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The 'Language of Flowers' as Coded Subtext: Conflicted Messages of Domesticity in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Short Fiction

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Abstract

This paper presents a unique, literary model for illustrating the symbiotic relationship of text, narrative and image. The examples in this paper are primarily drawn from a selection of popular short fiction by Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) to suggest that contemporary readers often overlook the nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon, the Language of Flowers. Further, this paper argues that knowledge of this socially constructed vocabulary, extensively detailed in floral dictionaries and other material culture in the nineteenth century, is necessary for fully enhanced readings of texts written by Freeman and other American writers of that time. In the latter half of the 1800s, the mere allusion to a blossom or plant in text could trigger a mental processing of flower to image to definition. Today, those readers who acknowledge the Language of Flowers and understand its use as a subtext can explore how botanical references, even in fiction, often support multiple interpretations of character, setting, plot, and theme. Those who do not understand the coded subtext of the Language of Flowers fail to analyze the literature to its fullest. In the 'reading' of the Language of Flowers within fiction, the textual word suggests a mental image of a flower, herb, or shrub. The reader then becomes the conduit and must cognitively associate the image of that plant to a culturally known association, or meaning. If the reader has not accepted these meanings for plants, as detailed in material culture of the nineteenth century, then the mental images are never extended, the meanings are never connected, and the reading is limited. With the knowledge and application of the Language of Flowers, however, a knowing reader decodes the subtext in an enhanced reading of text, image and the narratives they produce.



Introduction

Based primarily on a collection of popular short fiction by Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930), this paper suggests that contemporary readers often overlook the nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon, the Language of Flowers, as it is revealed through images of plants in the text. Further, this paper argues that knowledge of this socially constructed vocabulary, extensively detailed in floral dictionaries and other material culture in the nineteenth century, is necessary for a fully enhanced reading of texts by Freeman and other American writers of that time. In the latter half of the 1800s, the mere allusion to a blossom or plant in text or image could trigger a mental process of translating flower to meaning. Today, those readers who acknowledge the Language of Flowers and understand its use as a subtext can explore how botanical references, even in fiction, often support multiple interpretations of character, setting, plot, and theme.

The objective of this paper is to show how the process of multiple, simultaneous readings of text and images occur and how the dialogue between text and images is actually established for Freeman's readers. By re-visioning text through the Language of Flowers, the internal, domestic conflicts of nineteenth-century American women become a dialogue between texts and images, between flowers and meanings. In Freeman's work, gardens represent domesticity, but they also provide alternate ways of viewing a woman's right to construct her life.

The following pages of this essay demonstrate that Freeman used the Language of Flowers to challenge nineteenth-century expectations of domesticity, gender, and power. In doing so, this essay addresses four key points: 1) Terms from a variety of disciplines introduce the process of moving from print to conceptualized images, 2) A brief history of the Language of Flowers explains how this phenomenon became a shared body of knowledge for the literate, dominant classes in nineteenth-century America, 3) Examples drawn from Freeman's fiction show how she constructs narratives using the Language of Flowers, and 4) A discussion of one flower in particular, the hollyhock with its double meanings of *fecundity* and *ambition*, asserts that this flower represents the conflicted message of true womanhood for nineteenth-century American women: to be fecund and be devoted to family or to be ambition and pursue a career or a talent in the public sphere.



Moving from Print to Images in Theory

Educational theorist Henry Giroux says, 'Language makes possible both the subject positions that people use to negotiate their sense of self and the ideologies and social practices that give meaning and legitimacy to institutions that form the basis of a given society' (1992: 204). Language is not only the way we communicate, but it is also one means by which we construct our lives. For nineteenth-century readers, the Language of Flowers was part of that construction.

Linguist Mikhail Bakhtin describes language as the means by which ideologies get articulated. Language, for Bakhtin, is a material substance; it is not purely structural. People's use of language is key, how it is constituted by and through its subjects. Language, according to Bakhtin, is a dialogue between readers and text, between author and readers. Bakhtin acknowledges that fiction is a socially and historically specific form of language that is in tune with its historical moment. In Bakhtin's words, 'The way in which a word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility' (1981: 477). Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia allows that there is a multiplicity of various socio-ideological languages all in operation at one time in a culture. He also describes the process of multiple discourses competing in the same line. In this double-directed discourse, readers must understand more than the literal meaning of a text; interpretations depend upon the readers' historical, educational, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Limited readings occur when readers fail to recognize the competing dialogues. Much like missing allusions, readers can only 'hear' multiple discourses when they understand the languages being spoken. This paper takes that 'double discourse' a step further by asserting that nineteenth-century readers not only 'heard' the language, but they also 'saw' the images and were able to associate, at another level, meaningful connotations for those images.

Poet Ezra Pound classifies image-making as a mental activity. He views an image as 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (1913: 200). These images are used to convey knowledge existing beyond the linguistic structure of the text. According to Gunther Kress, University of London (2001), the term which helps to explain how images are constructed and how they transform text to multiple narratives is called



'multimodality.' Multimodality represents the process of transferring how we experience the world through multiple modes of communication to which each of the senses is attuned. Images which are seen, smelled, and perhaps even felt with our senses are stronger, Kress says, than simple texts. A related term, 'multisemiotics', refers to the multiple meanings that are offered through the various modes or senses. These terms address the blending communication of sensory impressions and the extrication of meaning. As Ben Williamson of Nesta FutureLab on-line explains, 'The meanings that we construe from particular moments of multimodal communication are inextricably linked to our previous experiences, personal histories, our cultures, communities, and identities as individuals' (2005: n.p.). Williamson explains Kress's multimodality and multiliteracies concepts, saying it is important to identify how multiple modes such as images, words, and actions all depend upon each other to create whole meanings (2001: n.p.). As Kress says in his *Multimodal Teaching and Learning* (2001), creating meaning is essentially an act of design. Readers draw upon available resources and conventions such as forms of discourse, genres, and dialects. The third part of this process, Kress says, is the production of the 'redesigned' where meaning has been remade. In this study, the Language of Flowers is considered such a resource. The reader participates in the process of 'designing.' This involves the transformation of these resources into one's own voice, and making new use of old materials. In the Language of Flowers example, once the definition has been established, the reader uses this new resource to construct additional meanings from the text.

