

Symbolic Codes of Communication in the Victorian Era: The Language of Flowers in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Abstract

*John Fowles's love of nature is illustrated by the great variety of landscapes and flowers present everywhere throughout his fiction. His interest goes well beyond that of a mere admirer of flowers as it is proved by his knowledge of their names and species and by his great ability to describe and use them as symbols, as carriers of meaning. In all his six novels, Fowles makes extensive references to flowers and their symbolism and **The French Lieutenant's Woman** is no exception in this sense. The present article aims to prove that the language of flowers as a form of symbolic communication was very much used in the Victorian era, which Fowles reconstructs minutely. At the same time, the close analysis of the text will reveal that the novelist uses flowers as a symbolic code of communication with his readers so as to disclose the hidden nature of his characters. The focus is placed on decoding the language of flowers, as there is no systematic approach to it in the critical writings on Fowles's fiction.*

Key words: Victorian era, symbolic communication, language of flowers/ floriography.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles's neo-Victorian novel, the author uses flowers in the same way he uses nature in his fiction. If his landscapes are both real and symbolic, his flowers may also represent 'real', decorative elements of the setting or they may be used as symbols that reveal the hidden meaning(s) of story and characters. At times, flowers are part of the natural scenery, and they are described in order to outline the richness and beauty of the vegetation growing on a field, on an alpine meadow or in the forest.

In the novel, Fowles makes references to a wide variety of flowers to emphasize the Eden-like quality of the Undercliff. One of the most beautiful descriptions of flowers occurs when Charles is in search of his precious ammonites.

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The ground about him was studded gold and pale yellow with celandines and primroses and banked by the bridal white of densely blossoming sloe; where jubilantly green-tipped elders shaded the mossy banks of the little brook he had drunk from were clusters of moschatel and woodsorrel, most delicate of English spring flowers. Higher up the slope he saw the white heads of anemones, and beyond them deep green drifts of bluebell leaves (1981: 62).

In this luxurious garden bursting with flowers, which are the most delicate of English spring flowers, Charles will encounter Sarah. Thus, flowers are used to create a paradisiacal atmosphere and as background for the love story of the two protagonists.

As in many of his novels, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, too, Fowles uses flowers not only to enhance his vision of nature, but also in more subtle and sophisticated ways. In reconstructing the Victorian world, the writer introduces, among other specific elements that create the impression of the 'real', the language of flowers. The Victorians loved plants and flowers and the great majority of plant introductions took place in the nineteenth century (Hillier 1988). It is a known fact that the Victorians resorted to flowers as a symbolic code of communication in a time when feelings would not be expressed in a direct manner. "The Victorian era was the great age of the flower garden and of all things horticultural, and so it is not surprising that flower symbolism became particularly elaborate at this time" (Kirkby, Diffenbaugh 2011: 4).

Restrictive rules applied also to conversations in which certain topics were definitely avoided. As flowers allowed secret messages to be passed between speakers, the popularity of flowers increased rapidly and a great number of meanings were attached to them. The language of flowers, also known as floriography, thus came into being during the Victorian era, when a large number of dictionaries that explained the symbolism of flowers, plant and herbs was published. As Vanessa Diffenbaugh notes

... every young lady wanted to be well-versed in the meanings of flowers. And though they didn't spend hours coding secret bouquets, the Victorians did set great store by flowers and used them extensively in everyday life, much more so than today. Bouquets as love tokens were sent, carnation buttonholes were extremely popular and women wore flowers a great deal - in their hair, on their evening gowns, or tucked into a bodice. Flower symbolism was important and was

applied to all the major occasions in life: roses, violets and forget-me-nots during courtship, orange blossoms at weddings... (Kirkby, Diffenbaugh 2011: 6).

As it may be seen from the analysis, Fowles introduces in his novel many of the meanings associated with flowers that were popular in the Victorian era, but at the same time he assigns them other subtle and original meanings. It may be said that flowers become a symbolic, inventive and mysterious code of communication with the reader, who is invited to take an active part in the story by decoding the symbolism of flowers scattered throughout the book by a playful and ingenious writer. In this sense, Fowles uses the secret language of flowers as a means to reveal the true character's nature. Many of Fowles's protagonists are associated with flowers which become a sort of an emblem for each of them. In Fowles's vision, Sarah is associated with the anemone, the violet and the primrose, whereas the other important feminine character in the novel, Ernestina, is linked to the jasmine and the violet.

The first flower that is associated with Sarah is the anemone. The second encounter between Charles and Sarah, whose natural environment is the wood, takes place in the mysterious forest of the Undercliff, described as both an English Garden of Eden and as the site of pagan celebration (the feast of Midsummer Night). Charles's 'chance' meeting with Sarah is somehow anticipated by the multitude of flowers he finds near the brook. He goes on through the trees, moving gradually to the west and he arrives to a little green plateau. "It opened out very agreeably, like a tiny alpine meadow. ...Charles stood in the sunlight. Eyebright and birdsfoot starred the grass, and already vivid green clumps of marjoram reached up to bloom. Then he moved forward to the edge of the plateau. And there, below him, he saw a figure" (1981: 64). On this 'little natural balcony' which was 'some five feet beneath the level of the plateau', Charles finds Sarah asleep, with anemones spread around her.

