Raleigh Was Right

SUMMARY

We can't escape to the countryside, because it's not going to offer us any comfort. What could we possibly learn from tiny, fuzzy-stemmed flowers, which are surrounded by tall grass and tapered, swordlike leaves?

You compliment and celebrate the natural world, recalling those pastoral poets who sung its praises in verse, but that was a long time ago—quite a long time indeed! A time when those who lived in the countryside worked the land, their minds inspired and free and their pockets unburdened by cash—if this ever really was the case.

It certainly isn't like that today. Nowadays, love is like a blossom whose roots can't expect any care or nourishment from their environment. Now, having no money just brings a *lack* of inspiration and freedom. Fix these conditions if you're able to, but don't believe that we can make a home for ourselves countryside, because it's not going to offer us any comfort.

THEMES

NATURE VS. MODERN LIFE

"Raleigh was Right" is a response to a Renaissance-era spar, in verse, between poets Christopher Marlowe and Walter Raleigh. In Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," a shepherd tries to convince a woman to live with him in the countryside, where, he promises, their life will be filled with natural beauty and pleasure. In Raleigh's response, the shepherd's beloved points out that those same pleasures will decay in time and thus refuses to follow him into the forest. Williams's speaker agrees with this decision, but not (just) because all good things come to an end. Instead, the speaker of Williams's poem argues that the small comforts of nature can do little to soothe the ills of modern life. What's more, this poem implies, there's no use clinging to the romanticized pastoral existence praised by those older poets—a way of life that is long gone, and, in fact, may never have existed at all.

Apparently propositioned by a figure similar to Marlowe's shepherd, the speaker of Williams's poem confidently asserts that running off to the country won't grant them any "peace." The speaker adds that nature can't offer much insight at all, asking, "What can the small violets / tell us"—a phrase that presents natural beauty as fragile and insignificant in the face of modern problems.

The speaker then points out how the seductive vision of rural life as inherently peaceful recalls the work of pastoral poets from hundreds of years ago. Those writers romanticized the countryside as a place where people happily tended to their fields and flocks, their minds at ease and their "pockets" unburdened by the demands of a modern economy.

But such harmony, the speaker emphasizes, isn't relevant anymore; it existed "long ago"—and may never have existed at all. Indeed, the speaker wonders whether nature *ever* offered the kind of idealized life depicted in pastoral poems, or if the idea of finding comfort and peace in the countryside was *always* nothing more than a fantasy.

In any case, such a lifestyle certainly isn't attainable "now." Today, the speaker says, "empty pockets" are not something to be romanticized, as they "make empty heads." The speaker suggests that a lack of income leaves rural populations without an education or the opportunity to experience the world. The implication is that pastoral work has become a burdensome necessity rather than rewarding and inspiring.

The speaker thus expands on the argument that Raleigh's nymph lays out: this speaker will not agree to live in the country, not only because time decays all pleasures, but also because the pleasures of the natural landscape are no balm for modern troubles in the first place. The pleasant provincial life is no longer on the table—if it ever really was.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

We cannot go ...
... no peace

Before the poem even begins, its title offers readers some important context. "Raleigh" here alludes to the English Renaissance poet Walter Raleigh and his 1600 poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which essentially argues that all of nature's pleasures decay in time. This poem is itself a parody of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," published in 1599:

- The speaker of Marlowe's poem is a shepherd imploring his beloved to come and live with him in the countryside, promising all kinds of pleasures that they might craft from the landscape—"beds of Roses," "A gown made of the finest wool" that they

would harvest themselves, and so on.
- "The Nymph's Reply" imagines that the beloved turns the shepherd down, explaining that neither their love nor the natural world will remain in the young, perfect state that the shepherd describes.
- *This* poem, then, is saying that Raleigh's nymph made the right choice not to follow the shepherd.

When Williams's actual poem begins, it seems that its speaker has just been met with a proposition similar to the shepherd's: someone, perhaps a lover, has asked the speaker to "go to the country," presumably as a kind of respite from the chaos of urban life. The speaker quickly shuts down the idea, insisting that doing so "will bring [them] no peace." In other words, a rural life won't offer them the tranquility and happiness they seek. It offers no escape.

The speaker seems to directly respond to the beloved who came up with this misguided plan, using "us" and "we" phrases. The resulting apostrophe gives the impression that the audience is involved in the poem's events. The speaker also uses plain, straightforward language that adds to the authoritative feel of these opening lines.

