
Analysis of the symbolism of flora in miss julie

"Oh, what a delicious odour that violet has!": An analysis of the symbolism of flora in the progression to Miss Julie's defeat in Strindberg's Miss Julie (1888)

Published in 1888 at the height of the Swedish "sedlighetsdebatt" (the Virtue Debate), Miss Julie by August Strindberg divided its audience between those applauding the play as a masterpiece and those calling the play misogynistic. According to the preface by Strindberg, the play tells the story of the eponymous character Miss Julie, who was raised by a mother heavily influenced by "the ideas of her time about equality, and woman's independence" (xiii) and a father neglecting his role as the male of the household. Strindberg argues in the preface, that as a result of her "mistaken upbringing" (xiii), she is condemned to a tortured life, where she will eventually perish (xiii) as a result of "the irresistible revolt of [her] suppressed instincts" (xiii). Throughout the play, Strindberg makes use of an array of literary techniques to instigate Julie's defeat, significantly the symbolism of flora, which is used to demonstrate class difference, further sexual conflict and emphasize seduction. Thus, the symbolism of flora is vital to the course of events in Miss Julie, as their seductive powers lead to her ultimate defeat.

From the onset of the play, Strindberg integrates floral symbolism to distinguish between class and emphasize sexual desire, as seen in the following stage direction: "It has double glass doors, through which are seen a fountain with a cupid, lilac shrubs in bloom..."(1) . The description of Cupid, the God of Love, hoisted on top of a stack of lilac shrubs primes the audience for the nature of the affair between Julie and Jean. This is evident in the feminine and aristocratic colour of lilacs (faint purple) as well as its traditional symbol of first love. Furthermore, the traditionally sexual connotations of the image of flowers is worth taking notice of as well . Contributing to the evidence of foreshadowing, Professor David Thomas and Professor Jo Taylor from the University of Warwick, argues the "association of Cupid [the God of Love] with cascades of water suggests a process of continuous love-making." .

Strindberg further makes a distinction between the aristocratic and the servant class by reserving two physically separate paragraphs. The first one describes the lower-class kitchen, while the other describes the aristocratic garden. Additionally, there is a distinct juxtaposition in the colour scheme of the two respective spaces. The kitchen is described with "copper kettles, iron casseroles and tin pans," as well as "birch branches" and "juniper branches" (1). In contrast to the garden, which is described lavishly with colourful flowers, the kitchen's appearance is virtually monochromatic. However, one exception to the bland colour scheme of the kitchen is made with the presence of "a big Japanese spice pot full of lilac blossoms" (1), indicating a merge between the aristocracy and the lower class.

Although the play itself does not instantly establish the date as Midsummer's Eve, Strindberg pre-reveals it in the preface. Midsummer's Eve is a national holiday in Sweden, which has been known for its flower decorations as well as "gathering around a flower-festooned maypole to sing and dance" . Noting that it takes place on the longest day of the year, flora thrives especially well at this time. As the play begins to unfold, Jean has the first line, which is seen in the following quotation: "To-night Miss Julie is crazy again" (2). He further states that he "never saw the like of it" (2), indicating her behaviour to be an especially unusual one, perhaps caused

by the festive circumstances. This theory is supported subsequently, as Julie appears in the doorway and enters into dialogue with Christine. Gallantly, Jean remarks: "The ladies are having secrets, I believe" (4). Julie, returning the banter, "strikes him in the face with her handkerchief" (4), to which Jean replies "Oh, what a delicious odour that violet has! (4). Julie then orders him to "Go away!" but with a tone of coquetry (4). With the encouragement of the arousing effect of the violet-scented handkerchief, they go out to dance, despite Jean's warnings that people may start to talk if peasant and aristocrat are seen together.

The succeeding pantomime scene elaborates on the seductive effect of flora, or rather lack thereof. With Christine directed to not hurry as if fearful that they might become impatient," while "humming the tune" of a schottische (5), she appears serene, as the flowers' effect is tested on her:

Christine, representing the self-righteous antithesis to Julie's "modern character" (xiii), as is remarked by Strindberg in the preface, appears unaffected by the seductive power of the flowers, as demonstrated by her absent-mindedly folding the violet-scented handkerchief upon smelling it. This further suggests her fundamentally grounded state of mind, in contrast to Julie who is easily affected by flora, thus indicating her credulousness.

As the play progresses, the contribution of floral symbolism becomes increasingly apparent in representing class and sexual desire, as Jean manipulates its impact on Julie. As Julie reveals her dream in which she has climbed to the top of a pillar and wishes to come down, Jean reciprocates by telling her his dreams, as seen in the following quotation: "lying under a tall tree in a dark wood. I want to get up, up to the top, so that I can look out over the smiling landscape where the sun is shining, and so that I can rob the nest in which lie the golden eggs" (9). The image of flora, as stated in the form of a tranquil dark wood in addition to the positively-charged words smiling, shining and golden, romanticizes his discourse and counterpoises the actual content of his monologue, allowing him to stealthily ingrain his wish of social ascendance by climbing the tree. Taking advantage of the romantic aesthetic of his monologue, he further allows himself to suggest the phallic image of the tree and the thievish act of getting ahold of the "golden eggs", as indicated by the word rob. Julie, having been seduced by the sexual undertones of his monologue, is simultaneously blinded to his corrupt social implications, as she swiftly asks Jean to join her in the flowery aristocratic park (9).

Shortly following Jean's story wherein he attempts suicide by elderflower poisoning because of his unrequited love to Julie (12-13), Jean convinces her to seek refuge in his room, as the peasants are approaching. It is indicated that they have intercourse. After the sexual interval, floral symbolism is used to disillusion Julie to Jean's true facade, as he has gained sexual superiority. The previously tender story of a lovestruck boy gazing hopelessly after Julie is now ridden by lewd discourse, as Jean admits the following: "When I was lying among the onions and saw you up there among the roses — I'll tell you now — I had the same nasty thoughts that all boys have" (18). Julie reacts by expressing the following: "So that's the sort you are —" (19), thus implying her disillusion.

As Jean renders a narrative of their escape from the estate, he incorporates flora one last time to seduce Julie to agree to his new mission, as seen in the following quotation: "Oh! Eternal summer! Orange trees! Laurels! Oh!" (15). As the play progresses, the floral symbolism ceases. However, Julie is seen continuously repeating both "oranges" and "laurels" (23, 31), indicating the uninterrupted effect flora has on her. As the use of flora exhausts its power, Strindberg lets

the play run its natural course as Julie has been irredeemably driven to the edge of her constrained existence. Hypnotized and unable to act, Jean, having gained social and sexual superiority over Julie, takes a razor and puts it in her hand. Finally, he commands her towards the barn alone, suggesting the encouragement of suicide.

As Strindberg argues in the preface, Julie's natural instincts and convictions condemn her to a life that will inevitably lead to surrender and perish. However, floral symbolism is an integral driving force in catalysing this defeat. The build-up of the external forces on Julie's fate on that Midsummer's Eve is, to a great extent, seduced by the use of flora, as seen in the establishment of the physical stage, and then by discourse, both of which are reliant on floral symbolism to emphasize class and gender hierarchy, as well as sexual desire, and seduction. As the use of flora ceases, it is because its effect has been employed to the extent that the societal forces, the primary forces of the play, suffices to bring her suppressed existence to an end, ultimately leading to her defeat.

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