As a final theoretical reference, Paul Martin Lester's six perspectives from which images can be analyzed are explained in his text, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (1995). They are as follows: personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, and critical. Throughout the remainder of this paper, the images which are created instantaneously from words in the text and 'redesigned' through the Language of Flowers will be considered through multiple lenses, especially personal, historical, cultural, and critical perspectives.

Because the Language of Flowers was shared cultural knowledge, the nineteenth-century readers understood flowers in ways incomprehensible to uninformed modern readers who struggle through lists of garden blossoms—syringa, hollyhock, bachelor's



buttons, fuchsia, lilac, or phlox. Often, today's readers ignore pointed references to tuberose or raspberries or basil or morning glories and disregard the implications of floral references at all levels in the text—in landscaping, gardening, clothing adornments, and interior design.

A Brief History of the Language of Flowers

To understand how pervasive the Language of Flowers was in nineteenth-century culture, here is a brief history. At its peak in the United States, from 1850-1900, the Language of Flowers was a popular fad of the literate, social, white middle- and upper-classes. It was a highly developed, coded language system which assigned definitions to a wide variety of plants. In her study of this phenomenon, *Tussie Mussies* (1993), Geraldine Adamich Laufer notes the complete Language of Flowers was a comprehensive list, totaling more than 850 flowers, trees, shrubs, vines, herbs, spices, leaves, fruits, vegetables, and grains (1993: 12). Laufer explains that most books offered some history of the flowers as well as the definitions.

A close examination of Language of Flowers books from 1850-1888 shows that two lists, or dictionaries, were often included, one alphabetizing the flowers with their meanings, the other listing the meanings and the corresponding flowers. Some entries supplied scientific Latin names; many of the texts were colorfully illustrated and exquisitely bound. Language of Flowers books often included botanical information, and most were based on Carl Linnaeus' system of classification. Other Language of Flowers books featured parlor games; some added flower clocks and calendars, with special flowers listed for each month, day, and hour. Popular magazines, such as *Harper's Monthly Magazine* and *Godey's Ladies' Book*, repeatedly referenced the Language of Flowers in volumes after 1860, with allusions in poems, stories, and illustrations. In addition, trade books, calendars, gift books, encyclopedias, Webster's dictionaries, and even botany texts included examples of the Language of Flowers meanings and confirmed the shared knowledge of flower associations with character traits, romantic wishes, physical appearance, and desires. To the majority of readers in the nineteenth century, the mention of flowers *meant* the Language of Flowers, a visible, printed, *lived* part of their existence.



In this study, a private library of ten nineteenth-century Language of Flowers books or other texts containing floral dictionaries were examined: *The Language of Flowers Including Floral Poetry* (London, n.d.); *The Flower Vase Containing the Language of Flowers* by Miss S.C. Edgarton (Lowell, 1844); *The Language of Poetry and Flowers* (anonymous, n.d.); *The Language of Flowers with Illustrative Poetry* (Philadelphia, 1848); *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry* by Lucy Hooper (Philadelphia, 1864); *Flora's Interpreter* by Sarah Josepha Hale (Boston, 1848); *The Language of Poetry and Flowers* (London, n.d.); *Flora's Lexicon* by Catharine H. Waterman (Boston, 1855); *Our Deportment on the Manners, Conduct, and Dress* by John H. Young (Detroit, 1882); *Gems of Deportment* by Mrs. M.L. Rayne (Detroit, 1880); and *Familiar Lectures on Botany* by Almira H. Lincoln Phelps (New York, 1848).

An early writer to promote the Language of Flowers was Catherine Waterman, who published *Flora's Lexicon* in Boston in 1839. Sixteen years later, in her 1855 edition of the same book, Waterman states in its preface:

The Language of Flowers has recently attracted so much attention, that an acquaintance with it seems to be deemed, if not an essential part of a polite education, at least a graceful and elegant accomplishment. A volume furnishing a complete interpretation of those meanings most generally attached to flowers, has therefore become a desirable, if not an essential part of a gentleman's or a lady's library. (np)

Certainly, this was part self-promotion of the book, but Waterman's acknowledgement of its familiarity in 'polite' society is evidence that the Language of Flowers was a known commodity.

During the nineteenth-century, the Language of Flowers in America was a prominent subtext in fiction, especially for women authors, and it provided responses to questions like the following: Why did authors describe flora in such endless detail of flowers, trees, and herbs: hydrangea, chamomile, cock's comb, chrysanthemums, snowdrops, and clematis? Why did it matter? In a short story, if a woman chose to plant potatoes, not petunias, or to pick pennyroyal, what conclusions would the nineteenth-century reader draw about her character? How was this Language of Flowers being used to support, counter, or contradict the text and to reflect the culture and its ideologies?



