The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd

POEM TEXT

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move,
To live with thee, and be thy love.

Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,
And *Philomel* becometh dumb,
The rest complains of cares to come.

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields,
To wayward winter reckoning yields,
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

Thy belt of straw and Ivy buds,
The Coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last, and love still breed,
Had joys no date, nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee, and be thy love.

SUMMARY

If the world and love could stay young forever, and if what shepherds promise young women were true, then all the lovely things you're offering might convince me to live with you and be your lover.

But, in reality, time pushes the sheep from the field into their enclosures, rivers crash violently, and rocks become cold. Philomel, the mythical young woman turned by the gods into a nightingale, stops singing, and that silence foreshadows future difficulties.

Flowers wither and the bountiful, wild fields grow bare in when winter comes along. Sweet words and keen affection seem appealing, like springtime, but lead to melancholy and decay.

All the fancy dresses, shoes, roses, garlands, skirts, and bouquets you offered me will soon enough break apart, wither and die, and ultimately be forgotten. When we are foolish and young we think things will be great forever, but we soon learn how things go bad.

That belt you promised, the one made of straw and ivy, with coral fasteners and precious stones—none of these objects can make me want to join you and be your lover.

If youth and love could last forever, if happiness had no expiration date and old age didn't have to claim us all, then your sweet promises might convince me to live with you as your lover.

THEMES

TIME AND DECAY

"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" is Walter Ralegh's response to a poem by his contemporary writer Christopher Marlowe. In Marlowe's original poem, a shepherd propositions a young woman, promising her a joyful, carefree life in the beautiful countryside if she'll "come live with [him] and be [his] love." In Ralegh's witty reply, the woman (depicted as a nymph, a mythological forest spirit) rejects the shepherd, telling him he has failed to recognize that time will eventually destroy all the treasures he offers her—even and especially his love. In essence, then, "The Nymph's Reply" is a reality check that undermines the shepherd's naïve (or perhaps deliberately misleading) idealism, arguing that time ultimately conquers all of life's pleasures.

Responding to the shepherd's original promises, the speaker acknowledges that the world is full of beauty and that youthful love indeed offers "joys." The speaker namechecks all the love-tokens the shepherd promises to her in the earlier poem, "all" the "pleasures" of life: an idyllic natural environment to call home, beds of roses and garlands of flowers, luxurious "gowns" made of soft lamb's wool, pretty jewelry made of precious "Coral" and "amber."

These "delights," the speaker concedes, do sound pretty tempting, and they all seem to fit in with a vision of giddy, youthful love. Among all these sensual treats, life could be wonderful—for a while, that is. But the shepherd's promises, the speaker goes on, are misleading—not necessarily because he's trying to deceive her (though he might be), but because he doesn't understand that everything that exists, even love, will

eventually fall prey to time.

The speaker thus picks apart the shepherd's plan with devastating logic. She points out that flowers fade, fields become barren in winter, and that today's "fancy"—that is, the shepherd's head-over-heels attraction and the naïve, possibly deceptive promises that come with it—soon becomes tomorrow's "sorrow."

Even the shepherd's gifts, which aren't subject to the natural rhythms of life and death, are doomed to "rot[]." That is, gowns, shoes, belts—*whatever* the shepherd offers—all will be wrecked sooner or later. The nymph thus cannot accept the shepherd's proposal: since the carefree days of youth are short-lived, and even love has an expiration date, she wants none of his absurd promises of everlasting bliss.

The nymph "might" be tempted by the shepherd's offer, she says, but only "if all the world and love" could *stay* perpetually young—an obvious impossibility. The shepherd's "honey tongue" thus tells only lies. All things come to an end, argues the poem, and any vision of the future (or of love) that doesn't acknowledge this brute fact is mere fantasy at best—and a cynical deception at worst.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move,
To live with thee, and be thy love.

A bit of context is essential before diving into this poem. "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" is actually a reply to another poem: Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." In that poem, a shepherd propositions a young woman (the nymph here), offering a vision of life together if she will choose to "be [his] love." This picture of the future is idealistic, a promise of luxury and happiness in the beautiful countryside. The shepherd also offers the nymph fine jewelry and clothing.

In this poem, the nymph makes her answer clear: no dice! The poem thus hinges on that all-important first word: "If." The nymph is suggesting that she might consider the shepherd's offer if, and only if, it didn't depend on a lie, if the shepherd's "tongue"—that is, the words he says—contained actual "truth." If that were the case, she says here, then all his lovely promises and gifts might "move" her to be with him.

