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## FLORA IN EDMUND SPENSER'S POETRY

**Abstract:** In literature, plants and flowers often represent emotions, beauty and its symbolic meaning can take on new depths beyond the silky texture of the flower or its fragrance. The pain often accompanying love, found in the bloom's thorns, can express the dual nature of love and other expressions. As time passed, poets expressed their ideas via flora in various ways. This article focuses on how Edmund Spenser, the representative of the sixteenth century poetry used flora to describe people and their characters in his poems and analyses them carefully by giving some examples.

**Key words:** comparison, symbolic meanings, rose, lily, gillyflower, pinks, bellamoure, jasmine, apple, cherry.

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### Introduction

Flowers with their all beuty and sweet fragrance have been called "stars of the earth" and "alphabet of the angels". It is difficult to disagree to Mr. Howitts words that of all the minor creations of God, they seem to be most completely the effusion of his love of beauty, grace and joy<sup>1</sup>. For many centuries plants, specifically flowers have charmed almost all human not speaking about delicate taste of poets. In literature, the colour, number, placement and cut of the flower all have an influence upon its intended meaning. They became increasingly entwined with nature, love, human character, even legends and religious symbolism. In poetry they referred to flowers which carried certain meaning in certain context depending on culture, history, geographical position of the place and many other factors. One of the prominent representatives of the 16<sup>th</sup> century English literature William Spenser liked to use plants, especially flowers in his poems. We can come up with several books written by Frances S. Osgood, John Ingram and F.H.Halme which are devoted to the use of flowers

and flower symbolisms in poetry<sup>2</sup> of a lot of different poets' works. In this article we will investigate how Edmund Spenser utilized flowers to describe human physical appearance and feelings. Analysis of some sonnets, and examples from "Epithalamion", "The Faerie Queen" and other poems are brought.

During the Early modern English period Edmund Spenser was known to have a keen interest in flowers and loved to use them within his poems. When it is spoken about his "Amoretti" sonnets, most consider that it came into existence as a result of his mature love towards Elizabeth Boyle whom he married. However William C. Johnson finds it to be the last in the list and insists that as Dante and Petrarch Edmund Spenser's sonnets were means of self recognition. His passion and writing ability deliberately increases simultaneously with his love<sup>3</sup>. Peculiar feature of Spenser's is that it doesn't follow sorrows of courtly love where the poet cannot be together with his lover. In the poet's case it is different as he achieves his love's affection. While reading his sonnets we can observe that he puts his beloved not

<sup>1</sup> Fransec S. Osgood. (1858). Poetry of flowers. New York: Derby and Jackson, 19

<sup>2</sup> Fransec S. Osgood. (1858). Poetry of flowers. New York: Derby and Jackson, 336; Ingram J. Flora Symbolica or the language and Sentiment of Flowers. London: Frederick Warne and Co, 460;

Hulme F.E. (1877). Bards and Blossoms or the Poetry, History and Associations of Flowers. London: Marcus Ward, 262

<sup>3</sup> William C.J., Spenser's Amoretti: Analogies of Love. London and Taronta: Associated University Press-1990, 281

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only prior himself but also prior of nature's beauties, flowers. Sonnet 64 of the Amoretti is about the desire he feels about his lover, when he begins to kiss her, he describes the aromas coming from different parts of her body.

Coming to kiss her lips, (such grace I found)  
 Me seemed I smelt a garden of sweet flowers:  
 Her lips did smell like unto Gillyflowers<sup>4</sup>,

As we know carnations and "gillyflowers" belong to the same species. Being considered as one of the most loved flowers for many centuries, they are believed to be brought by the Romans in 55 B.C. Though there are many different spellings of the flower (Chaucer called it "gylofre", in France it was called "girofle"), there is a great probability that all of them are rooted from Latin "Caryophyllus" which means "cloves"<sup>5</sup>. Because of its sharp pungent fragrance, it was also called "clove-gillyflower" and used to make delicious wine which resulted earning the name "sops in wine"<sup>6</sup>. Describing his beloved to the reader, he gave intensification of her lips' feature and Gillyflowers which is built on common property as intoxicating smell. The reason why the poet chooses gillyflowers to emphasize lips' aroma is its rich pungent smell as well as the symbolic meaning attached to the flower. This flower is associated with the themes of "bliss" and "everlasting love". Suzie Canale claims that this flower can also stand for accepting and enjoying the life you have been given, endless purity, beauty and adoration<sup>7</sup>. As we have already mentioned above Spenser dedicated his sonnets to Elizabeth Boyle and succeeded in gaining her love which was different from other poets' sonnets where they spoke about unachievable affection. Given in the first line when he started to kiss her, aroma of her lips made him feel bliss and he adored her beauty enjoying the gift or life he was given.