That women and men authors incorporated this Language of Flowers into their fiction would not be surprising to the reading audience of the time. Most significant is how powerful and pervasive the Language of Flowers was in print. More than fifty-seven identified authors published more than 227 editions of 98 versions of Language of Flowers books and dictionaries in America from 1827-1923 (Laufer, 1993:12). In a study *The Language of Flowers* by Beverly Seaton in 1995, the numbers varied, but were quite substantial: 113 language of flower dictionaries and 151 other books referring to the Language of Flowers in their titles were published in the 1800s (1995: 203-227). By the end of the century, the Language of Flowers dictionaries were printed in domestic advice manuals, medical dictionaries, general encyclopedias, calendars, greeting cards, and in popular mainstream references like the 1899 edition of the *Vest Pocket Webster Dictionary and Hand Manual: Including a Dictionary of the Language of Flowers*. Even the newly developing FTD (Florists' Telegraph Delivery) appropriated as its slogan: 'Say It with Flowers' in 1892 (Goody, 1994: 268, n. 43).

That the Language of Flowers became part of the 'learned' culture is evidenced by its inclusion in guides to proper etiquette, like *Our Deportment or the Manners, Conduct, and Dress of the Most Refined Society*, published by John H. Young in 1882. This advice manual covers 'manners, conduct, and dress of the most refined society' and details appropriate behavior in such areas as conversation, dinner parties, courtship, and sports. One chapter is devoted to 'The Language of Flowers' and includes a list of flowers 'to which, by universal consent, a sentiment has become attached' (Young, 1882: 441-442). The introduction to this household advice manual says, 'There is a sentiment attached to flowers, and this sentiment has been expressed in language by giving names to various flowers, shrubs and plants.' He adds, 'A bouquet of flowers and leaves may be selected and arranged so as to express much depth of feeling—to be truly a poem' (411). Young adds that flowers constitute a language 'which may be made the medium of pleasant and amusing interchange of thought between men and women' (411). The purpose of another etiquette text, *Gems of Deportment and Hints of Etiquette: a Manual of Instruction for the Home*, edited by Mrs. M. L. Rayne and published earlier in 1880, is clearly stated on its frontispiece: 'The ceremonials of good society, including valuable moral, mental, and physical knowledge, original and compiled from the best authorities, with suggestions on all matters pertaining to the social code' (1880, n.p.). Its Chapter 28 is devoted to the



'Language of Flowers,' complete with poetry, a bit of floriography, and extensive lists and definitions. Poems are interspersed with the 'meanings.' One verse encourages the reader to ' . . . gather a wreath from the garden bowers, /and tell the wish of thy heart in flowers' (Rayne, 1880: 326).

Although commonly shared knowledge of flowers as symbols has existed since antiquity and occasional flower references are common in literature throughout the centuries, a combination of cultural influences created the widespread commodification of the Language of Flowers in the nineteenth century. These factors included an increased interest botany with detailed botanical illustrations recording plants from newly discovered lands around the world; more cost-efficient publishing techniques and distribution processes for popular texts which allowed for growth in personal libraries; an increasing consumer culture which focused on displayed wealth, knowledge, and possessions; and the belief that the flower, like the woman, represented the best in nature: piety, purity, beauty, and the reproduction of life. Even more, the Language of Flowers was a way for the rising middle class to bond through a shared linguistic fad and an obsession with all things floral.¹

The original Language of Flowers is traced to the Turkish *sélam*, with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's 'Turkish Embassy Letters' as evidence that a coded language of meaning and symbol was used by women in the harems. In her letter to a friend, dated 1718, Lady Montagu encloses a 'Turkish love letter' and includes a list of flowers and other items and cites 'meanings' for them. She urges her friend to see how coded the letter is with 'a million of verses designed for this use.' She gives examples, such as a jonquil means *have pity on my passion*; a pear, *give me some hope*; a rose, *may you be pleased, and all your sorrows be mine*; and a gold wire, *I die—come quickly*. Lady Montagu says, "There is no colour, no flower, no weed, no fruit, herb, pebble or feather that has not a verse belonging to it; and you may quarrel, reproach or send letters of passion, friendship or civility, or even of news, without ever inking your fingers' (Montagu, 1763: 121-122). Lady Montagu was a

¹ Perhaps other scholars will find it fruitful to expand and extend upon these reasons for the unusual and complex cultural development of the Language of Flowers in America, especially during the 1850s-70s. Of special note would be the expansion of publishing technology and commercial innovation in print, as well as further study of the private and public art and science education of women and the influence of botanical studies on their lives.



world traveler and a woman of letters; her reputation and writings were well known in English society. Her 'Embassy Letters' were published in the *London Chronicle* in 1763 and were well received, positively commented upon by such notables as Voltaire and Dr. Johnson (Montagu 1763, xxv, xxix-xxx). Often noted as other, more direct sources for French and British Language of Flowers books are Charlotte Latour's *Le langue des fleurs* (1819) and B. Delachénaye's *Abécédaire de Flore ou langage des fleurs* (1810). Both texts consolidated lists of plants and meanings and are cited as primary sources for the earliest British, and sometimes American, authors who compiled the Language of Flowers dictionaries in the early 1800s.

Dorthea Dix published one of the first American Language of Flowers books in 1827, although British texts continued to be popular in the United States throughout the century. Since copyright laws were limited or non-existent in the early 1800s, most of the British Language of Flowers lists were blatantly plagiarized in America, which resulted in fairly standardized definitions on both sides of the Atlantic by the middle 1800s.

