul-bird isn't a common sparrow.

Listen to the sounds in this rich passage:

> There like a bird it sits and sings,
> Then whets, and combs its silver wings;
> And, till prepared for longer flight,
> Waves in its plumes the various light.

The musical assonance, consonance, and alliteration here evoke the song of a soul-bird at its ease. As the speaker's body relishes seductive fruits, his soul relishes simply being. The soul's easy music here might take readers back to the poem's earlier images of natural creativity: the bird's art comes to it as easily as leaves to a laurel tree.

Notice, too, that the soul relishes the physical world as much as the body does. It knows it's only here for a little while: when it's "prepared for longer flight," it'll leave body and world behind altogether, taking off for a heavenly world beyond. For now, though, it "waves in its plumes the various light"—a moment of imagery in which feathers and sunlight interweave, each playing through the other. That "various light" evokes the dapple that comes through moving leaves, swaying over the bird's silvery feathers.

The speaker's body relishes sensual pleasure; his mind rejoices in reflective creativity. His soul seems to do both. Even as the soul-bird leaves the body behind, it takes on a new embodiment of its own, one that allows it to bask in the light and sing.

LINES 57-64

Such was that happy garden-state,
While man there walked without a mate:
After a place so pure and sweet,
What other help could yet be meet!
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises 'twere in one
To live in paradise alone.

The speaker has painted a picture of perfect harmony. In his garden, he finds that his mind, body, and soul are attuned to the natural world, a state that gives him all-fulfilling and self-contained pleasure. In this stanza, though, the silvery bird of the speaker's soul comes down from its exalted heights. The poem descends from its green thought into curmudgeonly annoyance that one can't always be alone in an enchanted garden.

He begins by spelling out what he's often implied:

> Such was that happy garden-state,
> While man there walked without a mate:

His garden life, in other words, is just like Adam's life before Eve was created. The first man, in his first days, enjoyed this same innocent fulfillment, with Eden providing all that he needed. His "happy garden-state" was, in a pun, both his way of being and his domain, the one matched perfectly to the other.

What more could a man want?

Certainly not a wife:

> After a place so pure and sweet,
> What other help could yet be meet!

Here, the speaker acidly puns on the word "helpmeet" (or spouse), rejecting the idea that any "help" with one's solitary garden-state could possibly be "meet" (or fitting). These lines, beside recalling the speaker's general sense that romantic entanglement is more trouble than it's worth, might also remind readers of the speaker's earlier "fall on grass"—the untroubled, "pure and sweet" fall one could only enjoy in a world without an Eve.

Here, then, the speaker alludes to the end of the Eden story, in which the serpent tempts Eve to try the forbidden fruit and Eve encourages Adam to do the same. The entanglement of fruit and sex in this poem might suggest that, to this speaker, all womankind presents the same kind of danger. Get too swept up the "white or red" of a lovely lady's complexion, and you'll lose all the self-sufficient pleasures of the "amorous green"—and when you fall, it sure won't be on grass.

Sex, in this vision, is a very great temptation. It's also one that can't be altogether evaded. The speaker's fantasy of seductive fruit makes it clear that passion is part of paradise; he's not interested in giving up on sexual pleasure altogether. The trouble is, sex with *women* comes with complications, struggles, disappointments, and compromises—none of which the speaker has patience for. His dream garden doesn't do away with sex, it just purifies it by making it solitary. In this speaker's ideal, then, he himself is a kind of self-contained, self-fertilizing garden.

But alas:

> [...] 'twas beyond a mortal's share
> To wander solitary there:

That echoing assonant /air/ sound evokes a rather wistful, longing mood; the speaker can only *dream* of getting to be alone in a garden forever, whether it's a literal garden or a fantasized garden of perfect, creative self-sufficiency.

But his tone gets tarter as the stanza closes:

> Two paradises 'twere in one
> To live in paradise alone.

These rather misanthropic lines don't just wish away the complications of relationship. They also suggest that paradise shared is paradise halved, not doubled. "To live in paradise alone" is to live contented in yourself, aligned with the nature of things—and to live unimpeded, enjoying a completely fulfilling relationship with the world around you. To live in paradise with other people is to live in paradise—well, not *lost*, exactly, but *divided*.