The alliteration of these lines adds a playful, teasing rhythm. The crisp /t/ sounds of "truth" and "tongue" and the /p/ sounds of "pretty pleasures," in particular, add sharpness and bite to the nymph's speech, making her sound authoritative and dismissive.

LINES 5-8

Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,
And
Philomel
becometh dumb,
The rest complains of cares to come.

In Marlowe's poem, the shepherd imagines himself and his love lounging on rocks, watching shepherds feeding their sheep, and sitting by rivers as birds sing pretty songs:

> And we will sit upon the Rocks,
> Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,
> By shallow Rivers to whose falls
> Melodious birds sing Madrigals.

This stanza alludes to Marlowe's, the nymph now methodically unraveling the shepherd's ridiculous promises. She starts providing evidence that the "world and love" are *not* "young."

In line 5, the nymph personifies time in order to portray it as an unstoppable force bent on destroying life's joys. Time will bring about bad weather as the seasons turn, and the sheep in the fields will have to be moved into a fold (an enclosure) for shelter. This mini-journey from "field" to "flock" subtly suggests the journey from freedom to entrapment, and from youth to death.

Notice how just how similar these words sound, the tongue-twisting mix of alliteration, assonance, and consonance suggesting gradual but definite change:

> Time drives the flocks from field to fold,

The long /i/ sounds in "Time drives," meanwhile, adds a sense of forcefulness to the phrase itself. And while the poem's meter is mostly iambic (following an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM, pattern), this line starts with a spondee too (a metrical foot of two stressed syllables in a row), making "Time" feel all the more decisive and strong:

> Time drives the flocks from field to fold,

Line 6 also focuses on what the shepherd misses in his original proposition. It might be nice to sit by rivers or on rocks *sometimes*, but at other points in the year the rivers might be dangerous and the rocks might be unpleasantly cold (this chill symbolically evoking death). The line uses more clear alliteration, consonance, and assonance, mocking the shepherd's flowery tone in the original poem:

When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,

The growling /r/, spiky /c/, and hollow /oh/ sounds here suggest violence and danger—not the calm, bucolic joy the shepherd imagines in Marlowe's poem.

Next, lines 7 and 8 respond to the shepherd's promise that he and his lover could spend their days listening to "melodious birds" singing songs. The nymph alludes to the Greek myth of Philomel, a woman who had her tongue cut out and was then transformed into a nightingale by the gods. But even nightingales, the nymph says here, fall silent ("dumb") sometimes. What's more, this silence is like a musical "rest" that actually foreshadows the worry and destruction ("cares") to come.

Soft, muted /m/ sounds in line 7 capture this sense of silence—"Philomel becometh dumb"—while the hard /c/ sounds in line 8—"complains of cares to come"—evoke the harsh dangers that await.

LINES 9-10

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields,
To wayward winter reckoning yields,

The nymph continues to argue against the shepherd's offer. In Marlowe's poem, he promises her "beds of Roses," "fragrant posies," and a garland of flowers to wear on her head. But, the nymph points out here, all of these flowers will fade and die as the seasons change—and what happens then?

The intense alliteration in these lines emphasizes the inevitability of decay and death, creating a link between "flowers" and "fade." The whooshing /w/ sounds of "wanton" and "wayward winter" might evoke the rush of a cold wind, and they draw attention to the fact that winter is always waiting in the wings, like an ambassador sent by time on a mission to wreak destruction. The word "wanton" is an old fashioned adjective for a sexually promiscuous woman, and here suggests that the wild, lusty pleasures of youth can't last.

It's worth noting how Raleigh mocks Marlowe by subverting elements of the original poem. The "fields/yields" rhyme in the original relates to abundant natural beauty:

That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

But here "yields" becomes a verb meaning "to give way" (as opposed to "offers"); all those pretty fields will bow to winter. The shepherd, in other words, pretends things will be young, great, and beautiful forever—but Raleigh's nymph points out that there is a "reckoning" on the way.

LINES 11-12

A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Lines 11 and 12 are a little dense at first glance. "A honey tongue" and "a heart of gall" form a little list, rather than suggesting that "honey tongue" *becomes* "a heart of gall." *Together* they are "fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall."

"A honey tongue" is a metonym for sweet words of seduction (like the shepherd's in the original poem). "A heart of gall" could mean either rash, overly excitable behavior or a hidden bitterness. In other words, the nymph is talking about the kind of naive, idealistic love expressed in the shepherd's appealing but hollow promises—or hinting that he might just be trying to get her into bed.

