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## Colour Meaning in English Literary Pieces

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**Abstract.** The article deals with the colour meaning and colour symbolics of a literary piece. Analysis of colour world in English fiction is aimed at determining the linguistic means of representing the individual writer's idea of colour via the system of colour values. Along with it, analysis of the expression of colour sensations and their influence both on characters and on the plot development was carried out. It was shown that colour vocabulary is represented by words in their direct and figurative meanings. It was proved that language units may be represented in the form of a complex individual-authorial interpretation. Adjectives which convey or specify various colours and their shades make the main group of colour vocabulary discussed in the article. The same function may be performed by attributive phrases the semantic centre of which form names of animate/inanimate nature. Frequency of adjectives denoting colour was stated. Of special importance is the way colour names carry a special psychoemotional load. On the basis of analysis of literary pieces, it is shown that together with other psychological details colour meaning and colour symbolism perform esthetic function. Colour value can enhance a positive or negative assessment of the work of art described in a literary piece. The article presents classification of colour names based on different types of meaning: direct, metaphoric and symbolic. An attempt (based on an analysis of the color names) was made to determine the author's idea of further development of the plot. Study of the role of light in works of art verbalised in fiction proved that light and transparent colour scheme render high spirits of the characters of literary pieces and evokes the recipient's positive emotions.

**Key words:** colour meaning, colour names, colour scheme, esthetic and evaluative functions

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## Значение цвета в английских литературных произведениях

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена изучению цветовой картины мира в английском художественном тексте, репрезентирующей индивидуальное представление писателя о цвете через систему цветовых значений. В настоящей статье анализу подвергаются языковые единицы, которые выражают цветоощущения, а также их влияние на характеристику персонажей и на развитие сюжета. Выявлено, что цветовая лексика представлена языковыми единицами в прямом и метафорическом значениях, а также в формате усложненного индивидуально-авторского толкования. Показано, что основной группой языковых единиц цветообозначения являются прилагательные, которые передают (либо уточняют), различные оттенки цвета, установлена их частотность, а также атрибутивные фразы с опорным компонентом, представленным именем живой/неживой природы. В качестве языковых коррелятов цвета выступают именные и глагольные компоненты. Выявлено, что цветообозначение несет особую психоэмоциональную нагрузку. Показано, что, вкупе с другими психологическими деталями значение и символика цвета, которые выполняют эстетическую функцию, могут меняться под воздействием различных факторов. Цветообозначения могут усиливать позитивную или негативную оценку объекта. Анализ фактического материала позволил дать классификацию цветовой лексики, которая включает языковые единицы в прямом, переносном и символическом значениях. На основе анализа роли света в произведениях искусства, вербализуемых в художественной литературе, доказано, что свет и транспарентная цветовая гамма передают позитивный настрой персонажей литературного произведения и вызывают у его реципиента положительные эмоции. Предпринята попытка определить установку автора на дальнейшее развитие сюжета на основе анализа используемых им цветообозначений.

**Ключевые слова:** цветовая семантика, цветообозначение, цветовая гамма, эстетическая и оценочная функции

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## Introduction

Semantic and esthetic categories are known to represent meaning in the broad sense of the word. Language as representation of esthetic function and the author's idea implemented in literary and artistic images may be treated as kind of art. Hence — the implication that language is incorporated in a literary piece as esthetically organized system [1. P. 18—20].

The notion of colour is considered to be contradictory as the perception of colour depends on many things, the main of which is the man's cultural adherence. Some scholars consider colour to be a psychic phenomenon born by the brain and the visual apparatus of a person. It is assumed that colour world picture is based on colour and on individual, professional, cultural, age and temporal peculiarities [2. P. 62].

Colour picture of the world includes conceptual and lexical systems of language world picture. In different languages colour is reflected in a different way, which is proved by different names of colours and shades. Under the term "the phenomenon of colour space" is meant a complex of colour names of psychological nature which is accounted for by existence of light waves, colour being a result of brain and eye work [3. P. 1991]. Thus, colour names represent lingvocolour world picture. One of the peculiarities of colour naming is that authors of fiction often describe a symbolic meaning to the colour scheme that helps the reader to better understand the psychology of the characters. Of special interest is the colour picture of the world as represented by authors of literary pieces. In this connection it is clearly seen why it is important to analyse the linguistic expression of colour sensations and their influence on characters as well as on the development of the plot.

