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**LANDSCAPE AND FLORAL EMBLEMS AS A KEY TO COMPREHENDING ARTISTIC SECRETS
OF THE POSTMODERN NOVELS “THE MAGUS” BY JOHN FOWLES AND “RARE EARTHS”
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Abstract

The novels “The Magus” by John Fowles and “Rare Earths” by Vasily Aksyonov are rich with cultural allusions. In both novels, belonging to different time periods and national cultures, floral emblems are present. In “The Magus”, Fowles uses floral codes as beacons – clues to secrets and hidden meanings of the novel. Aksyonov, in turn, uses floral symbols not only at the narrative level but also in an attempt to identify the main character. Decoding floral emblems hidden in the novels allows the reader to identify the main characters and find answers to many other questions concerning the meaning of the title, as well as the aim and significance of the novels for the authors themselves.

Keywords

Floral emblem – Symbolism – Literary criticism – English literature – Russian literature

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Introduction

The novels "The Magus" and "Rare Earths" are rich with cultural allusions. In addition to direct and indirect references to Shakespeare's works, Greek myths, tarot, and biblical motifs, landscape and floral emblems are present in both works.

Floral symbols have been mentioned in novels since medieval times. In the 19th century, B. Delachénaye's book "Abécédaire de Flore ou langage des fleurs"¹ was extremely popular. In 1830, the book "Selam, or the Language of Flowers" was published in Saint Petersburg, which not only listed floral symbols but also interpreted the meanings of plants and bouquets. "Selam" can be called a projection of the human world onto the plant world.

Vasily Aksyonov and John Fowles use such emblems as well but at a different semantic level. The variety of plants hidden in the novels serves as a key to their comprehension.

Methods

In the analysis of this topic, a systematic approach was applied.

When studying landscape and floral emblems and the history and theory of the artistic process associated with the issue under study, we used the cultural-historical method to analyze a key to the interpretation of the considered works.

The aim of the research was not only to study floral emblems but also to compare their depiction in the novels by two authors belonging to different national cultures. Thus, for the study of the considered issue, we used the comparative-historical (comparative) method allowing comparing and finding similarities and differences in the works under study.

Results

The first chapter of "Rare Earths" entitled "Tamarisk park" and the first sentence of the novel – "The main plant in Biarritz is tamarisk"² – immediately indicate meanings hidden in the novel in the form of floral emblems. Aksyonov, referring to himself in his own novel as the writer Buzz Oxelotl, begins the story with his settling in the surrounded-by-tamarisks French resort town of Biarritz on the Atlantic coast. The writer admits that he wants to conclude his trilogy about Gennady Stratofontov. Since ancient times, tamarisk has been considered a symbol of purification, a remedy for diseases, both physical and spiritual. In the "tamarisk empire", Aksyonov "purifies" himself for his new work. Something similar occurs to the main character – Aksyonov ends his trilogy about a boy-turned-man Gennady Stratofontov (the author calls him Gen Stratov).

For the first time, plants are mentioned in "The Magus" in the climactic scene in the first part of the novel when Nicholas, before meeting Conchis, attempts suicide: "I put a cartridge in the gun, and sat on the ground, against the stem of a pine tree. All around me

¹ B. Delachénaye, *Abécédaire de Flore ou langage des fleurs* (Paris, 1811).

² V. P. Aksyonov, *Redkie zemli [Rare Earths]* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2014), 5.

blue grape-hyacinths pushed through the pine needles"³. Since antiquity, pines have been a symbol of hope while hyacinths have been associated with play. Thus, invited to the game, Nicholas, without knowing, was already on his way out of depression. The first part of the novel ends with the words "But then the mysteries began"⁴.

On his way to the waiting room, where Nicholas will begin his search for authenticity, he sees wild pink gladioli: "It was steep, and the undergrowth inside the fence was too dense to see through. Small pink heads of wild gladioli flopped out of the shadows, and some warbler in the thicket of the bushes reeled out a resonant, stuttering song"⁵. Since the Middle Ages, wild pink gladiolus has been considered a symbol of truth and sincerity. Fowles hints that in the waiting room, Nicholas will learn the truth about himself.

Walking around the villa, Nicholas feels stressed without understanding why. Although he wants to escape, there is a hint that he needs to stay. "But we had come to an arbor of bougainvillea and morning-glory at the end of the kitchen-garden terrace, set back and obliquely"⁶. "Bougainvillea" means "paper flower" – something fake – while morning-glory is a symbol of joy. Thus, plants growing on the symbolic border between Bourani and the real world make it clear that in such a calm and familiar reality, Nicholas will find only fake joy, which means that he needs to stay there and look for something real.

Precisely about the present Aksyonov seeks to tell using floral emblems. Towards the end of the novel, when Gen's colleague Max Almazov is killed, the cedar of Lebanon is mentioned – a symbol of eternity. Aksyonov hints that the crime of the Russian 1990s continues today: assassinations take place and people die. Nothing changes – this story is endless.

