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Flower Imagery and Symbolism in Hamlet

Critics consider Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' as one of the greatest tragedies of all time. Set in the kingdom of Denmark, the play revolves around themes of madness, revenge, death, gender and moral corruption where prince Hamlet takes revenge from his Uncle Claudius for murdering old King Hamlet and for succeeding the throne and marrying his mother Gertrude. Ophelia, daughter of Lord Chamberlain of Claudius's court Polonius, appears as a beautiful young woman and obedient daughter with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia lives in a male domineering society, being forced to keep silent and suppress her feelings. Bewildered and heartbroken on Hamlet's behavior towards her, she goes mad when Hamlet kills Polonius. Even in her descent into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs, distributing flowers and finally mysteriously drowning in the river amid the flowers garlands. Ophelia, not being the focal character of Hamlet, still moves audience by the subtleness and complexity of her character. Shakespeare used flower symbolism to give audience more insight into Ophelia's character because flowers hold deeper meanings and symbolic interpretations in them and Ophelia's character reveals itself by the analysis of flower imagery and symbolism used in the play. Mad, suppressed and distraught Ophelia distributes flowers among people after she enters the room in great castle of Elsinore. Each flower referred to specific person symbolizes some attribute or idea devoted to that person. This paper attempts to prove that Shakespeare's use of flower imagery

and symbolism for Ophelia urges the audience to see her coming alive as a solid character of sensitive, innocent and intelligent young woman and forces them to reckon with her innuendoes even in her madness by showing them a method in her madness and an undertone of logic in her insanity.

Ophelia's character grows as loving, gentle and innocent woman through the flower imagery used in the play. Laertes, first introduces his flower imagery associated with her. He tries to convince Ophelia that she should not trust Hamlet as his love for her is deceitful. He calls Hamlet's love for her a 'violet' (1.3. 7). Violet, a flower of early spring, sweets smell but it does not last longer. Laertes believes that like a violet, Hamlet's love for Ophelia will also go away soon. Both Laertes and Polonius have little faith in Ophelia's decisions and they think of her as vulnerable and incapable. Ophelia, though, still has hope for her relationship with Hamlet as she calls him "rose of the fair state" (3.1. 153) showing her simple unselfish affection towards him. Her direct comparison of Hamlet and a rose reflects her belief that Hamlet should be heir to the throne, just as rose dominates all other flowers, as well as an emblem of her abiding love for Hamlet since a rose represents love, passion and beauty. Also, a rose, like love, has thorns that prick and cause pain. Because Hamlet, in his madness, spoke to Ophelia in an angry frightening tone and insulted her, this is a thorn that pricked her. Then, the death of her father and loss of her lover continued to break Ophelia's heart and she sinks into a period of severe depression. Eventually, Ophelia commits suicide and the gentleness of her character reveals itself through the peacefulness which surrounds her at the time of death. When she dies, "crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples" (4.7. 168-169) surround her. Crow-flowers symbolize ingratitude, nettles are sharp and stinging, daisies represent Ophelia's innocence and long purples give a hint

of the sexual love. Even, at her burial, flowers are buried along with her as “sweets to the sweet” (5.1. 243). These Queen’s “sweets” are funeral bouquets scattered in her grave.

Ophelia unfolds her true character in act 4 scene 5, when she appears knowledgeable of the truth and contradicts audience’s belief of being merely a suppressed silent bystander. Ophelia enters, with her hair and whole figure entwined with chain of flowers and singing strange songs and in her thin outer skirt, she carries a mass of flowers. She seems to have gone mad due to the unbearable sorrow and grief of her father’s death. Ophelia’s lunatic ravings are because of the sorrow and grief she faces after Polonius’s murder by Hamlet, Hamlet’s subsequent exile and Laertes’ absence. Still she advances slowly with the strange light of sanity in her eyes, sits down on the floor and plays with the flowers in a childish way, as she sings. Then she arises, distributes the flowers, sings her last song, loiters a moment after her parting benediction and runs out in a burst of mad laughter. In her seeming madness, knowing that she lives in a society women are tools used by men, dependent on men and easily manipulated by them and where she is considered as vulnerable and indecisive, she expresses herself using flowers. She assigns Rosemary to Hamlet, present to her imagination. Rosemary emblemizes remembrance, faithfulness and is being worn at weddings to signify the fidelity of the lovers. She says, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember," (4.5. 175-176) and she gives pansies to Laertes when she says, “and there is pansies. That's for thoughts” (4.5. 176-177). Pansy symbolizes pensiveness and grief. She urges her brother to reflect on the madness of the recent events in the kingdom. Through this distribution of flowers, she becomes the judge being above any judgment of herself in her state of insanity.

On this passage, Hunter annotates:

"Ophelia in unbalanced mind thinks of marriage; with it comes the idea of rosemary, and she addresses him who should have been the bridegroom, Hamlet himself, as her lover. She then feels her disappointment. Hamlet is not there, and she turns to another flower — the pansy, or heart's ease — as more fitting her condition; for the pansy is associated with melancholy" (Blackmore, The Riddles of Hamlet).

Finally, even in her seeming mad state, Ophelia seems sensible and mature as she fears to cross king and queen and be punished for insulting them and due to lack of polite and proper words about the accusation she wants to make on king and queen, she lets the flowers do the talking. Flowers express her thoughts and convey her emotions about whatever happens around her. She does not choose flowers haphazardly, rather she chooses them with the intent to say to the king and Queen what she thinks about them. She accuses the king and queen of the guilt she wants them to feel in a safer way. She walks to the king and while handing him some fennel, says, "There's fennel for you and columbines" (4.5. 180). Fennel symbolizes flattery, foolishness, marital infidelity or cajolery and deceit. Columbines symbolize ingratitude and faithlessness. Ophelia appears very brave to first flatter the king and then accuse him of foolish adultery despite of knowing that he has a right to take away her life. She, then walks over to the Queen and says, "There's rue for you; and here's some for me" (4.5. 181-182). The bitter plant Rue symbolizes repentance. She thinks Queen should wear it in token of repentance as being directly responsible for the death of her late husband and she must also ask for forgiveness on her incestuous marriage, while Ophelia will wear them herself in regret and grief at the loss of her father and her lover. She also says, "There's a daisy," (4.5. 183) and she picks it up, looks sadly and then puts it back as if she is saying, "There is no innocence here". She continues by saying, "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died", (4.5. 184-

185) questioning King and Queen about their faithfulness and integrity. In this distribution, audience see the demented maiden choosing flower intelligently and most suitable to everyone.

Conclusively, flower imagery and symbolism used by Shakespeare helps audience to develop Ophelia's character as a brave, gentle, innocent and sensible young girl. We see a method in her madness and a sense of consciousness in her insanity. The unbearable grief drives her mad, but even her madness reflects her selfless love for Hamlet, feelings for Laertes and ideas about the infidelity of the world, unfaithfulness of people and injustice of Elsinore.

"In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry of fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking. And the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful". (Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy 132-3).

References:

Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966.

Blackmore, Simon Augustine. *The Riddles of Hamlet*. Boston: Stratford & Company, 1917.

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