ISSN: 3008-1769

The Dialectic of Flowers and Death: The Symbolism of Life and Death in "Ophelia" from an Iconographic Perspective

Jiayuan Ying[1,*]

[1]Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua 321004, China

[*] Corresponding Author

Abstract

"Ophelia" is a paragon of "returning to nature" achieved through Millais's phase of sketching. It is centered on Ophelia, the tragic female character from Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Through highly realistic natural depictions and meticulously designed visual symbols, Millais constructs a beautiful world full of poetic and death metaphors. Based on Panofsky's iconographic theory, this paper decodes the imagery of "flowers" and "death" in the painting through the lenses of semiotics and psychoanalysis, exploring their dialectical relationship of life and death and the cultural codes behind them.

Keywords

Millais, Ophelia, iconography, symbolism of life and death

1. Introduction

John Everett Millais, as a core member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, created his representative work "Ophelia" (1851–1852), which is based on the death of the female character in Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet". Through highly realistic natural description and carefully designed visual symbols, Millais constructs a beautiful world imbued with poetic significance and death metaphors. In the painting, Ophelia floats in a flower-filled stream, her posture serene yet containing elements of tragedy. This visual language reflects not only the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic of "returning to nature" but also hints at the complex Victorian social gaze on women, madness, and death.

Since the 20th century, art historical research has gradually shifted from formal analysis to interdisciplinary approaches such as semiotics and iconography. Panofsky's iconographic theory provides an important pathway for interpreting "Ophelia." Every detail in the painting—such as poppies (symbolizing death), willow branches (symbolizing rejected love), and nettles (symbolizing pain), alongside Ophelia's pale skin and vacant gaze—forms a complete symbolic system. However, existing studies often focus on literary adaptations or aesthetic styles, with insufficient exploration of the dialectical relationship between "life and death" in the image and its cultural significance.

This study employs iconography as the core method, integrating semiotic and psychoanalytic theories to unveil the visual dialectical relationship between "flowers" (nature, youth, ephemeral beauty) and "corpses" (death, decay, the objectification of the female body) in "Ophelia," addressing the fragmented approach traditionally seen in art historical studies of the Pre-Raphaelite symbolic system. This paper will analyze the plant symbols and Ophelia's physical expressions in the painting to explore how the romanticized imagination of women's death in the Victorian era is constructed through art.

ISSN: 3008-1769

2. Preliminary Iconographic Analysis

Millais's "Ophelia" (1851–1852) presents the image of the drowning young girl from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in an extremely realistic naturalistic style. The composition of the painting extends horizontally, with Ophelia floating on her back in a meandering stream, her body slightly tilted, arms spread open, palms facing upwards, depicting a sense of helpless relaxation. Her lips are slightly parted, her gaze vacant and dreamy, and her facial expression hovers between daze and calmness, suggesting a critical state of life about to fade away.

The colors in the painting are rich and delicate. Ophelia wears a silver-white embroidered gown, partially submerged and partially floating in the water, creating folds and flowing lines that echo the ripples of the stream. Her golden-red hair spreads out, drifting with the current and intertwining with the surrounding aquatic plants.

The background features dense natural vegetation, including willows, reeds, and wild roses, each finely depicted, with discernible details of petals and leaves. The stream is crystal-clear, reflecting the light of the sky, with a variety of flowers like poppies, daisies, and stitchwort floating on the surface, forming a dense visual focus.

Light streams in diagonally from the upper left corner of the painting, creating highlights on Ophelia's face, palms, and gown, contrasting sharply with the dark underwater part, thus enhancing the drama of life and death intertwining. In the lower right corner, her gown's edge can be faintly seen sinking into the water, while in the upper left, a willow branch stretches across the stream, seemingly suggesting her process of being "accepted" by nature. The overall atmosphere is tranquil and mournful, creating a strong contrast between the lush vitality of the natural environment and the withering of the character's life.

