

The prevalence of *Carpe diem* (Seize the day) in English Poetry

Pro. A. John Siluvai

Abstract: Carpe diem: seize the day. The roman poet Horace said it first and best as with so many things in the "Odes," a long series of poems composed in 65 B.C. 1

*While we
speak, time is envious and
is running away from us.
Seize the day, trusting
little in the future.*

It implies that one should make the most of one's present moment, and grab hold of the chances one gets for happiness as soon as they appear, because life is very short. It simply suggests that one must live each and every moment of every day's life to its fullest.

From a literary point of view, this phrase is very important, as it sheds light on Epicurus' philosophy of Epicureanism, which asserts that pleasure is the greatest good, and in order to attain pleasure, a person needs to live an enjoyable and luxurious life, without paying any attention to any other thing. Its literary advantage is that instead of giving explanations, it just sums upon the invitation to a luxurious lifestyle in just two words. However, it is understood clearly in the context of Horace's Epicurean background, which calls us not to trust our future, as it may never come at all. The right time to take action is today, not tomorrow.

Many English poets have put their distinctive stamp on this motif *carpe diem*, exhorting us to seize the day, to make the most of life, 'to make hay when the sun shines', 'to gather ye rose buds while ye may', in Robert Herrick's well-known phrase, or 'to stop and consider! Life is but a day', as Keats has it in 'Sleep and Poetry'. This article will make an attempt to analyse and synthesize a few '*carpe diem*' poems in English, all of which warn us about the brevity of our life and encourage us to get on with it while we still can.

Keywords: '*Carpe diem*' means 'seize the day' or 'pluck the day' – Epicureanism is an ancient philosophy initiated by Epicurus who advocated the urgency of enjoying the sensuous life to the fullest: 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die' – '*tour de force*': a performance with great skill.

Introduction: ‘*Carpe diem*’ concentrates only on the material possessions in life and its enjoyment with no regard to the future life in store for man. In the Bible one comes across two parables, one that of a rich man who had abundance of material possessions and spoke to his Soul: ‘you have many good things laid up for many years; take your rest, eat, drink and enjoy yourself’.² But God said to him: ‘Fool, this night your soul is demanded from you.’ He has heaped up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God. Jesus had something to say to those who had abundant supply of material possession and something to say to those who had few possessions.

The rich fool was aggressively self-centred. There was too much of ego in his cosmos. When he had superfluity of goods it never entered his head to give something away to others. Instead of denying himself, he aggressively affirmed himself with I, me, my and mine. Instead of finding his happiness in giving, he tried to conserve it by keeping and enjoying it by himself. The Romans had a proverb which said that money was like sea-water; the more a man drank, the thirstier he became. The rich fool never saw beyond this world. In fact, all those who are carried by ‘*Carpe diem*’, never think of the life after this life. There is a story of a conversation between a young and ambitious lad and an older man who knew life. “I will,” said the young man, “learn my trade”. “And then?” said the older man. “I will set up in business” “And then?” “I will make my fortune”. “And then?” “I suppose that I shall grow old and retire and live on my money.” “And then?” “Well, I suppose that someday I will die.” “And then?” came the last stabbing question. The man who never remembers that there is another world is destined someday for the grimmest of grim shocks **3**. (William Barclay)

There is yet another parable of the rich man who is usually called Dives, which is the Latin for rich and the poor man Lazarus. The Dives dressed habitually in purple and fine linen and feasted in luxury every day. He seized the day by eating and drinking like a glutton and gourmet feeding on exotic and costly dishes. He was a figure of indolent self-indulgence. He wiped his hands on hunks of bread which was thrown away. It was that bread which Lazarus was waiting for. Dives was a picture of wealthy luxury and Lazarus was a picture of helpless and abject poverty. The Dives who was steeped in ‘*carpe diem*’ never noticed the world’s suffering and need and did nothing. He had no feeling for the suffering of poor Lazarus. He thought that Lazarus should be in pain and hunger while he wallowed in luxury. The bitter truth is that Lazarus is in glory, lifted to the bosom of Abraham in heaven and the Dives was

thrown in torment in hell after this short and ephemeral life. '*Carpe diem*' can never be the be-all and end-all of man's life. (Mine)

Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress': Since Horace, poets have regularly adapted the sentiment of *Carpe Diem* as a tool to procure the affections of their beloved by pointing out the fleeting and brief nature of life. Marvell is known today as one of the metaphysical poets along with John Donne, Henry Vaughan, George Herbert, Thomas Traherne and Richard Crashaw because he wrote on subjects such as man's place in the universe, existence, love and religion. Since its posthumous publication in 1681, 'To His Coy Mistress' has focused on the lustful desires of a man attempting to entice a female virgin, the mistress, into sexual intimacy. The poem has come to be known as a seduction poem or *carpe diem*, (pluck the day) or his best known tour de force poem. All metaphysical features of wit, allusion, and metaphor are all employed in what is called a syllogism, a logical argument with a major, minor statements and conclusion.

The poem in the form of a dramatic monologue progresses through three sections and stirs the lady's head and the heart to his submission. He wants to deflower her before it is too late. The argument begins with an appeal to the coy mistress based on the idea that, if time and space were limitless, they could spend their days in leisure, she by the exotic Ganges River looking for rubies for instance, and he by the ebb and flow of the Humber, wouldn't be looking for precious stones. He would be rather complaining, perhaps unhappy with the distance between him and his lady. And there would also be time, thousands of years, for him to admire her physical beauty, her eyes, and her breasts and so on. Sex needn't be a priority in this fantasy world. The speaker's ironic tone even allows for his love of the lady a decade before the Old Testament flood, and she could say no to his advances up to the time when the Jews convert to Christianity, a matter which would of course never ever happen.