LINES 65-68

> *How well the skillful gard'ner drew*
> *Of flowers and herbs this dial new;*
> *Where from above the milder sun*
> *Does through a fragrant zodiac run;*

The poem's closing stanza might come as a surprise. The speaker, so far, has written in two modes. There's his curmudgeonly, cynical, condemning mode, in which he longs to wash his hands of a corrupt and corrupting world. And there's his exalted, lyrical, metaphysical mode, in which the garden offers him a glimpse of heaven and a mirror of the mind.

Here, rather than rising to a grand climax in either of those styles, he introduces a new, quieter voice. He's just finished wistfully (or grumpily) declaring that "Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone," in the same breath as he admits that no "mortal" can ever return to Adam's happy "garden-state." Now, as if with a resigned sigh, he turns back to the "flowers and herbs" around him:

> How well the skillful gard'ner drew
> Of flowers and herbs this dial new;

So far, the speaker has treated the garden as a living being in its own right. Now, he draws attention to the idea that this place was planned and designed: a gardener puts in a first appearance.

The mysterious gardener's design is an artful one. Whoever they are, they've made a "dial," a clock, out of plants:

- This image might suggest a literal flower clock, a bed of flowers chosen because they respond to certain times of day. (Think of morning glories, which open in the morning and close at night, or sunflowers, which turn to follow the sun as it rolls overhead.)
- It might also suggest the natural rhythms of those "flowers and herbs" form their *own* sort of "clock," measuring time without the imposed idea of, say, "two in the afternoon."

The image of the gardener's design also unites the heavens and the earth, much as the speaker's vision of "green thought" united the inner and outer worlds:

> Where from above the milder sun
> Does through a fragrant zodiac run;

As the sun runs through a "fragrant zodiac" of flowers, those flowers become the fixed stars that the sun moves through in

its predictable, steady rhythm. The metaphor suggests that flowers and stars alike are part of a grand, elegant, harmonious design. The unknown gardener, then, might be the same one who designed Eden.

Though the speaker gestures to the divine here, there's still something *gentle* in this new image of fragrance, opening flowers, and a "milder sun." Rather than launching into "other worlds, and other seas," the speaker here quietly appreciates the gardener's work on the ground, measuring out the day in the motion of the flowers. He also moves from a dream of a timeless, deathless Eden back into everyday life, where time—however you measure it—*passes*.

LINES 69-72

And as it works, th' industrious bee
Computes its time as well as we.
How could such sweet and wholesome hours
Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers!

In his new reflections on time, the speaker again learns something from the garden and its denizens:

> And as it works, th' industrious bee
> Computes its time as well as we.

With the garden as its only clock, the bee "computes its time," measures out its days, just as effectively as we human beings do: the bee doesn't need *two o'clock* to know when it is time to act and time to rest.

It's also "industrious," hard-working, as nothing else in this garden has been. Remember, not long ago, the speaker was daydreaming of ripe apples dropping all around him, nourishment without labor. He was also pooh-poohing those whose foolish "toils" never provide the satisfaction they crave. This bee offers a different vision of work: one gently in tune with garden time, not clock time.

Hours spent on garden time, the speaker goes on, are "sweet and wholesome"—imagery that, alongside that bee, suggests they're *honeyed* hours, creative, golden, and nourishing. Such hours can *only* be "reckoned," told, with "herbs and flowers."

The speaker can't escape into a solitary Eden of green thought forever, then. He'll have to reckon with time and with labor (and probably with sex, too). He can, however, approach those inavoidable parts of life in a fallen world with the wisdom of a "happy garden-state," computing his time as a bee does, not as a foolish striver after the "palm, the oak, or bays" does.

Listen to the quiet, unobtrusive chiasmus that ends the poem:

> How well the skillful gard'ner drew
> Of flowers and herbs this dial new;
> Where from above the milder sun
> Does through a fragrant zodiac run;
> And as it works, th' industrious bee
> Computes its time as well as we.
> How could such sweet and wholesome hours
> Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers!

Flowers and herbs to herbs and flowers: the garden world moves in a steady circle, following the rhythm of the sun. So must the speaker, while he wears the "vest" of his body. But this final, peaceful acceptance of life in time is sustained by an inner world of eternal green.

