

Fragrant Ferment

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From time immemorial flowers have been associated with feasts and celebrations. They adorn churches and temples and are considered fit offerings to the gods. There are myths in various cultures that explain how different flowers came into being. Artists and poets have either celebrated the loveliness and fragrance of flowers or philosophised on their brevity and transience. This paper attempts to understand the special significance a few flowers have for people of different cultures and how artists and poets have used them in their works.

Lotus

It is the national flower of India and a sacred symbol steeped in folklore and religious mythology. It is said that at the utterance of the first 'P' the golden lotus came forth. Another version tells us that god Vishnu, preserver of life, who resides in the primordial waters, was asleep in this timeless darkness, dreaming of worlds to come. As his dreams unfolded, a lotus emerged from his navel and revealed within its many folds the cosmic egg, in which Brahma was asleep. As Brahma stirred, creation began to unfold and new worlds, new gods, and new life appeared.¹

In India today, the lotus is still considered to be the cradle of the universe. Besides, it is also the seat of Brahma, the creator; Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. Krishna is described as the "Lotus-Eyed One," referring to his divine beauty. The lotus therefore symbolizes divinity, fertility, wealth, knowledge and enlightenment.²

In Hinduism, the *lotus* (Sanskrit: *padma*) primarily represents beauty and non-attachment. The lotus is rooted in the mud but floats on the water without becoming wet or muddy. This symbolizes how one should live in the world in order to gain release from rebirth: *without attachment* to one's surroundings. The lotus is also a symbol for the *centers of consciousness* (chakras) in the body.

“One who performs his duty without attachment, surrendering the results unto the Supreme Lord, is unaffected by sinful action, as the lotus leaf is untouched by water.”

— *Bhagavad Gita* 5.10

The lotus (*padme*) is an important symbol in Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddhist iconography, buddhas are often seated on lotus thrones, indicating their transcendent state. Buddha was said to sleep on a lotus six months of the year, and *Shambala* (Buddhist heaven) is sometimes represented as a field of flowering sacred lotuses. Another legend tells us that when the Buddha walked on the earth he left lotuses in his trail instead of footprints.

Like the Hindus, the Buddhists also attribute the same transcendent property to the lotus. It is born in the muck and mud at the bottom of a swamp, but when it emerges on the surface of the water and opens its petals, a beautiful flower appears, unstained by the mud from which it arose. Similarly, just as the world is the locus of destructive emotions, it is also the place in which we can become buddhas, perfected beings who have awakened from the sleep of ignorance and who perceive reality as it is, with absolute clarity and with profound compassion for suffering living beings.³

According to a Japanese legend, the mother of Nichiren (Lotus of the Sun) became pregnant by dreaming of sunshine on a lotus. Nichiren founded a branch of Buddhism in the 1200s. The phrase “*Om mani padme hum*” which both Hindus and Buddhists use in meditation means “the jewel in the lotus” and can refer to the Buddha or to the mystical union of male and female energies.⁴

Ancient Egyptian mythology informs us that a giant blue lotus rose from the abyss of the primordial waters, and as its flower opened it revealed a new child god, born to restore the Light and banish Darkness. The blue lotus is said to have been used to invoke Isis, Osiris, and Thoth. It is said that Tutenkhamen’s body was covered with blue lotus when his tomb was opened in 1922.

One of the Sun gods, Nefertem, also god of the primeval lotus blossom, patron of healing, perfumes, and cosmetics, is usually depicted with a crown of blue

lotuses around his head. Some say that his special healing power works through the healing power of flowers.⁵

Not only in Hindu and Egyptian mythology is it a strong symbol, in China as well, Lotus is a symbol of creation. It also represents the seventh month. It also symbolizes unbreakable relationships taken from the concept of the flexible stalk of the flower.⁶

The colour of the flower also contributes symbolically, like the white lotus means purity and transcendence; pink lotus signifies the supreme One, the Great Buddha and Goddess Lakshmi; red lotus expresses compassion and passion; blue signifies the supremacy of the eternal over the temporal.

The adventure of Odysseus and his men in the land of the *Lotophagoi* forms the basis for Alfred Lord Tennyson's 1833 poem, "The Lotos-Eaters". Homer's version is notoriously sparse in comparison to Tennyson's. In just twenty-three lines Homer describes how on the tenth day of their voyage from Troy the Greeks land in the country of the Lotus-eaters. (The 5thC BC historian Herodotus located the Lotus-Eaters on the Libyan coast.) Odysseus sends a party to survey the land and inhabitants. They are warmly welcomed and accept a taste of lotus, a mind-numbing plant which has the effect of making the sailors lose any interest in continuing their voyage home. Odysseus, however, drags the recalcitrants back onto the ship and orders his men to set sail before others eat lotus and abandon the journey.⁷

"Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land,
"This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon."
In the afternoon they came unto a land,
In which it seemed always afternoon.
All round the coast the languid air did swoon,⁸

Notably, Homer does not describe the country, the lotus-eaters' characteristics, or the specific effects of the plant, whereas Tennyson does. His landscape is a pastoral ideal. A sandy shore gives way to a land of fruitful abundance capped by picturesque mountains.