When formatting this poem for publication, Williams chose narrow margins that required "no peace" to spill over onto its own line, highlighting the phrase. This structure creates anticipation as the audience must read on to learn what life in the country might "bring us," thus making the revelation that it offers "no peace" all the more dramatic and memorable.

LINES 4-6

What can the ...
... leaves?

The speaker continues to explain the foolishness of running off into the countryside. The speaker poses a rhetorical question, asking what "the small violets" can "tell us." In other words, the speaker doubts that nature can bestow any deep wisdom or inspiration that would be relevant to the speaker's life.

The specific mention of violets here also brings up all sorts of connotations:

- The poems that this one responds to directly—Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's reply to the Shepherd"—name many flowers but never violets. As such, the speaker's choice of flower is sometimes interpreted as an allusion to John Milton's "L'Allegro," T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," or various other poems, where these purple flowers generally represent the beauty and pleasure of nature (which exists in opposition to the bleakness of society).
- In the Renaissance era, when the poems the speaker references were written, violets were thought to cure depression.
- Williams was a trained doctor and practiced medicine alongside his poetic career, so he was likely aware of their history and might have been drawing on these connotations.

What's clear above all is that these violets represent the pure delights of the natural world—delights that have nothing to offer the speaker. The speaker refers to them as "small" and with "furry stems," a description plays up their apparent insignificance and harmlessness.

Note, too, that these tiny, fuzzy flowers are surrounded by tall, menacing plants—"long grass" with leaves shaped like "lance[s]," or swords. This image, which brings to mind violence and war, might suggest that humanity's troubles will follow them into nature—or that nature itself is more dangerous than people think.

LINES 7-11

Though you praise ...
... long ago!

An unnamed voice pops up in this stanza, one that seems to belong to the violets mentioned above (which speak on behalf of nature in general). Whereas earlier, the speaker spoke of "us" and "we," here the violets single out a "you" for falsely praising nature. This "you" probably refers to the speaker's beloved, or perhaps both members of the couple; in any case, the second-person pronoun makes the apostrophe feels more accusatory.

The voice then explains that the lover's praise of the natural world recalls longstanding literary traditions that romanticize life in the countryside. The voice specifically refers to "the poets who sung of our loveliness," an allusion to pastoral or bucolic poetry:

- This ancient genre of literature examines the relationship between the natural world and human society—typically by presenting an idealistic vision of simple country life, which is understood to be an antidote for the chaos and complexity of city life.
- The tradition goes all the way back to ancient Greece—and, of course, informs the two poems that this poem is responding to.

The voice's speech begins, "Though you praise us," so the audience understands that these elaborate glorifications of life in the countryside must have some caveat or drawback. Indeed, soon enough the voice declares that this way of life "was long ago!"—and then the voice repeats "long ago!" This epizeuxis adds a sense of authority and finality; the violets almost seem to cry out, insisting that the era pastoral poets describe is definitively gone.

LINES 11-15

when country people ...
... this were true.

The "long ago" era praised by "poets" was a time when farmers would work in harmony with the land. They'd happily tend to their crops, their minds free and open. More specifically, their minds were "flowering"—a word that suggests growth and nourishment. It's as though manual labor in the countryside allowed people's minds to "blossom" in a way they couldn't elsewhere.

The speaker then indicates that the rural laborers of this past time were penniless. Yet their lack of money was a blessing; their pockets were "at ease," suggesting that having money is in fact a burden. And thanks to the description of plowing and planting in the previous line, the audience understands that these farmers aren't kicking back and lazing about, but rather are working hard to provide for themselves. Life was simple without the complications of a modern economy, it seems, back when people could make an honest living with their own two hands.

The sounds of these lines themselves evoke the gentle, happy mood of this idyllic society. Note, for example, the. loose iambic (da-DUM da-DUM) rhythm of the description of this lost golden age:

> [...] when country people
> would plow and sow with
> flowering minds and pockets
> at ease—

The repetitive rises and falls of the language give these lines a lighthearted, singsong feel. The meter also echoes that of Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd."

But the stanza doesn't end there, and the dash that follows "at ease" creates some anticipation and drama leading up to the qualification, "if ever this were true." This line marks the end of the stanza, pushing the reader to linger on the possibility that the idyllic, pastoral society described in this stanza never existed at all.