Her ruddy cheekes, like unto Roses red:

In the line above Spenser compares his beloved cheeks to roses. Of two concepts brought together in simile – one characterized (cheeks), and the other characterizing (roses red)—the feature intensified is more inherent in the second one. It is clear that Spenser wants to express how her cheeks were delicately red as roses. Being the queen of flowers rose has always had a special place in English culture and literature. One can observe that in the sixteenth

century English literature poets often compared roses to human lips, cheeks, and used them to suggest to blush of shame or anger. Shakespeare himself mentions them at least seventy times in his plays and sonnets<sup>8</sup>.

Her snowy brows like budded Bellamoures

In this line Bellamoures is a flower which is named after one of Spenser's own characters in the Faerie Queen. While Collins dictionary gives the definition "obsolete, a beloved person", some sources say that it is the name of a flower which is unknown. The word has originated from French word and signifies "fair love". In order to understand intensification of meaning between brows and budded Bellamour, we looked up the meaning of the word "bud" in Merriam-Webster dictionary where it is defined as to produce buds, an incompletely opened flower. From this one can understand that Spenser is comparing his sweetheart's brows to budded Bellamoure and their denoting thin and delicate shape.

Her lovely eyes like Pinks but newly spread,

Pinks are one type of carnation but small in size. They have earned this name due to the petal edges looking as if they have been "cut with pinking shears"<sup>9</sup>. Spenser compares lady's eyes not just to the Pinks but newly spread. He might want to denote the beauty of her eyes which matured in blossom or freshness as well as rich fragrance. Moreover, as they symbolize pride beauty and ardent love, he one more time emphasizes his beloved features.

Her goodly bosom like a Strawberry bed,

In the next line 'goodly bosom' like strawberries which stands for perfection as they are regarded as having "perfume with the bud of the sweetest flowers, delights the eye, the taste and the smell"<sup>10</sup>. Spenser characterizes her bosom in a quite a new and unexpected light, because the poet imposes strawberry's feature as shape and smell on it. It is said that strawberry family is very close to rose's family. Thus the comparison helps to capture the senses with its sweet aroma and provokes the thoughts of romantic feelings.

Her neck like to a bunch of Collambynes

Belonging to buttercup family Columbine's leaves have a characteristic arrow base that flares out to scalloped edges. In fact, this flower represent

<sup>4</sup> www.genious.com

<sup>5</sup> Kerr, J. Shakespeare's flowers. Johnson's books Press-1997. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/[Jessica\_Kerr]\_Shakespeare's\_Flowers(BookFi)%20(1).epub

<sup>6</sup> Gillyflowers were used for making a fine wine for their rich scent and that's why called "sops in wine". It can be observed in "The Lay to Eliza" by Edmund Spenser where he writes: "Bring hether Pincke and Purple Cullambine, With Gelliflowres:..... Bring Coronation, and Sops in wine, Worne of Paramoures."

<sup>7</sup> Canale S.(2017). The Symbolic meaning of the Gillyflower. Retrieved from <http://blog.exoticflowers.com/blog-0/the-symbolic-meaning-of-the-gillyflower>

<sup>8</sup> Kerr, J.(1997). Shakespeare's flowers. Johnson's books Press. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/[Jessica\_Kerr]\_Shakespeare's\_Flowers(BookFi)%20(1).epub

<sup>9</sup> d'Cruz, P. (2002, April 23). Retrieved May 6, 2010, from Pinkie's Parlour - Language of Flowers: <http://www.angelfire.com/journal2/flowers/pcd2.html>

<sup>10</sup> Shoberl, F. (1848). *The Language of Flowers*. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, p133

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foolishness and deserted due to its likeness of a jester's hat and bells<sup>11</sup>.

