



The Melancholic Language of Flowers in Sara Teasdale and Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems

Momen Hussein Ismael Assistant Professor Shaymaa Zuhair Al-Wattar
College of Arts/ University of Mosul

Abstract

This research paper delves into the melancholic use of the language of flowers in poetry. It highlights the different ways poets utilize this language to express their feelings and emotions. The paper highlights the sad aspect that is associated with flowers and the language they hold, contributing to a deeper understanding of the influential role of the language of flowers in poetry. It further shows the psychological and emotional backgrounds of the poets and how far flowers contribute to their poetic expression of their melancholic state. Through the analysis of Sara Teasdale's "Dooryard Roses" and Sylvia Plath's "Poppies in July" the research paper highlights the sorrowful aspect of flowers and the language imbued with them. It concludes that flowers possess a dual language that is profoundly reflective of the poets' feelings, emotional and psychological state, becoming an innate part of their sadness and suffer.

Email:

momen.23arp104@student.uomosul.edu.iq
shaymaa_zuhair@uomosuledu.iq

Published: 1- 12-2025

Keywords: Floral language,
Melancholy, Emotional turmoil

هذه مقالة وصول مفتوح بموجب ترخيص
CC BY 4.0

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

For centuries, the rich symbolic and multi-layered language of flowers enchanted various writers and poets. It encompasses the profound bond between Man and the symbolic use of flowers. Such profound enchantment between the two led to the use of flower language in the literary works of sundry great writers and poets; hence different floral dictionaries regarding flowers and their emblematic language appeared.

The language of flowers is a rich language through which poets communicate myriad messages, feelings and emotions through the symbolic use of different flowers. While flowers often symbolise beauty, love, and positive emotions, they in fact have another usage that is directly influenced by the poets' emotions and psychological state. Their function alters from being a representation of positive feelings into emblems of negative ones as they turn to symbolise the poet's grief, loss as well as her/ his emotional turmoil. Moreover, poets harness the symbolic language of flowers to articulate their feelings by giving several descriptions to flowers and personifying them as if they are constituting a major part of their misery. By so doing, they mirror their emotional state that grapples with grief and despair through the multi-layered language of flowers.

That highlights the profound connection between flowers and emotions. This paper undertakes a structured literary analysis of floral symbolism as a melancholic, expressive devise in Sara Teasdale's "*Dooryard Roses*" (1911) and Sylvia Plath's "*Poppies in July*" (1981). The selected poems clearly exemplify the interconnectedness of floral imagery and the poet's sorrowful expression. The rose in Teasdale's "*Dooryard Roses*" (1911) and poppies in Plath's "*Poppies in July*" (1981) are prioritised as primary symbols for their stark ability in conveying the poets' agony, grief, sadness and their turmoil, showcasing the significance of flowers not as peripheral symbols, but as an ingrained part of their poetic production. They presented those flowers as agonised utterances imbued with a symbolic lexicon of melancholy. This paper offers a comparative and interdisciplinary analysis that enriches readers' understanding of how floral imagery functions as a multifaceted literary device.

2. The Origins of the Language of Flowers

Floriography, also perceived as the language of flowers, is a sort of symbolic communication that portrays flowers alongside the different meanings, colours and hues linked with them to articulate and reflect numerous emotions, ideas and meanings. In other words, floriography is involves a symbolic language that is communicated and conveyed via flowers. Flowers hold myriad messages and meanings based on the colour, scent and kind of the flower. Such sort of communication and language that is imbued with flowers helps poets to propagate their emotions and ideas freely without the need of explicit words. According to Henry Gardiner's, an English chemist, author and editor, **Flowers; Their Moral, Language and Poetry** (1845) the language of flowers is a delicate, ancient and a natural means of communicating feelings where hopes, grief, joy, happiness and every other emotion Man possess are articulated through flowers (46). Poets, in general, incorporate floral imagery within their works in a way that allow them to carve layers of meaning upon their poems. Accordingly, they alter the static role of flowers, being mere symbols of nature, into a dynamic one, turning them into a vehicle to communicate multi-layered and universal language.