Indeed, pastoral poetry is known not just for praising nature, but for glossing over the many harsh realities of rural life. The poem suggests that the bucolic vision of life in the countryside may have always been a fantasy.

LINES 16-18

Not now. Love ...
... make empty heads.

After skeptically imagining farmers and shepherds living simple, happy lives in harmony with nature in some distant past, the speaker plainly states that this is certainly not the case "now."

With this curt "Not now," the speaker seems to snap back into the poem's overarching narrative voice and out of the imagined perspective of the violets. The speaker goes on to update the idealized images of the rural past for the modern day.

Note how the language here echoes and subverts that of the prior stanza. "Long ago," pastoral life led to "flowering minds and pockets at ease"; now, modern life has led to "a flower / with roots in a parched ground," and those "empty pockets make empty heads":

- In that first metaphor, the speaker compares love to a flower that is sure to die. Its environment is "parched," or dry and thirsting for water. It will not bear fruit or new seeds (nor will it lead to "flowering minds"). In other words, spreading love is no easy task in the modern world.
- Also note how the enjambment makes the flower's certain death all the more graphic and memorable: the metaphor is split across two lines, with the first presenting a blissful representation of love ("Love itself a flower"). The conclusion of that enjambed line then reveals the flower's grisly fate: it has "roots in a parched ground."

The speaker next updates the image of the farmers' blissful pennilessness in the idealized distant past:

- In the previous stanza, the speaker describes farmers living totally off the land, with no need for currency and their "pockets at ease."
- Today, however, the speaker claims that "Empty pockets make empty heads." In other words, a lack of resources does not allow for such a full interior life today. Instead, the speaker suggests that modern financial hardship leads to a dearth of opportunities—and with it, the *death* of hope and inspiration as laborers tirelessly work the land with no promise of reward.

LINES 19-23

Cure it if ...
... no peace.

After describing the drawbacks of life in the modern world—namely, its lack of love and opportunities—the speaker suggests that their beloved should find a remedy, if possible. That the beloved seeks a "cure" indicates that modern woes cause great suffering, akin to an illness. But again, the speaker clarifies that the countryside is *not* that "cure" that the lover seeks.

The speaker repeats the explanation "for the country will bring us no peace." However, while the speaker earlier stated that the couple *can't* escape into the countryside, the speaker now warns against even *believing* in that possibility:

do not believe that we can live
today in the country

Earlier in the poem, the speaker said they could not "go" to the country. The shift from "go" to "live" here suggests that the countryside is an inhospitable environment—an idea that echoes the speaker's descriptions of parched ground and dying flowers in the preceding lines. The addition of "today" also emphasizes the time that has passed since living an ideal life in the country might have been possible. Maybe, long ago, rural life was as wonderful as the poets said—but that time is long gone.

The speaker's authoritative tone suggests a desperate insistence against investing in a false, idealistic solution to modern despair. Note, for example, how both this warning ("do not believe") and "cure it" are imperatives or commands. These examples of apostrophe are particularly effective because they seem to single the reader out, directly commanding "you" (rather than referring to a shared "us"). As such, the speaker seemingly encourages the audience to cure *themselves* of the cruelty of the modern world and, by extension, also warns them against believing that nature contains the solution to all their problems.

As in its first appearance, "no peace" ultimately lands on its own line due to the poem's narrow formatting, again drawing attention to the lack of "peace" that the countryside promises. But here, this statement is followed by a period, resulting in an end-stopped line that lends a weightiness to the poem's final line.

SYMBOLS

FLOWERS

Flowers appear throughout the poem and symbolize the beauty and pleasures of the natural world.

The speaker first mentions flowers in the opening stanza, basically deeming "small violets" useless against modern woes. The speaker asks what these flowers can "tell us," as if they have little useful knowledge to offer. Nature's pleasures, these lines imply, are insignificant.

The speaker then pictures "country people" working the land in the distant past, producing inspired or "flowering" minds. Here, the speaker suggests that a close relationship with nature was once fruitful—that the pleasures of nature helped those farmers' minds grow and blossom. Of course, the speaker quickly clarifies that this lifestyle only existed "long ago"—and may never have existed at all. Now, the speaker argues, the flowers that represent such pure pleasures as "love" are sure to die.