SYMBOLS

THE GARDEN

The pleasure this poem's speaker's takes in his garden isn't the same as a Romantic poet's pleasure in the rhythms of real-life nature. For this isn't a wilderness, or even the open countryside, but a *garden*, a cultivated collaboration between nature and humanity. For that matter, it's a *supernatural* garden, eternally green and fertile; its fruits even throw themselves at the speaker, begging him to eat them. For that reason, readers have also interpreted this poem, not just as a meditation on nature's delights, but as a symbolic depiction of an poet's inner life: a solitary, rich, imaginative, and fertile place where raw natural materials can be shaped into art.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-16
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 33-40
- Lines 48-56
- Lines 65-72

GREEN

The garden's greenness draws on traditional symbolism that connects the color to fertility and creativity. Since leafy, grassy green is the color of the natural world in summer—and the color of evergreens, trees that live all through the winter—the color has always been associated with life, growth, and even immortality. The speaker certainly uses that idea here: his garden seems perpetually green, unlike the fast-fading leaf crowns that foolish people pursue. The speaker finds this greenery refreshing and enlivening, but also outright erotic. To him, green is "amorous" and seductive. All that greenery reflects the idea that the garden is a vibrant, lively, inspiring place; a place that refreshes and rejuvenates the speaker.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "No white nor red was ever seen / So amorous as this lovely green."
- **Line 48:** "To a green thought in a green shade."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors transform the speaker's philosophies into concrete, surprising, and even funny images.

In the second stanza, the speaker personifies the qualities that make his garden perfect, presenting "Quiet" and "Innocence" as a pair of lovely sisters. There's something ironic about this moment: the only reason Quiet and Innocence live in the garden is because there's nobody there! The only company the speaker needs, the personification suggests, is the *absence* of company.

Company, after all, only leads to struggles and troubles. The speaker is particularly happy to leave behind the exhausting pursuit of romance. Lovers, he observes, become "cruel as their flame"—that is, cruel as the metaphorical flame of passion that burns within them. Such flames drive them to do silly things like carve their beloveds' names on the bark of innocent trees, behavior the speaker rolls his eyes over.

He's far happier spending his time in:

> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find;

This metaphor draws on the old belief that the ocean contains an analogue of every land animal: if there are rabbits on land, for instance, there must be sea-rabbits to match them. If the mind is an ocean, it's not only vast and deep but also a mirror of the whole world, inhabited by a mind-copy of everything it observes around it.

Navigating this inner ocean, the speaker can get so absorbed in his imagination that he feels as if he's tossed "the body's vest aside"—that is, as if he's shrugged off his body like an old jacket. His soul, in a simile, is then "like a bird," unbound from earthly limitations and free to fly among the green branches above him.

Above and around all these metaphors, some might read the speaker's dazzlingly green garden as itself a conceit, an extended metaphor for the poet's own mind. This solitary place, after all, is endlessly lush, sensuous, and creatively fertile, just like the generative imagination the speaker describes in the sixth stanza.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "While all flowers and all trees do close / To weave the garlands of repose."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Fair Quiet, have I found thee here, / And Innocence, thy sister dear!"
- **Line 19:** "cruel as their flame,"
- **Lines 43-44:** "The mind, that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find;"
- **Line 51:** "Casting the body's vest aside,"
- **Line 53:** "There like a bird it sits and sings,"

IMAGERY

Sensuous imagery makes Marvell's garden seem at once real and ideal, natural and artful.

The speaker begins by defining his garden against what it isn't: "short and narrow." These are the words he uses to describe the shadow of "some single herb or tree" like the "palm, the oak, or bays"—the trees whose symbolic leaves honor various kinds of triumph or glory. The image of these trees' "short and narrow verged shade" suggests that the successes they represent can only give so much spiritual refreshment, shelter, or comfort.

Why, the speaker asks, would a person scramble after just one of those symbolic trees when they could have the whole rich world of a garden? The "lovely green" there, to him, is more "amorous" (that is, attractive, lovable, and—oddly enough—*loving*) than the "white" and "red" traditionally associated with a lovely lady's complexion.

This isn't the only time that the speaker's imagery will hint the garden's pleasures outweigh those of sex, either. When the "luscious clusters of the vine" (grapes, that is) begin to "crush their wine" against his lips of their own volition, it seems as if the garden can provide all the sensual pleasure anyone could desire. Images of "curious" peaches and nectarines seductively pushing themselves into the speaker's hands create a fantasy of perfect, mutual fulfillment: the garden desires the speaker as much as the speaker desires the garden.

