

Floral Growth of Genuine Emotion

Flowers and their meaning as symbols have been a long standing tradition that goes back through history among many cultures. When looking up definitions of flowers online, one can gather that there are many ideas of what various flowers mean or represent. The term ‘floriography’ means the ‘language of flowers’ and dates back to English Victorian times.ⁱ By creating a dictionary of floral vocabulary and definitions, it became a socially significant way to send coded messages to friends or lovers; however, the Victorian etiquette of flowers and their definitions is altered and critiqued in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. The opening line of her novel creates an association between the protagonist, Mrs. Dalloway, and flowers. Roses and carnations, which are common flowers to give to one’s lover, frequently appear within the story, as Richard gives Clarissa red and white roses, and Whitbread gives Lady Bruton red carnations. While flowers symbolize various emotions, and therefore creates its own social language, Woolf redefines flowers metaphoric power. Flowers are animate objects that are superficial and fleeting, and it is this aspect of short-lived survival of the flower that Woolf discards and supplies a new everlasting meaning. When comparing scenes where characters exchange flowers, the symbolic power of the flower evolves from an object that one places in a vase to a more abstract metaphor. In the way Woolf’s characters handle flowers in their daily lives, she ultimately critiques the cliché of floriography and its significance as a stand in for honest emotion.

Within the novel, there are two women who receive flowers from a man: Lady Bruton and Clarissa Dalloway, and by the way they treat their flowers, Woolf critiques the etiquette of floriography. At Lady Bruton’s luncheon with Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway, Whitbread “would never lunch [. . .] without bringing her in his outstretched hand a bunch of

carnations” (103). Based on multiple flower catalogues, carnations are generally defined as representing admiration; therefore, Hugh Whitbread’s present of carnations implies his admiration and possible love for Lady Bruton. Yet, when she “raised the carnations, holding them rather stiffly” and then “laid the carnations down beside her plate,” Lady Bruton rejects the flowers significance by holding them “stiffly” and “raised” up in front of her. Her awkward handling of the flowers and her dismissal of them, as she lays them on the table by her plate opposed to in a vase, depicts Lady Bruton as a woman outside the normal exchange of signifiers that the flowers present. Only after Whitbread aids Lady Bruton writing a letter to the paper does she take up the flowers and “stuffed all Hugh’s carnations into the front of her dress” (110). By taking up the flowers and replacing her bosom for a vase, Lady Bruton lies Whitbread’s sign of admiration close to her heart and ultimately signifying her acceptance and reciprocation of his gift. She enters the exchange of metaphoric flowers by displaying the carnations to the men; however, her socially peculiar way of handling the flowers offers a sarcastic critique of the social responses, and thus mocks the social cliches for expressing oneself to another.

In contrast to Lady Bruton’s reception of carnations, Richard is fixed on the idea of telling Clarissa he loves her, while giving her a bouquet of roses. On his way home from Lady Bruton’s, “he wanted to come in holding something” and he decides he will buy, “[y]es, flowers, since he did not trust his taste in gold” (115). Richard’s disregard of gold marks the desire to present something growing and living. Gold is cold, hard and shiny, and it has never been and never will be an animate object. Yet, flowers are living, breathing, and animate objects that grow and give birth. “[G]rasping his red and white roses together,” Richard thinks over how he has not said “I love you” to Clarissa in years (115), and by grasping red and white roses, he has picked the one flower that symbolizes never-ending love. It is socially acknowledged that when one

wishes to express ardent love, one sends roses, especially red roses. He explicitly states “he did not trust his taste in gold” implying that he does not know how to individually symbolize his love to Clarissa. He buys her something that society has defined as the ultimate symbol of love. When he enters the room where Clarissa is sitting sewing her dress, “he was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words)” (118). By presenting her the roses, he is at a loss for words. Despite not saying what he had intended, “[s]he understood; she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa” and she “put them in vases on the mantelpiece” (118). Woolf alters the meaning of roses through this simple interaction between a husband and a wife. Clarissa acknowledges the roses as symbolic of “his Clarissa”; thus, the roses identify her as an object of Richard Dalloway, and in accepting them, Clarissa accepts her objective place within her marriage. Not only does she accept the objectification of their love, but she places them on display, as if to always remind her that she is “his Clarissa.”

