

A Study on Iconography within the Work of John Everett Millais.



John Everett Millais
Spring (Apple Blossoms)
1859
Oil on canvas
113 x 176cm
Lady Lever Art
Gallery, Port
Sunlight

John Millais' 1859 *Apple Blossoms* depicts eight young girls enjoying a picnic on a spring day. The composition is bright and high in saturation, with opulent colours creating a warm and joyous atmosphere. In the foreground, the girls idle on the grass. On the left-hand side of the canvas, a girl in a burgundy dress pours liquid from a jug, two girls sit at her feet, both engrossed in their own activities. In the middle of the composition there is a large bowl containing curds and whey placed on a blanket (Escolme, 2014) a fallen leaf rests in front. Behind the bowl, a girl in grey holds golden spoons, some of which have been passed amongst the others. Drawing the eyes of the viewer to the right-hand side of the canvas, a girl in a yellow dress lies salaciously on her back, she holds a blade of grass to her lips and makes eye contact with the viewer. Almost out of view, a scythe hovers over the young girl. Three of the girls have various flowers in their hair and there are also baskets of flowers placed upon the grass. In the background, behind a short wall, there is an orchard, thus the perspective is deep as we can see into the trees. Numerous

flowers grow amongst the trees which fill the top half of the canvas, their leaves turning from buds to blossoms and back again.

Apple Blossoms is rich in iconography. For Millais, every brushstroke is symbolic, alluding to the overarching theme of the death of innocence. Arguably this is most prevalent in the positioning of the girl in yellow. The epitome of seduction, she lies on the grass making direct eye contact with the viewer. Grass itself symbolises submission (Gardening Channel, n.d.) according to Victorian Floriography which would have been prevalent as Millais painted *Apple Blossoms*. Further, the girl holds a blade of grass to her lips in order to draw attention, specifically masculine attention as the art of the 1800s had a predominantly male audience. It is essential to note that no other girl in the painting is aware of the viewer's presence, they remain consumed by childhood virtuousness, in contrast to the girl in yellow who is perhaps revelling in the fact she is being watched. The colour yellow represents happiness and optimism, though this is harshly juxtaposed by the presence of the scythe looming over the young girl. Commonly associated with the grim reaper, the scythe develops the motif of death within the painting. Symbolically, the scythe does not extend over any of the other girls, they are unaffected by the actions of the girl in yellow. However, in slight opposition to this notion, the girl in black is arguably on the cusp of womanhood as Millais demonstrates by depicting her with red hair. Traditionally, red hair is an iconographical attribution of the femme fatale, a temptress who likely leads to destruction and distress. Though it is important to note that whilst her hair is red, this is contrasted by the crown of irises that she wears. The iris connotes purity, chastity, and is often associated with the Virgin Mary (Hall, 1996), thus implicating the idea that despite the fact the girl may be a femme fatale, she is not fully impure.

In order to build upon the central philosophy of this painting, that being the idea that innocence is ephemeral, Millais makes multiple references to the Victorian language of flowers. Each flower within *Apple Blossoms* carries a distinct meaning. Most importantly this is exemplified in the eponymous 'apple blossoms' that occupy the top half of the composition. Cycling from buds, to blossoms, to bare leaves, the apple blossoms signify the transition from girlhood into womanhood, the figurative death of childhood sweetness and virtue. Interestingly, the trees themselves are a female symbol

of the earth's fecundity due to their seasonal dying and renewal (Hall, 1996). Furthering the discussion around the fleeting nature of innocence, the girl seated in the foreground wearing a blue dress has a flower chain neatly woven through her hair. When looking closely at the canvas it becomes evident that Millais has included two very different flowers. Primarily the chain is made up of Jamaican primroses which symbolise early youth (Gardening Channel, n.d.), a nod to the virtue so often associated with this, though it is essential to note the presence of two other flowers in the chain on the viewer's right-hand side, these flowers are most likely Michaelmas daisies. Interwoven, the two flowers present the dichotomy between innocence and impermanence, Michaelmas daisies were often used as a farewell flower (Roux, 2020) thus suggesting that it is only a matter of time before the remaining girls lose their virtue. This dichotomy is again explored through the flowers that grow behind the wall which separates the girls from the orchard. Notably, both dandelions and gypsophila (commonly known as 'baby's breath') can be observed. Baby's breath connotes purity due to the fact it is similar in appearance to the delicate lace of a bridal veil, whereas dandelions are often recognised as a Christian symbol of grief (Hall, 1996).

Arguably, the position of the girls is incredibly significant. By placing them in front of a wall, Millais figuratively bars them from society, representative of the way in which women in the 19th century were often dismissed. If we are to assume the wall wraps around the entire garden, then it is possible to assert that the girls are within a hortus conclusus. Traditionally, the hortus conclusus is associated with the Virgin Mary as she is often depicted within one. Horti conclusi symbolise the preservation of virginity, an attempt to crystallise innocence and prevent the emergence into womanhood. Ideally, the purity of the girls would remain untainted whilst they reside in the garden, however, one cannot escape the sinister and overarching presence of death. Millais' constant allusions to the death of innocence, notably the fallen leaves, dandelions, and Michaelmas daisies remind the viewer that the sweetness of childhood is but a temporary illusion.

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