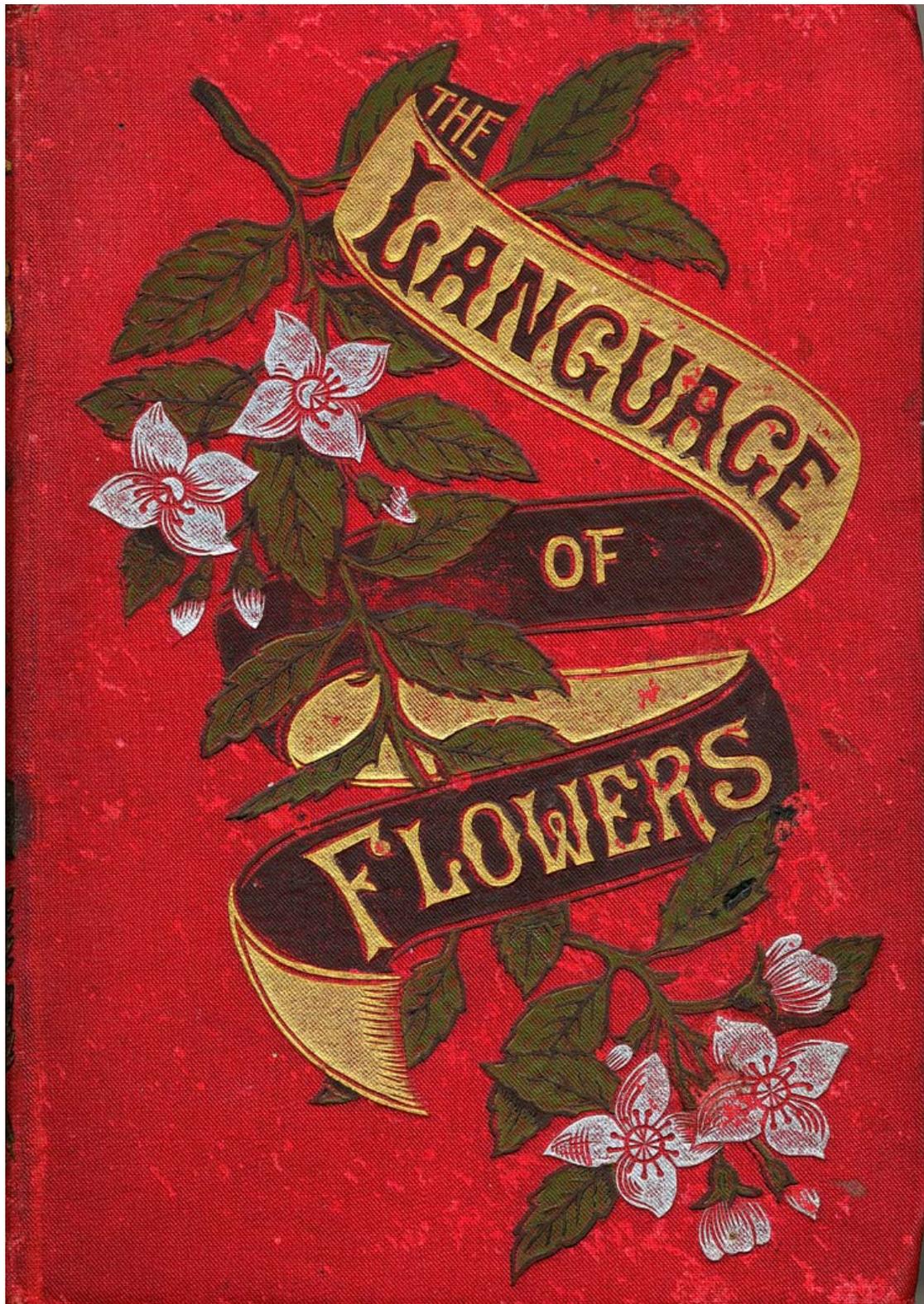


Fig. 1 Example of cover, *The Language of Flowers* c. 1850.



VOCABULARY.		293
Poppy, Red		<i>Consolation.</i>
Poppy, Scarlet		<i>Fantastic extravagance.</i>
Poppy, White		<i>Sleep. My bane.</i>
Potato		<i>Benevolence.</i>
Potentilla		<i>I claim, at least, your esteem.</i>
Prickly Pear		<i>Satire.</i>
Pride of China		<i>Dissension.</i>
Primrose		<i>Early youth and sadness.</i>
Primrose, Evening		<i>Inconstancy.</i>
Primrose, Red		<i>Unpatronized merit.</i>
Privet		<i>Prohibition.</i>
Purple Clover		<i>Provident.</i>
Pyrus Japonica		<i>Fairies' fire.</i>
QUAKING-GRASS		<i>Agitation.</i>
Quamoclit		<i>Busybody.</i>
Queen's Rocket		<i>You are the queen of coquettes.</i>
		<i>Fashion.</i>
Quince		<i>Temptation.</i>
RAGGED-ROBIN		<i>Wit.</i>
Ranunculus		<i>You are radiant with charms.</i>
Ranunculus, Garden		<i>You are rich in attractions.</i>
Ranunculus, Wild		<i>Ingratitude.</i>
Raspberry		<i>Remorse.</i>
Ray Grass		<i>Vice.</i>
Red Catchfly		<i>Youthful love.</i>
Reed		<i>Complaisance. Music.</i>
Reed, Split		<i>Indiscretion.</i>
Rhododendron (Rosebay)		<i>Danger. Beware.</i>
Rhubarb		<i>Advice.</i>
Rocket		<i>Rivalry.</i>
Rosa Mundi		<i>Variety.</i>
Rose, Austrian		<i>Thou art all that is lovely.</i>
Rose, Bridal		<i>Happy love.</i>
Rose, Burgundy		<i>Unconscious beauty.</i>
Rose, Cabbage		<i>Ambassador of love.</i>
Rose Campion		<i>Only deserve my love.</i>
Rose, Caroline		<i>Love is dangerous.</i>
Rose, China		<i>Beauty always new.</i>
Rose, Christmas		<i>Tranquillize my anxiety.</i>
Rose, Daily		<i>Thy smile I aspire to.</i>
Rose, Damask		<i>Brilliant complexion.</i>
Rose, Deep Red		<i>Bashful shame.</i>
Rose, Dog		<i>Love, pleasure, and pain.</i>
Rose, Guelder		<i>Winter. Age.</i>
Rose, Hundred-leaved		<i>Pride.</i>
Rose, Japan		<i>Beauty is your only attraction.</i>
Rose, Maiden-blush		<i>If you love me you will find it cu.</i>
Rose, Montiflora		<i>Grace.</i>
Rose, Musk		<i>Capricious beauty.</i>
Rose, Musk, Cluster		<i>Charming.</i>