The origins of the language of flowers is traced back to the Turk's harem practice of what is called *Sélam*, which is a sort of encrypted language that became popular in the fourteenth century among Turkish harems. It includes reciprocating messages, flowers and other objects like jewellerys and perfumes in addition to any other object that has floral prints among the harems and their suitors (Kirkby n.p.). In other words, it is an elaborate coded floral language utilized by harem women to communicate with their secret lovers and suitors. Besides, the recipient is responsible for decoding the desired message accompanies those objects due to the fact that those objects didn't have an inherent meaning by their own. The recipient was able to fulfil that task by finding words that rhyme with those flowers and objects.

Such form of communication becomes of a great importance and benefit for the harems at that that time as it preserved the effectiveness and secrecy of those messages in a time where women had lots of restrictions regarding their self-expression. Hence, the practice of *Sélam* provided and introduced another form of communicating language that is represented by replacing words with objects like flowers. Frederic Shoberl, an English author and translator, in his **The Language of Flowers with Illustrative Poetry: To Which are Now Added the Calendar of Flowers and the Dial of Flowers** (1835) indicates that "[w]ritten love-letters would often be inadequate to convey an idea of passionate feelings which are thus expressed through the medium of flowers" (13). That stratifies with the idea that non-verbal way of communication is

capable of capturing a rich tapestry of Man feelings and emotions more effectively than mere words. Floriography eased feelings and emotions expression process in an accepted manner at times where explicit expression of feelings such as love were restricted by the social norms imposed by the society. In other words, the language of flowers offered the means for individuals to freely communicate their affection, sympathy and other feelings.

Consequently, various floral dictionaries started to appear and the first Western floral dictionary, entitled **Le Langage des Fluers** (1819), permeated Western community which was composed by Madame Louise Cortambert, under the nickname Charlotte de Latour. That floral dictionary marked the spur of many other floral dictionaries spread throughout Europe regarding the language of flowers (Kirkby n.p). The followed dictionaries largely consisted of an alphabetical catalogue of different flowers and the connotations accompanying them, in addition to their sources such as mythology and folklore.

The language of flower reached its zenith in the Victorian age in which “Victorian era was the great age of flower garden and of all things horticultural, and so it is not surprising that flower symbolism became elaborate at this time” (Kirkby n.p.). In the Victorian era, interest in flowers, and botany in general, witnessed a significant increase and attracted the attention of numerous people, which aided the popularity of the language of flowers among people who celebrated the symbolic language that flowers possess.

Moreover, the majority of houses at that time had floral guidebooks which elucidate the different symbolic uses of flowers. Kate Greenway, a renowned English writer celebrated for her illustrations of floral books, in her **Language of Flowers** (1884) daisies are emblematic of innocence, while dahlias are linked with instability whereas daffodils are used to express regards (15). As a result, the language of flowers became a crucial part of literature, specifically poetry, which attracted various poets to incorporate it within their works, extending the beauty and influence of such language into modern times. They further transformed flowers to be testaments of poets’ limitless ambition to find creativity and meaning in flowers and their language.

3. The Interplay of Flowers and Emotions

Flowers act as poignant symbols of nature that bond literature, psychology and nature altogether. Carrying inherent beauty, symbolism and various messages make them an ideal representation of such themes like resilience, joy, renewal and even sorrow and death. In other words, they serve as an ideal resemblance of Man’s positive and negative emotions. Authors portrays flowers differently in which “a flower is not a flower alone; a thousand thoughts invest it” (Kirkby n.p.). That highlights the interconnectedness of

authors' emotions and the language of flowers. The interplay of flowers and emotions underscore the deep and influential impact of flowers upon human emotions, combining the concrete flowers with the abstract emotional and psychological impact they possess.

Furthermore, flowers offer a means for poets to adapt with the environment and reality they live in through their rich symbolism. The Black-eyed Susans are known for their harsh environments endurance. Accordingly, they are portrayed by poets as symbols of strength and resilience reflecting positive feelings such as delight which is traced back to the flower's appealing shape and sight (Jones).