The flowers in the poem thus speak to the state of the world, ultimately suggesting that its pure beauty and pleasures are insignificant and dying off.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "the small violets tell us / that grow on furry stems"
- **Line 13:** "flowering minds"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Love itself a flower / with roots in a parched ground."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

"Raleigh Was Right" contains several allusions, especially to poems in the pastoral tradition. Pastoral poetry typically presents an idealized vision of life in the countryside, praising the imagined simplicity and virtue of rural labor. The poem's frequent allusions to this tradition allow the speaker to explore its limitations and poke holes in its relevance to modern life.

In fact, before the poem even begins, its title alludes to Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd":

- Raleigh's poem, published in 1600, parodies a work by fellow English Renaissance poet Christopher Marlowe, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love."
- Marlowe's original poem perpetuates pastoral ideals, as its speaker implores his beloved to live with him in the countryside, describing the many tantalizing pleasures they might glean from the natural world.
- However, Raleigh's "Nymph's Reply" imagines that the beloved turns the shepherd down, shattering the illusion of a perfect life in the countryside by explaining how each of the pleasures the shepherd offers will decay and bring hardship with time.

There are other possible allusions as well. In the poem's opening stanza, for example, the speaker describes "small violets," questioning the insight they have to offer. Both Marlowe's poem and Raleigh's reply describe several varieties of flowers, but neither actually mentions violets. As a result, the "small violets" have been interpreted as an allusion to various poems, most convincingly John Milton's "L'Allegro" and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land":

- The speaker of "L'Allegro" describes the conception of Mirth (a spirit representing amusement/laughter) "on beds of violets blue." The poem generally describes a life of pure pleasure and reckless abandon in the countryside, parroting Marlowe's perspective and ultimately revealing just how

extreme it is.
- Eliot's "Waste Land" refers to twilight as "the violet hour," which is described as mechanically driving people away from work and towards home with its captivating beauty. "The Waste Land" generally explores the decay and alienation that pervades the modern world.
- By possibly invoking these poems, the "small violets" become an image of nature's delights—albeit one whose pleasures might not stand up to the harsh realities of the surrounding world.

Finally, the speaker and the beloved's discussion of nature reminds the violets of "the poets / who sung of our loveliness"—an explicit allusion to poets writing in the pastoral tradition, which stretches back to ancient Greece. The societies such poets describe existed "long ago! / long ago!" In other words, the idyllic life in the countryside their poetry praises is long gone.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "We cannot go to the country / for the country will bring us / no peace"
- **Line 4:** "violets"
- **Lines 8-15:** "and call to mind the poets / who sung of our loveliness / it was long ago! / long ago! when country people / would plow and sow with / flowering minds and pockets / at ease— / if ever this were true."
- **Lines 22-23:** "for the country will bring us / no peace."

APOSTROPHE

The speaker of "Raleigh Was Right" appears to address a beloved who has proposed, at some point before the poem begins, that the two escape into the countryside to find "peace." The beloved is never given the opportunity to respond, producing apostrophe.

This device creates the impression that the speaker addresses the audience directly—as if the speaker calls the reader out with commands like "cure it if you can" and includes them in collective statements like "we cannot go." As such, apostrophe seems to involve the audience in the poem's events. In doing so, apostrophe prompts readers to work out their own place within the poem—that is, their position on the ancient ideal of a simple, harmonious life in nature.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We"
- **Line 2:** "us"
- **Line 4:** "us"
- **Line 7:** "you"
- **Line 19:** "you"
- **Line 20:** "do not believe," "we"
- **Line 22:** "us"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds emphasis and music to the poem. It can also affect the poem's tone. The sharp /c/ sounds of the opening lines, for example, make the speaker's insistence that they "cannot go to the country" sound all the more forceful. By contrast, the soft /l/ sounds of "long grass among lance shaped leaves" add gentleness to this description of natural beauty.

The second stanza is particularly alliterative, with popping /p/ sounds echoing from beginning to end—in "praise," "poets," "people," "plow," and "pockets." All this alliteration makes the stanza more memorable and interesting for the reader/listener. That /p/ sound might come across as forceful and dismissive, as though the violets (who seem to be speaking in this stanza) are strongly rejecting the pastoral tradition that these lines describe.