This initial description focuses on pure formal elements (lines, colors, light and shadow, composition, etc.), without delving into symbolic meanings; yet it is possible to observe the painter's visual suggestion of "coexistence of life and death," laying the foundation for subsequent iconographic analysis.

3. Iconographic Analysis

Millais's "Ophelia" is based on Shakespeare's drama but reconstructs the tragic core of the text through the visual language of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, forming a complex symbolic system interweaving literature, religion, and social metaphors. The following analysis unfolds from two dimensions: plant symbols and bodily narratives.

3.1. Plant Symbols

In the painting (see Figure 1 "Ophelia" - Ophelia 1851, 76.2*111.8cm, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London, John Everett Millais), it is evident that the selection of plants in the work is by no means arbitrary but strictly adheres to the language of flowers from the Victorian era, with a high degree of resonance with the description in Act IV, Scene VII of "Hamlet." In the painting, the willow tree occupies a significant portion; its drooping branches symbolize abandoned love, resonating with Ophelia's tragedy with Hamlet.[1] "This is a tree with a mournful disposition: it chooses to live by water, a tranquil, slow-running river its favored spot; its branches are pendulous and low; and when the wind catches its leaves, it seems to be whispering sad and sorrowful things."[2]

The daisies occupy the upper middle portion of the painting. In " A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion," it describes: "The daisy was known, in Chaucer's time, as

[1] Liu, Dongmei. "An Interpretive Study of Millais's Work 'Ophelia' and Its Iconographic Phenomena." The Grand Stage, 2012, no. 9, pp. 126-127. DOI: 10.15947/j.cnki.dwt.2012.09.128.

[2] Kirkby, M., Diffenbaugh, V. (2011) A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion. US: Ballantine Books

ISSN: 3008-1769

'the day's eye', because the flower opens in the morning and closes in the evening. For centuries, this sweet and tender everyday flower has been a symbol for innocence and lack of worldliness. In the illuminations in medieval Books of Hours, the daisy stood for contempt for worldly goods and also implied that a person could learn something even from the smallest flower in God's creation. Its association with the purity and simplicity of children comes in part from the ancient Celtic belief that when a child dies at birth, an angel throws a daisy down upon the earth to console the bereft parents."[3] The daisies in the painting also play the role of the "eye of the day," suggesting that Ophelia witnesses the occurrence of evil yet is powerless to prevent it and foreshadowing her innocent image in the story.

Around Ophelia's neck, there is a garland of violets, referencing the line from "Hamlet," where Ophelia says, "I would give you a bunch of violets, but they withered before I got to give them to you, when my father died." [4]Similarly, we find in the " A Victorian Flower Dictionary ": "In the wild, the violet does grow very low on the ground, its head downcast and concealing itself amidst foliage from the gaze of the sun. As a symbol for modesty and humility, it appealed to the Victorians' notion of the ideal woman." [5]It symbolizes loyalty and chastity, hinting at Ophelia's pure character and early demise, while also emphasizing to viewers that Ophelia's madness is not solely in relation to Hamlet; the blow from the loss of her father profoundly wounded this young girl's spirit.

The forget-me-nots in the corner represent the girl's eternal love and longing for Hamlet, while also foreshadowing both Shakespeare's and Millais's remembrance of this young girl's pitiable fate. [6]The significance of remembrance can also be seen in the literature: "The little flowers appeared on china and on writing paper, were embroidered on slippers and reproduced in velvet to pin on ladies' bonnets and children's caps. A forget-me-not silver brooch with the initials of a loved one would make a poignant memento mori."[7]

Above the forget-me-nots are reddish-purple flowers, described in many texts as early spring violets or purple pea flowers. However, based on visual comparison, they appear to be orchids from the genus Pleione. In Millais's painting, it becomes the "long-necked orchid" mentioned in "Hamlet," also referred to as "the flower of the dead child." In Victorian times, the term "orchid" was associated with love-making, as reflected in "In Swann's Way,"[8] by Proust, who uses the lovely purple-pink Cattleya orchid to symbolize this theme. This segment in Shakespeare's text, which includes the long-necked orchid, implies that Ophelia's suicide is forced by circumstances. "Such a display of detail will inevitably lead careful readers to further investigate the metaphoric significance of romance, sex, pregnancy, and abortion within the flora and fauna of the drowning scene."[9]

Due to space constraints, other flowers in the painting will not be elaborated on in this article. However, it is certain that Millais, based on his familiarity with the language of flowers, incorporated numerous flowers into the painting that collectively point toward the tragic fate of this loyal, kind, and pure young girl, who could only succumb to death in the embrace of the river.