Floral emblems symbolize not only reality and search for oneself but romantic relationships as well. During Nicholas and Alison's meeting in Greece, the crocus is mentioned – a symbol of resurrected love. However, Nicholas does not understand this and continues to perceive Alison as a friend, sure that he is in love with Lily. He will come to realize this much later, but the sign in the form of the flower is already present, as well as the sign of Nicholas' punishment – thistle, also mentioned in the scene. In Greek myths, thistle is associated with punishment and absolution. In Nicholas' case, it refers to his future trials – further journey "through the Labyrinth of the Minotaur" in search for himself. Unable to withstand Nicholas' coldness, Alison fakes her own death, although Nicholas does not yet know that it is only a game. He receives Alison's "suicide note": "I looked at the airmail envelope. It had my name outside, in Alison's handwriting. I tipped the contents out on the desk. A tangle of clumsily pressed flowers: two or three violets, some pinks. Two of the pinks were still woven together"⁷. According to Greek myths, Persephone was gathering violets when the god of the underworld Hades abducted her. In the depth of her despair at the disappearance of her daughter, Demeter brought cold to the earth, killing all life. Since then, the violet has become a symbol of the untimely death of a young woman. The ancient Greeks put violets on young women's graves. Paradoxically, the violet is also associated with the dawn of a new life, awakening, because Persephone returned to

³ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013), 73.

⁴ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 76.

⁵ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 79.

⁶ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 100.

⁷ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 488.

Demeter. All these meanings illustrate Alison's "death" and "resurrection" in the best possible way. The violet has another notable meaning – the love triangle, which causes Alison's "suicide" when she learns that Nicholas chose Lily over her. The pink has multiple meanings as well: "it is a symbol of female love, charm, fidelity, and honour"⁸. At the same time, it is a symbol of the blood of the crucified Christ, suffering. The pink symbolizes the sacrifice of the innocent associated with Alison.

When Nicholas is fired from the Lord Byron School, he is desperate: "But leaving the island, the light, the sea. I stared out over the olive groves"⁹. Since ancient times, the olive tree has been associated with peace, wealth, and tranquillity. Nicholas leaves all this behind: "At two, in the fierce afternoon sun, I started to toil up between the hedges of prickly pear towards the central ridge"¹⁰. Prickly pear, or opuntia, the ancient Greeks called a plant unknown to them. Thus, Nicholas leaves for the unknown.

Despite belonging to different national cultures, Aksyonov and Fowles use the same plants in their novels. One of such plants is cypress – a symbol of the forbidden. This motif is present in both novels. When the author considers how to describe Gen Stratov's time in prison, he finds a cypress grove: "I found sheared cypresses, some barely living stems. Wearing rubber gloves, I dug in there, weeding the beds, freeing the living from rot"¹¹. The cypress is considered a guardian of the afterlife, protecting the forbidden. The writer metaphorically shows that he wants to destroy the secrets of the authorities and the prison itself, that there is nothing forbidden for him – he wants the reader to find answers to all questions, even if they are hidden under a veil of secrecy. The writer achieves his goal. In the middle of the novel, when the author discusses his new work with a friend, he observes a fig tree. The fig is a symbol of well-being and answers found. The author is pleased with his work as all points are made.

At the end of the second part of "The Magus", when Nicholas starts his own investigation in an attempt to learn the truth about Conchis and the inhabitants of the villa, the locals state that Conchis is long dead. They do not even know where his grave is. "And there, between two cypresses, shaded by a mournful aspidistra-like plant, lay a simple Pentelic marble slab..."¹². According to ancient Greek beliefs, the cypress protects the secrets that no one should know while the aspidistra is associated with fleeting happiness. These plants show Nicholas that his investigation is futile. The aspidistra has wilted – happiness did not last long and he will not find anything. Nicholas fruitlessly seeks in the outside world answers, which he can only find within himself. In part, he finds them. When Nicholas and Alison's long-awaited meeting occurs, he smells the scent of lilac. In Greek mythology, hideous Pan – the god of forests and meadows – fell in love with a beautiful nymph Syrinx and started pursuing her. Terrified, Syrinx asked the gods to hide her and they turned the nymph into a lilac bush. Still, Pan found his beloved by her strong, sweet scent. Since then, lilac has been a symbol of a successful search for the beloved and this is what happens to Nicholas. Sitting on the bench and speaking with Alison, Nicholas finds a round chestnut in his pocket. Chestnut is a symbol of selfishness, which Nicholas has "suffered" from all this time, but it also symbolizes self-development, which characterizes Nicholas as well. Finally, at the end of the novel, as Nicholas and Alison "stood there,

⁸ B. Walker, *Zhenskaya entsiklopedia: simvoly, sakralii, tainstva* (Moscow: Simpozium, 1999), 125.