The flower ripens in its place,
Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,
Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil. [III.36-39].

It is country that requires no toil to reap the bounty of the earth, and expectedly, its inhabitants do not labour. By eating lotus, the battle-hardened Greeks join the lotus-eaters in a semi-sleep sate, "careless of mankind," and ignorant of trouble, pain, and death. Memories of wives, households, sons, and Fatherland fade. It is truly an Epicurean, ethereal world.

Rose

"That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet".

Romeo and Juliet (II, ii)

The creation of the rose is usually attributed to Flora, the goddess of spring and flowers and the subject of many rose myths. After one of her nymphs died, Flora called upon the gods to change her into a beautiful flower. Aphrodite, the goddess of Love, gave her beauty; Bacchus gave her nectar; Vertumnus, a beautiful perfume and Zephyrus, god of the West Wind, blew the clouds away so Apollo, the Sun god could shine and make the flower bloom. That is how the rose was created and rightfully called "Queen of Flowers". The myth continued when Eros, son of Aphrodite shot arrows at bees which have stung him. Thorns grew from the rose stems where his arrows missed their mark.

According to the poet Anacreon, sea-foam dripped from the body of Aphrodite as she was born and turned into white roses. This indicated her purity and innocence. Later, when she was trying to help her wounded lover, Adonis, Aphrodite shed a few drops of blood onto a white rose and changed it to red. This repented her desire and passion.

Many rose myths of classical Greece include Eros, the sometimes mischievous symbol of love and earthly desires. In one of the most famous love stories in all of literature, Eros eventually weds Psyche. After the ceremony, Zeus' daughters,

the hours (seasons) and the graces (charities), make everything “glow with roses” and scatter the blossoms about the land.

Most scholarly accounts describe the story of Psyche as an allegorical representation of mankind’s soul (from the Greek word psych, literally translated as “breath,” “life” or “soul”). Thus, when love and desire (represented as Eros) are “wedded” to the soul of mankind (represented as Psyche), the seasons bring forth roses which spread the magical powers of Zeus across the land.⁹

Long ago Robert Burns sang: ‘ O, my love is like a red, red rose’. Since then rose is an integral part of romantic love literature.

O, my love is like a red, red rose,
that is newly sprung in June.
O, my love is like the melody,
that is sweetly played in tune.

As fair are you, my lovely lass,
So deep in love am I,
And I will love you still, my Dear,
Till all the seas go dry.¹⁰

Not all poets were enamoured by the rose. William Blake’s “The Sick Rose” presents a very different perspective.

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
that flies in the night,
in the howling storm,
Has found out thy bed
of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.¹¹

Blake's 'The Sick Rose' inverts the images of beautiful flowering into those of irreversible decay. It broadly represents a fall from the state of innocence. The rose itself symbolizes this innocence and love. The speaker opens by apostrophizing the rose, immediately setting a tone of despair that is intensified by the epithet of "sick", which carries a larger sense of permanency than alternatives such as 'unwell' or 'ill'. The rose resides in a "bed", which denotes both a flower bed and a human one. The sexual undertones are elevated by reference to "crimson joy", which is almost oxymoronic as the said colour is distinctly sinister, often used to describe the appearance of blood and therefore tying into the poem's suggestions of death. A literal death is not suggested, however, but a figurative one, as the rose's life is irreparably "destroyed".

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, we are transported to the land of dreams.

A large rose-tree stood near the entrance of the garden: the roses growing on it were white, but there were three gardeners at it, busily painting them red. Alice thought this a very curious thing, and she went nearer to watch them, and just as she came up to them she heard one of them say, 'Look out now, Five! Don't go splashing paint over me like that!' (Chapter VIII)¹²

Claude Monet was an Impressionist painter and has wonderful paintings of Roses

Sunflower

Clytie was a water-nymph and in love with Apollo, who made her no return. So he pined away, sitting all day long upon the cold ground, with her unbound tresses streaming over her shoulders. Nine days she sat and tasted neither food nor drink. Her own tears and the chilly dew were her only food. She gazed on the sun when he rose, and as he passed through his daily course to his setting; she saw no other object, her face turned constantly on him. At last, they say, her limbs rooted in the ground, her

face became a sunflower, which turns on its stem so as always to face the sun throughout its daily course; for it retains to that extent the feeling of the nymph from whom it sprang.¹³

William Blake has a poem on the sunflower - 'Ah Sunflower'

Ah Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun;
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done;

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sunflower wishes to go!¹⁴

It is a powerful poem which shows how mankind yearns for the eternal and impossible. The head of the sunflower "seeking after that sweet golden clime" shows how man tries to follow his dreams but is not always successful. The poet admires the determination of the sunflower.