A major part of the language of flowers lies in the emotions flowers convey. It enables poets to communicate various emotions throughout the incorporation of different flowers. Numerous flowers are associated with positive emotions like happiness and hope. For instance, lilies symbolise purity and innocence and they evoke a sense of happiness and joy (Greenway 27). John Ingram, an English biographer and editor, claims in his **Flora Symbolica or the Language and Sentiments of Flowers** (1986) that Jasmine is associated with abundant of positive meanings and emotions. It is frequently connected with amiability (358), reflecting such emotions like love and affection. Psychologically speaking, flowers offer a sensory stimulation through their scents, colours and hues impact the psychological well-being, playing a significant role in emotional expression. For example, roses symbolise love and affection while sunflowers reflect feelings of joy and admiration. Such symbolic language allows poets to convey different emotions in the most delicate manner. In his theory of emotion, Antonio Damasio, a renowned Portuguese neurologist mostly celebrated for his fundamental works on emotions, decision-making and the neurobiology of human behaviour, describes emotions as a neural, unconscious and bodily reaction to a certain stimuli. He emphasises that creativity springs from the embodied emotional experiences (Bosse et al. 95). Poetry, and the language of flowers in particular, transforms the abstract emotional experiences into tangible and communicable ones, in which flowers operate not merely as decorative motifs but as signifiers saturated with emotional resonance. For instance a violet might whisper of modesty or grief, a poppy of sleep, ecstasy, or mourning.

Accordingly, poets translate inner, often ineffable, emotional experiences into images the reader can grasp, visualize, and even feel. Marigolds, for instance, are associated with pain (Ingram 7) which is ascribed the drooping head of the flower in the absence of light. As a result, it is imbued with negative symbolism and evokes a sense of melancholy. Moreover, they are connected with grief and loss (Miller 199). Many prominent poets like the ground-breaking American Sara Teasdale and Sylvia Plath utilize the delicate imagery of flowers negatively to evoke a sense of melancholy and endless suffer, reflecting their lives experiences and emotions.

4. Rose in Sara Teasdale's "Dooryard Roses"

Born in 1884, Sara Teasdale is one of the American landmark poets who won lots of prizes such as the Pulitzer Prize for the publication of her collection "Love Songs" in 1918 as well as the annual prize of the Poetry Society of America. Teasdale's lyrical poetry is characterized by its simplicity, clarity and her portrayal of classical forms. It encompasses various themes such as joy, love, nature, grief and even death. Despite her success as a poet, Teasdale constantly struggled with depression, anxiety and frail health throughout her life which affected her poetry to a large extent, intertwining it with a sense of melancholy and introspection. Furthermore, Teasdale in her childhood was highly coddled by her parents who restrained her freedom and did not allow her to engage with the social environment surrounding her until she was about thirty years old. Being the youngest child in her family, Teasdale parents excessively protected her from her surrounding as they always worried about her health.

They led her to believe that she is constantly sick, even if she was in a good health. This negatively influenced her psychological state as she grew older haunted by the idea of sickness, which she reflected it in her poetry. Teasdale feelings of isolation and turmoil increased after her divorce from her husband Ernst Filsinger in 1929. She ended her life by committing suicide in 1933 that is ascribed to the unstable psychological state she struggles with (AlAjmi n.p.).

Teasdale incorporates nature imagery, especially flowers, in a large number of her poems, utilizing them as a reflection of her torment and suffering. Among the foremost flowers she uses in her poetry is the rose. Roses, which are used frequently as symbols of love and passion (Ingram 23), are portrayed by her as emblems of her pain and melancholy. In other words, the usual positive and tranquil image of the rose is deconstructed by Teasdale into a symbol of grief and sorrow that accompanies her constantly. In her poem "Dooryard Roses" (1911), Sara Teasdale uses the roses to reflect complex emotions of pain, loss and the passage of time, saying:

I HAVE come the selfsame path

*To the selfsame door,
Burning as before.
While I watch them in the wind
Quick the hot tears start
Strange so frail a flame outlasts
Fire in the heart. (Teasdale lines 1-7)*

In the poem, Teasdale clearly states that her sense of melancholy increases as she observes the sight of the roses before her, arousing feelings of loss and pain that overcome her.

