

PLANT NAMES AS THE INTEGRAL PART OF LINGUISTIC PICTURE OF THE WORLD IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE

Latipjonova Malikakhon Odiljon qizi

The second year post-graduate student
at Andijan state institute of foreign languages
e-mail: akilam96@mail.ru

Annotation: This article gives specific information about symbolic power of plants and their secret language, as well as Victorian-Era-Etiquette.

Key words: symbolism, Victorian era, floriography, secret messages, acasia tree, linden, apple thorn, apple blossom, apple, almond, hazel tree, matrimony, mulberry tree, orange tree, pine tree, laurel tree, elm, magnolia, cedar tree, larch, palm tree, blackthorn tree, beech tree, cypress, pomegranate, hawthorne, ogwood, oak, sycamore, juniper, laburnum, dogwood, weeping willow, olive branches, tea, coca, pear tree, carnation, rose, beech tree, with-hazel, dogwood, exotic flora, lily-of-the-valley, William, hyacinth, ivy.

The symbolic power of a beautiful flower or majestic tree has been utilized for hundreds of years to communicate beyond words. In the Victorian era of England (late 1800s), a kind of language using plants, trees, and flowers called “floriography” was particularly popular. At that time, floriography was an important aspect of genteel life, influencing everything from what people wore to how they decorated their homes. Scents, bouquets, and ornaments were carefully selected to express the intended meaning and were a subtle way of passing secret messages to anyone paying attention. It became even more complicated when certain plants had two or more meanings—just as some words in spoken languages do. Along with low-growing flowers and herbs, various trees and tree blossoms were very much a part of this delicate language’s vocabulary.

A secret language begs the imagination for tales of love, and the Victorians use of tree symbolism does not disappoint. Yellow blooms from acacia trees indicated *chaste love*, whereas the linden referred to the passion of *conjugal love*. Apple blossoms signified a definite *preference*, while the apple thorn signified *deceitful charm*. The less than admirable side of relationships was portrayed by the apple (*temptation*) and the almond (*indiscretion/stupidity*). But when things went awry, the hazel tree meant *reconciliation*. The culmination of (at least some) love stories was the American linden, standing in for *matrimony*. Spindle and mulberry trees spoke of the intensity of one’s love, saying, respectively, “*your charms are engraved upon my heart*” and “*I shall not survive you.*”

Some trees were high praise indeed. Pink and white acacia flowers awarded a person with elegance, the birch gentleness, and the orange tree generosity, kindness and fruitfulness. Pine trees aimed even higher, labeling “perfection in another person.” Grandeur was extolled by the ash tree and the bay and the laurel tree declared glory. The American elm displayed one’s patriotism, whilst the elder tree marked one’s zealousness. The larch was one’s audacity; the elm and the magnolia were one’s dignity. The sycamore represented one of man’s greatest motivators—curiosity. Cedar trees usually denoted strength. Many celebrated courage and heroism, such as oak leaves, the poplar, black poplar, and the evergreen thorn. The palm tree touted victory over adversity, and the blackthorn tree symbolized the defiance of life’s difficulties. Naturally, trees were perfect symbols for all kinds of strong virtues.

Prosperity grew with the beech tree. The cedar of Lebanon was *incorruptible*. The hawthorne was the tree of *hope*, though some thought it was bad luck to bring it across your threshold into your home. Juniper was meant to serve as a sign of *protection*. Mighty oak trees gave an air of *ancient wisdom* and *hospitality*. The olive tree, as many could guess, meant *peace*. The graceful willow meant *freedom*. The dogwood implied *durability*. Trees, being quite literally upright and solid, always easily conjured up ideals and principles.

The dark side of things was no less represented. Witch-hazel was often planted at the gates of cemeteries as a symbol of *sorrow*, though it also traditionally meant, “a spell had been cast.” As for grieving, it was the cypress that meant *death, mourning and despair*, with the aspen following up with a simple call of *lamentation*. In kind, the laburnum and the weeping willow portrayed the deep feeling of being *forsaken*. Yet, hope also grew here, with the pear tree representing *comfort*. As silent sentinels of time, it makes poetic sense that trees would be part of the language surrounding pain.

The above description barely scratches the surface of all that can be found in a floriography dictionary. Today, most of the Western world is reduced to a more limited grasp of the “language of flowers,” such as red roses for love and olive branches for peace. Though many of the nuances of this tradition have fallen by the wayside in this generation, this natural language has obvious appeal. To harness nature to speak for you is a powerful choice—for, arguably, nature speaks the sweetest, the loudest and the purest.

By the end of the century, trade and exploration had ensured that Britain was a nation that positively respired exotic flora, as an abundance of recently discovered plant products circulated through the Empire: spices and chocolate filled its pantries, rubber lined its industries and quinine coursed the veins of imperial commanders in malarial climes. At the same time that these strange new plants were becoming household names, the influx of botanical wonders also heightened interest for even greater vegetable wonders. Indeed, credulity and intrigue had risen to such a pitch that

tales of fantastical flora, which at another time would seem miraculous or beyond belief, were increasingly being seen as not only possible, but imminently attainable by the same channels that brought the world tea, orchids and coca.

Learning the special symbolism of flowers became a popular pastime during the 1800s. Nearly all Victorian homes had, alongside the Bible, guidebooks for deciphering the “language,” although definitions shifted depending on the source

Following the protocol of Victorian-era etiquette, flowers were primarily used to deliver messages that could not be spoken aloud. In a sort of silent dialogue, flowers could be used to answer “yes” or “no” questions. A “yes” answer came in the form of flowers handed over with the right hand; if the left hand was used, the answer was “no.” Plants could also express aversive feelings, such as the “conceit” of pomegranate or the “bitterness” of aloe. Similarly, if given a rose declaring “devotion” or an apple blossom showing “preference,” one might return to the suitor a yellow carnation to express “disdain.”

One tradition is to select the flowers of a wedding bouquet based on plant symbolism. As an example, look to the royal flower bouquet in the wedding of Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, to Kate Middleton (now Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge). Her all-white bouquet had lily-of-the-valley (representing trustworthiness, purity), sweet William (gallantry), hyacinth (loveliness), myrtle (love in marriage), and ivy (continuity). Altogether, these flowers’ meanings reveal the hope of a loving, everlasting marriage.

The groom, too, wears a flower that appears in the bridal bouquet in his buttonhole. This stems from the medieval tradition of wearing his Lady’s colors, as a declaration of his love. One fun modern idea is to give each bridesmaid a bouquet featuring a signature flower whose meaning suits her personality.

There is a language, little known, Lovers claim it as their own. Its symbols smile upon the land, Wrought by nature’s wondrous hand; And in their silent beauty speak, Of life and joy, to those who seek For Love Divine and sunny hours In the language of the flowers. (–The Language of Flowers, London, 1875)

On "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" (1893), Sherlock Holmes bends Watson's ear with an account of a stakeout in rhododendron bush. Standing in the plant's dark shadow, he observes the nighttime traffic to and from a house from which a valuable document has been stolen. Although it seems only tangentially related to the plot, this convenient rhododendron may not be a random detail. An import to Britain, the plant, which spreads rapidly, also has toxic qualities that make it a danger to native species. It, too, is an interloper. The result is a horticultural *mis-en-abîme*: a detective on the trail of an interloper himself becomes an interloper who, in turn, uses a third interloper, the rhododendron, to avoid detection. If Elizabeth Hope Chang's provocative *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth*

Century (2019) teaches anything, it is that these horticulturally-informed moments permeate mid-Victorian literature, giving botanical form to anxieties roused by the expansion of Britain's empire.

References:

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