The shepherd's "tongue" and "heart" belong to "fancy's spring"—that is, his enthusiastic attraction towards the nymph. Before too long, the nymph suggests, this would become "sorrow's fall." That is, all good things end with goodbye. Notice how caesura in line 12 creates a stark juxtaposition between these two ideas.

Line 12 also plays with the multiple meanings of "spring" and "fall." First, there's the "spring" in the step that comes with being in love, which, as stated, ends in a kind of "fall" (a collapse). But there is a seasonal metaphor at work here too, with the bounty of "spring" giving way to the decaying forces of "fall." Raleigh might not have intended the latter word to mean the season—most British writers wouldn't—but it's certainly possible! A "spring" could also be a kind of fountain, gushing out jets of water like the shepherd's mouth does with fancy words.

LINES 13-16

Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

This stanza is the equivalent of the nymph throwing a list of the shepherd's promises back in his face. In Marlowe's poem, the shepherd offers a whole range of beautiful objects: gowns made of the finest wool (from the shepherd's own sheep, naturally), gold-buckled slippers, garlands, and a belt made of straw, ivy, coral, and amber. He hopes that the promise of material possessions will sway the nymph's mind.

Here, the nymph resists these objects item by item (though she saves the belt for the next stanza). Her tone is scathing, as if naming each individual part of the shepherd's promise proves it as fake. The repeated "thy" (diacope), the multiple caesurae, the harsh word choice of "break," "wither," and "forgotten"—all this combines into a searing critique of the shepherd's false words. Even inanimate objects eventually decay and die, the nymph argues, they just take a little longer to do so than flowers.

Line 16, like line 12, uses metaphor and antithesis to hammer home this point:

In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

Everything that the shepherd promises is like a fruit. When life is ripe—full of carefree joy, and youthful love—it is a time of foolishness because people think it will last forever. Then reality takes over, and fantasy gives way to reality. Time forces people to confront the fact that all things, sooner or later, will be destroyed, just as a sweet fruit will inevitably go rotten. The guttural alliteration of "ripe," "reason," and "rotten" make the nymph's rejection sound almost like a fierce growl.

LINES 17-20

Thy belt of straw and Ivy buds,
The Coral clasps and amber studs,
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

In the fifth stanza, the nymph turns her attention to the belt promised to her by the shepherd. The language here is almost identical to the equivalent lines in Marlowe's original poem. Here's that stanza for comparison:

> A belt of straw and Ivy buds,
> With Coral clasps and Amber studs:
> And if these pleasures may thee move,
> Come live with me, and be my love.

The nymph unpicks the shepherd's proposal piece by piece, in methodical detail. The belt, for all its beauty, would be just another thing that would not "last." The alliteration and consonance in "coral clasps and amber studs," lifted directly from the original, now appear gaudy and over the top. Both coral and amber are hard substances—but even these, are subject to time's forces of death and decay.

in lines 19 and 20, the nymph sums up her rejection of the shepherd's offer: none of the pretty gifts he proposes could make her want to get with him. Both lines are full of alliteration and assonance, as though the nymph is turning the speaker's "honey tongue"—his seductive way of speaking—back on its source:

> All these in me no means can move
> To come to thee and be thy love.

These lines effectively mock the shepherd, calling out the hollowness of his own words, fighting fire with fire in terms of his pleasant-sounding phrases.

LINES 21-24

But could youth last, and love still breed,
Had joys no date, nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee, and be thy love.

The last stanza takes one final turn that neatly brings the nymph back to her opening points. The whole poem is an argument, with introductory remarks, evidence, and, now, a conclusion that ties it all together.

The first stanza started with the word "If," which has a companion in the "But" that opens the last. The nymph reiterates what she said at the start: if youth could last and love could grow—then, and only then, she might take up the shepherd's offer.

The nymph specifically uses the phrase "love still breed," a metaphor that gestures towards the physical expression of love (that is, sex and procreation) and brings to mind an image of love growing/replicating itself day after day.

In the next line, the nymph turns to "joy" and "age." If happiness had no expiration date and age, by which the nymph really means time, did not have to move forward, then the nymph would be "moved" to become the shepherd's "love."

The nymph apparently agrees with the shepherd to an extent: what he offers *does* sound "delight[ful]." But he doesn't acknowledge the ephemeral nature of his promise, and therefore her mind cannot be "move[d]." All things are bound to age, decay, and die, and the nymph thus won't become the shepherd's love after all.