Finally, the alliteration of phrases like "Not now" and "cure it if you can" again adds oomph and a sense of certainty to the speaker's declarations that the modern world is a far cry from the idyllic countryside of the past.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cannot," "country"
- **Line 2:** "country"
- **Line 6:** "long," "lance," "leaves"
- **Line 7:** "praise"
- **Line 8:** "poets"
- **Line 9:** "loveliness"
- **Line 10:** "long"
- **Line 11:** "people"
- **Line 12:** "plow"
- **Line 13:** "pockets"
- **Line 16:** "Not now"
- **Line 19:** "Cure," "can"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout this poem, drawing attention to important ideas and making certain images all the more memorable for the reader. The sharp /t/ and hard /c/ sounds of the poem's opening, for example, make the speaker's declaration that they "cannot go to the country" sounds all the more forceful.

Then, towards the end of the stanza, note the string of /l/, /m/, and /s/ sounds:

> What can the small violets tell us
> that grow on furry stems in

the long grass among lance shaped
leaves?

The music of these lines evokes the gentle beauty of nature—even as the speaker insists that such beauty has little to "tell us."

Later, consonance adds emphasis to the description of idyllic pastoral life in the past:

when country people
would plow and sow with
flowering minds and pockets [...]

All those /p/ and /w/ sounds (plus the assonance of "plow" and "flowering") again evoke the harmony that supposedly existed between humanity and the natural world "long ago."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "cannot," "to," "country"
- **Line 2:** "country"
- **Line 4:** "small violets tell us"
- **Line 5:** "stems"
- **Line 6:** "long grass among lance," "leaves"
- **Line 7:** "praise us"
- **Line 8:** "poets"
- **Line 9:** "sung," "loveliness"
- **Line 10:** "long"
- **Line 11:** "long," "when," "people"
- **Line 12:** "would plow"
- **Lines 12-13:** "sow with / flowering"
- **Line 13:** "pockets"
- **Line 16:** "Not now"
- **Line 18:** "Empty pockets make empty"
- **Line 19:** "Cure," "can"
- **Line 21:** "today," "country"
- **Line 22:** "country"

END-STOPPED LINE

While most of this poem's lines are enjambed, a few end-stopped lines add to the speaker's straightforward, authoritative tone. Within these end-stopped lines, the conclusion of a complete phrase or sentence also corresponds with the end of a line. The line break that follows thus reinforces the natural pause indicated by the end of the phrase, giving it added weight and finality. In turn, the speaker's statements come across as confident and credible.

For instance, take this line:

if ever this were true.

Here, the speaker doubts whether humans *ever* had an ideal relationship with nature. The full stop increases the direct, terse nature of this remark. The pause it indicates encourages the reader to linger on the possibility that the pastoral ideal has *always* been a fantasy.

The end-stopped lines in the final stanza work in much the same way:

with roots in a parched ground.
Empty pockets make empty heads.

The firm pauses after "ground" and "heads" add finality and authority to the speaker's words. This is simply the way it is, the speaker seems to be saying, leaving no room for any argument to the contrary.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "peace"
- **Line 6:** "leaves?"
- **Line 10:** "ago!"
- **Line 14:** "ease—"
- **Line 15:** "true."
- **Line 17:** "ground."
- **Line 18:** "heads."
- **Line 23:** "peace."

ENJAMBMENT

While end-stopped lines create a definitive tone and suggest finality, enjambment has the opposite effect in this poem—producing ambiguity, anticipation, and surprise. Enjambment requires that the audience read on in order to learn the outcome of the speaker's statements, creating suspense and holding the reader's interest.

For instance, the poem's second stanza begins, "Though you praise us," indicating that the beloved's praises of nature have some drawback or limitation. Two more examples of enjambment follow before the audience learns what that limitation actually is, encouraging the reader to continue quickly down the page:

Though you praise us
and call to mind the poets
who sung [...]

Enjambment often creates a sense of purpose in this poem, as key information is withheld until the next line. Such "twists" keep readers on their toes and make the poem more dramatic and memorable.

For instance, the poem's third stanza opens with a comparison of love to "a flower," a pleasant image:

Not now. Love itself a flower

But this line is enjambed; it flows right into the next, which reveals that this flower has "roots in a parched ground."

In general, this poem's enjambment creates a fragmented reading experience, as sentences and phrases are broken up unnaturally. The overall fast pace, confusion, and ambiguity that results can be seen as expressing the chaos of the modern world.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "country / for"
- **Lines 4-5:** "us / that"
- **Lines 5-6:** "in / the"
- **Lines 7-8:** "us / and"
- **Lines 8-9:** "poets / who"
- **Lines 9-10:** "loveliness / it"
- **Lines 11-12:** "people / would"
- **Lines 12-13:** "with / flowering"
- **Lines 14-15:** "ease— / if"
- **Lines 16-17:** "flower / with"
- **Lines 19-20:** "but / do"
- **Lines 20-21:** "live / today"
- **Lines 21-22:** "country / for"

METAPHOR

"Raleigh Was Right" contains several metaphors, which can be broken up into two main groups: the "flower" metaphors, and the "pocket" metaphors.