Colour meaning and colour symbolics may be treated from the angle of creating the verbal image. It is of vital importance to study the role of colour in a literary piece in order to state the mechanism of how colour makes the reader's representation of the objects depicted closer to reality.

## **Discussion**

Esthetic function of the language is performed by different meanings of words. Colour-denoting words belong to expressive means of artistic image of fiction. They are used in psychological portraits, in the description of the characters' outward appearance and while describing the surrounding world. The main peculiarity of colour-denoting is that authors often ascribe some symbolic meanings to a certain colour scheme which helps the reader understand the psychology of the characters better.

Colour naming is known to have inherent connection with human norms and values [4; 5]. Colour is said to participate in complex processes of language conceptualization of the world which can't be confined to mere physiological reflection of the substance [6. P. 152]. Hence the assumption that different cultures and peoples have their own colour world picture, which is predetermined not only by different perception of colour but by the peculiarities of the environment as well. Which is why one can speak about conventional associations in a certain society.

Colour feelings are rendered with the help of certain linguistic means. The colour image prompts the reader's associations, evokes his/her emotions and codes rational and emotional information of a literary piece. The author has to find such colour names which contribute to the author's message, while the reader is to

gain the required associations and a visual picture evoking corresponding emotions [7. P. 72].

According to some scholars, in a literary piece there may appear additional meanings to the main colour meaning, which is a result of interrelation of the given units with the elements of different language levels [8. P. 25].

Psychologists hold the opinion that colour is connected with human emotions and that each emotion occupies a place of its own in the colour space. It is implied that each colour evokes definite emotions [9. P. 21].

Colour sensations are referred to prototypes: of all visual sensations they were the first to be objectivized in the language. Colour represents the deep level of ethnic cognitive base which is characterized by value-semantic contents and has national-cultural properties belonging to the system of values [10. P. 115].

Scholars assume that naïve colour world picture fixed by means of the language is inherent in the psyche of a common native speaker although the speaker is unaware of this process as well as of its connections and relations.

Linguistic theories of colour naming are based on lingvo-cultural, lingvo-cognitive and ethnolinguistic approaches. Lingvo-cultural approach implies that the cultural peculiarities are the main means in colour naming formation. Colour names are treated as lingvoculturemes which combine linguistic and extralinguistic contents. The adherents of lingvo-cognitive approach claim that colour-naming formation is predetermined by the anthropocentric factor in the language, by the way colour naming correlates with the realia of the surrounding world that not always coincide, which is a specific feature of cognitive human activity [6. P. 86]. Cognitive-discursive study of the linguistic colour picture of the world and its basic component, namely the achromatic fragment, based on the universal archetype semantic opposition white — black in the Russian and English languages combines macrosituational and microsituational approaches, which makes it possible to reveal collective prototypical and individual discourse senses of the concepts under study. According to ethnolinguistic approach, colour naming is a result of linguistic activity of a certain ethnosociety [11. P. 9].

Names of colour may be classified according to certain systems, basic colour words making the main system. American scholars B. Berlin and P. Kay speak about 11 universal colour categories which correspond to English colour names [12. P. 1969]. English adjectives *white*, *black*, *green*, *blue*, *yellow*, *red*, *brown*, *pink*, *purple*, *orange*, *grey* are considered to be the main terms of colour naming. However, the notion of the main colour is ambiguous, that's why all the attempts to introduce strict criteria which would enable us to refer this or that colour to the "main" ones failed [13. P. 32].

The concept of colour is treated as a perception scheme in accordance with which the objects of the surrounding world may be characterised as "being dyed". Adjectives denoting colour serve as language correlates. The linguistic units that form the class of colour names are considered to be markers of the concept "colour", which enables us to speak about the nucleus and the periphery of the semantic field, the former being represented by the colour names *white* and *black* characterized by

a high frequency of occurrence. The terms denoting colour are characterized by one-to-one correspondence [14. P. 76].