The alliteration in "my mind might move" is bold and forceful, the nymph making her rejection emphatic and final. The shepherd, of course, can't do anything about the forces of time—and so her answer must be no. Thus even as the poem ends with the same rhyming couplet as Marlowe's, it has a completely different meaning. Whereas the shepherd offers an idyllic vision of countryside life, the nymph counters with an unflinching reality check.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

The shepherd's initial offer—the one presented in Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Lover"—talks about flowers *a lot*. The shepherd himself knows the typical symbolism that comes with them: beauty, youthfulness, romantic love, and so on.

But for the world-weary nymph who knows better than the shepherd, the flowers represent something totally different. Flowers, no matter how pretty, fade and die. Each bouquet that promises eternal love is really just a stark reminder that no such promise can ever be fulfilled! She isn't "moved" by the promise of flowers at all, seeing them as just another trick in the shepherd's attempt to seduce her. That's not to say he's being deliberately deceptive—he might not have realized what flowers *really* stand for: the *fleeting nature* of love and beauty.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** “The flowers do fade,”
- **Line 13:** “thy beds of Roses,”
- **Line 14:** “Thy cap,,” “thy posies”
- **Line 17:** “Ivy buds,”

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears in almost every line of the poem, filling it with music. Much of this alliteration actually echoes the alliteration that appears in Marlowe's poem, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," to which this poem responds. In a way, then, alliteration is a key tool with which this poem mocks the original.

For example, "pretty pleasures" in this poem picks up on the /p/ sound in "pleasures prove" from Marlowe's. That crisp sound also makes the phrase itself seem "pretty" and "pleasant"—perhaps self-consciously so.

While Marlowe's poem uses alliteration to suggest, beauty, natural abundance, and carefree joy, the nymph flips this on its head. In her poem, alliteration becomes part of her *rejection* of his offer. Here is the second stanza, for example:

> Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
> When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,
> And *Philomel* becometh dumb,
> The rest complains of cares to come.

The alliteration here is showy and over-the-top, firmly deriding the shepherd's own poetic attempts. The /f/ sounds make the flocks' march from "field to fold"—which stands in for the onset of winter and, ultimately, death—seem inevitable. The gritty /r/ and sharp /c/ come across as violent and threatening, a far cry away from the idyllic vision of the countryside offered by the shepherd.

The nymph saves some alliteration for her final rejection at the end of the poem. The four /m/ sounds in "my mind might move" make her "no" emphatic and final, showing that her mind is firmly made up.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “truth,” “tongue”
- **Line 3:** “pretty pleasures,” “might me move”
- **Line 5:** “flocks from field,” “fold”
- **Line 6:** “Rivers rage,” “Rocks”
- **Line 8:** “complains,” “cares,” “come”
- **Line 9:** “flowers,” “fade”
- **Line 10:** “wayward winter”
- **Line 11:** “honey,” “heart”
- **Line 12:** “fancy’s,” “spring,” “sorrow’s,” “fall”
- **Line 13:** “Thy,” “thy,” “thy”
- **Line 14:** “Thy,” “cap,” “thy,” “kirtle,” “thy”
- **Line 15:** “Soon,” “soon,” “soon”
- **Line 16:** “ripe,” “reason rotten”
- **Line 18:** “Coral clasps”
- **Line 19:** “me ,” “means,” “move”
- **Line 21:** “last,” “love”
- **Line 22:** “no,” “nor,” “no”
- **Line 23:** “my mind might move”

ALLUSION

The whole poem is a response to Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." It's a poetic take-down by Raleigh, who thought Marlowe's poem was naive and overly sweet. This guide explores the relationship between the two poems in the Form and Literary Context sections.

The poem makes one other specific allusion, however, in line 7:

> And *Philomel* becometh dumb,
> The rest complains of cares to come.

In Greek mythology, Philomela's brother-in-law rapes her and then cuts out her tongue. The gods later transform Philomela into a nightingale, a bird with a famously beautiful and mournful song.

The mere reference to the myth here adds a darker color to the poem (although in fairness the Shepherd never refers to nightingales specifically, just to "melodious birds"). The nymph argues that birdsong, no matter how beautiful, falls silent—and that silence is like a void that hints at future darkness and destruction to come.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-7:** “And / Philomel / becometh dumb,”

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration and consonance, creates an ironically poetic tone that parodies Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." If sections sound particularly musical and pleasant in Raleigh's poem, it's primarily to mock the original or to reinforce the message that "time drives" all things towards their death and destruction. In fact, "time drives" is one of the prime examples of assonance here, those two forceful long /i/ vowels giving the phrase itself a sense of unstoppable force.

