

Color Language Concerning Scenes in *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract: The paper attempts to study color language concerning scenes in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Firstly, it sorts out color language in the novel, and figures out the pages of color language out of it. The analysis shows the heavy repetition of color language concerning scenes has a central function in the depiction of characters' inner world and the revealing of the thematic aspect of a novel both at literal and symbolic levels. With the exploration of the characters and settings with regard to the principles of harmony and contrast of colors, it concludes that color language concerning scenes is Woolf's challenge to and refutation against the patriarchal society and tradition in her time, and her voice of longing for the equality between men and women.

1. Introduction

A great number of colors in the works of Virginia Woolf might be inseparably connected with her appreciation of arts, because Woolf's Victorian upbringing provided the perfect nourishment for her writing development. Bernard Blackstone says: "Virginia Woolf's eye seems to me a painter's eye as much as a writer's... Her values are those of a plastic artist. She is interested in colors, shapes, masses." [1] David Daiches asserts Woolf's sense for color that there is a color symbolism in *To the Lighthouse* [2]. According to Reiko Hayakama, Woolf's appreciation of literature and arts is to seek literary equivalents for "that pleasure which we gain from seeing beauty, proportion, contrast, and harmony of color in the things around us" [3]. Color is a sensitive medium for expressing both individual and universal experience.

In the position of the association of complement and contrast of colors, the paper proposes color language concerning scenes in Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*. In terms of the principles of harmony and contrast of colors, it is to explore characters' inner world by the analysis of color language in scenes.

The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors

According to M.E. Chevreul's study in the *Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colors and Their Applications to the Arts*, we get a general understanding that color is seen at the same time as form. It imparts a more agreeable aspect to a smooth body, augments the relief, rendering the parts of a whole more distinct than they would be without it, and efficaciously concurs in increasing the beautiful effects of symmetry, and of connecting the affinities of the parts with the whole. Thereby, certain colors with specific meanings from M.E. Chevreul are: first of all, the primary colors are blue, red, yellow; the secondary or compound colors are orange, green, and violet; moreover, the complementary colors are defined as the primary or the secondary requisite to make up the complement of colored rays that constitute white light. The complementary of a primary as red, is the secondary composed of the other two primaries (green) [4]. In terms of the association of the complementary and contrast of colors, color language produces the vigor with their own characteristics. If a color is mixed with another, the resulting compound color would be formed. It is evident that the color of the primaries cannot vary as color (or in hue), but only in intensity, at least so long as they are kept pure, but the hues of the secondary may vary infinitely, according as one or the other predominates. The association of complementary colors is the best that can be adopted to

produce harmony of contrast in the arts.

2. Color Language in To the Lighthouse and Narrative Repetition

2.1. Calculations of Color Language in To the Lighthouse

First of all, it sorts all color language out of *To the Lighthouse*, and figures out the pages of color language in the novel. The percentages of color language to the whole pages in each chapter are given here: “Whole” stands for “the Whole Pages of Each Part”; “Color” stands for “Pages with Color Language”; “Part I” refers to “The Window”; “Part II” refers to “Time Passes”; “Part III” refers to “The Lighthouse”. According to the statistics, color language has an important place in *To the Lighthouse*. In the table, color language in *To the Lighthouse* shows higher percentage, especially color language concerning scenes. Why does Woolf have such an extraordinary inclination to repeat these individual color words in the novel? On the basis of the analysis of the data, the variegated colors: green, blue, yellow, red, white, black, purple are applied frequently throughout the novel. Such repeated color language concerning scenes might have an important part of characterization and presentation of theme of the novel.

Table 1 Calculations in *To the Lighthouse*

	Part I	Part II	Part III
Whole	87	14	45
Color	75	14	41
Percentage (%)	86	100	91

2.2. Narrative Repetition in To the Lighthouse

In the novel, the variegated colors: green, blue, yellow, red, white, black, purple are applied frequently concerning scenes. Pure colors, the mixture and juxtaposition of colors and the contrast of two complementary colors deliver some specific meanings, producing a certain effect on characterization, especially on the characters’ inner world. With the repetition of some adjective colors concerning scenes, the characterization in the novel becomes more vivid, and the complex symbolism of color language is accomplished thoroughly. Besides, some specific scenes are repeated in the novel, presenting many gloomy colors in the landscapes and terrible weather. The gloomy colors: grey, black, white, create an air of sadness. A lot of color language concerning scenes is to create a sense of sadness and suspense. Colors like blue, red, yellow in particular become primary in the novel.

Whatever the relationship among these variants of repetition is like, with reference to the characterization and setting in the novel, the heavy use of color language concerning scenes has become integrated in complex characters, narrative and thematic patterns.

3. Color Language in Scenes and Characterization

3.1. Harmony of Color Language in Scenes and Characterization

Through the pure color language, Mrs. Ramsay’s inner world is exposed vividly. She worried about the expense of repairing the greenhouse roof, but she said no word. She was taking care of “the dahlias in the big bed” [5]. The relationship between the couple seemed harmonious outwardly. In practice, they did not understand each other. When Mr. Ramsay talked about his books, Mrs. Ramsay was just thinking about those flowers, “something red, something brown” [5]. She was not interested in his topic. Those red and brown flowers indicate Mrs. Ramsay’s great irritation to her husband’s discourse. Both of them had the disagreements about some problems. Mrs. Ramsay never expressed her feeling to his husband and her husband could not understand her. Such a disharmony between a husband and a wife enables her to suffer from a sense of depression. That “Mrs. Ramsay folded the green shawl about her shoulders” presents her willing to lead a fresh life to get away from her repressed feeling [5].