Another way of classifying colour names was suggested by experts in experimental psychology. It was based on the principle of “warm” and “cold” colours which influences the process of colour naming. “Warm” colours are considered to be stimulating colours as this group of colours is connected with the processes of activity and tension. The so-called “cold” colours are referred to the passive group. As a result of such distinction colour acquires additional meanings that belong to its psychological correlate and to its physical characteristics [2. P. 62].

Scholars pay special attention to the way colour functions in a literary piece [7. P. 68]. Colour image in literary pieces expresses the general emotional tone of the units of semantic field “colour”. Scholars stress the emotional tone of the situation or phenomenon expressed by the colour image in a literary piece that evokes the reader’s associations.

Repetitions of the units of the conceptual field “colour” leads to a greater effect the image described produces on the reader. Colour image is highly differentiated, which contributes to the integration of vague emotions and diminishes cognitive overloading. Colour image renders not only emotional but esthetic information in the process of communication. Different stylistic means help the author of a literary piece create the colour image by rendering the outer image which influences the reader emotionally and helps to reveal the sense implied. The colour image prompts the reader a number of associations and codes the national and emotional information of a literary piece. The author has to select such names of colour which render the plot most adequately, while the reader is expected to gain the right associations [7. P. 74]. Thus, the problem of colour picture of the world has been studied mainly from the angle of lingvoculture and from the point of cognitive — discursive outlook.

The insufficient number of papers devoted to the role of colour names in the process of verbalization of works of art in a literary piece enables us to claim the novelty of the given research.

## Results

The research enabled us to monitor the way colour perception is expressed in the English language and how colour-denoting words influence both the characters and the plot of a literary piece. The results of our analysis of colour-denoting in English fiction are as follows.

O. Wilde’s novel “The Portrait of Dorian Grey” is characterized by a wide range of colour names, which serves as a means of the author’s outlook. In the very title we find the adjective *grey*, the general meaning of which is *colourless*; it denotes achromatic colour and when ascribed to a person, it expresses negative attitude. Within the text of the novel the meaning is modified. The main character’s temper and his mode of life prompt the reader that his surname is symbolic: it expresses negative connotation. For example, in the sentence *its gold would wither*

into grey we observe negative dynamics and regress, youth is turning into old age, beauty is transformed into weakness and ugliness. The adjectives denoting colour form the main group of colour names *white, green, yellow, blue, black, red, brown, gold, lilac, jade, purple, pink, violet, grey*. Within the conceptual field of colour we find not only adjectives but also nouns (*the scarlet, the white, the black*) and verbs (*to redden*).

Colour shades in the novel are rendered either by the elements of the corresponding lexico-semantic group *pale blue* or by means of word-composition *light-blue*. Compounding enables the author to point to the shades of the same colour and mixed colours as well.

Typical of the novel under discussion are specific adjectives used in preposition to the colour names. Among them we find colour names modified by colour intensifiers: *rich purple, deep green, dark red*. Some adjectives found in the book, while serving as a name for a certain colour, point out its shade: *blue-green, fawny yellow, golden brown, grey-green, rose-red, scarlet gold, rose-white, green-and-white, purple-and-gold*.

Some colour names coined by means of compounding contain names of objects of nature: *olive-green, copper-green, coin-red, pearl-coloured a buttercup-yellow landscape, corn-red hair, a copper-green sky, the great crocus — coloured robe, olive-stained oak, bright emerald-green, the snowy table-cloth, flesh-coloured stockings, honey-coloured blossoms, apricot-coloured light, moss-coloured jacket, wine-yellow stone, amber-coloured silk, jade-green, pearl-coloured, flame-red, cinnamon*.

The analysis proved that the most frequently used colour in the novel is red, the corresponding adjective serving as its language correlate: *in red foam* [15. P. 31], *the red petals* [15. P. 47], *red whiskered* [15. P. 199], *growing rather red* [15. P. 52].

