

LITERARY DEVICE: SYMBOLISM
-AND-
LECTURE TOPIC: OPHELIA'S BOUQUET

Symbolism is the use of objects to represent abstract ideals. Although the term was not specifically coined until the late 1850s, Shakespeare still used the device to make various points throughout his works. In *Hamlet*, one distinct use of symbols occurs in Act 4.6, when Ophelia uses the symbolism of her floral bouquet to represent ideas about love, betrayal, regret, and loss.

Ophelia makes some telling allusions in the symbolism of her death-bouquet. She sings to her brother and others who witness her descent into madness: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. And there's pansies, that's for thoughts... There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me; we / may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. You (must) wear / your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when / my father died. They say he made good end" (4.5.199-209).

In the Renaissance, as do many flowers today, the particular blooms selected had specific meanings. For example, daisies stood for unhappiness in love; violets, faithfulness.

SMALL GROUP EXERCISE:

One of the things that is both wonderful and frustrating about Shakespearean plays is the scant amount of stage directions. In this scene, there is a great deal of ambiguity about who Ophelia gives her particular flowers. For example, is the rue intended for Hamlet, for Gertrude, Laertes, or someone else?

In groups of three or four students, have them examine the specific flowers Ophelia distributes in 4.5.199-210. To whom would they direct Ophelia give her symbolic blooms and why?