As Mrs. Dalloway is first introduced in the novel with the intention of buying flowers for a party, flowers are initially seen as decorations and symbolic of the objectification of human emotions, but also the chance to express individual taste; however, when set against the final scene between Rezia and Septimus, Woolf gives new symbolic power to flowers. Rezia is sewing “a coverlet of flowers” for a straw hat for Mrs. Peters (143) and as she stitches together the design, she is “sitting at the table twisting a hat in her hands, watch[ing] him; saw him smiling . . . it was not marriage” (140). As she sits sewing the design for the hat of a newly wedded woman, Rezia feels isolated from her husband. Septimus smiling alone “was not marriage.” The flowers on the hat that are composed of bits of cloth are symbolic of happiness for the newly wedded woman, but remain meaningless in Rezia’s own relationship. When

Septimus becomes focused on his wife, “[h]e shaded his eyes so that he might see only a little of her face at a time, first the chin, then the nose, then the forehead, [. . .] looking a second time, a third time at her face, her hands” (142). The way in which Septimus sees his wife, is like a flower slowly opening in the sunlight. He sees her in bits as he spreads open his fingers, allowing him to see new parts of her face and body. Through this vision of her opening up before him, as well as himself opening up to her as he jumps up to help her finish the hat, Rezia feels “like married people” (143). The collaboration between Rezia and Septimus, as he “began putting odd colours together” to alter the design of the hat, and Rezia “must stitch it together,” creates a couple that thinks and works together; thus, they are “like married people” (143). In their united effort to create a beautiful hat of flowers, the flowers become symbolic of the relationship between the two characters. Rezia felt “it would always make her happy to see that hat” because her husband “had become himself” by helping her make it (144). Woolf incorporates actual flowers, as Rezia designs the coverlet out of flowers and pins a rose on the side; however, the flower becomes more abstract, and Septimus sees his wife as “a flowering tree” (148). In this scene there is a movement of the symbolism in flowers, from cloth to living to human form. As cloth, the flowers are symbolically dead and linked to the failure of Rezia’s marriage, but when Septimus adds a real rose, the marriage comes to life and the hat of flowers becomes the symbol for the memory of a happy moment. Woolf again, denies the socially acceptable flower, such as the rose or carnation to represent emotion, but instead replaces the flower with the budding relationship between Septimus and Rezia. In this scene, Rezia and Septimus “assemble” their relationship and happy memories.

In comparison, Clarissa Dalloway, similar to Rezia, must “stitch together” the flowers of her party. At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa is surrounded by flowers in the store, and they

are depicted like girls at a party. Clarissa is at the center of her decorations, picking the flowers that may best present her creativity and individuality through display. However, the focus from the beginning of the novel on the physical flower and its symbolism dramatically alters during her party when she states “she must assemble,” that “she must find Sally and Peter” (186). As Rezia “stitches” a happy memory with her husband together, Clarissa begins to “assemble” the people in her life. Her specific need to assemble Sally and Peter is explained by the memories these characters share from their youth. Upon their last meeting, Peter recalls having met her “among the cauliflowers in the moonlight [. . .] and she had picked a rose” (187); and Sally remembers the same extraordinary moment between herself and Clarissa when they kissed, and “Clarissa all in white going about the house with her hands full of flowers” (188). Instead of the exchange of flowers, Woolf suggests a transfer of meaning from flowers which are perishable and transient, and alters its meaning to something more everlasting: memory and love. She supplies an exchange of memories that maintain a bond between Clarissa and Sally, and Peter; thus, eradicating the socially superficial metaphor. Woolf replaces fleeting objects with everlasting connections by showing the progression of assembling, stitching and creating loving relationships through her characters.

Common Victorian practice of sending flowers developed a complex system of definitions and meanings in which flowers were used as coded messages for intense emotions. In the world of love, flowers symbolize those emotions and are meant to objectify love; however, the cliché nature of such symbols is distasteful for Woolf and she ultimately subverts the objectivity of flowers in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the exchange of flowers between her characters, such as Richard and Clarissa, love is objectified and superficial. Richard’s inability to create moments of connection with his wife the way Clarissa has with Sally and Peter mark the

failure of his love, and thus the failure of the red rose's symbol for love. Woolf suggests that one may begin with a metaphoric object, but one must use it to create meaning rather than only signify meaning. By refusing to adhere to social standards of what roses or carnations as gifts mean, Woolf refuses to accept the cliché and inefficient representation of ardent emotions. Instead, she replaces the physical object of flowers with the presence of people and uses flowers as a source of connection between past and present.

"Florists.co.uk." *All Florists - UK Florist directory, Florists, Flower Shops & Flower Delivery online*. All Florists.co.uk, 22 Sept. 2005. Web. 10 Oct. 2009. <http://www.allflorists.co.uk/advice_flowerMeanings.asp>.