Fig. 2 Example of Language of Flowers book, interior pages listing of flower, herb, tree, and shrub 'definitions.' C. 1850.



The Language of Flowers as a list of plants and meanings was integrated into culture in the United States in many forms, from popular fiction to textbooks. References to the Language of Flowers appeared regularly in articles, poetry, and serialized stories in widely read magazines, like *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Atlantic*, and *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. *Godey's* is a rich source for this study as its circulation reached 150,000 in 1860 (Ryan, 1990: 34). Also, *Godey's* long-term editor Sarah Josepha Hale published one of the most popular Language of Flowers books, *Flora's Interpreter*, in 1832. As one of the first women to edit a major periodical, Hale served as editor of both *Ladies' Magazine* and *Godey's Lady's Book* (1827-77) and helped shape the concepts of the good wife and mother for five decades. Scholar Vera Norwood in *Made from This Earth* (1993) notes that Hale is a key figure in the study of the Language of Flowers as the connection between popular culture, the Language of Flowers, literature, and the women who were the reading audience. Hale's floral dictionary, *Flora's Interpreter*, which appeared in numerous editions from 1832-1850s and was based on Language of Flowers books imported from England, was a major source for later lists of 'definitions.' More than 40,000 copies of Hale's book were sold in America (Norwood, 1993: 19).

In the 1830s, when educator and scientist Almira Lincoln Phelps (1793-1884) revised her earliest botany texts for female seminary students, *Familiar Lectures on Botany* and *First Lessons in Botany*, she added a glossary of the Language of Flowers, based on Hale's *Interpreter*. Phelps' *Familiar Lectures* text was published in eleven editions from 1829-1869 and had an approximate distribution of 275,000 volumes, reaching as far West as the Kansas territory (Norwood 1993, 19). According to Norwood, the wide-spread use of Phelps' botany texts and also Hale's writing promoted botanical knowledge as a way of moral improvement: 'If nature could be improved by cultivation, so could woman' (1993: 17). Not only were young, educated women familiar with the Language of Flowers through the study of botany, but the general reading public had access to these lists as well through gift books, floral calendars, greeting cards, advertising, parlor games, reference guides and more.

In her study, *The Language of Flowers* (1996), Beverly Seaton compared five language of flowers books to trace the influences from Latour's French collection in 1819 through several British publications to a 'truly American list' published in 1829 (or before) by



Elizabeth Wirt (1996: 167). These books cover a short period of ten years. Seaton notes the meaning of jonquil, for example, is given as *desire* in all versions, and the meaning of iris is constant as *message*. Although occasionally there are slight shifts in definitions from text to text, rarely are there more radical ones. In general, Seaton shows the definitions of other plants share a pattern of similarity in the meanings as they move from British to American versions of flower dictionaries.

Importantly, however, the Language of Flowers was not static. The dictionary lists grew with increased botanical discoveries world-wide. In the last half of the century, a greater emphasis was placed on landscaping and gardens; the middle and upper-classes used their homes as showcases for material wealth and featured botanical plants in greenhouses and indoor terrariums, often mentioned in literature and illustrated in women's magazines. Further, as geographical explorations identified new plants, the Language of Flowers dictionaries were revised to include the added flowers and shrubs, often granting new definitions with slightly negative meanings to those plants clearly associated with foreign lands. The changing of the meaning of lotus, for example, might indicate such a shift. In the original French texts, lotus meant *eloquence*; its definition shifted to *silence* in the British editions and to *estranged love* in the American texts. By the turn of the century, lotus was routinely paired with *lust*. Other flowers from foreign landscapes were given negative definitions: cyclamen, with its origins in Greece and Turkey, meaning *voluptuous* and the Turk's cap, actually a native plant of the Americas, was defined as *shony*. Other plants have origins outside the United States' growing fields, like tamarisk, imported in 1885 meaning *crime*, the dahlia from Mexico which means *instability*, China pink which means *aversion*, and the scarlet aricula meaning *avarice*. Perhaps, with the influence of Spencer and Darwin and the increasing emphasis on racial superiority in the late nineteenth century, the flower dictionaries held more than a few seeds for ethnic prejudice.²

Today, multiple versions of the Language of Flowers books are easily found in libraries, rare book rooms, used book outlets, and in private collections as indisputable evidence of the reading public's demand for such material in the late 1800s. The Language of Flowers

² These meanings are taken from a popular culture website edited by Katherine Bryant at <http://home.comcast.net/~bryant.katherine/flowt.html> and from a scientific study (Shosteck, 1974). Changing definitions and the introduction of new plants into the Language of Flower dictionaries is an underdeveloped research area.



as a cultural phenomenon captivated the nineteenth-century upper and rising middle classes with converging themes: an increased interest in botany, the developing professions of horticulture and landscape design, the categorization of race and gender, and a demanding, insatiable consumerism. The connections between material culture, publications, and educational texts indicate the widespread accessibility of the Language of Flowers and the influence of its 'definitions' and 'defining' through flowers.