The “*Burning*” state of the roses is intertwined with the poet’s endless suffer. Moreover, the gloomy image of the roses is reflected through the unchanged tormented state of the poet. Teasdale invites readers to come into “*the selfsame path / To the selfsame door / Burning as before*” and interrogate the cyclical and inescapable nature of her inner turmoil. Rather than portraying a static image of agony and loss, she presented a dynamic picture revealed through the repetition of “*selfsame*” showcasing a recurring surge into despair, and exposing an unyielding continuity in Teasdale’s torment. The rose, usually linked with passion and love, is reconfigured by Teasdale as a dynamic symbol of her persisting suffer. On a grammatical level, the continuous “*Burning*” of the rose in the dooryard underscored by the present participle “*Burning as before*” functions as a critical commentary on the unremitting torment that seeped the poet, escalating the overall sorrowful tone of the poem.

The tormented state of the poet continues in the following stanza. The moment Teasdale observes the roses “*Quick and hot tears start*” and that roses ignite “*Fire in the heart*” of the poet. Accordingly, the rose is no longer a solely symbol of a delicate beauty but a burning witness of the endless grief of the poet. The rose left no space for the poet to relief her state and finds a sort of solace, continuously reminding her of the gloomy life she lives. Incorporating such floral imagery, the poet reflects her endless pain that burns her internally. Teasdale, by so doing, shifted the usual emblem of the rose into a resemblance of sorrow and pain, underscoring the negative impact it possess on the poet’s state.

Flowers and emotions are quite connected on a profound level since flowers act as a medium of expressing both positive and negative emotions, affecting the poet and reflecting his/her psychological state. The binary usage of flowers creates a rich medium through which poets enrich their poetic works and multiply their emotional impact.

5. Sylvia Plath's Melancholic Use of Flowers

Sylvia Plath, born in 1932, is one of the most renowned American poets of the twentieth century whose works are known for their intensity and emotional depth. Her works, especially her later works, reflect her attempts to catalogue despair, anxiety, inner turmoil and her obsession with death. Intensely confessional, Plath's poetry highlights her mental anguish, her turbulent marriage with the well-known English poet Ted Hughes, her unresolved problems with her family and her tormented vision of herself (Smitha 451-453).

Sylvia Plath frequently uses flowers in many of her works, in which flowers serve as powerful symbols to convey a wide range of emotions. Moreover, "[w]hether Plath wrote about nature or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the post war period" (Rees). Plath was able to convey the depth of her emotional struggles and the persistent sense of melancholy that permeate her works, throughout flowers. Consequently, flowers in her poetry act as potent symbols of her misery and trajectory life she lives, reflecting the enduring pain and her emotional suffering.

Among the foremost flowers Plath utilizes in her poetry are the poppies. Poppies that frequently symbolise consolation (Ward 300) are used by Plath as emblems pain, numbness and her emotional turmoil. That is evident in her "*Poppies in July*" (1981) where she describes poppies as:

Little poppies, little hell flames, Do you do no harm ?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.

I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you

Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, (Plath lines 1-5)

The poet metaphorizes poppies as "*little hell flames*" implying that the poppies' intense colour and appearance discomfort her and increase her agony as they come with flames from hell. She portrayed the poppies as a symbol of her emotional and psychological torment. The juxtaposed image of the diminutive "little" poppies and the violent "*hell flames*" encapsulates the poet's senses of fragility intertwined with endless pain and anguish. Plath deconstructed the resemblance of the poppies into pain and suffer. In light of Damasio's theory of emotion, the melancholic emotions aroused within the poet is traced back to a visual stimuli reflected via poppies which imprisoned her in suffer. The inability to touch anything and then getting nothing from the poppies "*exhausts*" the poet and reinforce her feelings of despair and disconnection

form everything around her despite the fiery appearance of the poppies. The suffering and pain of the poet continues as she observes the poppies. The unstable “*Flickering*” movement of the poppies, their “*wrinkly*” and “*red*” colour intensifies the poet’s suffer and sense of vulnerability. It symbolizes a torment that is both inescapable and isolating. The symbolic representation of the poppies in the poem facilitated the transmission of Plath’s emotions and state (Lakhadive 2). In an anguished and angry tone, Plath further apostrophizes the poppies saying: “*Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?*” (Plath line 10), she attempts to find a sort of relief in the bitterness of poppy’s “*capsules*”, a futile hope that the flowers’ narcotic associations might offer solace, yet in vain. In the following lines where she says “*If I could bleed, or sleep / If my mouth could marry a hurt like that*” (Plath lines 11-12) Plath effortlessly expresses her deep desire to commit suicide and escape the harsh reality she lives in as well as her deteriorated marital life.