[3] Kirkby, M., Diffenbaugh, V. (2011) A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion. US: Ballantine Books

[4] Shakespeare. Hamlet. Translated by Zhu Shenghao. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2016, pp. 128-135.

[5] Kirkby, M., Diffenbaugh, V. (2011) A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion. US: Ballantine Books

[6] Zhou, Mei. "Appreciation of Millais's Ophelia in Relation to Shakespeare's Original Work." Forum of the New Era, 2024, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 215-217.

[7] Kirkby, M., Diffenbaugh, V. (2011) A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion. US: Ballantine Books

[8] Kirkby, M., Diffenbaugh, V. (2011) A Victorian Flower Dictionary: the Language of Flowers Companion. US: Ballantine Books

[9] Zhou, Mei. "Appreciation of Millais's Ophelia in Relation to Shakespeare's Original Work." Forum of the New Era, 2024, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 215-217.

ISSN: 3008-1769

Figure 1: "Ophelia" - Ophelia 1851, 76.2*111.8cm, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, London, John Everett Millais

3.2. Bodily Narrative

Ophelia's slightly open arms and upward-facing palms are often interpreted as a Christ-like pose, symbolizing passive sacrifice. Her facial expression is calm with no struggle, lips parted as if wanting to speak, and her gaze is empty, staring at the sky, conveying a sense of release after despair and a critical state of mental collapse. This allows viewers to more deeply comprehend her emotional struggles amidst a complicated destiny, providing a greater impact than the original textual description. "Looking again at Ophelia's expression, her eyes unfocused, lips slightly parted, with a faint blush on her cheeks. This calmness reflects Ophelia's madness; under normal circumstances, falling into a river would elicit instinctive struggle, panic, and fear. Millais not only realistically restores the scene but also captures the character's personality and emotions."[10]

Regarding Ophelia's hand gestures, some critics suggest that the positioning of her hands may metaphorically allude to the orans posture of prayer. This stance often appears on catacombs or sarcophagi to depict saints praying for the dead, and such an open gesture signifies compliance with God's will. Most Pre-Raphaelite members were Christians, and their shared virtues, which related to religion, manifest prominently in their artworks. When Ophelia faces her own death, her lack of struggle simultaneously reflects her utter detachment from the world and hints at her acceptance of death and forgiveness of the suffering of life, embodying a posture of surrender.

[10] Zhong, Yueying. "An Iconographic Interpretation of Millais's Work 'Ophelia' and Its Symbolic Implications." Drama Home, 2019, vol. 18, pp. 220-221.

ISSN: 3008-1769

Figure 2: Mosaic from a Church in Ravenna, Italy

4. Iconographic Interpretation

Millais's "Ophelia," with its ultimate realism and meticulously encoded symbolic system, transcends mere literary illustration, becoming a visual fable of the cultural spirit of the Victorian era. Through Panofsky's iconographic framework, its deeper structural meanings can be revealed—the painting serves as both a critique of industrial society by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and a map of patriarchal cultural discipline over the female body, as well as an eternal dialectic concerning life and death, nature, and civilization.