Flowers in the poem represent nature's pure beauty and pleasures. Thus, when the speaker questions what "small violets" can "tell us," they're personifying nature's beauty as insignificant and unwise.

This wasn't necessarily always the case, however. The rural laborers praised in pastoral poetry had "flowering" minds, a word that indicates maturation and productivity. The metaphor suggests that the rural workers of this lost age were, at least according to pastoral poetry, intellectually, creatively, and/or spiritually inspired by their connection with nature.

Later, love is described as "a flower / with roots in a parched ground," the dry, inhospitable environment suggesting that love is at risk of dying out. The diminished power of these flowers suggests a generally bleak state of the world today, which stands in contrast to the "flowering minds" of the distant past.

The speaker also describes the financial situation of the ancient farmers in romantic terms; they have no money, leaving their "pockets at ease." "At ease" suggests relaxation, as if the pockets are "off duty" from carrying heavy coins. However, "today" a lack of money only breeds a lack of opportunity in the modern world. Or as the speaker puts it, "empty pockets make empty heads."

The speaker's revival of these images in different lights throughout the poem creates a stark contrast between the glory of the imagined past and the horror of the present.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "What can the small violets tell us"
- **Lines 12-14:** "with / flowering minds and pockets / at ease—"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Love itself a flower / with roots in a parched ground"
- **Line 18:** "Empty pockets make empty heads"

REPETITION

The poem features a few brief instances of repetition, which emphasize the speaker's arguments. In fact, the speaker's justification for denying the beloved's proposal to escape into the countryside appears at both the poem's outset and its conclusion. The resulting refrain, "for the country will bring us no peace," emphasizes the lack of contentment that life in the country offers, according to the speaker at least.

This phrase itself also contains repetition, specifically diacope:

> we cannot go to the country
> for the country [...]

And:

> today in the country
> for the country [...]

This diacope underscores "the country's" futility; it can't do anything to solve the speaker's problems.

The poem also contains one example of epizeuxis, when the violets (which seem to become the poem's speaker in its second stanza) exclaim that the world pastoral poets phrase existed "long ago! / long ago!" The quick repetition here makes the phrase feel more insistent and urgent. This repetition emphasizes just how much time has passed since poets observed a totally harmonious relationship between humans and nature. In this way, it reinforces the speaker's argument that the pastoral ideal cannot be achieved today.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the country"
- **Lines 2-3:** "for the country will bring us / no peace"
- **Lines 10-11:** "long ago! / long ago!"
- **Line 21:** "the country"
- **Lines 22-23:** "for the country will bring us / no peace."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

This poem contains one rhetorical question, in which the speaker calls the value of nature into question:

> What can the small violets tell us
> that grow on furry stems in
> the long grass among lance shaped leaves?

In general, rhetorical questions imply their own answers. Here, the speaker describes the violets as "small" and "furry"—seemingly insignificant in the face of the menacing "long grass" and "lance shaped leaves" that surround the violets, swallowing them up. The question thus implies that people won't gain any special wisdom or contentment from the natural world, at least not enough to outweigh the cruelty of the outside world.

The speaker will go on to imagine the violets' response—what they might "tell us" if they were able. But in the meantime, the audience is left to consider the possible majesty and wisdom of the natural world—or perhaps its failure to live up to these qualities.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "What can the small violets tell us / that grow on furry stems in / the long grass among lance shaped / leaves?"

VOCABULARY

Lance shaped (Line 6) - Long and tapered. Literally, resembling a lance, a simple weapon similar to a spear or sword that is typically thrown or jabbed at an enemy.

The poets who sung of our loveliness (Lines 8-9) - An allusion to poets writing in the pastoral tradition, which celebrates an ideal relationship between rural laborers (especially shepherds) and the natural world. These poems traditionally preach the virtues of a simple, carefree life in the countryside, often presenting it as an antidote to the chaos of city living.

Sow (Line 12) - Plant seeds.

Plow (Line 12) - Prepare land for planting by turning over the soil and bringing nutrients to its surface.