Another colour which is important for the characteristics of Dorian Grey is blue (*his eyes are blue*), the corresponding adjective being its language correlate. This colour symbolizes freedom, the sky's clarity. This colour also denotes honesty, devotedness, noble-heartedness: *a blue thread* [15. P. 58], *buzzed round the blue — bowl* [15. P. 14], *the sodden eyes had kept something of the loveliness of their blue* [15. P. 73]. O. Wilde often uses green colour in his novel. The meaning of the corresponding adjective in English is associated with youth and being inexperienced: *the green lacquer leaves of the ivy* [15. P. 201], *I am no more to you than a green bronze figure* [15. P. 12].

In other cases the meaning of this colour is close to “fading”: *Yet it was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile. Its bright hair gleamed in the early sunlight. Its blue eyes met his own. A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image of himself, came over him. It had altered already, and would alter more. Its gold would wither into grey. Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairnyss. But he would not sin. The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation* [15. P. 30].

To represent the portrait of young Dorian the author uses not only certain colours but their shades as well, which may be illustrated by the adjective rendering the colour shade — *coal black*. The meaning of the nucleus of the adjective *coal-black* is qualified as strong, negative and passive. This colour is associated with inner tension, disharmony and loneliness. All these features are ascribed to Dorian. So we can suppose that the author has chosen this colour to describe the young man's hair, thus implying that Dorian is bad-tempered and is doomed to hard lot.

In contrast to his temper, Dorian is really beautiful. To emphasize it, O. Wilde uses such attractive colours as *ivory, gold, rose, scarlet, blue*. The corresponding adjectives serve as epithets stressing the beauty of Dorian Grey. Ivory colour symbolizes luxury, tenderness, nobility and the like: *who looks as if he was made out of ivory*.

*Golden* [hair] symbolizes luxury as well as *ivory* [Adonis], the latter also denoting tenderness and nobility, rose colour — sweetness, exquisiteness *rose* [petals], blue colour prompts intelligence *blue* [eyes] [15. P. 3].

The above-mentioned colours are typical of Dorian when he is young, rich, light-minded, extravagant and optimistic. But later on, in accordance with the plot of the novel, we see the dynamics of the face colour of the man's portrait: *Perhaps, some day, the cruel look would have passed away from the scarlet sensitive mouth, and he might show to the world Basil Hallward's masterpiece* [15. P. 123].

Changes of the colour scheme contribute to the changes of the portrait which is expressed, in particular, with the help of metaphors: *Its gold would wither into grey; Its red and white roses would die*. So, we see that O. Wilde used to describe a symbolic meaning to a certain colour scheme, which helps the reader understand the characters' psychology better.

The results of the analysis of colour names in the novel "The Goldfinch" by D. Tartt are of special interest. The main figure of the novel is known to be *yellow* finch. The adjective modifying the name of the bird — *yellow* — denotes certain colour which implies certain connotations. It is yellow finch that causes the dramatic events in the novel. Despite its light and clarity which draws crowds, yellow finch symbolizes the forthcoming tragedy.

In some cases a certain colour scheme predetermines the way the character of literary piece perceives paintings. The statement may be illustrated by the following example. A small boy, Theo by name, the main character of the book under discussion, when brought to the art exhibition, associates the picture seen with red-black colour scheme: *The show was complicated to find, and as we wandered the busy galleries (weaving in and out of crowds, turning right, turning left, backtracking through labyrinths of confusing signage and layout) large gloomy reproductions of The Anatomy Lesson appeared erratically and at unexpected junctures, baleful signposts, the same old corpse with the flayed arm, red arrows beneath: operating theater, this way* [16. P. 28]. Here we come across the cases when colour meaning is implied in the meanings of the adjectives used in the given passage. The adjective *gloomy* implies the black colour of the gloom; the red colour