4.1. The Dialectic of Nature and Death

The Pre-Raphaelites advocated for a "return to nature" as a response to the alienation brought by industrialization; however, the portrayal of "nature" in "Ophelia" is rife with contradictions: the lush vegetation is imbued with anthropomorphic qualities (such as willows weeping and nettles stinging), implying that nature becomes a co-conspirator in human tragedy. This "empathetic nature" serves as an ironic commentary on the Romantic ideal of "the divinity of nature"—Ophelia's death does not seamlessly integrate into a sublime natural order, but rather is consumed by the system of plant symbols, alluding to the spiritual disintegration of the individual in an industrial society dominated by mechanistic rationality and material expansion. The stream is simultaneously a "river of life" (the clear water sustaining the plants) and a "river of forgetfulness" (the dark depths swallowing the body). This contradiction reflects the Victorian ambivalence toward nature—an eagerness for it as a spiritual refuge yet a fear of its uncontrollable primal forces.

Ophelia's death thus becomes a metaphor for the crisis of modernity: her body suspended between nature and civilization, between life and death, mirrors the 19th-century British condition torn between traditional beliefs and scientific rationality.

4.2. The Symbiosis of Repression and Indulgence

The details in the painting expose the deep-seated anxieties of Victorian society, as the "elegant metaphors" of plant symbols (such as daisies representing innocence) veil the truth of sexual repression. Ophelia's damp gown and flowing red hair contain erotic implications yet are "purified" by the moral meanings of the flowers, reflecting society's fear and regulation of women's desires. The Pre-Raphaelites claimed to portray nature with a scientific approach (such as accurate botanical details), but the pervasive mystique of death in the painting (such as the hypnotic quality of the poppies) reveals a spiritual emptiness that rationality cannot soothe. This conflict reaches its peak in Ophelia's hollow gaze—she is both the object of scientific observation and the unknowable "Other."

ISSN: 3008-1769

4.3. The Aesthetic Declaration of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Critique of Modernity Beneath a Nostalgic Mask

Through "Ophelia," Millais practices the artistic agenda of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood while implying a self-deconstructive quality: the surface of the painting imitates the intricate texture of medieval manuscripts yet relies on modern techniques (such as artificially constructed sketching scenes and photographic perspectives), thus exposing the illusion of "returning to tradition." The extreme detailing of every petal creates a visually overwhelming experience of "symbolic overload," suggesting the oppressive impact of information explosion in industrial society on the individual. Ophelia's body, submerged by plants, mirrors the spirit of modern individuals suffocating amid material abundance.

5. Reflections on the Symbols of Life and Death in the Image

In "Laocoön," Lessing established the core argument that poetry and painting adhere to different aesthetic principles. Poetry is the art of time, adept at narrating actions and plots that unfold continuously over time; painting is the art of space, skilled at depicting objects that coexist in space, infused with the most "pregnant" moments. [11]Millais's "Ophelia" happens to lie at the intersection of this theory: it draws on Shakespeare's poetic drama (the narrative's temporality) yet must use a still image (the spatial presentation) to convey a complete story about death. This chapter will use Lessing's theoretical framework to re-examine how the painting, through the management of spatial form, distills, transforms, and deepens the theme of life and death, ultimately revealing the cultural coding behind its visual strategies.

Lessing posits that painting should choose the "most pregnant moment" in the development of action, the peak moment just before viewers can imagine the preceding and following events. Millais's selection of the moment of Ophelia's death perfectly exemplifies this theory. He does not depict Ophelia struggling in the water or the body after sinking, but chooses to show her floating in the water in a critical state of life that is about to fade. This moment is replete with "pregnancy": her slightly parted lips and vacant gaze prompt viewers to recall her previous singing and madness (the past) while also foreshadowing the imminent finality of death (the future). The sense of tranquility in the painting does not simplify death but rather encapsulates the process of dying, transforming the temporal tragedy into a spatial existence available for contemplation.

This choice also exposes the dilemmas and strategies within the poetry-painting transition. Ophelia's death in Shakespeare's text is depicted indirectly, described by the queen, filled with dynamism and temporality: "She climbed onto a branch that hung sideways... there, her clothes spread out, making her temporarily float on the water like a mermaid... But soon, her garments absorbed water and became heavy, and before this poor soul could finish her song, she sank into the mud." Millais cannot replicate this process; thus, he selects the moment of "clothes spreading out... floating like a mermaid" and pours all detail into enhancing its suggestiveness. The submerged hem of the gown, the flowing hair, and the unfocused gaze are all arrows guiding viewers to complete the narrative. Therefore, the "life and death" in the painting are not static oppositions but a spatialized, suspended process, exemplifying Lessing's assertion that painting implies time through space.

