

The Use Of Nature As A Symbol

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Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" uses nature as the language through which the speaker imagines romance. Valleys, groves, hills, rivers, birds, roses, myrtle, lambs, and seasonal pleasures become more than scenery: they form an argument intended to persuade the beloved to accept the shepherd's invitation. The original essay correctly notices that natural images appear throughout the poem, but it treats them mainly as proof that love is naturally beautiful and tranquil. Marlowe's symbolism is more complicated. The pastoral landscape creates abundance, innocence, sensual pleasure, and apparent freedom from labor, yet the speaker transforms nature into gifts and promises whose permanence is doubtful. Nature therefore symbolizes both the attraction of ideal love and the instability of an argument built on fantasy. (Marlowe, 2007)

The Pastoral Tradition

Marlowe writes within the pastoral tradition, a literary mode that imagines rural life as simpler and more harmonious than urban or courtly existence. Shepherds in pastoral poetry are rarely realistic agricultural workers worried about weather, wages, disease, or land ownership. They are poetic figures who sing, desire, debate, and inhabit an ideal landscape. By placing the invitation in this tradition, Marlowe allows the speaker to present the countryside as a space outside ordinary social pressure. The beloved is not asked to calculate income or household duties; she is asked to enter a world of immediate sensation. Nature symbolizes an alternative to social complexity, but that alternative depends on excluding the hard conditions that make real pastoral labor possible.

Landscape as Unlimited Possibility

The opening catalogue of "valleys, groves, hills, and fields" expands the shepherd's offer beyond one location. The speaker promises that the lovers will experience "all the pleasures" these varied places can produce. Geographical variety symbolizes emotional completeness: no single scene can contain the love he claims to offer. The repeated conjunctions make the landscape seem continuous and inexhaustible, as if every visible feature exists for the couple's enjoyment. At the same time, the catalogue is imprecise. The speaker does not explain where they will live or how they will survive. His broad geography creates persuasive scale while avoiding practical detail. Nature becomes a rhetorical map of possibility rather than a realistic place.

Rocks, Rivers, and the Position of the Lovers

The lovers will sit upon rocks while watching shepherds feed their flocks beside shallow rivers. This image places them in a privileged position of observation. Other shepherds continue working, but the speaker and beloved enjoy the landscape as spectators. The rocks suggest stability and permanence, while flowing water suggests movement and time. Together, the symbols create an appealing tension: the lovers appear securely seated even as the river passes. The scene may therefore represent the speaker's wish to hold pleasure still. Yet water cannot stop, and the contrast quietly exposes the impossibility of permanent youth and uninterrupted romance. The natural image promises timelessness while containing evidence that time continues.

Birdsong and Artifice

The "melodious birds" that sing madrigals combine natural sound with a sophisticated Renaissance musical form. Birds do not literally perform composed part-songs, so the metaphor turns the countryside into a courtly entertainment arranged for the lovers. Nature appears spontaneous, but the speaker describes it through art. This mixture matters because the poem itself is a crafted persuasion pretending to offer effortless natural pleasure. The birds symbolize harmony, but they also reveal that the speaker's "natural" world is highly artificial. Marlowe uses polished meter, rhyme, repetition, and musical imagery to make the invitation sound inevitable. The poem's charm comes from art creating the illusion that desire and environment are already in agreement.

Roses and Fragrant Posies

Roses conventionally symbolize love, beauty, sensuality, and the intensity of desire. The shepherd promises beds of roses and "a thousand fragrant posies," transforming flowers into both setting and gift. Their abundance suggests that nature will provide pleasure without cost. Fragrance makes the offer bodily rather than merely visual, inviting the beloved to imagine touch and scent. Flowers also carry an unavoidable temporal meaning: they bloom, fade, and decay. The speaker never acknowledges this cycle, but readers know it. The rose therefore supports two interpretations at once. It signifies passionate beauty in the present, while its fragility suggests that promises based only on youth and sensation may not survive seasonal change.

Myrtle, Garlands, and Courtship

The cap of flowers and kirtle embroidered with myrtle convert vegetation into clothing. Myrtle was associated in classical tradition with Venus and with love, making it an appropriate courtship symbol. The garlands also resemble ceremonial and festive decoration, allowing the speaker to imagine the beloved publicly adorned by nature. Yet the promised garments are not simply gathered; they require

craft, labor, and maintenance. Flowers must be selected, woven, and replaced after they wither. The speaker hides that work by presenting finished objects as immediate products of the landscape. Nature becomes a storehouse whose materials can be transformed into signs of devotion, but the transformation exposes the human effort absent from his idealized account.

Wool, Lambs, and Innocence

The gown made from “our pretty lambs” associates the beloved with softness, warmth, innocence, and pastoral abundance. Lambs carry religious and cultural meanings of gentleness and purity, while wool represents the countryside’s ability to supply clothing. The possessive “our” is significant because it imagines a shared household before the beloved has agreed to join him. It converts courtship into assumed partnership. The original essay compares the scene with Eden, but the poem does not describe effortless clothing taken from animals without labor. Sheep must be tended, shorn, cleaned, spun, dyed, and woven. The speaker’s omission turns economic production into magic and makes ownership appear innocent and natural.