There's a similar sense of reciprocity in one of the poem's most famous images. When the speaker has spent enough time sitting quietly in the garden, he feels that "all that's made," all creation, is "annihilat[ed]" in his mind, leaving behind only "a green thought in a green shade." Thought and leaf-shadow become, almost, one green thing: speaker and world are in perfect tune.

In this state, the speaker can transcend his physical limitations. In a vivid simile, his soul leaves his body and perches in the branches above him:

> There like a bird it sits and sings,
> Then whets, and combs its silver wings;
> And, till prepared for longer flight,

Waves in its plumes the various light.

In this vision, the soul-bird is in much the same harmonious state as the speaker's "green thought." As it catches the "various light" in its silvery feathers, it seems to take sensuous delight in its surroundings: this soul-bird may have left the body behind, but it's still enjoying all the pleasures of embodiment, soaking up sight and sensation.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "some single herb or tree, / Whose short and narrow verged shade / Does prudently their toils upbraid;"
- **Lines 17-18:** "No white nor red was ever seen / So amorous as this lovely green."
- **Lines 34-40:** "Ripe apples drop about my head; / The luscious clusters of the vine / Upon my mouth do crush their wine; / The nectarine and curious peach / Into my hands themselves do reach; / Stumbling on melons as I pass, / Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass."
- **Line 48:** "To a green thought in a green shade."
- **Lines 49-50:** "Here at the fountain's sliding foot, / Or at some fruit-tree's mossy root,"
- **Lines 52-56:** "My soul into the boughs does glide: / There like a bird it sits and sings, / Then whets, and combs its silver wings; / And, till prepared for longer flight, / Waves in its plumes the various light."
- **Line 59:** "After a place so pure and sweet,"
- **Lines 67-68:** "the milder sun / Does through a fragrant zodiac run;"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The speaker's garden is loaded with mystical meaning, reminding him of the Greek gods and of the Garden of Eden. But one startling moment in particular makes the garden's magic feel real and tangible. As he makes his way through the garden, the speaker encounters a series of anthropomorphized fruits that seem to want nothing more than for him to devour them.

The speaker introduces these fruits by savoring the "ripe apples" that "drop about [his] head," an image that suggests nothing more unusual than bounteous fertility. Only a moment later, though, something strange happens:

> The luscious clusters of the vine
> Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
> The nectarine and curious peach
> Into my hands themselves do reach;
> Stumbling on melons as I pass,
> Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

These fruits seem practically to be seducing the speaker. Grapes crush their bodies against his lips as if kissing him, and the round, juicy, feminine nectarines and peaches press themselves into his hands. Even the flowers reach up to wind around his legs.

These sensuous images suggest that it's not just fruit the speaker's thinking about here. All through the poem, the speaker struggles with the compromises, difficulties, and disappointments of sex. The vision of seductive but unforbidden fruit suggests a kind of innocent, sinless sexuality. If, like Adam in Eden, a guy "fall[s]" through his entanglements with this fruit, he'll only "fall on grass," harmlessly, without getting into serious trouble.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 35-40:** "The luscious clusters of the vine / Upon my mouth do crush their wine; / The nectarine and curious peach / Into my hands themselves do reach; / Stumbling on melons as I pass, / Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass."

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions to Greek mythology and Bible stories give this poem its philosophical framework. Rich in allusive meaning, the speaker's garden here isn't just a garden, but an idea of a perfect, self-contained life.

Like any educated man of the 17th century, Marvell's speaker can casually draw on the traditions and tales of the ancient world. When he shakes his head over people's longing to win "the palm, the oak, or bays," for instance, he's referring to an ancient Greek and Roman practice in which a person who achieved a great triumph in war, politics, or poetry would be crowned with a wreath of palm, oak, or bay leaves, respectively. But striving for the symbolic leaves of any "single herb or tree," the speaker feels, is limited and limiting.