One might argue that not all nineteenth-century readers understood the nuances of plant 'definitions.' This is probably true, just as readers today do not understand all allusions found in poetry or comprehend the meaning of every slang word used in film. Still, the audience who read the fiction in question created the popularity of the Language of Flowers; they were schooled in it; it guided their social correspondence; it surrounded them in print. The Language of Flowers created its own iconology, one that was recognized by the informed reader. When a textual reference identified a known plant, a simultaneous association was made from the list of Language of Flowers' 'meanings.' In other words, it was a process within the mind to read the text and form images, literally and figuratively. While text is, generally, defined through denotation, connotation, and context, the Language of Flowers expands all three through plant imagery.

The Woman's Dilemma: Motherhood or New Horizons

The nineteenth-century ideal American woman was examined in Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,' an essay published in 1966. Welter identified the cultural expectations for women: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. Woman was to care for her home, husband, and children. In the nineteenth-century, children were a blessing; the more who thrived, the more blessed was the mother. Yet, in actuality, as the public world shifted through industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism, a woman was faced with an inner dilemma: Might she be ambitious and pursue a career and cultivate a talent in the arts, to seek fame or fortune outside the home and bonds of marriage? Or, must she heed the expectations of motherhood and the domestic sphere which required her to be fecund, to produce children, to be the angel in the house?

Nineteenth-century women writers often struggled with this thematic dilemma. Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910), in 'The Wife's Story' (1864), makes the choice clear for the



main character. Despite ambition, she will remain happily at home. In 'The Wife's Story,' Hester dreams of success with her life's work, an opera score, which would take her away from her family responsibilities, but allow her to achieve acclaim which she knows her talents would deserve. In the end, she capitulates and awakens from her dream of fame to be satisfied as the center of her home. Significantly, two flowers are pointedly mentioned at the turning point in Davis's narrative. In *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin (1850-1904), the heroine faces the same decision, but with more tragic results. In her frustration at an unfulfilled future, Edna Pontilier chooses to drown herself, leaving behind two children and a husband. In other stories, when the bearing of children became too much, alternative methods were sought. Herbalists had special knowledge to solve female 'problems.' In *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), a short novel by Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), Almira Todd travels to the island's far reaches to gather pennyroyal. Jewett's original readers would immediately acknowledge the connection: Mrs. Todd is the woman in the community who dispenses herbs for women's health. Even more significantly, they would know pennyroyal was used as an abortive, giving Mrs. Todd power over life and death.

In addition to this inner dilemma, scholar Josephine Donovan points out that flowers and the garden represent another conflict, one between mothers and daughters. She notes that 'mothers held to traditional roles; remained in the domestic sphere and upheld . . . a separate women's culture,' while daughters were 'attracted by promises of expanded horizons, new forms of knowledge, entrance into the patriarchal . . . public sphere, and toward an experience of male-dominated heterosexuality' (1986: 43). The resulting conflict is the same: family or fame—or perhaps more accurately, heart in the home or money in the pocket.

Although many writers in the nineteenth century were often didactic in their adherence to the tenets of true womanhood and that the woman's life or obligations were contained within the private or domestic sphere, some women (real authors as well as fictional characters) rebelled, often in subtle and almost silent ways through images of the gardens. For example, in the last part of the nineteenth century, Mary Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) pleased the publishing patriarchy by submitting her seemingly innocuous stories. However, while filling her fiction with rural New England, its old women, village



ideas, predictable love stories, flower gardens, and static lives, Freeman was also able to use the Language of Flowers, and the mental images of conflicting and contradictory abstract ideas it created for its readers, to counter, or at least to question, traditional ideas presented in the text.

For example, Freeman contradicts society's expectations in 'A Gatherer of Simples' (1887) when she introduces her main character, an herbalist named Aurelia Flower, who is described by the plants she carries in her arms at the beginning of the story: tansy for *resistance* or *I declare war on you*, boneset for *gratitude*, pennyroyal for *flee away* (and as an abortive), and lobelia meaning *arrogance*.³ These are not all complimentary, motherly, or womanly terms, and Aurelia Flower is not a submissive, passive female who abides by social conventions. She lives in isolation and is described as a plant, with colors that reflected nature's palette: She was tall and strong. 'She had a profusion of auburn hair' above a face tinged red by exposure to the sun. Her dress was 'in harmony with her surroundings,' with a green underskirt and brown overlay. Freeman is clear that 'although her name is Flower, she was not really a flower in regard to apparel, and had not its right of unchangeableness in the spring' ('Gatherer', 1887: 280-281). However, Aurelia is a woman, and she does have a capacity to love—within her own terms. Although Aurelia is single, she adopts a baby named Myrtle (meaning *love*) and demonstrates that she can be a different kind of mother, one outside the traditional bounds of marriage. Aurelia shocks the community, who eventually recognize her strong, capable, maternal connection to the child. Thus, Aurelia Flower reconstructs the community's standards for motherhood. Interestingly, Freeman selects the main character's name purposefully to focus on nature. An aurelia is the chrysalis that houses the butterfly before it emerges. In this story, Aurelia soars above the conventions of her village.

