A Forgotten Language

Reece Phillips

Faculty Mentor: Patricia Marchesi, PhD
Humanities, English

Flowers—roses, lilies, sunflowers, azaleas—are one of nature's most beloved creations. From the time we are young, we are enthralled by their beauty. Often would little girls pluck dandelion flowers from the dirt and, smiling a missing-tooth smile, present the bright yellow and white tufted bundle they'd gathered to their teachers. As for myself, once I discovered a cicada's shell—still clinging to one of the playground's many oak trees—and frightened my second-grade teacher with the exoskeleton. But I digress. What the little girls who so diligently picked flowers from the playground hadn't known was the symbolism of the dandelion: happiness. The downy tuft of a flower can flourish anywhere, in the smallest handful of soil, in cracks in the sidewalk. It is symbolic of joy and determination—quite fitting that little girls would gift bundles of the flower to their mothers and teachers. Every flower tells a story, but their language is one that is foreign to us, lost to the passage of time. But it is a language we should not forget, for the beauty and intricacy of floriography speaks a language we should be desirous of.

According to Jayne Alcock, the language of flowers came into existence in Ottoman Turkey, in the court of Constantinople. Thanks to Mary Wortley Montagu and Aubry de La Mottraye, floriography's roots flourished throughout Europe amidst the Victorian era. And by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, Elizabeth Wirt, and Dorothea Dix, the language of flowers had become the second language to numerous men and women within America ("Language of flowers"). Such a beautiful language, isn't it? Wild daisies symbolize innocence, childhood days of picking wildflowers from fields in the summer heat of July. The forget-me-not is symbolic of true love and remembrance, nostalgic for a loved one lost (Allende). The scent of gardenias, light and sweet, reminds me of my great-grandmother, how she wore the sweetest of gardenia perfumes—a symbol of purity and gentleness. Meanwhile, I have always loved hyacinths. The scent is not quite as strong as the scent of the gardenia flower, and the flower, heavy with blossoms, often topples over itself, but again and again I find myself drawn to the hyacinth's beautiful blooms, the small, silent blossoms a tower of perfect beauty. Blue hyacinths symbolize constancy and sincerity. White hyacinths suggest tenderness, yellow, jealousy. Bloomed from the blood of Hyákinthos, perhaps it, too, symbolizes humanity.

The way in which flowers are presented is a crucial detail of the flowery language. If answering "yes," the flowers would be accepted with the right hand; if answering "no," the flowers would be accepted with the left hand. Similarly, if the flowers were held upside down, they conveyed the inverse of the traditional message. If a woman was gifted a bouquet of red roses but returned it to her suitor with the head of the roses pointing downward, it signified refusal and nonreciprocity ("Floriography: The Secret Language of Victorian Florals"). The rejection was final. Flowers and plants could symbolize averse feelings, as well, such as the "bitterness" of the aloe plant. If she feels strongly enough, a woman may "gift" her unwanted suitor a yellow carnation to signify her disdain for him. The thought amuses me greatly, but it is a gentle rejection, the beauty of flowers to soothe the hurt of refusal.

The way in which flowers are presented is important, as is the manner in which the flowers are worn. The nearer the flowers to the woman's heart, the more accessible to love she is (Allende). The tradition of the corsage is still practiced to this day—most notably seen at school formals—however, the flowers are now often worn around the woman's wrist to symbolize consideration and generosity. The ribbon added to the flower arrangement, too, is an important detail. If the ribbon is tied to the left, the symbolism of the flower has to do with the giver. If the ribbon is tied to the right, the symbolism is regarding the recipient (O'Connor). Such a detail reminds me of the tying of a kimono; the left side of a kimono is always tied over the right side. The only exception is when the deceased is dressed for his or her funeral, where the right side of the kimono is tied over the left. To wear a kimono with the right side tied over the left is considered to be bad luck in Japanese culture. The two details—the tying of a ribbon to a flower arrangement, the tying of a traditional kimono—are complex, but I believe that there is beauty to be found in intricacy.

Blooms of improbable beauty are still gifted to this very day: to mothers for Mother's Day, to lovers for Valentine's Day—perhaps even to yourself, for the fact that you simply could not resist the delicate beauty of the local grocery store's orchids, the enthusiasm of the orange, the elegance of the white. We never truly lose our childhood awe for all things beautiful, the desire to run into a field of wildflowers and *pick, pick, pick* the tufty dandelions, the yellow daffodils and daylilies, the white daisies, and the orange

butterfly weeds to your heart's content. Flowers are Mother Nature's gift to her children of humanity, her sweet, unspoken words of adoration. Accept her gift, and one day return the favor to her by planting violets of loyalty and hydrangeas of gratitude.

It is unfortunate that the language of flowers is all but gone, for it is a beautiful language. Gone but not forgotten. The flowers—the roses, the sunflowers, the daffodils and daisies, all of the wildflowers—sing their language, quiet and poignant. Listen to their songs, again and again. Learn to speak their language. Open the door to your heart. Pick dandelions and wild daisies and give them—their innocent joy, downy tufts and white petals—freely. No more words of insult and offense, no more hatred and cruelty—we must speak like the flowers: fine and delicate, always.

Works Cited

"Language of flowers." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Apr. 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_of_flowers

Hogan, Linda. Peterson, Brenda. *The Sweet Breathing of Plants*, North Point Press, 2001.

"Hyacinth – the flower of grief and mourning?" *Flower Meanings*, 04 Dec. 2019. https://flower-meanings.com/hyacinth-meaning/

"Floriography: The Secret Language of Victorian Florals." *Invaluable*, 12 Nov. 2019. https://www.invaluable.com /blog/floriography/

O'Connor, Shannon. "How Flowers Were Once Used To Deliver Messages." *Petal Talk*, 29 Dec. 2016. https://www.1800flowers.com/blog/flower-facts/meaning-of-victorian-flower-messages/