So is striving for romantic love. The Greek gods knew this well, the speaker says, with just a touch of tongue-in-cheek humor. He alludes to a couple of famous stories of gods in love:

- In the first, the god Apollo falls in love with the beautiful nymph Daphne. She's not interested, but he pursues her anyway. At last, she prays to her river-god father to transform her into a laurel tree so that Apollo will leave her alone. The laurel thus became a tree sacred to Apollo—and the source of the "bays," the leaves that crown triumphant poets. (Apollo was the god of poetry, among many other things.)
- The story of Pan and Syrinx runs along similar lines. The lustful goat god Pan wants Syrinx; Syrinx doesn't reciprocate; Syrinx transforms into water reeds to escape her divine pursuer. Pan then uses the reeds to make his famous "Pan pipes," a simple

musical instrument.

In the speaker's view, the gods never wanted these nymphs at all: they chased their lady loves "only that she might laurel grow" and "not as a nymph, but for a reed." Notice, as well, that the gods don't just get lovely plants out of their pursuits, but plants connected to the arts: the poetic laurel and the musical pipes. The pleasures of the garden and the pleasures of art, in this speaker's private mythology, are closely intertwined, and both are superior to the discombobulating pleasures of sex.

There's a similar evasion of sexuality in the speaker's allusions to the Garden of Eden:

- When he observes that, in *his* ideal garden, he'll only "fall on grass" if he takes a tumble, he's alluding to the Fall of Man, the moment when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and become self-conscious.
- This, he seems to feel, was probably all Eve's fault: her unnecessary "help" spoiled Adam's fun. As he puts it: "Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone."
- His imagined "happy garden-state" is one of total purity and innocence, the most Eden-y time in Eden, before even a hint of corruption had entered the world.

Alone in an uncorrupted garden, the speaker suggests, a guy can finally get some thinking done. He vividly pictures his mind as:

> [...]that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find;

Here, he refers to an old idea that the ocean contained an analogue of every land animal. In other words, look in the ocean and you'll find sea-horses, sea-lions, sea-cows... a partner for every creature that walks the earth. This allusion suggests that the mind, too, is a place that contains the whole world: the idea of an ant is a mind-ant, the idea of a horse a mind-horse.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "How vainly men themselves amaze / To win the palm, the oak, or bays;"
- **Lines 27-32:** "The gods, that mortal beauty chase, / Still in a tree did end their race. / Apollo hunted Daphne so, / Only that she might laurel grow, / And Pan did after Syrinx speed, / Not as a nymph, but for a reed."
- **Line 40:** "Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass."
- **Lines 43-44:** "The mind, that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find;"
- **Lines 57-64:** "Such was that happy garden-state, / While man there walked without a mate: / After a place so pure and sweet, / What other help could yet be meet! / But 'twas beyond a mortal's share / To wander solitary there: / Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone."

DIACOPE

Elegant repetitions create some of this poem's most famous and memorable moments.

One of these is legendarily grumpy:

> Two **paradises** 'twere in one
> To live in **paradise** alone.

The diacope of "paradises" and "paradise" here plays a neat trick. By suggesting that paradise enjoyed alone is paradise doubled, the speaker suggests that every person you add to a scene *splits* it somehow: when Eve turns up, she takes half of Adam's pleasure in paradise. (Just think how much one loses in a crowd, then!) By the same token, solitude doubles pleasures. Being alone, to this speaker, is a paradise in itself.

Some of the speaker's reasons for delighting so much in his solitude appear in another of the poem's most remarkable moments. Here, the speaker describes how his mind begins to move when he sits all on his own in a garden:

> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find;
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far **other** worlds, and **other** seas;
> Annihilating all that's made
> To a **green** thought in a **green** shade.

The speaker here describes a movement from *reflection*—the mind mirroring the whole world, containing a little copy of all it perceives—to *creation*. The diacope of "far **other** worlds, and **other** seas" stresses the newness the speaker finds in his imagination after a spell of calm garden solitude.

This imaginative power doesn't just create other worlds, but carries the speaker away from this one. Paradoxically, it carries him deeper into this one at exactly the same time. When "all that's made," all of creation, is "annihilat[ed]" in his imagination, what's left behind is "a **green** thought in a **green** shade." The diacope there makes the speaker's mind seem almost to merge with the leaf-shadow his body rests in.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 46:** "Far other worlds, and other seas;"
- **Line 48:** "To a green thought in a green shade."
- **Lines 63-64:** "Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone."