Elsewhere, assonance makes the nymph sound witty and in control as she methodically deconstructs the shepherd's hollow promises. In line 23, "my mind might" makes her rejection seem all the more emphatic and final.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love," "young"
- **Line 3:** "These pretty," "me"
- **Line 4:** "thee," "be"
- **Line 5:** "Time drives"
- **Line 6:** "grow cold"
- **Line 7:** "becometh dumb"
- **Line 11:** "honey tongue"
- **Line 18:** "and amber"
- **Line 19:** "these," "me," "means"
- **Line 20:** "thee," "be"
- **Line 22:** "date," "age"
- **Line 23:** "my mind might"
- **Line 24:** "thee," "be"

CAESURA

Caesura helps the nymph construct a well-balanced, logical argument against the shepherd's naive vision of the future. For example, check out how neat and precise caesura makes the speaker's argument in lines 11 and 12:

> A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
> Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

Those pauses make the nymph come across as balanced, calm, methodical—like she's undermining the shepherd's offer with ease.

Elsewhere, caesurae create brief but telling pauses that subtly emphasize the transience of anything good: flowers, youth, happiness, and so on. These types of caesura appear in lines 9, 16, 21, and 22:

> The flowers do fade, and wanton fields,
> [...]
> In folly ripe, in reason rotten.
> [...]
> But could youth last, and love still breed,
> [...]
> Had joys no date, nor age no need,

The words highlighted above all relate to time's destructive forces, and each has a brief little void after it to strengthen this effect.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "thee, and"
- **Line 9:** "fade, and"
- **Line 11:** "tongue, a"
- **Line 12:** "spring, but"
- **Line 13:** "gowns, thy shoes, thy beds"
- **Line 14:** "cap, thy kirtle, and"
- **Line 15:** "break, soon wither, soon"
- **Line 16:** "ripe, in"
- **Line 21:** "last, and"
- **Line 22:** "date, nor"
- **Line 24:** "thee, and"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" works just like its alliteration and assonance: it fills the poem with pleasant music. At the same time, it satirizes the over-the-top, sugary sound patterning in Marlowe's original poem and makes the nymph's argument seem snappy and unforgiving. A significant amount of consonance here is lifted directly from the Marlowe (e.g., "coral clasps [...] amber studs")!

Line 7 deserves a special mention: "And *Philomel* becometh dumb[.]" Here the nymph says that even the most beautiful birdsong must eventually fall silent. Soft, muted /m/ sounds in "Philomel," "becometh," and "dumb," capture this sense of something going quiet, which is then interrupted by the hard /c/ alliteration of the following line.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "truth," "tongue"
- **Line 3:** "pretty pleasures," "might me move"
- **Line 5:** "flocks from field," "fold"
- **Line 6:** "Rivers rage," "Rocks"
- **Lines 7-7:** "Philomel / becometh dumb"
- **Line 8:** "complains," "cares," "come"
- **Line 9:** "flowers," "fade," "fields"
- **Line 10:** "wayward winter"
- **Line 11:** "honey tongue"
- **Line 12:** "spring," "sorrow's"
- **Line 13:** "Thy," "thy," "thy," "Roses"
- **Line 14:** "Thy," "thy," "thy"
- **Line 15:** "Soon," "soon," "soon forgotten"
- **Line 16:** "ripe," "in reason rotten"
- **Line 17:** "belt," "straw"
- **Line 18:** "Coral clasp," "s," "studs"
- **Line 19:** "me," "means," "move"
- **Line 20:** "thee," "thy"
- **Line 21:** "last," "love," " still"
- **Line 22:** "no," "nor," "no need"
- **Line 23:** "Then these," "my mind might move"
- **Line 24:** "thee," "thy"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition pops up in two places in the poem, and both examples highlight how nothing good can last. Here are lines 11 and 12, for example:

A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

The speaker is saying: wweet words and an enthusiastic heart make romantic fantasies seem full of life and potential, but soon enough they wither into sadness. Spring and fall can be read as seasons, the abundance of natural beauty in the former giving way to death and decay in the latter (though many people find that beautiful too!). This, as with the other example, is also antithesis: the opposing phrases here feature the same, or parallel, grammar, making their contrasting meanings all the starker.