As a spatial art form, painting generates meaning through the juxtaposition of objects. Lessing notes that painting suggests the states of the soul through bodily movements. In "Ophelia," Millais juxtaposes the symbols of "life" (the thriving and varied flowers) with the "body" of death (Ophelia), directly unfolding the dialectic of life and death on the same visual plane.

[11] Lessing. Laocoon. Translated by Zhu Guangqian. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016, pp. 19-22.

ISSN: 3008-1769

The spatial metaphor of "flowers" and "corpses": In the preliminary iconographic description, we observed the vigorous vitality of the natural environment forming a stark contrast to the character's fading life. On the iconographic level, each flower (the purity of daisies, the loyalty of violets, the death implied by poppies) acts as a compressed cultural time capsule, bearing the diachronic meanings derived from literary traditions and the history of floral language. Millais weaves these symbols around Ophelia, as if crafting a web of meaning for her. Her body is enveloped and submerged by these symbols, not merely as background but constituting a spatial realm of fate. Life (the vitality and symbolic meanings of plants) and death (the disappearance of the body) are not sequential; they exist simultaneously and annotate each other, creating a visual coexistence that underscores the indivisibility of fate.

The posture of the body as an annotation of the "pregnant moment": Ophelia's slightly open arms and upward-facing orans posture, under Lessing's theory, can be interpreted as a highly condensed bodily movement suggesting a mental state. It is neither an obvious struggle (that belongs to the moment before) nor complete rigidity (which belongs to the moment after) but rather a near-sacred acceptance after surrendering resistance. This posture freezes the spiritual turning point from despair to tranquility, directly externalizing the mental state at the moment of "near-death." It prompts viewers to contemplate the causes (oppression from a patriarchal society, the dissolution of love, mental collapse) and consequences (the completion of death, the conclusion of tragedy), thereby condensing the intricate temporal psychological narrative into a single still moment.

Lessing's theory is primarily based on the rationality and restraint of classical sculpture. However, as a Pre-Raphaelite painter, Millais's extreme realism and saturated style challenge Lessing's admonition against paintings depicting the peak of passion. The meticulous portrayal of Ophelia's calm yet flushed face and the dense layering of numerous plant symbols create an overloaded visual experience. This overload is precisely intended to infuse as many narratives and emotional capacities as possible into a single moment, transcending the limitations of spatial art.

Moreover, this painting constructs a unique "threshold space." Ophelia floats between the surface of the water and the depths, between life and death, between consciousness and madness, between nature and culture. The water's surface divides the spatial composition of the painting and symbolizes the boundary between life and death. Lessing's theory helps us to understand how painting excels at depicting such spatial juxtapositions and boundaries. Millais utilizes this characteristic to spatialize Ophelia's tragic fate completely: her body is defined and encircled by various social and cultural symbols (floral language, literary archetypes, gender norms). The embrace of water is both nature's embrace and society's devouring. This "threshold space" thus becomes a poignant metaphor for the dilemmas faced by women in the Victorian era—they are suspended between family and society, angels and madwomen, purity and desire, much like the character of Ophelia in the painting, unable to find a solid position.

Through the lens of Lessing's "Laocoön," we see that "Ophelia" profoundly contemplates the themes of life and death, intricately reflected in its strategies of poetry-painting transition and philosophical spatial composition. Millais, by selecting the "most pregnant moment," transforms the temporal tragic narrative into a suggestive still scene; through juxtaposing symbols of "life" with the body of "death," he spatially unfolds the dialectic of life and death; ultimately, he creates a "threshold space," rendering Ophelia's body a site of contestation and definition by various cultural forces. Therefore, this painting transcends the realm of literary illustration, becoming an extraordinary artistic practice that addresses how to express the fleeting within stillness and how to condense time within space, and the mystery of life and death is eternally and profoundly questioned within this tension of form and content.