Flowering (Line 13) - Productive and nourished, like a plant whose environment allows it to mature and produce flowers.

Parched (Line 17) - Containing no water, dried-out and thirsty. The dryness of the land suggests that it won't be able to sustain the "flower" that represents love.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Raleigh Was Right" consists of three narrow stanzas of varying lengths. It's written in free verse, meaning that those stanzas don't have any regular meter or rhyme scheme.

The poem's form is thus a far cry from that of the two poems to which it responds: both "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" consist of steady quatrains (four-line stanzas) with regular patterns of meter and rhyme. Williams's shift *away* from the rigid form of those older poems reflects the idea that old poetic tropes (especially the idealization of nature) are outdated and useless in the modern world.

Note that the exact line breaks in "Raleigh Was Right" were slightly modified from one publication to the next. That said, this poem (and many of Williams's others) was formatted to look like a narrow column of text on the page, with longer lines spilling over into the next and requiring indentation. Here, "no peace," "leaves," "at ease," and again "no peace" look like they fall on their own lines simply due to this narrow formatting. This is intentional, however, and calls attention to these phrases and subtly links them. It also highlights their shared long /ee/ sound, which produces slant rhymes.

More generally, the narrow structure creates a disjointed reading experience. The lines are broken up irregularly in order to fit into this one long column, with frequent enjambment cutting the speaker off in a middle of a phrase and creating a sense of anticipation and disorientation. The fragmented reading experience might reflect the chaos and confusion of the modern world (in contrast to the romanticized, free-flowing beauty of the idealized past).

Finally, like Raleigh's "Nymph's Reply," this poem can be interpreted as a parody of the pastoral genre of poetry, as the speaker introduces and then undermines common pastoral images and themes. In particular, the speaker riffs on the idea that rural laborers have a perfect, inspiring lifestyle due to their close contact with nature.

METER

"Raleigh Was Right" is a free verse poem and doesn't have a regular meter. In general, this makes the poem sound casual and conversational. It also veers away from the meter of the poems to which it responds, both of which follow a steady iambic (da-DUM) rhythm. Given that the speaker argues that the world of those other poems is long gone, it makes sense that Williams's poem avoids the rigid poetic structures of the past.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Raleigh Was Right" doesn't follow any

particular rhyme scheme. As with its lack of meter, this keeps things sounding loose and unpredictable. It's also another deviation from the two poems to which "Raleigh Was Right" responds: both "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" feature steady rhyme schemes. That this poem does *not* might be another subtle nod to the idea that the world of those poems is long gone.

However, there is one subtle chain of slant rhymes that appears throughout Williams's poem: between "peace," "leaves," "ease," and again "peace." These all fall at the end of the poem's longest lines, calling more attention to these words and perhaps reminding the reader of all the comforts of pastoral life that no longer exist.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Raleigh Was Right" seems to be responding to a request—perhaps from a lover—to "go to the country" and live a more peaceful, harmonious life. The speaker rejects this proposal, arguing that life in the countryside won't solve their problems.

From this speaker's point of view, the pastoral ideal celebrated by poets of the past doesn't exist anymore (and might never have existed at all). According to the speaker, a life of rural labor brings great challenges today, and idealizing such a lifestyle is thus misguided. As such, the speaker comes across as a realist—and a bleak and jaded one at that.

The speaker might be interpreted as a modern version of the nature spirit who narrates Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd." But in Williams's poem, the identities of the speaker and the speaker's partner ultimately remain ambiguous. This allows the poem's message to be more universal; life in the country, the poem implies, is no answer to modern troubles in general.

The poem's second stanza, meanwhile, is told from the perspective of the violets; the speaker imagines what they might "tell us" if they were able to. The speaker's ability to empathize with the violets, and the impulse to give nature a voice in the poem, might suggest a deep admiration for nature, even as the speaker acknowledges that it can't "cure" modern ills.

SETTING

The poem was first published in 1940, and while there are no specific references to any particular time period, the speaker repeatedly contrasts the world "today" with a distant, idealized past. As such, the setting can be taken as the modern world. And given that the speaker rejects the possibility of going "to the country," the poem presumably takes place in a city.

Within the speaker's imagination, the poem toggles between the rough landscapes of this modern world and the idealized rural pastures of a lost (and possibly fantastical) past. While the poem never explicitly describes what the modern city the speaker lives in is like, the beloved's desire to *escape* this city implies that it's an undesirable home. The description of old rural communities as virtuous societies where people lived in harmony with the land implies that modern cities are the opposite: complex, chaotic, and amoral.