Anemone

Greek myth linked the red anemone to the death of Adonis. Adonis was a handsome youth and Aphrodite was in love with him. Aphrodite's husband Ares, the God of War was really jealous and decided to take revenge.

Adonis loved hunting and one day when he was out hunting he was killed while hunting by a wild boar that was actually God Ares. When Adonis died, Aphrodite heard his cries and hastened to his side in her swan-drawn chariot. She cursed the Fates and Ares that had ordained his death. With Adonis still in her arms, Aphrodite turned the blood drops that fell from his wounds onto the soil into windflowers (the short-lived anemone) as a memorial to their love.

Anemones sprung from the blood of Adonis and his spirit returned to the underworld. In response to the tearful goddess, Zeus determined that Adonis should stay just for the half of the year in the Underworld.¹⁵

Shelley wrote the “Adonais” elegy immediately after hearing about Keats’s death. It was composed during the spring of 1821 and first published in July 1821. In his preface to the work, Shelley specifically thanked Joseph Severn for his devoted care of Keats in Rome. This ensured Severn’s fame throughout literary Europe.

I WEEP for Adonais—he is dead!
O, weep for Adonais! Though our tears
Thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!
And thou, sad Hour, selected from all years
To mourn our loss, rouse thy obscure compeers,
And teach them thine own sorrow! Say: ‘With me
Died Adonais; till the Future dares
Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto eternity!’¹⁶

‘Adonais’ was composed as a pastoral elegy, specifically in the tradition of Milton’s beautiful ‘Lycidas’. Like most of Keats’s admirers, Shelley believed the poet died because of the harsh and negative reviews of his poetry, specifically those of the Quarterly Review. It was among England’s most influential literary papers. It was believed that Keats suffered a rupture in his lungs because he was so angered by the attacks. This was not true, of course, but the idea persisted well into the 19th century.

Narcissus

According to Greek Mythology, Echo was a lovely young nymph, who was so fond of the sound of her own voice that she seldom stopped talking. One day she met the goddess Hera, and talked so much to her that she was rebuked for chattering. Echo answered the goddess rudely and angered her. For that, she was cursed by Hera to repeat only what others said. She was never again able to speak on her own behalf.

One day, as Echo was playing with her sisters in the woods, she saw the handsome young mortal named Narcissus, and fell immediately in love with

him. Echo longed to tell Narcissus how much she loved him but, of course, she could not. She could only echo the words of others, which she tried to do to communicate with the boy. But he grew tired of her game of hiding in the woods repeating nonsensical phrases. He demanded that she show herself to him.

When Echo finally came out of her hiding place, all she could do was wrap her arms around her beloved. But Narcissus hated to be touched and demanded that she let go of him, hurling obscenities and insults at the stricken nymph.

Echo, heartbroken, ran back into the woods once again. There she remained, pining away for her would-be beau. She would not eat and could not sleep. All she could do was sit and watch, hoping for a glimpse of Narcissus. It wasn't long; however, before Echo's body began to simply fade away into nothingness until all that was left of the beautiful nymph was her voice echoing throughout the woods.

The other nymphs felt that Narcissus deserved to be punished for the thoughtless way he treated those around him. They particularly felt he should pay for the loss of their beloved sister Echo. So they prayed to the gods for divine retribution.

Hera laughed at their prayers and said that Echo deserved to be ignored because she was a witless chatterbox that had caused her to lose valuable time. But Zeus disagreed with his wife and promised to answer the nymph's prayers. Being the wisest of all the gods, Zeus decided to let Narcissus's punishment fit the crime. Since he so callously tossed others aside who dared to fall in love with him, Zeus felt it only fitting that he learns what that felt like.

One day as the youth was hunting in the woods, he grew thirsty and looked for a pond from which he could draw water. As he bent over to retrieve the cool liquid, he caught a glimpse of himself reflected in the water and fell immediately in love - - with his own reflection.

