

Essence of Asphodel: Lily Evans Potter and the Poetic Tradition

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I have learned much in my life
from books
and out of them
about love.
Death
is not the end of it.
~William Carlos Williams

For hardly can my tremulous lips draw breath
To fill the silver trumpet with thy praise,
So bowed am I before thy mystery;
So bowed and broken on Love's terrible wheel,
~Oscar Wilde

I believe that when Potions Master Severus Snape sees young Harry Potter sitting in his class for the first time in Book One, he has someone else on his mind - Lily Evans Potter, Harry's mother.

Harry is often noted for his resemblance to both his parents, however his eyes are like Lily's - a bright green. I will show that the ingredients for one potion - the Draught of the Living Death - are the "essence" of Snape's feelings towards Lily, and that the two ingredients, which are asphodel and wormwood, symbolize her character in general. Then I will discuss the literary tradition of the references to Asphodel.

In Snape's first Potions lesson in Book One, he quizzes Harry about various potions ingredients:

Quote "Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.

"I don't know, sit," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

"Tut, tut -- fame clearly isn't everything."

. . . "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death

It's a strange choice for a first Potions Lesson for eleven year olds - the Draught of Living Death. Snape's extremely "grave" manner in that scene sets the somber tone for his relationship with Harry from that point on through the series. Yet in six books so far, Snape has yet to say the name "Lily." This first Potions Class, with the theme of death and healing, is about as close as Snape ever comes to betraying an emotion about Lily, although there are other clues, such as his intense dislike of Harry's father, James.

Dumbledore tells Tom Riddle that there are "things worse than death," and I believe one of those things is to go on living after losing someone we love. If Severus Snape loved Lily Evans Potter, then he is clearly thinking of her demise as he grills Harry about potions ingredients.

The two ingredients - asphodel and wormwood - can be seen as symbols of Lily's death. The asphodel flower represents Lily, and the "bitter" plant wormwood, her betrayer, Peter "Wormtail" Pettigrew.

Wormwood, or Artemisia, is also the main ingredient in the green drink "Absinthe," also called "The Green Fairy" or "Green Goddess." Lily was known most of all for her green eyes, shared by her son.

What is Asphodel?

Asphodel is a flower known to the ancients, and a member of the family Liliaceae: *Asphodelus Ramosus*. It's tall and wand-like shape gave it the name, which is Greek for "sceptre."

The Greeks thought that Asphodel was used in the afterlife as a food for fallen heroes in the fields of heaven, or the Elyseum Fields. Here on earth, it was planted near tombs.

Since Lily Evans Potter is dead, that is obviously something that Snape is thinking about, as he looks at and quizzes her only son, who is the reason for her death. Lily's heroism in standing up to Lord Voldemort is also cause for praise, since her love also made the killing curse rebound off of baby Harry, vanquishing the Dark Lord.

Asphodel is one of the most praised plants in all of literature, from ancient times till now. The mention of Asphodel is always a symbol of death, loss, grief, desire and regret.

From "The Odyssey" by Homer:

Quote"Hermes, the helper, led them down the dank ways. Past the streams of Oceanus and the White Rock, past the gates of the Sun they sped and the land of dreams, and soon they came to the mead of asphodel, where dwell the souls, the phantoms of men outworn."

From "Hawthorne Tide" by Algernon Swinburne

QuotePale and pure as a maiden secluded in secret and cherished with fear,

One sweet glad hawthorn smiles as it shrinks under shelter, screened

By two strong brethren whose bounteous blossom outsoars it, year after year,

While earth still cleaves to the live spring's breast as a babe unweaned.

Never was amaranth fairer in fields where heroes of old found rest,

Never was asphodel sweeter: but here they endure not long,

Though ever the sight that salutes them again and adores them awhile is blest,

And the heart is a hymn, and the sense is a soul, and the soul is a song.

From "An Asphodel," by Alan Ginsberg

QuoteO dear sweet rosy

unattainable desire

... how sad, no way

to change the mad

cultivated asphodel,

the visible reality . . .

From "Trial by Existence" by Robert Frost

QuoteEven the bravest that are slain

Shall not dissemble their surprise

On waking to find valor reign,

Even as on earth, in paradise;

And where they sought without the sword

Wide fields of asphodel fore'er,

To find that the utmost reward

Of daring should be still to dare...

That Greeny Flower

Perhaps the most famous poem evoking the symbolism of loss connected to Asphodel is the following poem by William Carlos Williams. The speaker in the poem is lamenting a lost love, and recalls the sense of "foreboding" as they pressed the flowers of asphodel.

What is reminiscent of Lily Evans is the scent of the flowers: "a moral odor that brings me close to you." In the poem, the scent is compared with honeysuckle, which is the flower Harry smells in the Love Potion, "Amortentia," in HBP; the scent reminds him of Ginny Weasley.