used in the attributive phrase *red arrows* causes excitement and stimulates agitation. Thus, the black-red colour scheme affects the character's imagination by its ugliness which causes repulsion and aversion towards works of art, namely, to some pictures of Dutch painters. In contradistinction to that is the device used by D. Tartt when he contrasts dark and light colours: *I was not very excited at the prospect of a lot of pictures of Dutch people standing around in dark clothes, and when we pushed through the glass doors — from echoing halls into carpeted hush — I thought at first we'd gone into the wrong hall. The walls glowed with a warm, dull haze of opulence, a generic mellowness of antiquity; but then it all broke apart into clarity and color and pure Northern light, portraits, interiors, still lifes, some tiny, others majestic: ladies with husbands, ladies with lapdogs, lonely beauties in embroidered gowns and splendid, solitary merchants in jewels and furs. Ruined banquet tables littered with peeled apples and walnut shells; draped tapestries and silver; trompe l'oeils with crawling insects and striped flowers. And the deeper we wandered, the stranger and more beautiful the pictures became. Peeled lemons, with the rind slightly hardened at the knife's edge, the greenish shadow of a patch of mold. Light striking the rim of a half-empty wine glass* [16. P. 29].

Dark clothes are contrasted to the things seen in pure Northern light, the latter making a positive effect on the recipient's imagination. The play of colours as described in the novel in some cases creates certain cultural images and may acquire symbolic meaning, as in the following example: *I like this one too, whispered my mother, coming up alongside me at a smallish and particularly haunting still life: a white butterfly against a dark ground, floating over some red fruit. The background — a rich chocolate black — had a complicated warmth suggesting crowded storerooms and history, the passage of time. They really know how to work this edge, the Dutch painters — ripeness sliding into rot* [16. P. 29].

The colour “triangle” *white-real-chocolate black* suggests the idea that everything in this world is temporary and passing, as the author himself expresses it: “*ripeness sliding into rot*”.

Every now and then colour makes part of the so-called psychological detail in the novel. It is the psychological detail that helps to verbalize the plot of the picture described. Moreover, the psychological detail helps to decipher the secret message of the artist that is implied in the picture: *Well, the Dutch invented the microscope, she said. They were jewelers, grinders of lenses. They want it all as detailed as possible because even the tiniest things mean something. Whenever you see flies or insects in a still life — a wilted petal, a black spot on the apple — the painter is giving you a secret message. He's telling you that living things don't last — it's all temporary. Death in life. That's why they're called natures mortes. Maybe you don't see it at first with all the beauty and bloom, the little speck of rot. But if you look closer — there it is* [16. P. 31].

By depicting the psychological details in this passage of the literary piece which are rendered with the help of attributive phrases *a wilted petal, a black spot on the apple* the author stresses the idea that beauty and bloom are not eternal.



The author expresses it in a metaphoric way: *death in life*. The black spot that implies life always ends with death.

Curious enough, in certain cases a character of a literary piece makes literary allusions to the work of art by associating the contents of what is written with visual imagery: *Kay smiled. He was always making these funny literary allusions. "Why Thys Maris?" she demanded. "Read this and see if it doesn't remind you of a Maris canvas, where the writer describes an old castle on a rock, with the autumn woods in twilight, and in the foreground the black fields, and a peasant who is ploughing with a white horse."* [16. P. 44]

One of the characters of I. Stone's novel "Lust for Life", Kay, is inclined to associate the description of a certain location with what is depicted in a well-known picture that he perceives in a white-and-black colour scheme. It is rendered in the novel by the attributive phrases *the black fields, a white horse*, which are contrasted as the black colour is more often than not associated with maliciousness, while the white colour symbolizes the attribute of divine powers struggling with the evil.

Close to the above-mentioned scheme of perception of a picture is the scheme where together with white and black colours the brown one is used: *He stood in silence before Mauve's painting, a large picture of a fishing smack being drawn up on the beach by horses. He knew that he was looking at a masterpiece. The horses were nags, poor, ill-treated old nags, black, white and brown; they were standing there, patient and submissive, willing, resigned and quiet. They still had to draw the heavy boat up the last bit of the way; the job was almost finished. They were panting, covered with sweat, but they did not complain. They had got over that long ago, years and years ago. They were resigned to live and work somewhat longer, but if tomorrow they had to go to the skinner, well, be it so, they were ready. Vincent found a deep, practical philosophy in the picture* [17. P. 266].