PUN

A smattering of puns give this poem both wit and meaning: the speaker makes his point with a little wink and a smile.

The first of these puns offers a vivid image as well as a joke. In the first stanza, the speaker pooh-poohs the idea of seeking glory, symbolically represented as "the palm, the oak, or bays" (the leaves that crown victors in military, political, or poetic pursuits). Those who choose to chase after "some single herb or tree," he says, will find that those plants' "short and narrow verged shade / Does prudently their toils upbraid":

- To "upbraid" is to tell off or scold: the idea here is that the scanty shade a single symbolic tree casts will soon punish the glory-seeker with its inadequacy.
- But there's also an image here of the victor's "toils," their labors, being literally *braided*, their temples wound round with the leaves they worked for. Such a scanty crown, the speaker feels, won't do anyone a bit of good in the long run.

No, the only lasting fulfillment the speaker has found is in a garden—a place whose pleasures don't fade. What's more, a garden is safe and innocent in a way the wider world is not. The speaker points this out in a pun that alludes to one of humankind's first big mistakes:

> Stumbling on melons as I pass,
> Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

The literal fall the speaker refers to here puns on the metaphorical fall that got humanity kicked out of its first paradise: the Fall of Man, in which Adam and Eve eat forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and become self-conscious. Without other people (ahem: *women*) around to suggest such perilous fruit-eating, the speaker implies, both fruit and falling are innocent and harmless.

To live in Eden "without a mate," the speaker elaborates, would be to enjoy a "happy garden-state." The pun here suggests both inner and outer fulfillment: alone in a garden, one's "state," one's way of being, would match one's "state," one's private, bordered territory.

In such a happy, fortunate solitude, the speaker wonders:

> What other help could yet be meet!

This ironical line puns on "helpmeet," an old word for "spouse" (and one often used to describe Eve's relationship to Adam in particular). "Meet," in Marvell's era, meant "fitting" or "suitable." A helpmeet, the speaker's pun thus suggests, is an unnecessary and ill-fitting impediment to enjoying the double paradise of innocent solitude in a garden.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Whose short and narrow verged shade / Does prudently their toils upbraid"
- **Line 40:** "I fall on grass."
- **Line 57:** "that happy garden-state,"
- **Line 60:** "What other help could yet be meet!"

VOCABULARY

Vainly (Line 1) - Pointlessly and foolishly.

Amaze (Line 1) - Confuse, befuddle.

The palm, the oak, or bays (Line 2) - The leaves of these trees, made into wreaths, symbolized military, civic, and poetic triumph, respectively.

Uncessant (Line 3) - Ceaseless, constant.

Short and narrow verged (Line 5) - That is, small and sharply limited.

Prudently (Line 6) - Sensibly, wisely.

Upbraid (Line 6) - Scold, criticize.

Repose (Line 8) - Rest, peace.

Thee, thy (Line 9, Line 10) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "you" (thee) and "your" (thy).

Sought (Line 11) - Looked for.

Busy companies (Line 12) - Bustling crowds.

Rude (Line 15) - Coarse, unrefined.

Amorous (Line 18) - Attractive, loving.

Flame (Line 19) - That is, the metaphorical flame of the lovers' passion.

Wheresoe'er (Line 23) - A contraction of "wheresoever"—that is, wherever.

Hither (Line 26) - Here.

Apollo, Daphne, Pan, and Syrinx (Lines 29-32) - The speaker alludes to two famous stories from Greek mythology:

- When the god Apollo fell in love with the nymph Daphne, she wanted nothing to do with him. To escape him, she prayed to her father, a river god, to be transformed into a laurel tree (also known as a bay tree).
- Similarly, the nymph Syrinx escaped the lustful goat-god Pan by transforming into water reeds.

Insnared (Line 40) - Tangled up.

The mind, that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find (Lines 43-44) - These lines allude to an old belief that the ocean contained an analogue of every land animal: for instance, you'd be able to find an ocean dog, an ocean cow, an ocean orangutan.

The body's vest (Line 51) - That is, the garment of the body. This image depicts the body as a mere suit of clothes that the soul can take off.

Whets (Line 54) - Grooms. The poem imagines the bird drawing its feathers through its beak like a knife-sharpener pulling a knife against a whetstone.

