

An Analysis of the Symbolic Meanings of Colors in Beloved

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Abstract: In *Beloved*, Morrison successfully used color symbolism to reveal the victimization of the blacks' society under slavery. The color symbolic image in this novel plays a great role in the profound thoughts and themes. In this novel, the author's description of color not only reflects the differences in the living environment of black and white people, but also reflects the spiritual world of black people. Therefore, it is of practical significance to study the color symbol of *Beloved*. This paper focuses on the symbolic meaning of color words in Morrison's novel *Beloved*, to provide some valuable references for scholars to study the image of color in the future.

1. Introduction

Beloved tells the lives and experiences of colored people under the influence of slavery. At the same time, the author cleverly uses a variety of colors in this novel to mobilize the reader's visual participation and guide the reader to understand the profound connotation of the novel from a deeper level.

The present research on the color symbolism in *Beloved* can be divided into two category. By analyzing the three method Morrison employs on color, some scholars find the function of color on plot constructing, character portraying and theme revealing in *Beloved*. It's inadequate to analyzing the method of color expression. Besides, the color used is related to the symbolic meanings and spiritual consciousness of black people. Some Scholars analyze different colors separately, and discuss their connection with the main character and the theme of novel. Red has important symbolic meaning, so Luo gives 8 symbolic meanings on red, which reveals the significance of red on a deep level. Wang discuss the connection between the symbolic meaning of red and green and the important role in revealing and deepening the theme of this work. Cui points out how the color change reveals the breakdown of the black's psychological world to show the reader how the author uses color words to reflect the black people's mental breakdown. Starting with black and white as a starting point for discussion, Zhou analyzes the importance of black and white as background colors in this novel. Xu added that gray, white and orange symbolizes the incompleteness of black freedom under the squeeze of white culture.

Therefore, the present study on color symbolism in *Beloved* is inadequate. This paper analyzes the colors mentioned in the novel one by one to dig out the “unspeakable certain thing” (Morrison 1994:23-26) that Morrison express in this novel. Besides, the main character of the novel is black people. Therefore, this paper takes black and white as the background colors to explore the symbolic meanings of various color words in *Beloved*.

2. Symbolism of Colors

2.1. Definition of Symbolism

Symbolism is one of the devices to enrich short fiction. Symbolism refers that the author uses a concrete thing to represent an abstract thing to express an obscure meaning (Chadwick 1971:13). Symbolism is a literary and artistic movement that originated in France in the late 19th century (Chadwick 1971:14). Symbolism literature begins with *The Flower of Evil* by French poet Charles Baudelaire in 1857.

2.2. Function of Symbolism

It's often difficult to describe the subtle characters' psychology, so symbolism is quite common in novels. Especially when the novel paradoxically conveys a certain philosophy, then the author uses symbolism to express the psychological activities and even the behavior of the characters. Color words usually have the following functions in literary works. First of all, the author uses color words to reveal the main idea. Secondly, the author uses color words to show the fate of characters and social reality. Then the author uses color words to imply the psychology of characters. In addition, the author uses color changes to describe the characters in depth. Finally, the author constructs the color image through the color description.

2.3. Symbolism in *Beloved*

Morrison uses a large number of delicate and subtle artistic techniques to manage this story, among which the skillful use of symbolism is most prominent in the symbol of color. Color words can be found in many places throughout *Beloved*, effectively conveying the thoughts of different characters at different times and in different occasions, and at the same time arousing the resonance of readers. Through the symbolism of color words, the author further reveals the deep influence of slavery on black people in this novel.

3. Black and White

Although black and white seem to be opposites, in this novel, the author integrates black and white to eliminate the opposites. The author expresses that the antagonism between the blacks and the whites is caused by slavery, not by skin color. This means that the blacks and the whites are not inherently opposed.