This imagery underscores the depth of Plath’s suffering and her desperate attempts to find some comfort, and she used the floral imagery to reflect that. Reaching the end of the poem, Plath draws a contrast between the fiery image of the poppies and her own devastated emotional state “*But colourless. Colourless*” (Plath line 15). This refrain emphasizes a pervasive numbness and emptiness, suggesting that despite the external vibrancy of the poppies, the speaker remains emotionally void and disconnected. It emphasises the pervasive sense of emptiness and suffer she feels. She reached a point where everything in her life turned meaningless and “*colourless*”. Plath’s “*Poppies in July*” (1981) Plath’s “*Poppies in July*” transcends its traditional floral symbolism, using the flowers as a vehicle to explore themes of pain, alienation, and the inescapability of psychological torment, making the poem a poignant and unsettling meditation on human anguish.

6. Conclusion

Flowers, despite mostly portrayed positively by a large number of poets, have a negative portrayal and connotation. They are used as emblems of misery, torment and the inner turmoil the poet. Furthermore, they are profoundly connected with poet’s emotions and psychological state. Poets through the careful selection of flowers and floral imagery, is able to articulate and reflect various messages and emotional states showing various aspects of their life as well as enriching their poetic production. Both poets employ floral imagery as a means of confronting emotional fragmentation, with Teasdale's imagery evoking a tender yet persistent sorrow and Plath’s language thrusting the reader into the raw immediacy of mental disintegration. By analysing the melancholic

language in the motif of flowers, the study underscores the enduring capacity of nature's imagery to articulate complex human experiences.

Work Cited

- AlAjmi, Alanoud. Sara Teasdale's "There Will Come Soft Rains": How a Lyric Poet Inspired a Science Fiction Story. 2023. King Saud University, MA Thesis.
- Bosse, Tibor, Catholijn M. Jonker, and Jan Treur. "Formalisation of Damasio's Theory of Emotion, Feeling and Core Consciousness." *Consciousness and Cognition*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2008, *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2007.06.006>.
- Gardiner, Adams, Henry. *Flowers; Their Moral, Language and Poetry*. London, H.G Clarke and Co., 1845, p.46.
- Greenway, Kate. *Language of Flowers*. London, George Routledge and Sons, 1884.
- Ingram, John. *Flora Symbolica or the Language and Sentiments of Flowers*. London, Frederick Warner and Co., 1986.
- Ingram, John. *The Language of Flowers; Or Flora Symbolica Including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected*. London, Frederick Warne, 1887.
- Jones, Steven. "Black-Eyed Susan Spiritual Meaning: A Deeper Look into the Symbolism and Significance." *Hidden Significance*, 26 May 2024, <https://hiddensignificance.com/black-eyed-susan-spirituameaning/>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2025.
- Kirkby, Mandy. *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion*. New York, Ballantine Books, 2011.
- Lakhadive, M. Rajkumar. Symbolism – A Key Concept In Literature. *Pune Research Discovery*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2018, <http://puneresearch.com/media/data/issues/5bea3e8b27260.pdf>.
- Miller, Thomas. *The Poetical Language of Flower; or The Pilgrimage of Love*. New York, J.C. Riker, 1848.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Collected Poems*. Ted Hughes, editor. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.
- Rees, Margaret. *Memories of Sylvia Plath*, World Socialist Web Site, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/1998/05/hugh-m28.html>. Accessed 25 Jan. 2025.
- Shoberl, Frederic. *The Language of Flowers: With Illustrative Poetry, to Which Now First Added the Calendar of Flowers and the Dial of Flowers; Revised by the editor of "Forget Me Not"*, 3rd ed., London, Saunders and Otley, 1835.

- Smitha, K.M. The Literary Influence of Sylvia Plath on Contemporary Poetry. Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR), Vol. 9, No. 9, 2022, <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2209579.pdf>.
- Teasdale, Sara. Sara Teasdale Complete Poetical Works. United Kingdom, Delphi Classics, 2018.
- Ward, Bobby J. A Contemplation Upon Flowers: Garden of Plants in Myth and Literature. Timber Press Inc., 1990. |