Line 16 uses a similar metaphorical idea based on nature, this time specifically referring to fruit:

In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

Youth is a foolish time in which life seems "ripe"—that is, sweet and appealing. Foolishness and ripeness are juxtaposed with "reason" and rottenness, demonstrating that people soon learn that nothing good can last.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "A honey tongue, a heart of gall, / Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall."
- **Line 16:** "In folly ripe, in reason rotten."

METAPHOR

The poem is full of figurative language, most of which relates to time's forces of decay and destruction. There are examples of metonymy and personification, and these devices have their own sections in the guide. Sometimes these get all mixed up together, as in lines 11 and 12:

A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

All of this is figurative. Metaphorically speaking, this likens youthful attraction—"fancy"—to the wonders of spring: a world full of beauty, life, and seemingly limitless potential. Soon enough, of course, this gives way to disappointment, bitterness, and betrayal—in a word, autumn. Spring and fall could also be movement-based metaphors, "fancy" giving people a spring in their step before they come crashing back down to earth.

The metaphor in line 16 sums up the nymph's view of the shepherd:

In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

All the beautiful material possessions offered by the shepherd seem "ripe"—that is, beautiful and appealing. But this is foolishness, and, though they are objects, they will decay just as fruits eventually do.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "If all the world and love were young,"
- **Line 2:** "And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Time drives the flocks from field to fold, / When Rivers rage and Rocks grow cold,"
- **Lines 11-12:** "A honey tongue, a heart of gall, / Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall."
- **Line 16:** "In folly ripe, in reason rotten."
- **Lines 21-22:** "But could youth last, / and love still breed, / Had joys no date, nor age no need,"

METONYMY

Metonymy occurs in lines 2 and 11:

And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,
[...]
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,

Here, the nymph associates the shepherd's words—his language—with his tongue. It's a *honey* tongue because it says sweet things—but not necessarily things that can be believed. Put simply, she doesn't trust the thing he says; she knows better.

"Heart of gall" is also a metonym. In fact, associating the heart with emotions is one of the oldest metonyms in literature. The shepherd's "heart" is full of "gall"—that is, it is overly enthusiastic and rash.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And truth in every Shepherd's tongue,"
- **Line 11:** "A honey tongue, a heart of gall,"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to bring the nymph's refusal to life on the page.

The poem starts with a small but crucial word, "If," which also introduces the first example of personification. *If* the world and love were like a person and could stay forever young—that is, beautiful, joyous, and carefree—then, and only then, would the nymph entertain the shepherd's offer.

The nymph views the shepherd's promises as hollow because she is aware of time's destructive forces. Personified time in line 5 "drives the flocks from field to fold," that is, from freedom to enclosure—similarly, time marches everything towards decay and destruction. There is irony at work here, too, because *driving* is what shepherds do to their flock (no cars necessary!). In Marlowe's poem, the shepherd imagines

spending his days beside calm rivers—but in line 6 those rivers "rage."

When the nymph makes her concluding remarks, personification comes into play again. Could youth itself live forever (e.g., line 1) and love forever be a lover—*then* she might take up the shepherd's proposal. If age didn't *require* people to grow old, like some tax collector demanding human years, then the shepherd's "delights" would be more appealing.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "If all the world and love were young,"
- **Lines 5-6:** "Time drives the flocks from field to fold, / When Rivers rage"
- **Line 21:** "But could youth last, and love still breed,"
- **Line 22:** "nor age no need,"

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition in various forms. Perhaps most obviously, the poem features a refrain of sorts: the final lines of the first stanza repeat two more times in the poem, albeit with minor changes. Here are lines 3-4, 19-20, and 23-24:

> These pretty pleasures might me move,
> To live with thee, and be thy love.
> [...]
> All these in me no means can move
> To come to thee and be thy love.
> [...]
> Then these delights my mind might move
> To live with thee, and be thy love.

The language here isn't exactly the same each time, but it's still clearly repetitive. This hammers home the speaker's point: that all "these" lovely things will never "move" the nymph to be the shepherd's "love." Returning to the point again and again like this makes it seem all the more irrefutable.

There are other, more discrete moments of repetition as well. In the fourth stanza, for example, the poem uses diacope and parallelism to create an exhaustive list of the shepherd's promises which, through further diacope, are then undermined:

> Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses,
> Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies
> Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:

There is something cold and cutting about the way that the nymph names every object in turn, before arguing that they *all* will "break," "wither," and be "forgotten." The repetition of "thy" is searing and forceful, the nymph rejecting the shepherd's offerings one by one.

