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Love Lost, Found through Nature

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is often compared to the second part of the Genesis creation narrative. The two have superficial similarities, as in a mutually exclusive male-female relationship. They also share common themes, as in masculinity, femininity, and exploration. However, the two stories have opposite outcomes. Adam and Eve lose their love, and the Songs' lovers find their love. In this essay, I argue that these different outcomes can be interpreted as a conversation about nature's effect on love. Love can be lost, or found, through nature depending on one's embrace of it. I define "nature" in the modern sense, as in geology and wildlife.

In the second Genesis creation narrative, the Lord God forms the first human and places him in the Garden of Eden. God commands the man, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (*King James Bible,* Genesis 2:16-17). Here God identifies the temptations nature produces. The man would completely embrace the idyllic setting around him, intrinsically attracted to its beauty, so God must demarcate safe and non-safe options.

God considers no animal fit to be the man's companion, and so makes a woman from his rib. He then declares their unity: "[he] shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The pair is born as a divine couple: made by God for one another, by one another. They are naked without shame. The setting supports their being in love. Eden's etymology stems from the Akkadian "C'dn," meaning "abundant or lush"

(Millard 103). The Garden of Eden produces abundant fertility and luxuriant vegetation. All these conditions combine to create a perfect, theoretically eternal, union.

The serpent recommends the woman eat the forbidden fruit, insisting she will not die, but become a God. “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). The woman eats the fruit, yielding to nature’s temptation. She gives the fruit to her husband, and he too yields. Later, God interrogates the couple. Adam, his name now given, implicates the woman -- his love -- as tempting him: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree” (Genesis 3:12). Eve, her name now given, implicates the serpent -- nature -- as tempting her: “The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat” (Genesis 3:13). God banishes them from the Garden of Eden, and places cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the tree of life.

Adam and Eve’s opportunity for idyllic love is lost due to the couple’s yielding embrace of nature. Nature affected their love by tempting them to indulgent, errant decisions. The two are consequently banished, and the opportunity lost. In Genesis chapter 3, nature’s temptation manifests itself through the serpent and forbidden fruit. The couple could have embraced these temptations in a different manner. Adam and Eve might have approached the serpent together, and collectively reflected that their love could not be risked. Alternatively, they might have allegorized the apple as a test of their union, where indulgence is easy when surrounded by beauty. Finally, the couple might have used nature as an aphrodisiac, comparing their love to the landscape through simile and metaphor. The lovers in the Song of Songs’ executed this final option, and found love as a result.

The Song of Songs begins with a woman desiring to kiss her lover's mouth "for [his] love is better than wine" (Solomon 1:2). An erotic tone is established from the start and, considering the poetic form, one assumes things will further escalate. The woman then describes her blackness and beauty. She recalls a springtime visit from her lover. A competition of compliments follows, with many comparisons to nature: "His fruit was sweet to my taste"; "My beloved is like a roe or a young hart"; "thou hast doves' eyes"; "The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell." They together agree the "beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir" (Solomon 1:10-17, 2:3-13). The depth -- likening their relationship's foundation to a forest canopy -- and breadth -- mentioning vineyards to doves -- of the compliments establishes the couple's association between nature and beauty. They find love for one another in recollecting the pastoral imagery of springtime. Every image evokes another characteristic of their lover.

After a dream sequence of a royal wedding procession, the narration returns to flattery. The man describes his lover comprehensively with nature similes: "thy hair is as a flock of goats"; "Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet"; "Thy two breasts are like two young roes," and concludes "Thou art all fair" (Solomon 4:1-7). He compares her to a locked garden, and she invites him in to taste "his" fruits. He accepts. The continued comparisons between natural beauty and their love's beauty build on their association between nature and love. To this couple, love is inextricably tied to natural beauty. No compliment can go without an organic reference.

The woman dreams her lover has left, and she occasionally imagines images of nature, as in "Thy teeth are as a flock of sheep" (Solomon 6:6). She returns to reality, and

pastoral references return abundantly. In nine verses, the man again comprehensively describes the woman's body. He states his intention to enjoy the fruits of her garden, and the woman invites him to the vineyards in order to "see if the vine flourish" (Solomon 7:12). The book ends with more nature images, as in the last line: "Make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices" (Solomon 8:14). A final repetition of landscape, animals, and lust, verifies love through nature as the Song's central topic. The lovers reflect on their relationship, look to describe it, and consistently draw analogies to nature. Love, sex, and beauty, three prominent motifs, are established through figurative images of nature.

The Songs' lovers are surrounded by natural temptations. Unlike like Adam and Eve, they aren't distracted. No literal forbidden fruit exists in Songs, though every relationship contains figurative forbidden fruit. In this book, the idyllic natural surroundings are the forbidden fruit. The Songs' lovers might have gotten pleasure by interacting with the landscapes and animals rather than each other. The woman reflects that interaction would not be as fulfilling: "Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away" (Solomon 8:7). Also, they might have compared their lover to nature in a nasty way, as in "sour like wine." Nature's crudeness offers many opportunities. Instead, the Songs' lovers embrace nature as an aphrodisiac, allowing its beauty to create a craving for intimacy. The two consequently strengthen their love through a competition of compliments. The overwhelming emotional power of nature manifests itself in an overwhelmingly passionate relationship.

Nature exhibits both physical and emotional power throughout the Bible. Representing the former, water returns the Earth to its pre-Creation state in the Genesis

flood narrative, and the animal Behemoth carries “a tail like cedar,” and “bones as strong as brass” (Job 40:17-18). Representing the latter, nature elicits excitement in the lovers of the Song of Songs and part two of the Genesis creation narrative.

Nature’s emotional power is sourced in its inherent beauty. The innumerable depictions and celebrations of the Earth in art provide evidence for a human association between nature and beauty. Given the idyllic nature in Songs and Genesis chapters 2-3, emotional power was bound to overwhelm their characters. This emotional power manifested itself in different ways, depending on the character’s embrace, and produced different outcomes for their love. Love was lost in the Garden of Eden, and found in the springtime of Songs.

Works Cited

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