3.1. No Opposition in Colors

Black and white is the background color for *Beloved*. Without the difference between black and white, this work will be meaningless. Although black and white are very different colors, in this work they are not completely opposite colors in terms of color itself. Actually, the author tries to

blend these two colors together. For example, the blacks' family, Sethe's family is living in a gray and white house. In this gray and white house, there are "a white staircase climbed toward the blue-and-white wallpaper", "luminous white of the railing and steps" and a white curtain (Morrison 1987:5). The author arranges the main character of the story, a black family, in a white living background, which is the main scene of the story. Besides, it is a white girl who come to the aid of main character, the blacks, Sethe, on her way to escape from the slave owners' house "Sweet Home"(Morrison 1987:2). Likewise, blacks and whites are not inherently mutually exclusive. They could have integrated with each other and lived in peace.

3.2. Be Opposites in Living

Black and white themselves are not completely opposite colors in terms of color itself, but it is slavery that leads to the opposition of the blacks and the whites in terms of survival. In this work, because of slavery, the blacks are the object of being enslaved, killed, mutilated and defiled; the whites are the object of expanding their living space, plundering and enslaving, killing and mutilating the blacks. White people deprive black people for their human rights, and make black people can only serve them. Black people have neither independent property of production and life, nor the right and opportunity to be educated, so the lack of color is the reality of their lack of material life and spiritual life. The extreme poverty of both material and spiritual cause black people's desire for various colors (orange, green, etc.). Their desire for color is actually a reflection on their own situation. The ultimate goal of thinking is their yearning for freedom. But the desire for freedom come at a price. Red (blood) is the outward manifestation of this price.

4. The Lack of Color: The Double Lack of Material Base and Spiritual World

The lack of color is showing the broken dream of Baby's freedom. Sethe closed the door of her spiritual world because of pain, and her daughter Denver's mental void caused by staying indoors. And the shadow of the trauma that was to blame for the spiritual incompleteness of the white race, even after the abolition of slavery, remained rooted in the blacks' psych world.

4.1. Incomplete Freedom: Baby Suggs

At the end of Baby Suggs's life, her surroundings are colorless, indicating her lack of material conditions. Her lack of material conditions is caused by slavery, which shows that she is not completely free, no matter in material condition or in spiritual world.

Baby Suggs' fantasy and desire for rich color reflect her lack of color. At the same time, the contrast between the rich colors in desire and the poor colors in reality highlights the lack of colors in reality. When Baby Suggs's good friend Stamp Paid tried to get Baby Suggs reinvigorated about life, Baby Suggs told him that she just wants to lay in bed and think about colors. For Baby Suggs, colors symbolize "something harmless in the world". At the very beginning of the story, the author describes the scene that Baby Suggs lays still in her sickbed and uses "the little energy left her for pondering color"(Morrison 1987:1). She lies in bed all day craving color and whines "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't"(Morrison 1987:1). But sadly, these colors can only exist in her imagination and desire.

4.2. The Imprisonment of Spirit: Sethe

When Sethe and Halle are “married” (perhaps not to be called marriage, because there is no sign that it was a wedding), Sethe solemnly sew a “wedding dress” for “marriage”(Morrison 1987:11). So, we can better understand that black people have nothing but the flesh. At Sethe’s wedding ceremony with Halle, they have nothing. “I guess she saw how bad I felt when I found out there wasn’t going to be no ceremony, no preacher. Nothing. I thought there should be something” (Morrison 1987:29). On the whites’ perspective, the blacks’ marriage means they are allowed be together. For the blacks, “Nothing” in the marriage seems just what the blacks deserve. What’s more, Sethe’s wedding dress is authentically colorless (Morrison 1987:29). So, here is no longer the lack of color itself, but the cruel lack of material. The simplest wedding Sethe had imagined was impossible. Any hopes of the blacks are brutally strangled. They are not only robbed materially, but also spiritually. Thus, their spirits become colorless.