Then the speaker's tone starts to alter, and becomes more serious. Time is flying.

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

The future isn't that bright. Her beauty will be lost in the sands of time. The worst part would be when she is dead and buried, her long preserved virginity will become food for the worms and her so called 'quaint honour' will turn to dust, while his lust will be all ashes.

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

The final part of the poem concentrates on the rational summing up of what's gone before. And the speaker clearly throws out the fantasies and wishes of the previous scenes. Gone are space, time and death. In their place is the all-consuming present. Just look at the use of the word 'now' three times with the suggestion that the speaker cannot wait a second longer for his deferred fulfilment. He believes therefore that his final effort will make her see sense. His emphasis is on the physical domain of skin, sport, roll and tear and the language is completely tinged with aggression and forceful energy to make her succumb to his pleas for *carpe diem*.

Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.

As the lines progress, the intensity increases, the passion starts to burn, and when the images of two birds of prey emerge, devouring time, instead of the other way round, the reader is surely taken beyond mere pleasures of the flesh. Common sense and the logic of time will no longer dictate their lives, if they come together. After analysing the poem, it is confirmed to be a remarkable permutation of the phrase *carpe diem*.

Robert Herrick's 'To the Virgins, to make much of time': In the same 17th century, Robert Herrick incorporates in this poem the principle of *carpe diem* by almost echoing the phrases used earlier by the ancient Latin poet Virgil: *Collige, virgo, rosas* (Gather, girl, roses) and the 16th century French poet Pierre de Ronsard's (1524 – 1585): '*Mignonne, allons si la rose...*' (Sweetheart, Come let us see if the rose which this morning unfolded its crimson dress to the sun.)⁴ The French poet addresses to his sweetheart who could be Helen or Mary or Cassandra and invites her to go with him to see if the rose that bloomed in the morning with its fresh purple colour has lost its lustre in the evening! But alas! Nature seems to be cruel that such a beautiful flower loses its colour, droops and sheds its petals in the evening. It lasts only from dawn to dusk. Just like the rose flower that bloomed in the morning, she too has flowered and bloomed so sweet and fresh in her youthful charm and beauty. Therefore, as long as her young age flowers in its greenest freshness, she should gather and enjoy her youthfulness. Otherwise old age will soon sully, dim and tarnish her charm and beauty.

In the backdrop of these Latin and French poets' expression of *carpe diem*, Herrick calls the young virgin girls to gather the roses and pluck their pleasures of their life to its full potential, singing of the fleeting nature of life itself.

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

The theme of *carpe diem* became so banal that most of the poets started writing of the brevity of life and the urgency to enjoy it thoroughly.

Robert Frost's poem on *Carpe Diem*: Frost's speaker of the poem offers a different approach to the age old theme of *Seize the Day* or *carpe diem* initiated by the classical Roman poet Horace. In the first part of the poem the speaker personifies Age which observes a pair of young lovers on a journey. He does not know where they are pressing forward. He speculates that the couple may be going home or moving out of the home village or possibly proceeding to church, because the 'chimes are ringing'. Since the lovers are 'strangers' to the speaker, he does not address them personally. But he wishes them all happiness in their life. He elongates his advice of *carpe diem*: **5**

Be happy, happy, happy,
And seize the day of pleasure

In the second part, the speaker exemplifies and evaluates the age-old adage of *carpe diem* by alluding to Robert Herrick's 'To the Virgins to Make Much of Time'. He alludes to the rose gathering by the virgins vis-à-vis the fleeting time. The speaker seems to laugh at the couple basking in their over flooded happiness of the present moment of seizing and plucking the day. Whatever attracts and stimulates the senses the mind and the heart, the brain becomes overloaded with all the details of the present. He is of the opinion that their present or here and now love is 'too present to imagine'. The very idea of life being lived in the present is cumbersome and unattainable because the human brain looks for something in future. The speaker believes that life is lived 'less in the present than in the future'. And the future in his opinion is the fertile ground for the imagination. Imagining what one will do tomorrow, what one will have for lunch, what job one will train for, where one will live, when one will get married and what one's children will look like etc. All these indicate the future time.

Therefore the speaker says that the human mind lives more in the future than in the present. Folks always live and move with their future in mind. This suggestion by Frost seems indeed to have more prevalence over Latin poet Horace's command of *carpe diem*.

In the backdrop of the perception of Robert Frost as well as the ubiquitous fear and death engulfing the world at present by the pandemic of Covid-19, it is time for human beings to concentrate not so much on *carpe diem*, luxury, money, ethnic loyalties, exclusive relationships, power, position, personal glory, indifference, self-centeredness but to think of helping the poor, the marginalised for the greater glory of God (*ad Majorem Dei gloriam*) 6

Works cited

1. Horace. *Odes* "Dum loquimur, fugerit invida Aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero"
2. Luke. 12:19
3. William Barclay. *The Gospel of Luke*: The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1967
4. Pierre de Ronsard. *Odes à Cassandre* (1556)
5. Robert Frost. *Carpe Diem* (1923)
6. St. Ignatius of Loyola. *On Spirituality: (Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam inque Hominum Salutem)* 'For the greater glory of God and the salvation of humanity.'