

INTERPRETATION OF COLOR SYMBOLISM IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S WORKS

Colors are found in all spheres and aspects of our life. Yet we not only see the colors around us but find them in many great writings of different authors. The present article aims at revealing the peculiarities of color symbolism in Edgar Allan Poe's works. Poe is famous as one of the most mysterious writers who lived his life very close to death. And the palette that he used in his writings was far from being bright. The analysis of the stories "The Mask of the Red Death", "The Fall of the House of Ushers", "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat" proved the supposition that he used mainly dark colors to present the necessary imagery. It seems reasonable to suppose that the translation of the color imagery presents rather challenging and uneasy task. We think that the present analysis of the color symbolism in Edgar Allan Poe's works will make that task less difficult by providing the possible interpretations of his imagery.

Key Words: *color symbolism, allegory, color spectrum, symbol of death, imagery, Edgar Allan Poe.*

Color plays such an integral role in our lives, it even shapes the way we describe our moods. Around the world, the way different cultures see and describe colors varies. It goes without saying that color symbolism can be found practically in

any work of fiction. Edgar Allan Poe is a superb example of the writer who uses color symbolism in his works to play off the emotions of his readers. Using elements of nature, dread, superstition and legend, Poe can create a world of trepidation in the minds of the readers; his poems and stories would not be the same without color symbolism. Poe loves to write about his feelings in a more, disturbing and haunting way. He wrote many great works about death, mystery and ghosts using particular colors for denoting them. Becoming famous, he earned the name of the “Father of Horror”. Edgar Allan Poe’s tragic life led to a fascination with the dark side, which is obvious with dark and gloomy colors that he uses so frequently in his works.

Edgar Alan Poe has a unique place in the world’s literature. As it is often said he lived very close to death and it affected his literature greatly. But his works would not be complete without his symbolism, especially, color symbolism, which he used throughout his works.

In this respect it seems important to note that symbols may have more than one association:

a) Personal: We all have associations with things in our experience. One thing can evoke in a person one kind of feelings, in another - quite different feelings. So, different people treat one and the same symbol differently and from different points of view.

b) Cultural: Symbols may have quite different meanings in different cultures.

c) Universal: Some symbols have universal meanings. Neither the writer nor the reader is in control of these associations. Here are some examples of symbols, whose meanings are the same for

almost all people and in almost every culture.

According to Pierce symbol is the sphere of impact of denotation and signified, which do not have anything in common but at the same time it is the signification of the things, in which the identification of the signified (symbolized) and signifier (symbolizer) which do not have anything in their direct content.(Pierce,1980).

The relationship between color terms and their meanings is not straightforward. The communicative properties of a color can be defined by two categories: natural and cultural. Occurrences of color in nature are universal and timeless. For example, the fact that *blue* is the color of sea can be considered a universal association. But colors may generate other levels of meaning in the mind and these associations arise from different sources. Color may have positive and negative connotations. For example, although *blue* is the beautiful color of the sky on a sunny day, it can be symbolic of sadness or stability.

Taking into account all these facts, we may proceed to the investigation of color symbolism and its possible interpretations in Edgar Allan Poe's works.

"The Masque of the Red Death" is an allegory. It features a set of recognizable symbols whose meanings combine to convey a message. An allegory always operates on two levels of meaning: the literal elements of the plot (the colors of the rooms, for example) and their symbolic counterparts, which often involve large philosophical concepts (such as life and death). The most obvious color symbolism in "The Masque of the Red Death" is in its title. The title itself is symbolic and contains a color – *red*. It has a universal association with blood, danger, aggression and in Africa it is even associated with death.

The *Red Death* symbolizes the inevitability of death. Although there is no specific disease with the exact symptoms described in the story, critics believe the disease's description has elements of tuberculosis, a disease which killed many of those close to Poe. It also brings forth memories of the *Black Death* which depopulated much of Europe during the Middle Ages. (<http://www.brighthubeducation.com/homework-help-literature>)

There are different interpretations of the 7 rooms that we see in the story. There is an idea that they represent the stages of life. (<http://www.shmoop.com/>) But we may also connect them with the rainbow having seven colors. This connection may give a ray of hope and optimism to this dark and gloomy story. The colors of the chambers are symbolic as a spectrum, and some of the individual colors are also symbolic. Some of the meanings are more obvious, while others have to be connected with the story and the placement of the rooms to make sense.

For example, *black* symbolizes death and evil, and *scarlet* can symbolize blood. As we know, in Western cultures *black* is often worn to funerals to represent the recent death, and *red* is the color of blood. *Black* combined with *red*, as in the seventh chamber, represents death, and since blood is the *Red Death's* seal, it represents death as well. Because of this, the revelers who tried to escape the *Red Death* confront it in this chamber and are all killed by it, as the colors of the chambers suggest.

As a spectrum, the colors— blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet and black — represent the beginning of the day to midnight. *Blue* is here the color of sadness and grief, *purple* and *violet* are the colors of penitence and morning, *green* is the

color of envy, *orange* may represent fear and *white* may achieve its negative associations representing emptiness. And finally *black* is death itself. Because everybody was trying to avoid death, they avoided the *black* room, which reminded them of death. But Poe showed that death is unavoidable.

We may also connect the seven rooms with seven sins. (<http://education.seattlepi.com/color-symbolism-masque-red-death-6040.html>)

Our opinion is that all the explanations that we can find have something in common, that is they all aim at bringing up an uneasy feeling of tragedy that is found in our life.

The human imagination is a powerful tool that sometimes is very hard to control, if it can be controlled at all. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", the relationship between the House and Roderick Usher is relative because the interior of the house symbolizes his slow, dilapidating mind. (www.enotes.com)

Here Poe uses a restricted number of colors - *red*, *white*, *grey* and *black*. They are all symbols of an approaching death and a lost health:

*"a few **white** trunks of decayed trees...*

*the ebon **blackness** of the floors...*

Dark draperies hung upon the walls.