4.3. Mental Void: Denver

In stark contrast are the bright colors of the whites, Mr. and Mrs. Bodwin’s house. “She was stepping on something soft and blue. All around her was thick, soft and blue. Glass cases crammed full of glistening things. Books on tables and shelves. pearl-white lamps with shiny metal bottoms. And a smell like the cologne she poured in the emerald house, only better”(Morrison 1987:126). The colorful house contrasts sharply with the grim 124. Denver has no opportunity to be educated officially, and she rarely goes out to broaden the horizon and gain spiritual colorful richness.

In addition to the colorful description of Bodwin’s house, the author also describes Lady Jones from the perspective of Denver, in order to reflect the spiritual richness of the character through the description of material colors. However, this description of other characters with rich material and spiritual colors highlights Denver’s lack of material and spiritual colors.

5. Green

Green, as the color of plants, often conjures up images of vitality. In addition, traditional African cultures regard green trees as a symbol of life and as a habitat for the spirits of their ancestors. Therefore, the author, who is deeply influenced by African culture, gives green a positive meaning. As a result, many scenes in *Beloved* are filled with green plants. Green gives them hope for life, symbolizing the vision of the blacks’ community for a better life in the future. Green plants symbolize life, vitality and hope, and *Beloved* not only reveals the evil of slavery, but also presents themes of redemption and hope. Therefore, the image of green plants plays a role in revealing the theme of the novel.

5.1. Freedom: Baby Suggs

Baby Suggs, the spiritual leader of the local people, preached in the clearing, offering his great heart to the people, and summoning them to love their bodies passionately.

Baby Suggs’ son buy her freedom with his own labor, but slavery deprives her of all body but her great soul. Baby Suggs leads the blacks to “clearing”(Morrison 1987:43), a wide expanse deep in the woods. “a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place”(Morrison 1987:43). Dancing in the sun, she encourages and persuades black people to love every part of their bodies. “‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard’”(Morrison 1987:86). The slave owners often enslave and bound the

blacks. But Baby Suggs bring her great spirit to Baptists and Holy Brethren. She urged people to liberate themselves, let go of painful memories of the past and value their broken bodies and minds.

5.2. Hope: Sethe

Sethe runs away from Sweet Home through the green forest. The mystique of the forest indicates that her new life is on the other side of the forest. This forest gives her hope of escaping the cruel slavery. The mysterious forest gives her the power to overcome all odds and reunite with Baby Suggs. The Clearing is always her green mecca for as long as Sethe can remember. Sethe survives in the forest, but she is keeping alive by the power of the green forest on her way to escape. Green led the slaves to free themselves physically and mentally from the ravages of slavery. When Paul D told Sethe about what had happened to Halle, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved walk through the thick forest to the clearing at the end of the path to pay their respects to Halle. In mourning and saying goodbye to Halle, Sethe was saying goodbye to her miserable old life as a slave. After walking out of the forest, she decides to accept Paul D and start a new life. Sethe finds herself in Clearing, where the green woods give her the courage to leave her past behind and prepare for a new life.

5.3. Growth: Denver

Green also symbolizes Denver's growth. Due to the infanticide that followed, Sethe and Denver were isolated. "Loneliness wore Denver out" (Morrison 1987:14). Even though Sethe, after the loss of her three children, had divots all her love to Denver, Sethe doesn't realize that Denver have grown up and need to get out of the house and meet people to complete her character. So, Denver found a little green shack behind 124. She comes to this emerald closet to deal with her troubles. "Denver stayed in her emerald closet as long as she could, lonely as a mountain and almost as big, thinking everybody had somebody but her; thinking even a ghost's company was denied her" (Morrison 1987:52). Denver is considered the future hope of the black community. The treehouse where the emerald hides are the premise for her to establish herself, leading Denver to a bright future.

Baby Suggs leads the blacks to prayer at Clearing. Sethe escapes from Sweet Home through the green forest. and Denver's secret base locates at the Emerald closet. Green gives them hope for life, symbolizing the vision of the blacks' community for a better life in the future. Morrison highlights the theme of hope and rebirth through the image of green. Black people continue to explore the path of self-development, and eventually they will walk out of the haze of slavery together, rebuild themselves and gain rebirth.