At first he did not see who she was. He stood at a loss, looking at but not seeing the fine landscape the place commanded. The girl lay in the completed abandonment of deep sleep, on her back.... A scattered handful of anemones lay on the grass around her. There was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay... (64).

There is no doubt that the anemones around Sarah are meant to refer symbolically to her inner nature. In one of the earliest pastoral elegies, anemones grow from Aphrodite's tears, as she weeps the death of Adonis, whereas in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the anemone grows from Adonis's blood (Ferber 1999). Thus, the anemone is a symbol of beauty and of deep sorrow, even of mourning when associated with purple flowers. Fowles does not say if the anemones around Sarah were white or red, but reading again the passage on flowers two pages earlier, there a reference to "the white heads of the anemones" (62), may be found. The white anemone stands for Sarah's innocence, but also for her wild, passionate nature by association with Aphrodite. The anemone also symbolizes Sarah's condition of abandoned lover who suffers from and laments the departure of her 'beloved'. Later in the novel, when Sarah tells Charles the story of her love affair with Varguennes, the French lieutenant, she chooses a secluded place to make her confession. The place is a little south-facing dell, described as 'a kind of minute green amphitheatre' (145). Symbolic flowers, among which the violets, add a delicate note to the charming beauty of the place: "The banks of the dell were carpeted with primroses and violets, and the white stars of wild strawberry. Poised in the sky, cradled to the afternoon sun, it was charming, in all ways protected" (145). The violets and the flowers of wild strawberry clearly stand here for love, for passion, foretelling the direction in which their relationship will evolve. They also point to Charles's view of Sarah as a wild creature, belonging to the green wood where she likes to walk, and to Charles's repressed sexual desire for her. Further on, when Sarah continues to tell the story of her seduction and abandonment by the French lieutenant, she deliberately cuts her finger on a hawthorn branch. Thus, the hawthorn becomes a symbol for Sarah herself. In Celtic mythology, the hawthorn is a sacred tree and is linked with the Fairy Queen. Under early Christianity, the Fairy Queen was assimilated with the Queen of the May. Linking the symbolism of the hawthorn, whose thorns reveal hidden dangers, with that of the anemone and the violet, Fowles makes of Sarah a Queen of the May (like Alison and Rebecca), able to appear under many guises. Sarah is represented by Fowles as a sort of a fairy, a spirit of the wood and that is why he uses so many vegetal symbols to sustain this representation. Besides the hawthorn, there is also the anemone (mentioned earlier), among whose petals it is said that at evening the fairies go to sleep, whereas the violet may be used with the same symbolic value as in the A

Midsummer Night's Dream where Oberon speaks of Titania sleeping on a bank where oxlips and 'the nodding violet grows' (II. I. 209-259).

Fowles uses the violet as a symbol for Charles's fiancée, Ernestina, as well. Ernestina seems to embody the quintessence of the Victorian woman. She has "exactly the right face for her age; that is small-chinned, oval, delicate as a violet. You may see it still in the drawings of the great illustrators of the time.... But there was a minute tilt at the corner of her eyelids, and a corresponding tilt at the corner of her lips - to extend the same comparison, as faint as the fragrance of February violets - ..." (27). It seems rather unusual that Fowles uses the same symbol for such different women like Sarah and Ernestina. But the alert reader already knows that Fowles has a (wicked) pleasure to play with symbols. This is why it can only be inferred that his intention is to throw the two feminine characters into relief by highlighting the contrast between them. In his view, Ernestina is a 'delicate' violet, whereas Sarah is the wild violet, growing on the banks of the dells of the Undercliff. This interpretation may be supported only by turning to the text in order to compare Sarah's and Ernestina's descriptions. The effect of such a comparison is striking. Ernestina is said to have "the right face for her age", whereas Sarah's look does not correspond to the canon established by the Victorian era. Sarah's 'was not a pretty face like Ernestina's" (13). Sarah has strong, dark eyebrows, and even though her face is completely feminine her 'wide' mouth suggests a "suppressed sensuality" (105). Unlike Ernestina's pale skin, Sarah's is very brown, "as if the girl cared more for health than a fashionably pale and languid-cheeked complexion" (65). Moreover, the 'faint fragrance of February violets' which point to Ernestina's youth, naivety and lack of experience, compare unfavourably with the violets, primroses and wild strawberries (full of flavour) connected to Sarah, who is always presented as a more mature woman. The primroses and wild violets versus February violets antithesis metaphorically expresses another opposition, that between appearance and essence, stressing out how deceptive appearances may be. In this sense, the simplicity of Sarah's outward look hides the great complexity of her personality, whereas Ernestina's fashionable, highly adorned dress hides nothing beneath, but her shallowness, her frivolity. The symbolism of the primroses is made very clear when the narrator compares Sarah with it: Sarah "seemed totally indifferent to fashion; and survived in spite of it, just as the simple primroses at Charles's feet survived all the competition of exotic conservatory plants" (146).