⁹ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 679.

¹⁰ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*...679.

¹¹ V. P. Aksyonov, *Redkie zemli [Rare Earths]*... 368.

¹² J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 695.

trembling, searching"¹³, Nicholas is confused; he no longer understands anything. "A blackbird, poor fool, singing out of season from the willows by the lake. A flight of gray pigeons over the houses. Fragments of freedom, an anagram made flesh"¹⁴. For Nicholas, this anagram is yet to be solved. The willow is a symbol of indestructibility, resilience, as well as strength in weakness. The blackbird is associated with new opportunities. Pigeon is a symbol of everyday life. The novel ends with these ambiguous and incomprehensible symbols.

As well as cypress, both authors use saffron and almond as hidden symbols.

For Gen, the main character of "Rare Earths", everything ends well – he escapes prison and begins a new life. At this very moment, he smells the scent of saffron and almond. "Gen as the protagonist of our novel remembered that he had crossed a threshold"¹⁵. Saffron is a plant of kings and eternal victors while almond is a symbol of immortality. At the end of the novel, when the main character meets his son in London, he tells him, "I set out in a solution of saffron and almond. And I arrived under the twinkling rare earths"¹⁶. Gen Stratov is a unique person. Having said goodbye to everything – Africa, his beloved wife, and business – Gen begins life anew as a king and eternal victor, no matter what the future holds. Saffron and almond are mentioned in "The Magus" as well. While Aksyonov uses these plant symbols only in relation to Gen Stratov, Fowles divides their meanings and describes two characters – Nicholas and Conchis.

When meeting the Magus for the first time, Nicholas, admiring the villa, smells saffron, which in Hindu culture, is a symbol of "power and wealth, a plant of kings"¹⁷. In the scene where Conchis invites Nicholas to court death using suicide pills, almond is mentioned. Conchis suggests throwing a die and if it is six Nicholas is to take the suicide pill: "But the odor of the colorless liquid was of bitter almonds, acrid and terrifying"¹⁸. In Greek myths, almond is a symbol of immortality. The author shows that playing with death is still playing. Nicholas will continue to live, albeit with a bitter aftertaste.

Discussion

The issue of floral emblems in novels is rarely considered in literary criticism. Of great importance in writing this article were the thesis by M.A. Vashchenko¹⁹ "Floral symbolism in the comparative culturological context", in which floral symbolism is considered as a research field, as well as the research by K.I. Sharafadina²⁰ "Floral alphabet in the imagery of the Pushkin era literature: sources, semantics, forms" in which the author in detail describes and analyzes the influence of floral emblems on cultural codes, hidden in literary works.

¹³ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 811.

¹⁴ J. Fowles, *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 812.

¹⁵ V. P. Aksyonov, *Redkie zemli [Rare Earths]*... 377.

¹⁶ V. P. Aksyonov, *Redkie zemli [Rare Earths]*... 378.

¹⁷ V. V. Kiprinov, *Makhabkharata. Drevneindiyskiy epos* (Moscow: Vostok i Zapad, 2000), 124.

¹⁸ J. Fowles. *Volkhv [The Magus]*... 151.

¹⁹ M. A. Vashchenko, *Tsvetochnaya simvolika v sravnitelno-kulturologicheskom kontekste* (Moscow: MSU, 2000).

²⁰ K. I. Sharafadina, "Alfavit flory" v obraznom yazyke literatury pushkinskoy epokhi: istochniki, semantika, formy (Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskiy institut pečati, 2003).

Conclusions

Thus, floral symbolism plays an important role in the works of the authors. In both novels, the floral motif and abundance of floral metaphors show the authors' connection to the world of nature and the senses, as well as the spheres of daily life and culture, which harmoniously flow into each other “giving birth to the phenomenon of creativity”²¹. In the novels, Aksyonov and Fowles use original beacon-clues in the form of plants as another level of the perception of the texts. The symbolism of floral emblems reveals to the reader one of the many meanings of the text. Although in his novel, Aksyonov mentions fewer plants than Fowles, undoubtedly, he attaches great importance to them as a key to comprehending the novel. In “The Magus”, Fowles uses floral codes as beacons – clues to secrets and hidden meaning of the novel. Fowles implements floral emblems at the level of the plot. Aksyonov, in turn, goes further, using floral symbols not only at the narrative level but also in an attempt to identify the main character. Using floral symbolism, the author describes in detail such unique people as the main character of the novel. Decoding floral emblems hidden in the novel allows the reader to identify the main characters and find answers to many other questions concerning the meaning of the title, as well as the aim and significance of the novels for the author himself.

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²¹ K. I. Sharafadina, “Alfavit flory” v obraznom yazyke literatury pushkinskoy... 291.