Then, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay had a discussion about their children and the Lighthouse. But their discussion kept both feel uncomfortable. Mrs. Ramsay even thought they could not share the fairy tales to James. It seems that the couple does not have any common language with each other. At the moment, they “had reached the gap between the two clumps of red-hot pokers, and there was the Lighthouse again” [5]. The use of “red-hot pokers” intensifies the disharmony between the couple. By mixing red-hot pokers and lighthouse, the orange color is produced. The orange is viewed as a color of hope [6]. The mixture of the colors changes the disharmonious relationship between the couple. “The lights were rippling and running as if they were drops of silver water held firm in a wind” [5]. Silver often symbolizes riches [6]. Thus, “the drops of silver water” imply the lights are strong enough that the hope is close at hand. In the end, “the lights of the town and of the harbor and of the boats seemed like a phantom net floating there to mark something which had sunk.” [5] The ample lights bring about hope for the equality between men and women and get rid of Mrs. Ramsay’s constrained feeling.

Mrs. Ramsay got hope from the lights, but Mr. Ramsay had a feeling of loss. Through “the red-hot pokers”, “the bay”, “those sand hills dwindling away into darkness” [5], Mr. Ramsay seemed to complain about his marriage, showing discontent with his wife. “...Looking at the land dwindling away, the little island seemed pathetically small, half swallowed up in the sea” [5]. This is the presentation of Mr. Ramsay’s gloomy mood. He was in such gloomy mood just because the ample lights bring the hope to his wife. It may signify that Mr. Ramsay feels sorry for the extinction of his masculine authority. “They turned away ... began to walk up the path where the silver-green spear-like plants grew, arm in arm” [5]. “The silver-green spear-like plants” may imply the couple began a fresh life and the disharmony between the couple might fade away.

3.2. Contrast of Color Language in Scenes and Characterization

The pure colors, the mixture and juxtaposition of color language in scenes demonstrate the characters’ inner world, exploring the characters’ feeling of sadness, irritation, jealousy and hope for the equality between men and women, while the juxtaposition of contrastive color language in scenes deepens Mrs. Ramsay’s repression and creates an air of sadness and suspense, helping to intensify the theme of the novel.

By means of contrast of white foam and black waves and sky, Mrs. Ramsay’s constrained feeling is reinforced. “But outside a great storm scarcely keep his feet; houses and trees toppled over, the mountains trembled, rocks rolled into the sea, the sky was pitch black, and it thundered and lightened, and the sea came in with black waves as high as church towers and mountains, and all with white foam at the top...” [5]. The terrible climate gives us a sense of suspense. It appeared that something bad would happen. The apparently contrast of color language keeps Mrs. Ramsay in a mood of melancholy. In the fierce climate, Mrs. Ramsay was telling a horrible story to the child in the bedtime. The fisherman’s story could lessen her sense of repression.

The white, green, grey with specific meanings reveal the sorrows of mankind. “The spring without a leaf to toss” implies that there would not be something full of vigor and vitality. It was on that May that Prue Ramsay was given in marriage, “bare and bright like a virgin fierce in her chastity, scornful in her purity” [5]. The spring means the renewal of life. However, Prue got married in a spring without vigor and vitality. This means mischief. On the summer evenings, human had “imaginings of the strangest kind--of flesh turned to atoms ..., of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within” [5]. The flesh reminds human of losing one’s life. They would rather imagine the beauties of nature to smooth their sorrow. But sorrow cannot be eliminated by the colors. The use of “those pools of uneasy water” and “shadows form of clouds” produces the vigor of grey. The novel talked about “a knowledge of the sorrows of mankind” [5]. Hereby, it sees that the use of color grey may be seen as the mourning for the sorrows of mankind.

The contrast of yellow and black deepens the sorrows of mankind. In the darkness, “the stroke of the Lighthouse...came now in the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight” [5], which brings about a feeling of gloom. In contrast, “the sun so striped and barred the rooms and filled them with

yellow haze” produces the brilliant yellow color. “Mrs. McNab ...looked like a tropical fish oaring its way through sun-lanced waters”. “The bright roses and light turned on the wall” heightens the red. [5]. Therefore, the contrast of dark night and brilliant daytime serves as a background for Andrew’s death. Meanwhile, the heavy use of yellow color may be seen as a hazard sign because “a shell exploded” [5]. The bright roses represent the loss of life and the darkness hints the mourning for the death of young men and Andrew.

4. Conclusion

In *To the Lighthouse*, the repetition of color language concerning scenes has advantageously revealed the characters' inner world and the theme of the novel. Such a narration technique provides the background for the change of characters' inner world; Repetitions of yellow, red, blue, green, white, black, grey, purple, pink, brown, deliver their specific symbolic meanings in the characterization and presentation of setting through the pure colors, the mixture and juxtaposition of colors and help highlight the theme of the novel. The symbolic meanings of the specific colors make it easy to probe into the characterization and theme of the novel. According to the analysis of color language in scenes, it explores the characters' inner world. Harmony of color language in scenes presents the characters' strong hope for the equality between men and women to get away from the repression. The contrast in scenes demonstrates a gloomy picture and strengthens women's constrained feeling in their daily life. The application of color language helps accomplish the characterization and presentation of the theme of women’s sense of repression, highlighting women’s hope for the equality between men and women. It comes to conclusion that color language conveys Woolf’s challenge to and refutation against the patriarchal society and tradition in her time, and her voice of longing for the equality between men and women.

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