Like so many before him, Narcissus pined for his love in spite of the fact that he was pining for himself. As Echo had done, Narcissus could not eat or sleep. He could do nothing but stare in the water at his one true love.

Slowly, but surely, his life force began to fail. As the last vestiges of life flowed out of him, Narcissus began to understand what his callous attitude had done. With his dying breath, he finally whispered the words that so many before him had longed to hear "I love you! Please forgive me."

The wood nymphs, hearing these words, let go of their anger and asked that Narcissus be released from his curse. Of course, it was too late. The youth was dead and the gods could not restore mortal life. However, Zeus took pity on him and transformed his body into a white flower that would bloom once again, every spring. And that is - - according to the Greeks - - how the flower, narcissus, came to be.¹⁷

The story of Narcissus finds an echo in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. A painter, Basil Hallward, paints a most exquisite portrait of his muse, the handsome young man named Dorian Gary. During the last session of painting, Dorian, who has until this point been completely innocent both of his beauty and of the world, meets Basil's friend Lord Henry Wotton, who opens his eyes to the ephemeral nature of his own beauty and tells him that he should experience life to the fullest. Upon the completion of the portrait, *Dorian wishes out loud that the painting would grow old, and not he.*

Due to Lord Henry's influence, Dorian goes out looking for passion and falls in love with a young actress of considerable talent, Sibyl Vane. When she falls in love with him, however, she realizes the falseness of her stage life and performs very poorly in front of Basil and Lord Henry when they come to meet her; Dorian is thoroughly disappointed, loses all respect and love for her, and breaks the engagement. He goes home to find that the painting has become slightly more cruel-looking, and the next morning, just after resolving to go back and marry her regardless, finds out that Sibyl has killed herself. The painting fills him with fear and he has it locked up in an old schoolroom in his house.

Dorian finds a certain joy, over the next years, in committing sinful or pleasurable deeds and watching the painting change; he loses none of his beauty or youth, but the painting grows old and ugly.

He is constantly in touch with Lord Henry, who feeds his beliefs about a new Hedonism-the search for pleasure, not morality-which should take over the world. When Dorian is thirty-eight, he runs into Basil, having not seen him for a long time, and finally shows him what has happened to his portrait. Basil is horrified and tries to make Dorian repent, but Dorian kills him, and has an old friend of his burn the body and gets rid of the evidence.

Dorian becomes increasingly anxious and fearful that someone might discover his secret, and goes to an opium den to try to erase his bad feelings. Sibyl's brother, James, who has been searching for him for eighteen years, knowing only that his sister called him Prince Charming finds Dorian and threatens his life. He lets him go when Dorian tells him to look closely at his face; he could not have been more than twenty years old. While at a hunting party a few days later, a man is accidentally shot and killed, and Dorian finds out that this man was James. He decides that from this time on, he will be good; and to do this, he must get rid of the constant anxiety and fear he has been feeling-he must destroy the portrait. He stabs it, with the same knife he used to kill Basil, and when the servants enter they see the portrait as it was when it was new, and a horrible, old, ugly man lying dead on the floor.¹⁸

Flowers as we have seen have been used as powerful symbols of religion, myth and culture. The Lotus besides being the national flower of India is a sacred symbol of folklore and religion. In the Hindu religion it is considered to be the seat of Brahma, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Buddhism considers the lotus as the seat of Buddha and it is said that as he walked he left a trail of lotuses. For the Japanese, Egyptians and Chinese too the Lotus is a strong religious symbol. Tennyson in his poem "The Lotus-Eaters" portrayed a pastoral ideal, "in which it seemed always afternoon". The creation of the Rose in Greek myth was attributed to Hera and while Robert Burns celebrated his love with his often quoted line, "My love is like a red, red rose", William Blake

inverts the image of beautiful flowering to those of irreversible decay in “the Sick Rose”.

We have the myth of Clytie in love with Apollo the Sun god for the origin of the Sunflower and William Blake’s poem “Ah Sunflower!” shows how mankind yearns for the eternal and the impossible. In the Anemone we have the Greek myth which surrounds the death of Adonis who Aphrodite loved. Shelley’s poem “Adonais” is an elegy to mourn the death of John Keats who was an exceptionally talented young poet who like Adonis, died young. The myth of Narcissus and the association of self-loving with that name can be found in the Greek myth of Echo’s unrequited love for Narcissus. This myth finds an echo in Oscar Wilde’s chilling novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

These are but a few flowers listed here and few literary references. There are many more flowers with fascinating myths and poets and writers have beautiful stories to tell. The contribution of the artists should not be overlooked and Impressionist painters like Claude Monet and Van Gogh have immortalized them in works.

End Notes

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