ISSN: 3008-1769

6. Conclusion

Millais's "Ophelia" is far from a simple literary illustration, but rather a visual fable interwoven with complex cultural codes. The painting's extreme realism and meticulously encoded plant symbols (such as the poppies symbolizing death, the daisies representing innocence, and the orchids suggesting desire) collectively construct a symbolic system that visualizes Ophelia's tragic fate. Her bodily posture—reminiscent of Christ's sacrifice and her vacant gaze—has been interpreted as a state of passive sacrifice and a critical moment of spiritual collapse.

On a deeper level, the work reveals multiple dialectical relationships: the juxtaposition of lush nature with individual death exposes the Victorian ambivalence of yearning for yet fearing nature; the pure connotations of flowers and the erotic implications within the damp gown and flowing hair of the character create a tension that reflects society's repression and regulation of female desire. Ultimately, this seemingly nostalgic and beautiful painting is essentially a critique of the crisis of modernity in industrial society—the body of Ophelia, drowned by symbols, is precisely a microcosm of modern individuals suffocating amidst material abundance. Through cultivating the "most pregnant moment" and the "threshold space," it condenses the temporal tragedy into an eternal spatial image, completing a profound inquiry into the themes of life and death.

References

[1] Shakespeare. Hamlet. Translated by Zhu Shenghao. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2016, pp. 128-135.

[2] Ruskin, John. Modern Painters. Translated by Ding Caiyun. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005, pp. 76-82.

[3] Lessing. Laocoon. Translated by Zhu Guangqian. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016, pp. 19-22.

[4] Panofsky, Erwin. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. Translated by Qi Yinping and Fan Jingzhong. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2011, pp. 33-46.

[5] [5] Xiao, Hong. A Study on the Melancholic Emotions of the Pre-Raphaelites. Master's thesis, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, 2023. DOI: 10.27191/d.cnki.gjdtc.2023.000211.

[6] [6] Zhou, Mei. "Appreciation of Millais's Ophelia in Relation to Shakespeare's Original Work." Forum of the New Era, 2024, vol. 1, no. 8, pp. 215-217.

[7] Jia, Lan. "Daisies, Buttercups, Poppies, and Death...—The Flower Language of Ophelia." Art Appreciation, 2022, no. 13, pp. 33-35 + 32.

[8] Debra Mancoff. The Language of Flowers: Floral Symbolism in the Pre-Raphaelites. Translated by Sun Jing. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2022, pp. 24-30.

[9] Yang, Junyuan. Ophelia in the Eyes of Pre-Raphaelite Painters. Master's thesis, China Academy of Art, 2021. DOI: 10.27626/d.cnki.gzmsc.2021.000103.

[10] Lu, Yijia. "Exploring Symbolic Meanings in Painting Creation through Millais's Ophelia." Beauty and Times (Chinese Edition), 2016, no. 8, pp. 65-66. DOI: 10.16129/j.cnki.mysdz.2016.08.028.

[11] Liu, Dongmei. "An Interpretive Study of Millais's Work Ophelia and Its Iconographic Phenomena." The Grand Stage, 2012, no. 9, pp. 126-127. DOI: 10.15947/j.cnki.dwt.2012.09.128.

[12] Millais, J.G. The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais. 2nd ed. London: Methuen & Co., 1899, pp. 115-123.

[13] Pointon, Marcia R. Pre-Raphaelite Revisited: The Poetry of Drawing. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 89-107.

[14] Liu, Xuming. A Study of John Ruskin's Aesthetic Philosophy of Art. Master's thesis, Southeast University, Jiangsu, 2009. DOI: 10.7666/d.y1754651.

[15] Zhu, Xiaolan. "Study of the Theory of 'Gaze'." Master's thesis, Nanjing University, 2011.