Gold, Coral, and Material Desire

Although the poem celebrates rural simplicity, its gifts include gold buckles, coral clasps, amber studs, and ivory. These materials do not come from the local English pasture. They connect the pastoral fantasy with trade, wealth, craftsmanship, and distant extraction. The contradiction is revealing. The speaker rejects the complexity of ordinary society while using luxury objects to strengthen his proposal. Nature symbolizes simplicity only until expensive ornament becomes useful. Marlowe may be showing that desire cannot be separated neatly from material display. The beloved is promised both an escape from worldly structures and the prestige those structures produce. Pastoral innocence is therefore sustained by resources imported from outside the imagined landscape.

The Belt of Straw and Ivy

A belt made from straw and ivy buds blends humble agricultural material with decorative growth. Straw suggests harvest and human labor, while ivy traditionally suggests endurance because it remains green and clings persistently. The combination can symbolize a love that joins simplicity with constancy. The coral clasps and amber studs added to the belt, however, make the object luxurious rather than purely rustic. The speaker repeatedly combines natural materials with costly ornament, creating an image of abundance that crosses class boundaries. His promise is designed to be irresistible because it offers the beloved every category at once: innocence and wealth, rural freedom and courtly beauty, spontaneity and elaborate craftsmanship.

Nature as a Persuasive Inventory

The poem is structured as a sequence of future-tense promises. Nature becomes an inventory from which the shepherd selects pleasures, sounds, fabrics, ornaments, and scenes. This rhetorical structure gives him control over the environment. Weather never interrupts, animals never suffer, and flowers never fade before serving his purpose. The beloved does not speak, so the landscape functions as evidence presented by only one side. The shepherd's confidence may be sincere, but sincerity does not make prediction reliable. Nature symbolizes his imaginative power: he can arrange the world verbally even though he may not possess the resources or authority to arrange it materially. The poem seduces through description before any promise is tested.

Seasonality and the Missing Winter

Marlowe's landscape resembles perpetual spring or early summer. There is no winter, storm, drought, illness, aging, or shortage. This exclusion is central to the symbolism. Spring represents renewal, fertility, youth, and erotic possibility, so the shepherd builds his argument within the season most favorable to desire. Sir Walter Raleigh's later response, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," famously restores time and weather, observing that flowers fade and flocks move when winter arrives. Raleigh does not merely reject romance; he identifies the condition hidden by Marlowe's nature imagery. If pleasure depends on an unchanging season, the invitation cannot support a durable life. The missing winter becomes the poem's most important absence. (Raleigh, n.d.)

Fertility without Domestic Reality

The original essay connects flowers and fertile fields with prosperity and social desirability. Fertility is relevant, but the poem does not develop marriage, children, property, or household responsibility. Its natural abundance remains erotic and aesthetic rather than domestic. The speaker promises what the beloved can wear, smell, hear, and watch, not how the couple will negotiate work, conflict, illness, or obligation. Nature therefore symbolizes a relationship suspended before consequence. That suspension is part of the poem's pleasure: courtship can imagine total harmony before shared life introduces competing needs. A critical reading appreciates the beauty of that imaginative moment without treating it as a complete model of love.

The Beloved's Silence

Because the beloved never answers, readers cannot know whether she finds the natural imagery persuasive. Her silence gives the shepherd room to project desire onto both woman and landscape. The environment is described as ready to satisfy her, but she is not asked what she values. The poem can therefore be read as an example of how romantic speech creates an ideal recipient who wants

exactly what the speaker offers. Nature symbolizes consent only because the speaker interprets it that way. Raleigh's answering nymph became culturally important partly because she supplies the skepticism missing from Marlowe's lyric. Her response turns passive landscape and passive beloved into sources of resistance against the shepherd's control.

Form and Natural Harmony

The poem's regular rhyming couplets and strong four-beat rhythm help natural images feel orderly and inevitable. Each compact stanza adds another pleasure, making the proposal accumulate without interruption. Repetition of "and" suggests abundance, while the refrain linking love with pleasure makes acceptance appear like the logical end of every stanza. Formal harmony reinforces the symbolic harmony of the landscape. Yet this smoothness is produced by disciplined poetic craft. Marlowe's art does not imitate untouched nature; it organizes language so carefully that contradiction becomes easy to overlook. The form therefore demonstrates the poem's central tension: a highly constructed artifact persuades readers to believe in effortless natural love.

Conclusion

Nature in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" symbolizes beauty, fertility, innocence, sensual pleasure, material abundance, and the hope that love can escape ordinary difficulty. Valleys enlarge possibility, rocks promise stability, rivers mark time, birds create harmony, flowers express passion, myrtle suggests devotion, and lambs imply innocence. These symbols also expose the invitation's limits. Flowers fade, water moves, wool requires labor, luxury objects come from complex economies, and winter has been removed from the scene. Marlowe's poem is powerful because its pastoral world is both sincere and artificial. Nature does not prove that the shepherd's love will last; it makes his temporary vision of love emotionally irresistible. (Marlowe, 2007)

Works Cited

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