The repetition of "soon," meanwhile, emphasizes how, in the grand scheme of time, nothing lasts for a very long time. The asyndeton of line 15 adds to this effect: the line barrels forward without any conjunctions to slow things down, mirroring the inevitable march of time. Line 15 is also an example of the figure of speech known as climax: the nymph's points build up in intensity from merely breaking, to withering, to being totally forgotten.

The parallelism in the very next line then makes the nymph's rejection seem logical and methodical:

> In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

This is an example of antithesis: each side of the comma follows the exact same grammatical structure but with an opposite point. The balance of the phrasing itself heightens the *contrast* between "folly" and "reason"—in essence, the shepherd's and the nymph's respective points of view. The shepherd believes—or pretends to believe—in an idyllic vision of the future that the nymph knows doesn't exist. Her rejection is made emphatic by further diacope and parallelism in line 22's "Had joys no date, nor age no need[.]"

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "These pretty pleasures might me move, / To live with thee, and be thy love."
- **Lines 13-15:** "Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of Roses, / Thy cap, thy kirtle, and thy posies / Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:"
- **Line 16:** "In folly ripe, in reason rotten."
- **Lines 17-18:** "Thy belt of straw and Ivy buds, / The Coral clasps and amber studs,"
- **Line 19:** "move"
- **Line 20:** "To come to thee and be thy love."
- **Line 22:** "no date," "no need"
- **Line 23:** "Then these delights my mind "
- **Lines 23-24:** "might move / To live with thee, and be thy love."

VOCABULARY

Move (Line 3, Line 19, Line 23) - Persuade, convince.

Thee (Line 4, Line 20, Line 24) - An archaic form of "you."

Thy (Line 4, Line 13, Line 14, Line 17, Line 20, Line 24) - Your.

Drives (Line 5) - Pushes forward (like a shepherd with their sheep).

Flocks (Line 5) - Herds of sheep.

Fold (Line 5) - An enclosure for livestock.

Philomel (Lines 7-7) - A fanciful name for a nightingale.

Nightingales were called "Philomel" after a figure from Greek mythology who was transformed into a nightingale after her tongue was cut out.

Becometh (Line 7) - Becomes.

Dumb (Line 7) - Unable to speak or sing; silent.

Cares (Line 8) - Worries, fears, or troubles.

Wanton (Line 9) - Wild and fertile; promiscuous.

Wayward (Line 10) - Chaotic and uncontrollable.

Reckoning (Line 10) - Score-settling. In other words, winter is always going to come back and settle the score against spring, making the fields barren again.

Yields (Line 10) - Gives in, surrenders.

Gall (Line 11) - Bitterness or cruelty.

Fancy (Line 12) - Attraction; romantic fantasy.

Cap (Line 14) - A hat.

Kirtle (Line 14) - A gown or skirt.

Posies (Line 14) - Bouquets of flowers.

Folly (Line 16) - Youthful foolishness.

Reason (Line 16) - Logic, thoughtfulness, understanding.

Clasps (Line 18) - Fasteners that clip a belt in place.

Studs (Line 18) - Decorative buttons.

Means (Line 19) - Ways.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" uses quatrains throughout, each consisting of two rhyming couplets.

Everything about "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" is designed to respond to—and parody—Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Raleigh's poem lifts multiple sections almost verbatim from the Marlowe. Copying so much of the shepherd's proposal, formally speaking, allows the nymph to construct a devastating rejection. Like a skilled debater, she starts with introductory remarks, then provides evidence as to why the shepherd has got it so wrong, before reiterating what she said at the start.

"The Nymph's Reply" also relates to the long-running pastoral tradition, although this is mainly a product of parodying the Marlowe. The original is full of idyllic countryside imagery meant to entice the nymph—but here, those same images prove that all things are subject to the forces of time.

Finally, this is also a dramatic monologue: the original poem wasn't written by a shepherd, and this wasn't composed by a nymph.

METER

"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" takes its rhythms from Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," using iambic tetrameter throughout. That means each line has four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern.

The first two lines provide a clear example of this meter at work:

> If all | the world | and love | were young,
> And truth | in ever- | y Shep- | herd's tongue,

For the most part, the poem sticks to this regular sound. The overall steadiness of the meter gives the poem a strong sense of momentum, which makes the nymph's rejection of the shepherd—and her reasoning—more forceful and convincing.