6. Red

Red appears frequently throughout the whole novel, and is the theme color image in the novel. The red iconography in *Beloved* has different meanings for different objects. Red not only represents black people's struggle against fate for freedom, but also represents the sacrifice and blood in the process of struggle.

6.1. Red: The Struggle for Life

In the novel, Paul D is talking to Sethe about a rooster in Sweet Home named Mister. Paul D repeatedly emphasizes the rooster's crest, which is bright red, the color of blood. Paul D thinks he is

even worse than the rooster. The rooster will never be changed. It will always be a rooster. “Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn’t even get out the shell by his self but he was still king and I was...(Morrison 1987:36-37)” And Paul D can’t be himself. He has no dignity of his own and no value of his own. He has everything in the hands of white men. “there was no red heart bright as Mister’s comb beating in him”(Morrison 1987:36). Thus, in Paul D’s eyes, red symbolizes freedom and the courage to face his own and even the entire black nation’s past, as well as the courage to fight against white people to change his miserable fate.

The symbolism of red for Amy Denver is a symbol of hope and a bright future. When Sethe is exhausted on the run away, Amy Denver helps Sethe and tells her that she wants to go to Boston in search of Red Velvet. In Amy Denver’s mind, red velvet was like the world at birth, not only smooth, but clean and fresh. When she tells Sethe about velvet, she calls it “rough”(Morrison 1987:1). Amy Denver’s search for red velvet is the process of pursuing her dream and searching for a better life, which indicates that red is the hope for her to start a new life.

6.2. Red: Sacrifice and Bloody

Red is the red fire that burns Sixo. Sixo was one of five male slaves at Sweet Home. He plans the mass escape from the Sweet Home because the “schoolteacher” (Morrison 1987:4) denies their “human nature” and only acknowledged their “animal nature”. Being instrumented and objectified, they have to choose to flee. But Sixo and his companions are captured. “Schoolteacher”(Morrison 1987:4) ties Sixo to a tree and find wood for the fire. “By the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens”(Morrison 1987:112-113). The “Smoky, stubborn fire”(Morrison 1987:113). reddens the dark sky. A shot breaks up the hush of the night. Under the red glow of the fire, the life of Sixo was swallowed. Here red fire becomes an accessory to slavery violence, a weapon that deprives the blacks of their lives.

Red stands for death. Beloved’s death awakens the whole black community to the need for freedom. The color of Beloved’s death is red, and red becomes the only color Sethe can remember. “It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it”(Morrison 1987:112-19). To save her daughter from slavery, Sethe kills Beloved. This is a sign of Sethe’s awakening to self-consciousness. Slavery forces black mothers to find unique ways to save their children. Beloved’s death, in Sethe’s mind, is for Beloved’s better life. Beloved emerges wet after she rebirth, looking as if she had just been baptized. When Denver is an infant, she drinks Beloved’s blood while eating her mother’s milk. This behavior can be understood as the “sacrament” between Denver and Beloved, which highlights that Beloved’s death is an act of sacrifice. The infant’s sacrificial death is as redemptive as the death of Jesus. Here, the red color of blood represents sacrifice.

7. Conclusion

The success of *Beloved* is not only because of the real social history it reflects, but also because of Morrison’s excellent writing skills of symbolism. People can feel the psychological state of the characters from the familiar color words, and reveal the physical and spiritual destruction of slavery to the black slaves, the distorted maternal love and the theme of the black’s group’s exploration of the road on self-liberation and self-rebirth through the color images with symbolism.

Through the analysis of the color words in Toni Morrison’s masterpiece *Beloved*, this paper explores the connection between the color words and the spirit of black people, and shows the readers how the author reflects the spiritual persecution of black people by slavery through the color

words.

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