Brown colour is considered to be the colour of common people symbolizing poverty and hopelessness: the character is working hard but is still famished and sleep-deprived despite being a righteous person. The colour scheme of the picture prompts the reader the development of the plot: the character Vincent Van Gogh is destined to find himself in the Borinage mines where he would vainly confront the suffering of local people.

Another colour that is of great importance in the process of verbalizing of pictures is the yellow one, which plays an important role in Van Gogh's works of art: *He settled down to work. He found that bistre and bitumen, which most painters were abandoning, made his colouring ripe and mellow. He discovered that he had to put little yellow in a colour to make it seem very yellow, if he placed it next to a violet or lilac tone* [17. P. 357].

The meaning of this colour is positive as in Christianity, it is associated with the colour of the Holy Spirit, of divine revelation and enlightenment. This colour correlates with the artist's creative rise. At the same time his health deteriorates and he is seeking harmony in colours, choosing violet and lilac for balance, which is meant to bring him piece of mind.

A place of its own within the problem of colour meaning is given to the question of rendering of light in works of art verbalized in fiction. Light and transparent colour scheme are known to render high spirits and evoke the recipient's positive emotions, which can be illustrated by the example from the book "Lust for Life" (verbalization of Georges-Pierre Seurat's picture), where the adjective *light* serves as the key word: *The scene represented the Island of the Grande Jatte. Architectural human beings, made out of infinitely graduated points of colour, stood up like poles in a Gothic cathedral. The grass, the river, the boats, the trees, all were vague and abstract masses of dotted light. The canvas was done in all the brightest shades of the palette, lighter than those Manet or Degas or even Gauguin dared to use. The picture was a withdrawal into a region of almost abstract harmony. If it was alive, it was not with the life of nature. The air was filled with glittering luminosity, but there was not a breath to be found anywhere. <...> I make my luminous colours dominant, so, and my warm tone dominant, so. There! Doesn't that suggest the abstraction of gaiety?" <...> "Listen! What is painting today? Light. What kind of light? Gradated light. Points of colour flowing into each other..." "That's not painting, that's pointillism!" [17. P. 402, 405, 452]*

Significantly enough, light colour is rather frequently transmitted through the use of the noun "sun" which embodies the idea of the light as we find in the episodes of verbalizing the general tone of Dega's and Gauguin's works of art: *The paintings that laughed at him merrily from the walls were like nothing he had ever seen or dreamed of. Gone were the flat, thin surfaces. Gone was the sentimental sobriety. Gone was the brown gravy in which Europe had been bathing its pictures for centuries. Here were pictures riotously mad with the sun. With light and air and throbbing vivacity. Paintings of ballet girls backstage, done in primitive reds, greens, and blues thrown next to each other irreverently. He looked at the signature. Degas [17. P. 376].*

*Vincent had been prepared to see something unusual, but he could feel nothing but stunned amazement at Gauguin's work. He saw a confused mass of sun-drenched pictures; trees such as no botanist could discover; animals the existence of which had never been suspected by Cuvier; men whom Gauguin alone could have created; a sea that might have flowed out of a volcano; a sky which no God could inhabit. There were awkward and angular natives, with the mystery of the infinite behind their naive, primitive eyes; dream canvases done in blazes of pink and violet and quivering red; sheer decorative scenes in which wild flora and fauna burst with the heat and light of the sun [17. P. 399].*

## Conclusion

So we realize that colour names are used in literary pieces in their direct and metaphoric meanings. Of special interest are cases when the author treats this or that colour according to his outlook, which results in symbolic meaning ascribed to the colour.

Adjectives denoting colour and its different shades form the main lexico-semantic group of the conceptual field "colour". Adjective are also used in

combination with names of living nature and still life. Colour names may be used in their direct, figurative and symbolic meanings, the most frequently used were found out. It is proved that colour naming is closely connected with specific psychoemotional load and may affect positive or negative value of the object described.

When combined with other psychological details, colour name may change its meaning and acquire a symbolic meaning, thus performing the esthetic function. An attempt was made to determine the author's idea of further development of the plot.

The results gained during the analysis of colour meaning in literary pieces will contribute to systematic knowledge about colour perception and its interpretation in fiction from esthetic angle.

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