Yet the speaker insists that the *modern* countryside offers no more "peace" than does this city. While at one point in time the country may have been a lovely place to live, it's not anymore (and, in all likelihood, was never as wonderful as "the poets / who sung of [its] loveliness" made it seem).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Raleigh Was Right" was first published in *Poetry* magazine in 1940. However, William Carlos Williams modified the poem later and several versions have appeared in print. The original poem features slightly different line breaks, as Williams often toyed with his poems' structure at this point in his career. The version of "Raleigh Was Right" referenced in this guide first appeared in Williams's 1944 collection *The Wedge*.

Williams was a leading figure of a literary movement known as Modernism, which aimed to subvert conventional poetic techniques and to establish new poetic traditions to suit the concerns of the modern world. Modernist literature often features allusions, fragmented structures, and multiple perspectives, all of which can be found in this poem.

"Raleigh Was Right" also has some very specific literary context: it responds to Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which itself responds to Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Marlowe's poem, published in 1599, features a shepherd trying to convince a young woman to live with him in the countryside. The poem is typical of the pastoral genre in its romantic, idealized depiction of rural life.

Raleigh's poem, published a year later, sees the young woman rejecting the shepherd's request, arguing that his promises are hollow because time decays all pleasures. The famous parody has inspired a number of responses, and Williams, of course, agrees with Raleigh!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Raleigh Was Right" was collected into a manuscript as early as 1937, and it was likely written earlier that decade. The 1930s was a period of global upheaval that included a worldwide economic downturn and rising international tensions leading up to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. In fact, Williams

said that he put together *The Wedge* (1944), which contains the version of the poem displayed here, after fielding numerous requests from soldiers who wanted to carry a pocket-sized edition of his works as they fought in the Second World War.

In 1930s America, where this poem was written, an agricultural disaster known as the Dust Bowl was also ravaging the Great Plains region. Federal land policies had incentivized inexperienced farmers to settle out west in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over-cultivation and severe drought caused devastating dust storms that destroyed millions of acres of farmland throughout the '30s, injuring and killing many rural workers in the process.

The extreme physical, economic, and psychic strain that these communities faced conflicted with the Manifest Destiny they had been instilled with—a belief that God destined the expansion of the United States across North America. The noble, prosperous lifestyle of the rural settlers turned out to be an illusion, and such uncomplicated representations of living off the land felt increasingly far-fetched (especially as the whole country looked on with horror).

The pastoral poetic tradition that the poem references stretches back to the praises by ancient Greek poets of the Arcadians, an ancient tribe in the central mountainous highlands of the Peloponnese (a peninsula that is part of Greece). The tribe was believed to have been indigenous to the region, which is remote and high in the mountains, preserving its language and culture for many generations. The first pastoral poets praised the Arcadian way of life, extolling the virtues of the shepherds' simple, harmonious lives in nature.

In the Renaissance era (when "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" were written), Arcadia was often invoked as the epitome of a perfect, untainted wilderness—offering imaginary respite from the modern world. It's safe to say that such idealizing accounts of the Arcadian people are probably not historically accurate—and judging by this poem, Williams would likely agree.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of the Poet — Browse an overview of Williams's life and poetic career from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-carlos-williams)
- Marlowe's Many Replies and Parodies — Explore other responses to Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," one of the most frequently parodied poems in English. (https://comelivewithmeballad.com/replies-parodies/)
- The Original Publication — Browse the May 1940 edition of Poetry magazine, which included the original publication of this poem. Note the particularly narrow margins of Williams's contribution as well as the slightly modified line breaks. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=22610)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to the author read "Raleigh Was Right" at the Library of Congress in 1945. (https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Williams-WC/02_Library-of-Congress_05-05-45/Williams-WC_49_Raleigh-Was-Right_Library-of-Congress_05-05-45.mp3)
- Pastoral Poetry: Arcadia Through the Ages — Learn more about the pastoral tradition with this deep dive from the Classical Society of Poets. (https://classicalpoets.org/2018/04/29/essay-pastoral-poetry-arcadia-through-the-ages/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS POEMS

- Landscape with the Fall of Icarus
- Spring and All (By the road to the contagious hospital)
- The Red Wheelbarrow
- This Is Just To Say

HOW TO CITE

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