Love, Scent, and Memory are all connected in the HP world. Harry sits with Ginny at the Burrow in GoF and smells the honeysuckle on the summer air, and that becomes part of his "loving memory" of her. I believe the same thing is going on with Asphodel for Snape, which unfortunately is a plant connected to death, and is also a type of Lily.

The "voice" in this poem is wistful and bitter, confused yet philosophical. If they were friends, it's easy to imagine Snape

saying this poem to himself, wondering why Lily had to die before her time. Also note the mention of a Book the two people shared - perhaps a clue to the Snape/Lily connection in HBP?

From "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

QuoteOf asphodel, that greeny flower,

like a buttercup

upon its branching stem-

save that it's green and wooden-

I come, my sweet,

to sing to you.

We lived long together

a life filled,

if you will,

with flowers. So that

I was cheered

when I came first to know

that there were flowers also

in he*l.

Today

I'm filled with the fading memory of those flowers

that we both loved,

even to this poor

colorless thing-

I saw it

when I was a child-

little prized among the living

but the dead see,

asking among themselves:

What do I remember

that was shaped

as this thing is shaped?

while our eyes fill

with tears.

Of love, abiding love

it will be telling

though too weak a wash of crimson

colors it

to make it wholly credible.

There is something

something urgent

I have to say to you

and you alone

but it must wait

while I drink in

the joy of your approach,

perhaps for the last time.

And so

with fear in my heart

I drag it out

and keep on talking

for I dare not stop.

Listen while I talk on

against time.

It will not be

for long.

I have forgot

and yet I see clearly enough

something

central to the sky

which ranges round it.

An odor

springs from it!

A sweetest odor!

Honeysuckle! And now
there comes the buzzing of a bee!
and a whole flood
of sister memories!
Only give me time,
time to recall them
before I shall speak out.
Give me time,
time.
When I was a boy
I kept a book
to which, from time
to time,
I added pressed flowers
until, after a time,
I had a good collection.
The asphodel,
forebodingly,
among them.
I bring you,
reawakened,
a memory of those flowers.
They were sweet
when I pressed them
and retained
something of their sweetness
a long time.
It is a curious odor,
a moral odor,
that brings me
near to you.
The color
was the first to go.
There had come to me
a challenge,
your dear self,
mortal as I was,
the lily's throat
to the hummingbird!
Endless wealth,
I thought,
held out its arms to me.
A thousand tropics
in an apple blossom.
The generous earth itself
gave us lief.
The whole world
became my garden!
But the sea
which no one tends
is also a garden
when the sun strikes it
and the waves
are wakened.
I have seen it
and so have you
when it puts all flowers
to shame.
Too, there are the starfish
stiffened by the sun
and other sea wrack
and weeds. We knew that
along with the rest of it
for we were born by the sea,
knew its rose hedges

to the very water's brink.
There the pink mallow grows
and in their season
strawberries
and there, later,
we went to gather
the wild plum.
I cannot say
that I have gone to he*1
for your love
but often
found myself there
in your pursuit.
I do not like it
and wanted to be
in heaven. Hear me out.
Do not turn away.
I have learned much in my life
from books
and out of them
about love.
Death
is not the end of it.
There is a hierarchy
which can be attained,
I think,
in its service.
Its guerdon
is a fairy flower;
a cat of twenty lives.
If no one came to try it
the world
would be the loser.
It has been
for you and me
as one who watches a storm
come in over the water.
We have stood
from year to year
before the spectacle of our lives
with joined hands.
The storm unfolds.
Lightning
plays about the edges of the clouds.
The sky to the north
is placid,
blue in the afterglow
as the storm piles up.
It is a flower
that will soon reach
the apex of its bloom.
We danced,
in our minds,
and read a book together.
You remember?
It was a serious book.
And so books
entered our lives. . .

~William Carlos Williams

Another poet who often used Asphodel as a motif in his poems was Oscar Wilde. Again, Asphodel is evoked as the plant which grows on the fields of the brave, yet which sadly separates the speaker from the dead.

In the first poem, a woman is being compared to Helen of Troy. Of course Severus Snape's mother had the name "Eileen," which is a version of Helen:

From "The New Helen" by Oscar Wilde

Quote. . . Ay! even now the glory of thy fame
Burns in those fields of trampled asphodel,
Where the high lords whom Ilion knew so well
Clash ghostly shields, and call upon thy name.

Where hast thou been? in that enchanted land
Whose slumbering vales forlorn Calypso knew,
Where never mower rose at break of day
But all unswathed the trammelling grasses grew,
And the sad shepherd saw the tall corn stand
Till summer's red had changed to withered grey?
Didst thou lie there by some Lethaeon stream
Deep brooding on thine ancient memory,
The crash of broken spears, the fiery gleam
From shivered helm, the Grecian battle-cry?

Nay, thou wert hidden in that hollow hill
With one who is forgotten utterly,
. . . To-day at Rome the silent nations kneel;
Who gat from Love no joyous gladdening,
But only Love's intolerable pain,
Only a sword to pierce her heart in twain,
Only the bitterness of child-bearing.