Her breast like lillies, ere their leaves be shed,

Spenser's choice of the lily for breast description can be lightened by the following: lilies are said to have come from the split milk from Hera's breast that splashed upon the earth when she had been tricked into suckling Hercules, the demi-god son of Zeus<sup>12</sup>. So the poet alludes not only to the pleasant odour diffused by the flower and similarity of the colour, but also privileging his beloved's beauty to much higher than ordinary human beings. Lily is the flower which has the most prominent position among flowers dedicated to religious purposes by people of antiquity. In India it is closely associated with God of Love, the evidence of which we can find in Moore's lines. Moore alludes to the poetical legend of the Hindoos youthful God of Love being first seen "seated on a lotus flower": "As bards have seen him in their dreams.....Down the blue Ganges, laughing, glide.....Upon a rosy lotus wreath,"<sup>13</sup>. Lilies represents chastity and virtue and closely associates with love and purity.

Her nipples like young blossomed Jessemynes,

Jasmines with delicate beauty and delicious scent are believed to be introduced in European flora in 1560 by Spanish people who brought the seeds from India. When Europeans first visit India they were quite overpowered by the influence of perfumes emitted by plants, especially jasmine<sup>14</sup>. As Ingram J. states in his *Flora Symbolica*: "The early fragrance of these flowers is described as delicious, one authority stating that even the dews are impregnated with their odour, rendering a morning walk delightful"<sup>15</sup>. These descriptions make it clear why Spenser uses jasmine in his sonnet. He wanted to give crystal clear depiction of his beloved and wanted the reader feel the smell that he felt from her. Jasmine above is replacing many adjectives that could be used instead and creating poetic image.

Such fragrant flowers do give most odorous smell,

But her sweet odour did them all excel.

Comparing his sweetheart's scent to the flowers as pinks, gillyflower, rose, lily, bellamoure, strawberry and jasmine most of which is described to be flowers of Eden, Spenser still confesses that her aroma excels them all put together. The whole sonnet is built on description of his beloved which is achieved by comparison of flowers' features, especially fragrance. We can see Edmund Spenser's art of using

plants in other works as well. Further we will bring some examples from "Epithalamion" where the poet masterly describes a bride.

Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,

Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte,

Her brest like to a bowle of creame uncruddled,

Her paps lyke lillies budded,<sup>16</sup>

This time Edmund Spenser is comparing the girl's cheeks to red apples. It is quite obvious that similar feature between these two concepts of "cheeks" and "apples" is their colour. The same similarity of colour can be observed in the line where is comparison of lips and cherries are give. However it wouldn't be right to claim that only colour is of big domain here. If it were so, then could they be used for replacing each other? So far we haven't observed lines where cheeks are described with cherries and lips with apples. Thinking this way we can come to conclusion that comparison is not only made on color, but also shape and structure. Apples are bigger in size than cherries which is true about the size of cheeks and lips. Cherries usually come with pair joined in a bud, like paired lips. Cherries also as lips have thin skin if bitten flesh like substance comes out. The juice of the fruit looks like real blood from bitten lips. While in the last line Spenser refers to lily again to describe a part of breast, nipples. As we have mentioned above, Spenser used lily to depict breast where comparison was built on the color and size of the flower (leaves be shed), but this time he is using it for the nipples and comparing it to the size and shape as this time it is "lilies budded".

How the red roses flush up in her cheeks,

And the pure snow with goodly vermill stayne<sup>17</sup>,

In the later lines of the work we can observe another resemblance of meaning which is achieved with the help of rose. Spenser one more time wants to describe blushed face of bride as a result of excitement. When we look at the rich history of the flower we came across with some interesting believes. Stated in *Flora Symbolica*, some sources say that roses originally were white but received a rosy hue from blood drawn by the thorn from the foot of Venus, as she was hastening to the aid of her adored Adonis<sup>18</sup>. Symbolizing love rose was often used by Edmund Spenser to express different meanings and to create different images. Let us have a look at the samples from *The Faerie Queen (Bower of Bliss)*.