What other help could yet be meet! (Line 60) - Here, the speaker puns on the idea that Eve was Adam's "helpmeet," or spouse. "Meet" could also mean "fitting" or "suitable." Here, then, the speaker is essentially saying, *What help or company could you possibly need if you had a beautiful garden all to yourself?*

'Twas, 'Twere (Line 61, Line 63) - Contraction of "it was" and "it were."

A mortal's share (Line 61) - That is, the fate or fortune of any mortal person.

Dial (Line 66) - Clock, watch.

A fragrant zodiac (Line 68) - Here, the speaker suggests that the sun charts a course through the flowers of the garden just as it moves through the constellations of the zodiac.

Industrious (Line 69) - Hardworking.

Computes (Line 70) - Measures.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Garden" uses an elegant, measured form of Marvell's own invention: nine octets (or eight-line stanzas) built from four pairs of rhymed couplets apiece. This solid shape feels not unlike a well-maintained garden itself. Within these orderly stanzas, the speaker cultivates all kinds of "green thought[s]," from reflections on the mind's imaginative power to sensuous fantasies of seductive fruit. to wry rejections of human folly.

Notice, though, that there might be a tiny hint of transgression in the poem's neat shape. If Marvell had used *eight* stanzas of eight lines apiece, "The Garden" would be perfectly square, as geometrically neat as a knot garden. Instead, he uses nine stanzas—a subtle overreach that introduces the merest hint of wildness to his green paradise.

METER

"The Garden" is written in iambic tetrameter, a rhythm as steady and leisurely as the speaker's "happy garden-state" itself. In iambic tetrameter, each line uses four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in the poem's first lines:

How vain- | ly men | themselves | amaze
To win | the palm, | the oak, | or bays;

Those four pulsing beats keep the poem ticking along like a heart, evoking the speaker's calm pleasure as he rests in the garden.

However, the meter isn't perfectly regular throughout. Like a lot of poems written in iambic meters, "The Garden" plays with its rhythms from time to time; in moments of strong feeling, the speaker's meter changes to match his mood.

For instance, listen to the music of these famous lines:

Anni- | hila- | ting all | that's made
To a | green thought | in a | green shade.

The first line here is straight-ahead iambic tetrameter. The second still has four beats, but moves those beats around, so that the two strong spondees (feet with a DUM-DUM rhythm) of "green thought" and "green shade" carry all the weight of the line. The speaker's green thought is thus aligned with the green shade, not just because they share a color, but because they share a rhythm. It's as if the speaker has almost merged with the world around him.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhymes in "The Garden" are planted as neatly as rows of tulips. Each stanza uses a sequence of four rhymed couplets, like this:

AABBCCDD

These tidy rhymes line right up with many of the speaker's feelings. The mind, the speaker reflects, is itself a reflector: sitting in his garden, he becomes aware that his mind contains a little version of everything in the world, putting him in tune with what's around him. Just as, within the mind, everything finds "its own resemblance," the rhymes swiftly find a resemblance to each other, making the poem's lines a picture of the relationship between speaker and garden.

The speaker even drives the point home by threading internal rhymes through his description of finding likenesses between the inner and outer world:

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a complex and contradictory fellow:

- A romantic who sees an earthly garden as a mirror of paradise, he's also a curmudgeon who grumps that the only truly blessed person on earth was the utterly solitary Adam before Eve came along.
- A sensual guy who imagines the garden seducing him with fruity caresses, he dismisses the pleasures

of sex as only so much exhausting "heat."

In one thing, however, he's singleminded. His greatest pleasure comes from immersing himself in his private garden-world until he can barely distinguish his "green thought" from the "green shade" around him. Being in the garden, to him, eventually turns into *being* the garden: his happiest state is one in which imaginative visions come as easily to him as leaves to a tree.

This shifty poetic figure might even be read as a voice for Marvell himself. Though it's not altogether clear when Marvell wrote this poem, there's evidence to suggest that he composed it in the 1650s, when he was employed as tutor to a nobleman's daughter at a lovely country house called Nunappleton. The speaker's withdrawal into a peaceful garden world could mirror Marvell's own retreat from public life.

SETTING

The poem's lush garden is a place both tangible and otherworldly.

