

Colour Semiotics in “Ode to the West Wind”

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Article Received: 04/04/2025

Article Accepted: 08/05/2025

Published Online: 10/05/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.05.160

Abstract

Colour is something that is inseparable from Life and the world. Colours carry universal significations as well as cultural, national, regional and even individual significances. From the beginning, authors have relied on colours to highlight the physical and psychological settings of a story or characters. Percy Bysshe Shelley needs no introduction, being a favourite author of the English literary world, a much-celebrated poet, renowned for his mellifluous lyricism and unbridled revolutionary zeal that refused to die down in the face of social checks and restraints. His lyric poem “Ode to the West Wind” is unarguably one of the most beautifully phonetic and symbol-infused masterpieces in English Literature, encapsulating the very spirit and soul of Romantic Literary Revival in English Literature. Various aspects of this poem, the last line of which is oft cited as probably the most optimistic line ever penned, are discussed in the academic world. This paper is an attempt at a chromatic semiotic reading of the poem, to look at the use of colour codes, colours as symbols to augment the underlying and projected message of the poem.

Keywords: Shelley, Colours, Chromatic Semiotics, Decoding

Introduction

When Robert Burns proclaimed that “O My Luve is like a red, red rose” or when William Carlos Williams crafted a magnificent poem using merely 16 words in his “The Red Wheel Barrow” the readers are enthralled by brilliant use of the colour “red”. Umpteen number of illustrations of effective use of colours by authors in their literary classics can be cited from the annals of Literary History, from ancient

classical era to the contemporary times. Colours can simply be not divorced from Life in general or the world around, be it in the skies or the seas or the shores or the slopes, be it during day time or night time or the merging of the two.

Colour semiotics or Chromatic semiotics is a significant branch of Semiotics in general, and literary semiotics specifically. It tries to decode the use of colours and their significations. In literary study, it is often discussed in connection with the way an author uses specific colours in his literary work to enhance or subdue an ambience in general, or in relation to characters, their emotions and so on. Colour symbolism can be for psychological effect as well as for aesthetic outcome (Kartashkova and Belyaeva 2022).

Percy Bysshe Shelley is one of the foremost poets in English Literary history, specifically belonging to the Romantic Literary Revival in the 18th century. A rebel through and through, he was expelled from the University of Oxford for writing and circulating a pamphlet titled “The Necessity of Atheism” at the tender age of eighteen. He was literally born with a golden spoon, belonging to one of the richest families in the land of England, and yet all the riches could not deter him from his path of rebellion and sense of fairness resulting in severe dissatisfaction with the status quo of the society, especially lower-class people. He would actively write and circulate pamphlets and later, his poems would also be full of wake-up calls and the tragic examples of pioneers who braved existing societal conditions and ended up in martyrdom. So much so that Matthew Arnold would fondly describe him as the “beautiful but ineffectual angel beating in a void his luminous wings in vain” (Arnold cited in Weinberg 2009).

“Ode to the West Wind” is one of the most celebrated poems by Shelley, which mesmerises a reader with its overflowing imageries and symbolism. The lyrical quality of the poem stands unmatched, and the powerful message about the hopeful waiting for the arrival of good times in the wake of bad times, of lively and cheerful Spring after the bleak and monochromatic Winter, touches the soul of even casual readers. Though many lines from the poem are quoted often, the last line of the poem is probably the most famous of all – “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (Shelley 1820).

Review of Literature

Scholarly articles and books abound regarding Shelley, his personal life and his literary works. Several articles are found related to the use of imageries in the poem “Ode to the West Wind” and also about the use of sounds, the theme of call for change, the use of binaries and so on. However, no article could be found regarding the use of colours or decoding the colour semiotics of the poem.

Apart from articles and books on Colour Symbolism in general, numerous articles are also found regarding the use of colours in literary works, including “Metaphorical Meanings of Color Symbols in Literature” by Qian Zhao and Amalia Qistina Castaneda Abdullah (2024), “Colour Meaning in English Literary Pieces” by Faina Kartashkova and Liubov Belyaeva (2022), “Colour as Symbols in the Select Works of Yann Martel” by M Arul Darwin & Arul Anand (2023) and “Colour Symbolism in Literature” (*Times of India* 2021).

Colour Semiotics

Colour semiotics is an area that overlays into different fields of study such as Psychology, Arts, Literary Studies, Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Film Studies. Colours are used ubiquitously, though the interpretation of the semiotic values of colours vary from region to region, culture to culture, person to person and time to time too. “Colour is a subjective phenomenon; we all interpret it in different ways” observes Laura Dilloway in her comprehensive report on “An Exploration into Colour Symbolism as Used by Different Cultures and Religions” (2006). Colours are often classified into good colours and bad colours, dull colours and vibrant colours, lucky colours and unlucky colours, universal colours and personal colours, and so on. Cultures and societies often associate colours with virtues and vices, good and bad, such as Black for negative emotions, White or Gold for positive emotions. Many a study have looked at the way colour is used in *The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald or in *The Life of Pie* by Yann Martel, in both the literary works and their movie adaptations.

Jasmine Katatikarn points out in her “What is Color Symbolism? The Meaning of Color” that “Color symbolism is the subjective meaning humans attach to various colors. It also speaks to the emotions they evoke and other intangible ideas or

messages they send” (Katatikarn 2024). “There are three ways that people respond to color: biologically, culturally, and personally” she goes on to explain, “The truth is that there’s no right or wrong answer – it’s all subjective” (Katatikarn 2024).