In 'Louisa' (1891), Freeman's main character's appearance connotes her garden association: 'Her hands were all brown and grimy with garden-mould; it clung to the bottom of her dress and her coarse shoes' ('Louisa' 1891, 384). The first line of the story sets up the conflict between generations and attitudes toward marriage. Louisa's mother says, 'I don't see what kind of ideas you've got in your head. . . ' (384). Obstinate towards

³ Definitions taken from Language of Flowers texts 1860-1885, particularly Hooper's 'Floral Dictionary' (1864: 237-264), as an indication of meanings understood by readers upon publication.



marriage, Louisa irks her mother with her unladylike behavior. For one thing, she plants potatoes for *profits*, rather than petunias meaning *your presence soothes me*. When Louisa rejects her mother's suggestion that she entertain a local suitor, her mother chides, 'You don't know nothin' about it. You'd like him well enough after you was married to him' (384). Louisa answers with silence. Her mother's mortification is obvious: "I s'pose now you're going' back to your potater patch,' said she. 'Plantin' potaters out ther jest like a man, for all the neighbors to see. Pretty sight, I call it'" (384-385). Even when her family's income barely allows for food, Louisa continues to care for her senile grandfather and mother by doing farm work. Knowing that marrying well would ease the family's hardship, Louisa's mother continues to pressure her daughter to flirt and attract a man to take care of them all. She says, "T'wouldn't hurt you none. It's the way more'n one girl does' (400). However, in the end, Louisa's mother realizes that marriage is not for everyone, and she is grateful that Louisa has the physical and emotional determination to be the family provider.

In *The Jamesons* (1899), Freeman creates her strongest female character and crosses gender lines more than once. With her name as a double-masculine, 'James and son,' Mrs. Jameson obviously wears the britches in the family. She transforms the town by breaking traditions in clothing, education, social groups, thinking, and in historical celebrations; she also beautifies the village by planting clematis for *intellectual beauty* and woodbine for *fraternal love* on the houses of the village to replace the previous gendered stereotypes of strong trees and dependent ivy. By purposefully replacing the clinging ivy with powerful vines, she encourages the women to take their rightful place in decision-making for the village. The conflict of traditional paths versus new directions or the emphasis on a woman's need to construct her own future is the dilemma of heroines in fiction and in fact.

The Hollyhocks as Symbol of Conflicting Mores

Surprisingly to modern readers, one garden flower the hollyhock, passed from generation to generation, serves as a symbol for this dilemma. Seeds for the hollyhock, a 'heritage' plant, were brought to the New World from England before the Revolutionary War. The hollyhock's stately stalk and other colorful blossoms, such as lilacs, foxgloves, Johnny jump-ups, and roses, were traditional cottage garden plants in the 1800s. Most flowers or



plants held one or two similar definitions that stayed fairly constant during the multiple editions of Language of Flowers books which were published in the 1800s. The hollyhock, however, was associated with the two conflicting, almost contradictory, meanings of *fecundity or to be fertile* and *ambition, to strive for self improvement*. Although early Language of Flowers books usually featured one or the other definition, with fecundity being most represented in the early editions imported from England in the early 1800s, the definition of ambition was recorded regularly after Sarah Josephina Hale's *Flora's Interpreter* in 1832. Yet, both meanings are in evidence throughout the nineteenth century. In 1848 *The Language of Flowers* - a text published by Lea and Blanchard in Philadelphia - cited *ambition* for hollyhock. In 1855, Waterman's *Flora's Lexicon*, published in Boston, listed *fruitfulness* for hollyhock. In Young's *Gems of Deportment*, published in 1880, a rare distinction is made: hollyhock in is paired with *fecundity*, while 'white hollyhock,' is listed for *ambition*. The color qualifier is significant. White represents sexual purity, or virginity, and this distinction would eliminate fecundity or family. Thus, the choice is clear: family or ambition, but not both.

The two definitions combined represent the main dilemma of the nineteenth-century American woman: marriage with children or the pursuit of ambition and all its possibilities of new horizons, education, professions, and even equal status. In the short fiction of Freeman, whether the conflict was within the individual woman or was experienced through intergenerational value struggles, the choices of nineteenth-century young women seem inextricably connected to the image of the hollyhock. Several stories by Freeman suggest the author was purposeful in her selection of the hollyhock to illustrate this woman's dilemma. Because the flower had blossomed through the centuries, it ideally represented Freeman's subject of traditional values, of historical and cultural connections to the past. With its dual 'meanings,' it suggested the choices of the present. Two stories, summarized below, demonstrate the way these contradictory meanings and constructed themes that tested nineteenth-century mores.

In 'A Lover of Flowers,' (1887) Freeman describes a male character Silas as the keeper of the flower garden. He is described as 'short and slender and fair-haired,' quite child-like. The villagers said he was a 'dreadful womanish sort of feller' ('Lover' 1887, 193). There is no mention of hollyhocks in his garden of '[l]ilacs and snowballs and almond; apple-



blows and cherry-blows and daffodils' (193) but the hollyhock is integral to the story's conflict. Silas is devoted to his blossoms, but is also attracted to Althea Rose (whose name is a direct reference to the Latin term for hollyhocks, *althea rosea*).⁴

