



Symbolism of Flowers in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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How to cite this paper: Xie, J.W. (2021) Symbolism of Flowers in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 8: e7733.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1107733>

Received: July 5, 2021

Accepted: July 19, 2021

Published: July 22, 2021

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Abstract

Flowers symbolize women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is believed that flowers share similarities with women in many aspects. In this paper, symbolic meanings of three kinds of fresh flowers and dried flowers are discussed. The irises, tulips, dandelions and the dried flowers that represent the people Offred associated with and the change in their relationships as they blossom and wither. The color and the shape of each kind of flower are different, which resembles distinctions among characters to the protagonist in the novel.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Symbolism, Flowers, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

1. Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale, first published in 1985, is Margaret Atwood's sixth novel. Atwood is a fruitful and productive writer who has 17 novels, 10 short story collections and 14 poetry collections. Her novels cover a wide range of themes, from gender, identity, power of language, to politics, eco-system and so on. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel of multiple perspectives from different angles. It is about a woman named Offred, the name after her master Fred. She was an ordinary woman with a happy family. But one day, things have changed totally with the subversion of the government. She has been captured for giving birth to babies under the control of Gilead government. Her memory about the past has to be hid to comply with the new systems and environment. The oppression to wom-

en is obvious and severe, including wives, daughters, handmaids, Aunts, Marthas, and econowives.

As one of the most well-known dystopia novels of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* has aroused much attention since its first publication in 1985, for scholars all over the world have done researches about it from many different aspects. Some focus on feminism, and call this “a feminist 1984”, stating that “Atwood’s Gilead represents an extreme backlash against the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s”. [1] Some from the perspective of Eco-feminism, demonstrate that “planetary health and global ecological destruction are indeed feminist issues, because a healthy environment is prerequisite to many of their long-sought transformations.” [2] Some on politics of discourse, declare that “language is...more importantly an instrument for cultural and ideological subjugation of individuals.” [3] However, few pay attention to the flowers mentioned in this book, which is a non-ignorable element for understanding the text, since flowers are frequently mentioned and the profound meaning of these flowers should be explored for further understanding of the text. There are blue irises, framed in a watercolor picture, on the wall in Offred’s room, daffodils, irises, tulips, and bleeding hearts in Serena Joy’s garden, wallpapers full of forget-me-nots in the bathroom of Offred, dried flowers in the sitting room, and dandelions in Offred’s memory.

2. The Symbolism of Irises, Tulips, Dandelions and Dried Flower

As is known to us all, in a literature work, a plant, a flower, an accessory and maybe a cigarette has symbolic meanings other than the original meaning of the object itself. It always has symbolic meanings under certain circumstances. For example, in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, the sperm whale is not just a whale in the ocean, but the undefeated God, the mysterious Nature, or the original sin perused by Captain Ahab, according to scholars from different point of view. Another example is the famous letter A in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*; it represents Adultery or her lover Arthur Dimmesdale at first. With the seven years of repentance of Hester Prynne, the letter A on her breast symbolizes Ability, Admirable and Angel. Furthermore, it is natural that women are more sensitive to all kinds of flowers, and have been compared to flowers, among which roses are the most common. Flowers are frequently mentioned in the works of poets, writers and singers to show their feelings. Daffodils are dancing in William Wordsworth’s *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, roses are sweet in Robert Burns’s *A Red, Red Rose*, and the iris are talking about death in Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*.

According to Cirlot, “flower-symbolism is broadly characterized by two essentially different considerations: the flower in its essence, and the flower in its shape.” [4] That is to say, a flower has two symbolic meanings at least. Foster also argues that “...some symbols do have a relatively limited range of meanings,

but in general a symbol can't be reduced to standing for only one thing". [5] Therefore, it is necessary and worthwhile to explore the symbolic meanings of flowers in this novel.

In the following passages, the symbolic meanings of four kinds of flowers in *The Handmaid's Tale* are discussed. The first goes to the blue irises.

2.1. Irises

On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass, a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolour. Flowers are still allowed.

Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat's ears in the sun, indigo shadow. [6]

Blue iris is the flower of faith and hope. At the very beginning of the story, we are told the living condition of Offred is not satisfactory, with necessities only, a chair, a table, a lamp, a window and a bed, simple but safe. However, there are flowers on the wall. They are here before the appearance of Offred, maybe before the former Offred. It is predicted that they are here after Serena Joy moved in, because "she'd have to redirect her energies into something domestic". [6] Therefore, the blue iris is closely related to the hostess, Serena Joy. Maybe it is Serena who hangs the blue irises picture on the wall. The fact is that it doesn't matter who hangs the picture, what matters is the existence of flowers. In the house, the blue iris is Serena Joy, who holds belief of receiving a child by her handmaid. Her appearance is unpleasant to look, with eyebrows "plucked into thin arched lines", "eyes...hostile, nose...too small, her face...was large, her chin...clinched like a fist", [6] which forms a contradiction to the tall and beautiful irises, an irony to the color blue she wears. Owing to the diverse degrees of hatred to handmaid's, the color of blue varies from light to dark. The degree of color depends on the occasions whether the handmaids are "allies" or not. When Serena Joy offers her handmaid an opportunity to bear a child with Nick, their relationship is like a light blue iris. However, when Serena finds herself cheated by both her handmaid and husband, her hatred deepens and the color turns purple, and "the purple sequins fall, slithering down over the steps like snakeskin, glittering in the sunlight". [6]

Outside the house, the blue irises are the wives in Gilead, who are in blue, cool and arrogant just like the blue irises. Their relationships with the handmaids are complicated and changeable. On the one hand, they despise handmaids, and call their handmaids "little whores, all of them" or "slut(s)". [6] It is a suffering and humiliation for the wives to be presented at the ceremony. They have been deprived of the right to fight against the patriarchy oppression; therefore, they have the chance to control their handmaids, a kind of women oppression against women. On the other hand, the wives and handmaids are allies, for they share the same goal and are holding the faith and belief to receive a child in the devas-

tated state of reproduction. They know the chances are slim, but they still believe and hope for the desired outcome. When they realize their hope is fading, they would figure out ways to achieve their goals, which means to get a child by cheating on their husbands, though they know it is dangerous and risky to break the laws of Gilead.

2.2. Tulips

...the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out colour. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there. [6]

Tulips are handmaids, wounds, and blood. In the fiction, the tulips are parallels to the handmaids, for they are both covered in red, fertile, but cannot last long. Before her arrival in the Fred's house, Offred has been cut off the contact with her families and deprived of the power and rights once had in the world before Gilead. As time went by, she gradually gets used to the life of Gilead and faintly remembers the life before, so she calls it a kind of heal. After the arrival of Offred in Fred's house, the tulips in Serena's garden are depicted, almost at the same time with the arrival of her. What is worth noting is that the "Cup" of a tulip is a metaphor of the most important physical organ of a handmaid, in the eyes of Gilead governors, the womb, which shares the same shape as a tulip.

Subsequently, "the tulips...are redder than ever, opening, no longer winecups but chalices" [6] suggest the change of the condition. She has to open her "winecup", like a tulip, wider than before because she has to "subject to the breeding policy of their gardener" [7] and wait "to be filled...to have her womb filled with a child". [8] However, "they are, after all, empty", indicating the status of Offred, whose womb is empty without a baby. The consequence is that, once they are out of season, like the tulips, "shedding their petals one by one, like teeth", [6] they will be "thrown out like shards" [6] and "snipped off with a pair of shears" [6]. She came to know that "when their open fertility ceases, so will their existence". [9] When the color fades, they are no longer red and will be sent to another house or a lower-class workplace to be labors or econowives. From the above-mentioned two aspects of connections between tulips and handmaids, the color and the shape, it can be concluded that Atwood compares tulips with handmaids, since they share the similar situation in the novel.

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. [6]

In addition, tulips are for wounds, for both men and women under the reign of Gilead. According to Hooker, "the flower quite often signifies a wound, on the

bodies of men as well as women” [10] The statement can be traced from the excerpt above since bodies are hanging on the wall and bleed enormously, just like the color of the tulips. From this point of view, the wounds are on the corpses only, and only the dead are equipped with them. However, the wounds are not just on the body, but, more importantly, on the mental or emotional aspects of the livings. “The tulip phonetically sounds the same as two lips”, [8] suggesting that the flower is not only the symbol of Offred herself, but all the innocent victims of the Gilead tyranny, both men and women. The Gilead government tries to control everything within the country by force or slaughter, an effective way of governing people from the governors’ view. The consequence is that everybody hurts, some on the flesh, some on the mind. Women have been deprived of the right to speak, vote, work and so on, even the upper-class wives. The Commanders, the least law-breakers, find their lives tedious and break the rules the most frequently, let alone the doctors, merchants and soldiers. There are invisible wounds of almost everybody, which suggest the absurdity of the system and the sufferings of the ordinary people.