There are some variations, though, with noticeable effects. Check out line 5:

> Time drives | the flocks | from field | to fold

The first foot here is a spondee (two stressed syllables in one foot). This makes time seem all the more powerful!

In the fourth stanza, the nymph argues that all the objects promised to her by the shepherd will sooner or later break, decay, and disintegrate. Fittingly enough, the meter nearly loses its way completely in line 15:

> Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten:

The weak syllable at the end emphasizes the transience of all things—not even good old iambic tetrameter can survive the test of time! It's also possible to read the repeated "soon[s]" as stressed, which makes this extra dramatic.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" uses rhyming couplets throughout, just like the poem it parodies, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." This provides a scheme of:

AABB CCDD

...and so on. This poem copies Marlowe's in order to mock it and show the flaws in the shepherd's naive vision of the future. In fact, it's not just the rhyme scheme that's reproduced here, but many of the rhyme words themselves. Seven out of the twelve couplets appear in the original poem (though Raleigh turns "Madrigals" into "heart of gall"). It's clever, because the nymph literally uses the shepherd's own words against him, exposing his "honey tongue" for the fraud that it is.

SPEAKER

This poem is a dramatic monologue written in the voice of a nymph.

In mythology, a nymph is a female forest spirit, but it can also mean a young woman. (It was *also* Elizabethan slang for a prostitute, but that seems unlikely here.) Perhaps if this speaker is an eternal spirit, then she is all the better placed to know first hand the way that time destroys everything sooner or later: she might have seen many shepherds come and go!

The nymph effectively acts as the shepherd's counterpart. Where he offers carefree, youthful joy, she sees the transient nature of all things: people, objects, love, and so on. She cleverly subverts his offer, calling out for what it is—naive, idealistic, and possibly deceptive.

SETTING

The poem takes its cues from Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Marlowe's poem is in the pastoral tradition, which stretches all the way back to the ancient Greeks. Pastoral poems portray an idyllic version of rural life; Marlowe's shepherd, for instance, promises beautiful countryside scenery, carefree days, and lasting love.

But this poem subverts the original setting: peaceful rivers "rage," "rocks grow cold," flowers wither, and, ultimately, nothing can last. While Marlowe's poem offers a vision of the world that is based purely on spring/summer, Raleigh's emphasizes winter (e.g., line 10) and time's destructive forces.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Walter Raleigh lived from 1552 till 1618 and was one of the most prominent figures of the Elizabethan age. Around 30 poems or so are attributed to Raleigh, with "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" being by far the best known. Raleigh also wrote a number of works intended to flatter Queen Elizabeth, who was a great admirer of his.

Raleigh belonged to a group of writers known as the School of Night, who were largely defined by their atheism and general skepticism. That skepticism is on full display in this poem, which takes issue with the idyllic vision of life presented in Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Indeed, this poem can only be fully appreciated in the context of the one that inspired it.

Marlowe's poem (written the year before this one, in 1599) is in the pastoral tradition, which stretches back to the ancient Greeks. Pastorals present romantic pictures of rural existence, whereas Raleigh's nymph points out that such pictures are only brief, fleeting illusions. The fact that Raleigh was about a decade older than Marlowe no doubt influenced his own poem's more jaded, cynical outlook.

Raleigh is one of many poets to have written a reply to Marlowe's poem. William Carlos Williams, for example, penned his own poem titled "Raleigh Was Right" almost 350 years after "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" was written.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" was written during the final years of Queen Elizabeth's reign over England, which lasted from 1558 until her death in 1603. This was an era of colonialist expansion and naval domination. The Elizabethan Age set the British Empire in motion, and Raleigh played a central role. Famous as an explorer and colonist, Raleigh took part in numerous raids, rebellions, and conflicts, including early British expeditions to the Americas.

Raleigh was a favorite of Queen Elizabeth's and fought in numerous conflicts on her behalf, most notably during the uprising in Ireland. A few years before the composition of this poem, however, Raleigh fell out of favor with the Queen. Upon discovering that he had married one her maids of honor, Elizabeth imprisoned Raleigh in the Tower of London.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Marlowe's Poem — The work that inspired the nymph's reply. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44675/the-passionate-shepherd-to-his-love)
- Raleigh's Life Story — Learn more about the colorful life of Sir Walter Raleigh. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sir-walter-ralegh)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading provided by Librivox. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU6ozRDr7Go)
- The School of Night — A short article about the writers group to which both Raleigh and Marlowe belonged. (http://www.marlowe-society.org/christopher-marlowe/life/the-free-thinkers/)

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