In 1887, the readers would be familiar with the botanical names as well as the common appellations of garden flowers, and they would understand the reference to the hollyhock's double meaning within the Language of Flowers. Althea is described as an 'odd-looking girl.' Although her features are delicate and compared to lilies, her hair was bobbed (not long, as tradition dictated) and her dress was not designed to make her look womanly (194). Althea even defies her mother's edict to wear her bonnet. Simon notices this and also warns her, 'It would be a pity if you got brown' (196). In fact, Simon treats Althea as if she were a delicate flower. Althea's dominating mother pressures her to entertain Simon as a marriage prospect, and threatens, 'Don't you contradict me!' (199) But, Althea is repulsed by Simon's advances, and she rebels against her mother. Simon is aware of Althea's disinterest, but he is a man of traditional values. He expects girls to act like flowers and give him only 'sweetness and silence' (200). When Althea tells him her mother is forcing the marriage, he agrees to break the engagement, but his reputation suffers, as the village then views him as too tight with his money to support a wife. He becomes the brunt of jokes and is nearly destroyed, socially. Two years later, he hears Althea is getting married. He asks Althea if it is her choice or her mother's. He urges Althea to stand against her mother's wishes again this time as well. However, Althea, interested in the future, changing times, and the baubles of the market place, fingers a gold necklace, a gift from the man, and says the marriage is her choice. The story ends with Simon cutting all the blossoms off his flowers saying, 'They've gone to a wedding, dearie' (207). The story is a complex mix of gender-crossing, testing parental ties over children's lives, and the complicated choices young men and women face, whether to follow traditional paths or chart those which are not perfect but are, at least, new.

In 'Hyacinthus' (1904), Freeman creates another male gardener and associates him with the feminine, the exotic Other, and with the gods. The garden of Hyacinthus Ware is bordered by arbor vita meaning *live for me* and an imposing stand of hollyhocks. The

⁴ The hollyhock has two botanical names: *alcea rosea* or *althaea rosea*. See 'Common Names to Botanical Names' <<http://www.plantideas.com/names/common2a.html>>. Accessed 23 August 2005.



Language of Flowers inference is that a woman would not cross the boundary to capture his love unless she were independent, lived for herself, and was forward thinking. As the story unfolds, any woman who could be Hyacinthus's equal must hold her own with men in conversation and in intellect, accept his family's dark past, and risk society's censure.

Throughout this story, Freeman weaves the flower subtext. As a character, Hyacinthus, named for the flower, appears aloof, above the ordinary, but ever-present. Hyacinthus's garden contains many flowers, but the plot and characters are centered on four floral images: the hyacinth, lilies, roses, and hollyhocks. The connections are purposeful. Hyacinth means *constancy*, and he is the one who remains solid, determined to keep his secret, but devoted in love. Floral comparisons to the protagonist, Sarah, show her developing sexuality and desire for love. Initially pictured lounging on the front porch in the smothering heat of a summer evening, she is described as 'bent over like a lily from the heat' ('Hyacinthus' 1904: 448). The lily, of course, means *purity*. Later in the evening, the sweet scent of lilies overpowers Sarah and leads her to Hyacinthus Ware's garden. Reinforcing her purity and her innocence, the lilies emit a fragrance described as 'twining and winding about her and impelling her like leashes. All at once an impulse of yielding which was really freedom came to her' (449). Later, when she regrets entering Ware's garden at night, uninvited, she is entangled with roses, which meant *love, youth, and beauty*.

However, it is the positioning of the hollyhocks with Sarah's developing love for Hyacinthus that drives the story forward. Hollyhocks, with their double bind of *fecundity* and *ambition* are the initial barrier past the hedge between Sarah's house and the Ware mansion. Once she enters the garden, she pauses and is pictured 'standing against a background of blooming hollyhocks' (450). With her white face framed with flaxen braids, she becomes one of them, standing 'as still as the tall hollyhocks behind her which were crowded with white and yellow rosettes of bloom' (450). In this garden she is again pictured standing in the enclosure of box (a plant that represented *stoicism* and Ware's strength of character). In that first scene, torn between fear of exposure and emotions of love, anger, and adoration, Sarah swoons and sinks 'down to the feet of the hollyhocks, like a flower herself' (452).



The plot is a young woman's marriage decision: should it be based on a predictable, expected union approved by the mother and grandmother, or could it be built upon passion, devotion, and mutual love with an 'outsider'? Sarah is a village girl, but she has been educated at a 'girls' school of considerable repute' (449). What appears to be a traditional love story, also blossoms with additional themes. Roses and lilies denote young love, beauty, and romance. Yet, commentaries about the tainted Other exist within this narrative. Ware's mother was said to be Greek with 'some outlandish blood,' and she was 'dreadfully flowery' (448) in naming her son. Hyacinthus's step-sister loves 'foreign perfume' (458). He looks like a carved Greek statue. Clearly, Freeman is exposing her readers' limited world view—of the village and of marriage.

Hollyhocks confirm the issue of the Sarah's dilemma: what does life hold for the young woman: marriage, children, a chance to use one's intellect, partners who are equals in conversations and aspirations? Can anyone have it all? Clearly, for Freeman, the garden is the microcosm where issues of gender and power are debated, where future promises conflict with the traditional past, and where the emblem of that particular flower, the hollyhock, is a visual icon, showing how these debates can be deeply rooted.

Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, this suggested reading of the text and word using the Language of Flowers is not limited to a few women writers; examples can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Sarah Orne Jewett, Elizabeth Stoddard, Harriet Spofford, and more. References to the shared knowledge of the Language of Flowers can be found in other disciplines as well and is very visible in art of the day, especially that which pairs women with flowers. However, especially in the work of Mary Wilkins Freeman, the Language of Flowers identified in text often creates a narrative about nineteenth-century women's lives and possibilities that they understood, lived, and breathed. Even one flower, the hollyhock, was an emblem that represented their dilemma.

Today's readers are familiar with the process of decoding symbols, of translating text to image and image to meaning. Few, however, acknowledge garden flowers as more than ornament or a superfluous description in the fiction of the nineteenth century. Even



fewer readers would knowingly read the garden descriptions as subtext for character, plot, or theme. To them, unfortunately, a hollyhock is just a hollyhock.

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