Lastly, tulips are also for blood owing to their similarity in color. Some scholars believe that the red is of positive meanings, “the red of a smile and that of tulips...suggest a type of sensual pleasure; both convey positive connotations”. [7] In fact, the color red has been connected to negative meanings, such as blood, in most cases in the eyes of westerners. Tulip refers to the bloody throne of Gilead, who won the power by bloody slaughters of innocent people. The victims have been tortured, killed, and hanged on the wall to show a warning sign to the livings, for whom disobeys the rules or goes against the government will be deprived of their lives. Besides, the reason why the red “smiles” can be understood as “Offred’s inability to kill herself” [8] and the hanged man’s derisive laugh at Offred. Owing to the extreme control of the government, handmaids are unable to commit suicide anywhere, especially in their rooms. All the hidden danger has been removed, such as ceiling lamp, hooks, strings, glass and so on. Under this circumstance, Offred is sympathetic with herself who’s live is beyond her control. However, the tulips are of short blossom season, which suggest that the government will finally be eliminated speedily like a “blitzkrieg” due to its bloody ruling and extreme oppression on people.

2.3. Dandelions

Not a dandelion in sight here, the lawns are picked clean. I long for one, just one, rubbishy and insolently random and hard to get rid of and perennially yellow as the sun. Cheerful and plebian, shining for all like. [6]

The color yellow is totally different from blue and red, but is essential for composing the three-primary colors, just like the flower dandelion is an essential part in Offred’s life. The dandelion is “shining” because it symbolizes the daughter of Offred. From the narrator’s description, a sense of nostalgia is shown. On the way to “prayvaganza”, Offred is out of mind of the gathering but recall the hap-

py moments with her daughter in the past, “rings, we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces...smelling them, she’d get pollen on her nose”. [6] Since the color of a dandelion is “yellow as the sun”, it certainly brings warmth and happiness, just like the birth of her daughter brings happiness to her family. She is “a sparkler, a small wand of white fire”, [6] full of hope and energy. Unfortunately, when the flowers turn into “tiny parachutes”, they will be blown away and nowhere to find. Her daughter, like a “tiny parachute”, has been robbed from her hand by the governors of Gilead. She misses her so much that she “long(s) for one, just one” [6] sight of her daughter again to make sure she’s alive, which would make her image “hard to get rid of”.

Fortunately, what she longs for turns into reality, and she says “there is a dandelion, right in front of me, the color of egg yolk” [6] when she is attending “salvaging”. The dandelion here has two explanations. One is that the dandelion is still the dandelion before, since she has seen the picture of her daughter, “so tall and changed. Smiling a little now...”, and she is sure her girl is alive. Another interpretation is that it is a sign of her pregnancy, maybe she is going to have another baby, which is of great significance to her. It can be inferred from her conversation with Nick, “I put his hand on my belly. It’s happened...I feel it has.” [6] The color of this dandelion also is a hint that she maybe pregnant, for the color is “egg yolk”, unlike the one before, “yellow as sun”.

2.4. Dried Flowers

The dried flowers are mentioned at least four times, mostly when they are in the sitting room, and once in the garden. The dried flowers are regarded as a kind of decoration “on either end of the mantelpiece” [6], forming a contrast with “a vase of real daffodils on the polished marquetry end table” [6]. The dried flower represents the past while the daffodils present.

Later, Offred tells us that “I would like to steal something from the room...a dried flower...” [6], she explains that stealing things “would make me feel that I have power”. In fact, the dried flower is exactly the rights and power she had before Gilead. She wants to acquire it now, while waiting for the ceremony, but she knows it is “an illusion, and too risky” [6]. She has no rights to keep a dried flower, let alone other rights.

Another explanation of the dried flower is that it symbolizes love. In Offred’s view, “The stains on the mattress. Like dried flower petals.” [6] is old love. But when she meets Nick for the first time in the darkness, “in Serena’s parlour, with the dried flowers”, [6] the dried flower is mentioned again, which demonstrates their relationship is destined to end without good results. The dried flower witnesses the development of their relationship. However, their love begins with “dried” decorations, and they can only meet in private or expressing their love by looking at the eyes of each other. The love is doomed to be a secret without the recognition of others, more importantly, it is closely related to the future of them. What’s more, dried flowers can no longer be colorful and fresh, but can be

preserved much longer than fresh flowers. It reveals that the love lasts short but leaves a long-term effect on them.

3. Conclusion

The symbolism of flowers is an essential part for understanding the characters and plots of the novel. Different flowers are written at different scenario, and one flower appears in different chapters due to the change of seasons and situations. With the description of flowers, readers find that the character and scenario are much more colorful and vivid in their imagination. The flowers present colors to the stifling environment under the regime of Gilead, where women are deprived of their rights of free speaking, making decisions, freedom of religious belief, personal liberty and dignity and other basic rights. It is hopeful to see flowers blossom and wither, although their lives last only for one season at most, they lived. They are an encouragement for Offred to live in the reduced circumstances, and a reminder of her to keep living, that's why she emphasizes "I am alive, I live, I breathe". [6] Flowers are needed in literature works, as well as in actual lives.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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