The lotus-leaves which heal the wounds of Death
Lie in thy hand; O, be thou kind to me,
While yet I know the summer of my days;
For hardly can my tremulous lips draw breath
To fill the silver trumpet with thy praise,
So bowed am I before thy mystery;
So bowed and broken on Love's terrible wheel,
That I have lost all hope and heart to sing,
Yet care I not what ruin time may bring
If in thy temple thou wilt let me kneel.

. . . Nor shall I ever see thy face again,
But in this poisonous garden-close must stay,
Crowning my brows with the thorn-crown of pain,
Till all my loveless life shall pass away.
The Dead Rise Not Again

It is easy to compare the next poem to the story of Lily Potter, because many of the poetic motifs remind us of the view of death found in the HP universe: Love is eternal but tied to loss because we are mortal; Death is not an ending yet the dead will not return to us; and in some ways, the dead are lucky because they are in the fields of Asphodel, unlike those left behind filled with regret. The only atonement seems to be the hope of death someday, in order to be reunited. That is actually the hope Harry had in OotP, which spared him from possession by the Dark Lord.

"Panthea" by Oscar Wilde

Quote. . . Dost thou not hear the murmuring nightingale,
Like water bubbling from a silver jar,
So soft she sings the envious moon is pale,
That high in heaven she is hung so far
She cannot hear that love-enraptured tune,--
Mark how she wreathes each horn with mist, yon late and labouring moon.

White lilies, in whose cups the gold bees dream,
The fallen snow of petals where the breeze
Scatters the chestnut blossom, or the gleam
Of boyish limbs in water,--are not these
Enough for thee, dost thou desire more?
Alas! the Gods will give nought else from their eternal store.

. . . They sit at ease, our Gods they sit at ease,
Strewing with leaves of rose their scented wine,
They sleep, they sleep, beneath the rocking trees
Where asphodel and yellow lotus twine,
Mourning the old glad days before they knew
What evil things the heart of man could dream, and dreaming do.

And far beneath the brazen floor they see
Like swarming flies the crowd of little men,
The bustle of small lives, then wearily
Back to their lotus-haunts they turn again . . .

. . . There never does that dreary north-wind blow
Which leaves our English forests bleak and bare,
. . . To wake them in the silver-fretted night
When we lie weeping for some sweet sad sin, some dead delight.

Alas! they know the far Lethaeon spring,
The violet-hidden waters well they know,
Where one whose feet with tired wandering
Are faint and broken may take heart and go,
And from those dark depths cool and crystalline
Drink, and draw balm, and sleep for sleepless souls, and anodyne.

But we oppress our natures, God or Fate
Is our enemy, we starve and feed
On vain repentance--O we are born too late!
What balm for us in bruised poppy seed
Who crowd into one finite pulse of time
The joy of infinite love and the fierce pain of infinite crime.

O we are wearied of this sense of guilt,
Wearied of pleasure's paramour despair,
Wearied of every temple we have built,
Wearied of every right, unanswered prayer,
For man is weak; God sleeps: and heaven is high:
One fiery-coloured moment: one great love; and lo! we die.

. . . Over Death's river to the sunless land,
Victim and wine and vow are all in vain,
The tomb is sealed; the soldiers watch; the dead rise not again.

. . . Nothing is lost in nature, all things live in Death's despite.

The boy's first kiss, the hyacinth's first bell,
The man's last passion, and the last red spear
That from the lily leaps, the asphodel
Which will not let its blossoms blow for fear
Of too much beauty, . . .

The yellow buttercups that shake for mirth
At daybreak know a pleasure not less real
Than we do, when in some fresh-blossoming wood,
We draw the spring into our hearts, and feel that life is good.

And thus without life's conscious torturing pain
In some sweet flower we will feel the sun,
And from the linnet's throat will sing again,
And as two gorgeous-mailed snakes will run
Over our graves. . .

Is the light vanished from our golden sun,
Or is this daedal-fashioned earth less fair,
That we are nature's heritors, and one

With every pulse of life that beats the air?
Rather new suns across the sky shall pass,
New splendour come unto the flower, new glory to the grass.
Conclusion

We know that Lily Evans Potter is dead and won't be returning. Her memory, in my opinion, is symbolized by the Asphodel, the lily described as a potion ingredient by Severus Snape on Harry's first day of school. What is the "glory" in her death that led her to the fields of Asphodel in the afterlife? Only that her son could go on living, and hopefully vanquish the Dark Lord again. Why did Severus Snape make the "asphodel connection" on Harry's first day at Hogwarts? Was he merely picking on the son of his old rival James, or was he evoking the memory of Harry's mother and his childhood friend? Hopefully we will find out more in *The Deathly Hallows*. Considering the name of the book, we have to hope that the answer will be there.

Sources

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