The garden's "green shade" will feel real and familiar to anyone who's ever sat under a summer tree, and its "mossy root[s]" and "sliding fountain[s]" could come straight out of a stately old English country garden. But active, seductive fruits and hints of eternity—it never seems to be autumn or winter here, only the height of green summer—suggest that this isn't any ordinary backyard. Readers might take this poem's landscape as an image of the private paradise that is the speaker's mind, or as a vision of Eden itself (before Eve came along and things got complicated, that is).

In either of its guises, real or imaginary, this garden is the speaker's ideal place, containing within its green and pleasant boundaries all possible delights for the body, the mind, and the soul.

Readers might observe, too, that this garden combines the pleasures of nature and art. This isn't a wild Romantic landscape, but a cultivated place where humanity and nature work and grow together.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) was a famously elusive writer. In his political commitments and his poetry alike, he never stuck to one tradition or another: he's not quite a Cavalier poet and not quite a Metaphysical poet, though his work shows the marks and influences of both of those traditions.

For instance, Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" is one of the greatest examples of a *carpe diem* poem (that is, a poem in which a speaker tries to convince a lady to sleep with him)—a theme for which the Cavalier poets were famous. But Marvell was quick to turn his back on the Cavalier cause when the Puritanical government of Oliver Cromwell rose to power—and then to cheerfully become a monarchist again when King Charles II returned from exile and resumed his throne.

"The Garden," of course, expresses a general dissatisfaction with the grubby world of politics—and with people, full stop. In its picture of an Eden made even lovelier by total solitude, "The Garden" might respond not just to a depressing political climate, but to the work of Marvell's friend John Milton, whose epic *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the Garden of Eden and the fall of humanity. The poem's visions of the mind itself—one can even read the garden as a conceit for the poetic imagination—also links Marvell to the scintillating philosophizing of Metaphysical poets like John Donne and George Herbert.

Like many of Marvell's poems, "The Garden" appeared posthumously in 1681, when a woman who claimed to be Marvell's wife (but was probably actually his hard-up housekeeper) published an assortment of his manuscripts in the hopes of collecting some royalties. Though this publication history makes the poem's origins a bit mysterious, many critics suspect that Marvell wrote "The Garden" while working as a tutor in the lovely country house called Nunappleton—his own retreat from the sorrows of a war-torn world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Andrew Marvell made lived through one of the most dramatic episodes in English history: the English Civil War. In this earthshaking conflict, the Roundheads, led by Oliver Cromwell, rose up against the Cavaliers, forces loyal to King Charles I and to the monarchy in general. Cromwell's Roundheads argued for increased Parliamentary power as a curb on kingly tyranny.

This clash came to a dramatic climax in 1649 when Cromwell's forces tried, convicted, and beheaded Charles I for treason. This execution was a huge shock to a country whose recent monarchs had proclaimed the "divine right of kings," the idea that kings and queens were appointed by God.

Cromwell's stand against such ideas would start to look ironic when he began to exercise dictatorial control in his role as "Lord Protector." His power and popularity soon waned, and England invited Charles I's exiled son Charles II back to the throne, ushering in an era of luxury, elegance, and wit.

Marvell navigated these dangerous years by swearing his allegiance to whichever side happened to be dominant at the moment—a tricky strategy that he pulled off through brilliance, usefulness, and fast talking. If he held deeper political convictions than his actions suggest, they're hard to trace in his poetry. Though the tone and subject matter of his work make him sound a lot like a Cavalier poet, he also wrote poems in praise of Cromwell and was close friends with the anti-monarchical John Milton, whom he rescued from prison after

Charles II resumed the throne.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Marvell's life and times in this short biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/andrew-marvell)
- Marvell's Legacy — Learn more about Marvell's mysterious, shifty life (and afterlife) in this review of Nigel Smith's biography of the poet. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/06/andrew-marvell-nigel-smith-review)
- Portraits of Marvell — See some images of Marvell himself (looking rather rakish and piratical) via London's National Portrait Gallery. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp02994/andrew-marvell)
- Marvell's Manuscripts — Study images of Marvell's manuscripts and books at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/andrew-marvell)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5Nir9XM7Wc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ANDREW MARVELL POEMS

- The Mower to the Glow-Worms
- To His Coy Mistress

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Garden.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 10 Feb 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Garden.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved February 10, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/andrew-marvell/the-garden.