Here, the narrator clearly alludes to the exotic stephanotis growing in the conservatory of Ernestina's house where Charles's marriage proposal will take place. The stephanotis is used because it was an exotic flower loved by Victorians, but also for its symbolic meanings that attaches it with marriage.

In this way, Fowles sets the two women in sharp contrast through the symbolism of flowers and makes oblique references to their personality. According to a nineteenth-century custom, gentlemen asked their betrothed in marriage in the conservatory. It is also known that in the Victorian era, stephanotis was considered a symbol of happiness in marriage. Fowles takes care to set the scene in the proper place and has Charles asking for Ernestina's hand in the conservatory, where the powerful scent of the stephanotis embalms the air.

Charles opened the white doors to it [the conservatory] and stood in the waft of the hot, fragrant air. He had to search for Ernestina, but at last he found her in one of the farthest corners, half-screened behind a bower of stephanotis. ... She held a pair of silver scissors, and was pretending to snip off the dead blossoms of the heavily scented plant (75).

The difference between the two scenes is as remarkable as the contrast between the simple primroses on the hill and the opulent stephanotis in the conservatory. These two sequences are set in opposition by the metaphoric use of flowers which casts light on the events to come: Charles feels more and more attracted to Sarah and finally decides to break his engagement with Ernestina.

However, Ernestina's symbolic association with the February violets alludes obliquely to her repressed sexuality and is intended to question ironically the Victorian belief according to which women were not able to feel sexual desire. Victorians considered sexuality a taboo and held an idealised view of love, even of physical love. Fowles largely comments upon this issue in *Chapter Thirty-five* where he exposes Victorian mentality that proclaimed "the sanctity of marriage (and chastity before marriage)" (231) and made of sex "the business of sublimation" (232). The novelist also alludes to this mentality when he says that: "Charles was like many Victorian men. He could not really believe that any woman of refined sensibilities could enjoy being the receptacle for male lust" (307). He seemingly wants to undercut this Victorian notion and to prove how naïve such a belief was. This is evident

in the way he portrays Sarah who, despite being a virgin, manipulates Charles into making love with her at Exeter. Moreover, Fowles shows that even the delicate Ernestina can have 'wicked' thoughts. In her bedroom, Ernestina admires herself in the mirror, only in her chemise and petticoats (scandal of scandals!), and unlooses her hair. She imagines "herself for a truly sinful moment as someone wicked – a dancer, an actress" (30) and then, for a very brief moment, she has a *sexual thought* that she strives to banish from her mind, telling to herself "I must not". Afterwards, Ernestina takes her diary out of a drawer, unlocks it and there, among the pages of the book, she finds a sprig of jasmine. "Then she turned to the front of the book, or nearly to the front, because the book had been a Christmas present. Some fifteen pages in, pages of close handwriting, there came a blank, upon which she had pressed a sprig of jasmine. She stared at it a moment, then bent to smell it" (31).

The jasmine that Ernestina keeps in her diary is symbolically significant. The reference to the sprig of jasmine comes immediately after the reference to her 'sinful thoughts' and, like the February violets, is symbolic of her effort to repress her id, obliquely referred to in an ironic narratorial comment: "But though one may keep the wolves from one's door, they still howl out there in the darkness" (30). After 'having quelled the wolves', Ernestina smells the jasmine a gesture that may be interpreted as her temptation to yield to her inner sexual drives. As the jasmine is also a symbol of attachment, elegance and modesty, and in Japan it stands for the sort of amiability that attracts wealth, the flower becomes a metaphor of her relationship with Charles in the novel.

The symbolism of flowers in Fowles's fiction has been more often than not discarded by critics (who seem to find it unimportant). With the exception of the symbolism of the Rose and of the Lily, commented upon by several critics, other flowers in Fowles's novels are completely overlooked. The main reason for analysing the symbolism of flowers is its consistent and sophisticated use in all his six novels and the manner in which this particular kind of symbolism is interconnected with other layers of symbolism deriving from Celtic and Greek mythology and from Jungian psychology.

Including in his novels one of the most prolific sources of symbolism in the whole artistic world, Fowles places himself in a long literary tradition. Like Keats, who makes of Narcissus his own emblem, or like Shakespeare, who assigns many symbolic meanings to flowers in his writings (*Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*), to

name but a few, Fowles also plays with the symbolism of flowers to enrich the significance of his fiction and lures the reader into 'learning' their meaningful language.

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