The whiles some one did chaunt this lovely lay;

Ah see, who so faire thing doest faine to see,

<sup>11</sup> Shoberl, F. (1848). *The Language of Flowers*. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, p280

<sup>12</sup> Shoberl, F. (1848). *The Language of Flowers*. Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, p228

<sup>13</sup> Ingram J. *Flora Symbolica or the language and Sentiment of Flowers*. London: Frederick Warne and Co-p 280

<sup>14</sup> Ingram J. *Flora Symbolica or the language and Sentiment of Flowers*. London: Frederick Warne and Co-p 70

<sup>15</sup> Ingram J. *Flora Symbolica or the language and Sentiment of Flowers*. London: Frederick Warne and Co-p 71

<sup>16</sup> Gardner, H. (1985). *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. New York: Oxford University press, 68 p

<sup>17</sup> Gardner, H. (1985). *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. New York: Oxford University press, 69 p

<sup>18</sup> Ingram J. *Flora Symbolica or the language and Sentiment of Flowers*. London: Frederick Warne and Co-p 25

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In springing flowre the image of thy day;  
Ah see the Virgin Rose, how sweetly shee<sup>19</sup>

With the penetration of Christianity in Europe, the devotional verse which was about religious themes as Jesus Christ also appeared. In this verse Virgin Mary was referred to as "rose without thorns". Harrison N. claims that in fact, the five petals of the wild rose are often equated with the five joys of Mary (the five key moments that gave Mary joy, which were the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the Assumption) and the five letters in her full name, Maria<sup>20</sup>. In this way rose gained another meaning which is "Virginity". The poet is calling women as "Virgin Rose" and considering her to be the sweetest among other flowers, women.

Of many a Ladie, and many of Paramowre:  
Gather therefore the Rose, whilst yet is prime,  
For soone comes age, that will her pride  
deflower:

Gather the Rose of love, whilst yet is time,  
Whilst lovig thou mayst loved be with equal  
crime<sup>21</sup>.

The Rose which appears in the second line represents woman, while the Rose in the fourth line depicts love feelings. Author is hinting that among ladies Rose must be preferred (as she is Virgin) at this time. She can lose her pride after a while. Let your feelings of love act though it can be the same as crime. Spenser masterly used the flower to allude the meaning he intended.

### Discussion

Spenser skillfully used flora in his poetry as other members of the sixteenth century English literature. Comparison of the features or resemblance of the meaning were built on different factors which characterize certain plant. Being of different size,

color, shape, texture, smell flowers were masterly selected to describe human appearance and character, particularly of women. Comparison was not achieved only by one feature, other qualities of characterizing concepts also had somehow impacted on it as we saw in the examples where cheeks are compared to apples and lips to cherries. Symbolic meanings that each plant carries also influences the poets choice of them, as well as historical background of the flora which one can witness in the analysis of lilies and roses. As time passed they have gained new prospects and widened their use in literature. Coming up from its various features the same flower can denote different meanings in different situations. Flowers used in these poems illustrate some important characteristics, such as fidelity, beauty and perfect excellence, to be found in the pursuit of a female companion; it could be considered that with these poems, Spenser is describing his perfect woman, who is suitable for the role of lover, if not wife. It is possible then that the usage of the columbine demonstrates the fact that no one, even the object of his affections, is perfect in every sense. As the poet have said that this should not prevent the realization of such feelings and we should all learn that accept people the way they are, flaws and all.

### Conclusion

The conclusion is that in The Early Modern English lyrics not only flowers, but also various fruit conveyed different meanings. From early periods till now this flora is second to none aid for poets which comes in handy in giving voice to untold emotions. As above analysis, one can understand that without doubt flora can symbolize various human character, emotions and even, their attitudes, and physical actions.

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<sup>19</sup> Gardner, H. (1985). *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. New York: Oxford University press, 79 p

<sup>20</sup> Harrison N. (2016). Brief history of English rose. Retrieved from [www.historyextra.com](http://www.historyextra.com)

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