Even though there are common patterns in the use and interpretation of colours, it is not unusual to have contradictory symbolic associations for any given colour. For instance, Red is regarded to signify love and passion, and yet is also used to indicate “stop” and “danger” sign. Black is commonly regarded as the colour of mourning, of loss, and yet it is also considered by many to indicate luxury and sophistication. Colours can assume cultural, religious and political significations too, and thus it is common to find blue being popularly associated with Lord Krishna and predominantly red flags with Communism.

Colour Codes in “Ode to the West Wind”

The second stanza of the poem begins with “Yellow” (Shelley 1820), and in the same line is mentioned “hectic Red” (Shelley 1820). The next stanza has “azure”, and the next section has “blue”, followed by “Black” (Shelley 1820). Section III has “blue” and “azure” again, followed by “gray” (Shelley 1820). The last two sections have no direct reference to colours per se, but as is found throughout the poem, he also makes use of words that suggest transparent colours and even colourlessness. For instance, “breath” and “ghost” in the first section suggest invisible forms, yet somehow associated with white. Phrases like “dark wintry bed”, “living hues”, “decaying leaves”, “bright hair” and “Ashes and sparks” (Shelley 1820) all light up the minds of readers with varying colours. When he inserts “Winter” and “Spring” in the last line, the monochromatic blandness of winter is immediately replaced by a burst of colours in the mind of an imaginative reader.

Analysis

Even a cursory glance through the lines makes it obvious that “blue” and “azure” comprise the predominant colour scheme used in the poem. Blue is of course, the colour of the sky and the ocean, the sky which offers unlimited freedom to the birds and the ocean which sustains life. By general consensus, blue is the colour of trust, loyalty, peace, calm and serenity (Katatikarn 2024), though cultural, spiritual, national, political and individual significations will vary. For instance, the shade of

blue known as Royal Blue is often associated with royalty, and by extended association, with authority and power (canva.com).

Though blue and azure are repeatedly used, the colour reference begins with the bold and bright reference to “yellow”. Without doubt, Shelley uses it to describe the dead leaves flying around in the gust, thus the signification of yellow here is undoubtedly death and decay, rather the absence of life, which he perceives to be around him, in a society that has gone degenerate, gone soulless. This decadence and lack of life is reinforced by the use of black and pale, colours commonly used to indicate death and lifelessness. At the end of that list of colours comes “hectic red”. Red is a complicated colour, to say the least. It is regarded as a primary colour, also as one of the colours to find reference in the earliest existing paintings and writings, and has both positive and negative associations, quite often which are poles apart. In most cultures red signifies Life, energy, love and passion, but also danger (Katatikarn 2024) and rebellion. In a lot of religious cultures, red is considered to be auspicious, but is also associated with sacrifice and courage (Singh 2020). In all probability, Shelley uses red here to denote rebellion and sacrifice, the upsurge of life after death.

Gray is the remaining colour that is found in the poem, apart from repeated references to blue, azure and black. Gray, which is primarily made by combining white and black, is usually used to indicate neutrality and tranquillity (Katatikarn 2024), but is used by Shelley here to indicate the loss of blood, to show growing “gray with fear” (Shelley 1820).

As already mentioned, along with the names of colours, the use of words suggesting a lack of colour should also be noted here. Several words that suggest a lack of colour, such as “breath”, “air”, “odours plain”, “Wild Spirit”, “night” and “crystalline” (Shelley 1820) are strewn across the length and breadth of the poem. Words that trigger a sensation of colour are also aplenty, such as “dark Wintry bed”, “living hues”, “decaying leaves”, “bright hair”, “approaching storm”, “fire, and hail”, “sea blooms”, “sapless foliage of the ocean”, “bleed” and “ashes and sparks” (Shelley 1820). Not to be missed are words that suggest a transparent existence, without a specific colour or shape, such as “unseen presence”, “ghosts”, “spirit”, “angels” and “vapours” (Shelley 1820).

Discussion

It can be seen that Shelley makes use of a carefully planned and strategic use of colours to augment the message he wished to convey through the poem – that it is time to rise up and rebel, it is time to leave the lifelessness and regenerate, it is time to drive away all forms of pestilences and start anew, like the spring after a cold winter. For enhancing this message, and to highlight the binaries of life and death, colour and colourlessness, presence and absence of life and colours, he adroitly weaves a verbal tapestry of carefully chosen words with precision. The names of colours as well as the words indicating colours and suggesting colours are dextrously dovetailed into the fabric of the poem, with adept syntaxing, such as “hectic red”, “azure sister”, “angels of rain and lightning”, “blue Mediterranean”, “pumice isle” and “crystalline streams” (Shelley 1820).

Findings

From the close textual analysis of the poem “Ode to the West Wind” it is to be found that along with the wonderful gallery of imageries and the mellifluous phonetic structure, Shelley makes use of an apparently simple yet complex semiotics of colour, with a predominant blue and azure, followed by yellow, red and black. The binary structure of the poem is tautened by this colour semiotics which reflect the ultimate dichotomy of decay versus regeneration, death versus life, colourful versus lack of colour. Many a times Shelley subverts the universally accepted symbolism of a colour and brings out the less popular signification of the colour so that it blends with the matrix of the poem.

Conclusion

All the passionate yearnings of Shelley regarding the restructuring of the existing societal conditions can be seen condensed into this lyrical poem that resonates with the soul strings of the poet, desperately crying out to the world to heed him, to take notice of his bleeding heart, bleeding not for himself, but for the world and the unfairness and the injustices that plague the common man. From the study it can be clearly seen that Shelley definitely uses a specific colour semiotics in the poem, and that this colour semiotics closely binds together the structural, thematic and visual

drapery of the poem, all of which make it one of the most beloved literary creations in the English literary firmament.

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