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# The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring: A Critical Look at Flower Imagery in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

## **Keywords**

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Women studies

**The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring:  
A Critical Look at Flower Imagery  
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According to William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman's reference book *A Handbook to Literature* (2000), a leitmotif is "a recurrent repetition of some word, phrase, situation, or idea, such as tends to unify a work through its power to recall earlier occurrences"(288). Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) contains many such leitmotifs; one of the most subtle of these is the recurrence of flowers throughout the course of the novel. Atwood's narrator, Offred, notices and describes the flora she sees all around her. These flowers simultaneously hold both little meaning and great meaning for Offred. She connects the images of different kinds of

flowers with the different facets of her shattered life: normality, childhood, sexuality, and sterility. At the same time, Offred refuses to combine the meaning of these images with her life in Gilead, for fear of losing her sanity.

One of the few glimpses of normality that Offred has left in her controlled, exploitative society comes in the form of summer flowers, usually blue: “[o]n the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, water-color. Flowers are still allowed” (10). Blue flowers mark brief moments of normality and reality in the insane, surrealistic world of Gilead, but their nostalgic comfort is quickly overshadowed by the grim reality of Offred’s anti-utopian society. These blue flowers represent a world that has disappeared—a world of freedom and familiarity that has been perverted in Gilead. Offred’s comfort with the flowers is jarred by the lack of glass in the frame; this absence reminds her that the world she recognizes has been perverted into a nightmare. Offred also knows that the innocent flowers she observes all around her—her last concrete connections to the world she knew before Gilead became her reality—have no reality in her existence as a handmaiden: “[i]t [the bathroom]’s papered in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots, with curtains to match. . . all this bathroom lacks from the time before is a doll whose skirt

conceals the extra roll of toilet paper” (Atwood 81). The blue embroidered posies on Serena Joy’s veil are also outdated, merely memories of an earlier time: “No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can’t use them anymore” (Atwood 105). The narrator must force herself to separate the inconsequential summer flowers from the insanity around her. This separation is necessary because Offred knows that her sanity will snap if she tries to make meaning out of the insignificant.

Just as the blue blossoms connect to Offred’s nostalgic longing for the normality of the past, so yellow flowers bring her back to her childhood. “I long for one, just one, rubbishy and insolently random and hard to get rid of and perennially yellow as the sun” (Atwood 275). Yellow blooms send Offred back to the innocence of her childhood and her daughter’s infant-hood. For the narrator who has lost her identity amid the fractals of post-post-modern society, her reminiscence of youth and innocence can only be reflected and refracted in the yellow petals of the daffodils, the daisies, the buttercups, and the dandelions, “[c]heerful and plebeian, shining for all alike. Rings we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces...Smelling them, she’d get pollen on her nose. Or was that buttercups?...It was daisies for love though, and we did that too” (Atwood 275-6). The yellow flowers Offred sees—or, more often, she does not see: “Not a

dandelion in sight here, the lawns are picked clean”—hold the last essence of childhood innocence for Offred, capturing and holding it as long as the flowers last (Atwood 275).

The red and orange blossoms are to Offred the encapsulation of sexuality gone horribly wrong. Of course, the flowers are never *really* separate from Offred's nightmarish existence in Gilead because they are also what she is, "[t]hey're the genital organs of plants" (Atwood 105). These vivid, nearly noxiously brilliant blooms contain hints of blood, corruption, and decay even in their brightest blooms—whether these blooms are in the garden, the hotel room, or the faces of lusty young men. When Offred leaves on her journey to the market, she passes through Serena Joy's garden, particularly "the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem" (Atwood 16). Offred identifies herself with the garden; both she and the tulips are covered in the red of blood from the top to the bottom; she has been forced to abandon the second childhood (note the fading yellow daffodils) that she had found in the Red Center, and now Offred exists strictly as an open vessel for sexual intercourse. Also, like the narrator's over-emphasized womb, the tulips are described in holy terms. They are both round vessels, but quite

empty, and, like Offred, when their open fertility ceases, so will their existence, “[t]he tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old, they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (Atwood 59-60). Offred sees herself as temporary and self-destructive as the tulips, and the garden as a whole. Just before “Mayday” comes for her, Offred remarks, “There’s nobody in the garden” (Atwood 373, 376).

Fittingly, Offred’s final category of flowers includes those that have gone to seed or have been dried. To her, they are both the same, although on the surface they appear very different. In Gilead, the dried-up, the infertile, and the old are all treated the same; thus, all the dried buds, weeds, and seedy flowers are one and the same, producing a sense of sorrow: “I’m sad now, the way we’re talking is infinitely sad: faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo” (Atwood 339). These blooms become Offred’s future once she loses her flow of blood, and with it her fertility and her place in society: “Today there are different flowers, drier, more defined, the flowers of high summer: daisies, black-eyed Susans, starting us on the long downward slope to fall” (Atwood 347). These dried-up blossoms—a faked fertility—also

appear in the parlor, a place for formalized, sterile encounters. Pollen and seeds, usually considered fertility symbols, are perverted, as is everything in Gilead, into metaphors for sterilization, “[t]here’s something dead about it, something deserted. I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor” (Atwood 132).

Despite the power and poignancy that blooms clearly hold for Offred, they are simultaneously insignificant in her Gileadian existence. In their operetta The Mikado (1885), Sir William S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan wrote lyrics for the main character, Koko, that correspond very closely to the treatment of flowers in Atwood’s novel: “The flowers that bloom in the spring, / Tra la, / Have nothing to do with the case. / I’ve got to take under my wing, / Tra la, / A most unattractive old thing, / Tra la, / With a caricature of a face/And that’s what I mean when I say, or I sing, / ‘Oh, bother the flowers that bloom in the spring’” (337). In Atwood’s novel, Offred’s world is as topsy-turvy as Koko’s, and she has had to face a fate even more hideous than Koko’s marriage to Katisha. Consequently, the posies she loves, cherishes, and fears really cannot have any strength of meaning for her—and Offred knows it:

I look at one red smile. The red of the

smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (Atwood 44-5)

Offred must make her own meaning because everything she once knew is gone. All that remains are shadows of the past, like the yellow daffodils and the blue forget-me-nots, which Offred does not dare forget: "I decide I'm only having an attack of sentimentality, my brain going pastel Technicolor...The danger is grayout" (Atwood 258). Offred is very deliberate in her storytelling, although she hates it, and the inclusion of flowers is her tiny gift of kindness and meaning in an otherwise uncaring and meaningless void of existence: "I've tried to put some of the

good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (Atwood 343-4).

In order to maintain her tenuous grasp on her sanity and reality, Offred must see everything and think about everything, particularly the blossoms that surround her; however, she must not draw connections between "in the time before" and "now" because her sanity depends on not really recognizing all that she has lost. For Offred, flowers are the only familiarity she has left, and she clings to them all the harder for it.

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