His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan...

the huge antique panels....ponderous and ebony jaws..."

(<http://www.poestories.com/read/the>)

The personality of Usher is presented by these colors, a man whose mind was full of darkness and that darkness was spread on everything around him. There is a poem entitled "The

Haunted Palace" which tells us of a palace that has lost colors and light:

"Banners **yellow**, glorious, golden..." "pearl and **ruby** glowing" into gloom relieved only by **crimson** - "Through the **red**-lighten windows....Through the pale door...." and the final collapse of the house is announced when the **blood-red** moon breaks through the fissure when it sinks into the lake.

The image of Ligeia itself is a dear topic for Poe. In the story he presents the opposition is between two women – Ligeia and Rowena, or we can say that the opposition is between the dark colors of Ligeia and the light colors of Rowena:

*Ligeia - In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and in her latter days even emaciated. I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead — it was faultless — how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine! — the skin rivalling the purest ivory, the commanding extent and repose, the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples, and then the **raven-black**, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, “hyacinthine!” The color of the orbs was the most brilliant of **black**, and far over them hung jetty lashes of great length. The brows, slightly irregular in outline, had the same hue. The “strangeness,” however, which I found in the eyes was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression. (<http://www.poestories.com/read/ligeia>)*

Rowenna - I had become a bounden slave in the

*trammels of opium, and my labors and my orders had taken a coloring from my dreams. But these absurdities I must not pause to detail. Let me speak only of that one chamber, ever accursed, whither, in a moment of mental alienation, I led from the altar as my bride — as the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia — the **fair**-haired and **blue**-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine... It was then that I became distinctly aware of a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet, and near the couch; and, in a second thereafter, as Rowena was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and **ruby-colored** fluid".*
(<http://www.poestories.com/read/ligeia>)

But again the darkness wins:

*I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed, had chilled me into stone. I stirred not — but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts — a tumult unappeasable. Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me? Why, why should I doubt it? The bandage lay heavily about the mouth — but then it was the mouth of the breathing Lady of Tremaine. And the cheeks — there were the roses as in her noon of life — yes, these were indeed the **fair** cheeks of the living Lady of Tremaine. And the chin, with its dimples, as in health, was it not*

*hers? — but had she then grown taller since her malady? What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair. It was **black**er than the raven wings of the midnight! And now the eyes opened of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never — can I never be mistaken — these are the full, and the **black**, and the wild eyes — of the lady — of the
the Lady Ligeia!”*
(<http://www.poestories.com/read/ligeia>)

When discussing Poe’s dark and gloomy palette we can’t but mention his story “Black cat”. Poe, telling the story as a narrator, describes himself as humane and kind. But then everything ends up with the most unimaginable things. The narrator kills his cat and his wife with a horrifying ease. The *black* cat, hidden behind the wall and cemented in by the narrator symbolizes the decay and corruption of a human soul.

The association between bad luck and black cats dates all the way back to the middle of the fourteenth century. It’s not known exactly how and why cats became associated with the Devil in the Middle Ages, but the belief was so persistent that they were all but exterminated during the Black Death pandemic around 1348. Ironically, killing off the cats only worsened the plague, which was often spread via rodents, which all those dearly departed cats could have helped kill. In fact, the narrator mentions that his wife said the same about the

cat jokingly. This is an allusion to the myth about black cats. The name of the cat is also symbolic, as in Greek mythology Pluto was the ruler of the dead and the underworld.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote many stories and poems most about death and illness, mystery and spirits. There are many other great works with the symbolic use of colors but we shall limit ourselves with the ones discussed above. Poe's tragic life led to a fascination with the dark side which is certainly evident in his writings. But in fact, if life hadn't been so cruel to him, Poe may have not written his classic works we've come to know and love. And finally, where there is darkness there should be light.

It is worth mentioning that colours as symbols depend on the context and largely on the linguo-culture. Hence, this problem could be discussed on a larger scale comparing the components of Poe's symbols with the corresponding Armenian translations.

References

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ՔՐԻՍՏԻՆԵ ՀԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՅԱՆ - Էդգար Ալան Պոլի ստեղծագործություններում գունային խորհրդանիշների մեկնաբանությունը - Գույնն առկա է կյանքի բոլոր բնագավառներում: Այն ոչ միայն մեր շուրջն է, այլև հանդիպում է տարբեր հեղինակների ստեղծագործություններում: Սույն հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել գունային խորհրդանիշները Էդգար Ալան Պոլի ստեղծագործություններում: Պոն հայտնի է որպես ամենաառեղծվածային գրողներից մեկը, ով իր ամբողջ կյանքն ապրեց մահվանը շատ մոտ: Այն ներկայանալը, որը նա օգտագործում է իր ստեղծագործություններում, հեռու է պայծառ լինելուց: Նրա «Կարմիր Մահվան Դիմակը», «Աշերների տան անկումը», «Լիզեյա» և «Սև Կատու» պատմվածքների վերլուծությունը հաստատեց այն ենթադրությունը, որ Պոն օգտագործել է հիմնականում մուգ գույներ իրեն անհրաժեշտ կերպարները ներկայացնելու համար: Մխավված չենք լինի, եթե ասենք, որ գունային խորհրդանիշների թարգմանությունը ոչ այնքան դյուրին մարտահրավեր է թարգմանչի համար: Կարծում ենք, որ սույն աշխատանքում տեղ գտած վերլուծությունը, որը ներկայացնում է նրա պատկերների հնարավոր մեկնաբանությունները կնպաստեն խորհրդանիշների ճիշտ ընկալմանն

