

Ophelia's Flowers and Their Symbolic Meaning

Shakespeare liked to use flowers and plants as images to illustrate his ideas. Ophelia uses flowers as symbols of her deep sorrow and grief. She is very upset because her father, Polonius, has just been killed by Hamlet. Being a sensitive and intelligent young woman, Ophelia needs to express herself, and she does so by passing out flowers to the court in her seeming mad state of mind. Through this, she accuses the King and Queen of the guilt she wants them to feel. Using flowers in this indirect way is safer than directly stating her opinions.

The people of those days found it difficult to express and communicate directly. This is based from fear and lack of polite and proper words. They feared to cross someone (in this case the King and Queen) and be killed for insulting them; so, poor distraught Ophelia does not choose these flowers haphazardly. She chooses them with the intent to say to the King and Queen what she thinks and feels about the whole weird happenings around her.

Here is the symbolic meaning of the flowers she hands out:

Rosemary: the symbol for remembrance and faithfulness

Laertes, the son of Polonius, has been out of the country and returns home to find out who is responsible for the death of his father. While speaking with the new King and Queen, his sister, Ophelia, enters and speaks. First she goes to Laertes, her bother, and says, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember." She wants her brother to help her figure out who killed their father. "Remember Think back on what's been going on" is what she is telling him.

Pansy: the symbol for thoughts and faithfulness.

Ophelia then says, "And there is pansies, that's for thoughts."

Fennel: the symbol of flattery

At this point, Ophelia walks to the King, and while handing him some fennel, says, "There's fennel for you and columbines." That's a jab to the King! The audience in Shakespeare's time would have understood the first to mean flattery and the second to mean male adultery and foolishness, because once you pick fennel, it would wilt so quickly. She knew that the new King loved flattery. An old saying is "Sow fennel, sow sorrow."

Columbine: the symbol for male adultery, ingratitude, and faithlessness; the emblem of deceived lovers

It was also the symbol for foolishness. It was kind of an amusing type of thing for men, which was the old double standard in those days. It was brave of her to first flatter the King and then accuse him of foolish adultery. A very frightening thing, when we remember that the King has the power to take her life.

Rue: the symbol for adultery; the symbol for genuine repentance of all transgressions for women; the symbol for everlasting suffering

Rue is very bitter. Ophelia then walks over to the Queen and says, "There's rue for you; and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sunday's. O, you must wear your rue with a difference." Note that rue was the major cause of abortion in its day, which is also why it was tied in with adultery. So she insults both the Queen and King to their faces, in front of witnesses.

Daisy: the symbol for innocence

Ophelia then sees a daisy and says, "There's a daisy," and she picks it up, looks sadly, and then puts it back. In effect she is saying, "There is no innocence here."

Violet: the symbol for faithfulness or fidelity

Then Ophelia says, "I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when my father died." So what is she telling the King and Queen? What is she saying about their faithfulness and integrity?

This was very confrontational and brave to say, for this young lady. Most people now do not know about flower symbolism and how important it was to the story. That's unfortunate, for so much is missed and unappreciated. Ophelia knew exactly what she was doing when she handed out flowers in this scene.

