

Color Symbolism In The Poems Of Sergey Yesenin

Elena Stoiakina

PhD scholar

Lucknow University

Colors have been recognized as symbols since the ancient times when it was first noticed that they can be used as a separate language with every color bearing a specific meaning. This can be traced in different ancient myths, folklore, traditional tales and even mystic teachings. The color preferences of a person often speak of his or her personality, mood and the perception of reality. That is why the colors that we choose at a particular time period characterize us and our worldview at this time. Of course, the choice of colors depends on many factors, such as age, gender, education, temper, character, mood etc.

Linguists and literary critics, as well as experienced readers notice that writers and poets can use colors to convey their mood and emotional state, that is why poetry is usually loaded with emotions expressed in various color combinations and color-based images.

The present research article focuses on the peculiarities of color symbolism in the poetry of the great Russian poet Sergey Yesenin. For Russians he has become one of the symbols of Russia, along with white stemmed birches and blue sky. His poetry is full of feelings, expressed in simple genuine way, much appreciated by the audience. Sergey Yesenin is loved by Russians for his truly Russian emotions and love for his land. He is famous for his colorful poems filled with all shades, brightness and nuances of colors and sincerity. His poems always make a significant profound effect on the readers who cannot remain indifferent.

The purpose of the article is in the following:

- 1) To discover the symbolism of color and its meaning and usage in the poems of the Russian poet Sergey Yesenin;
- 2) To analyze the poems of Yesenin from color-based point of view;
- 3) To find out the most commonly used color epithets in Yesenin's poems;
- 4) To investigate the psychological effect of colors in the poetry of Sergey Yesenin.

The methods of research include comparative analysis of the poems of Sergey Yesenin, research of literary sources i.e. academic articles on the psychological effects of colors, comparative analysis of color associations.

The novelty of the article lies in the fact that the themes of the great Russian poet Sergey Yesenin and his poetry are not widely covered or discussed in English language sources, especially the symbolic meaning of the colors in his poetry.

Key words: color symbolism, Sergey Yesenin, Russian poetry, color in the poetry

Yesenin who is metaphorically called the poetic heart of Russia, has left rich literary heritage. Like a real artist, he attracts the readers with the bright palette of his poems. He remains the unmatched poet of the Russian land, whose poems penetrate in every Russian heart and are consonant to every Russian soul. Emotions embodied in colors saturate his melodic poems and correlate with the palette that can be found in traditional embroidery, icon painting and in oral folk traditions. This can be explained by the closeness of Yesenin to Russian traditional folk culture which was the main source of inspiration for him. The poet was of peasant origin and knew well all specificities of the simple rural life. He admired the native land, people

and customs and often described them in his poems. Especially he is famous for lyricism of poems about the motherland and separation from the native places. Such poetic works are really the masterpieces of lyrical poetry and can be called colorful landscapes painted by the artist of the words. The landscapes in his poems are very picturesque and multicolored, the nature is full of all shades of the palette of light and dark, bright and dull colors. So, the images that the poet creates are so beautiful and alive that the poem literally makes the same impression as a painting would make.

It is a well-known fact that color has been used as a symbol since ancient times. Every color has its own symbolic meaning attributed to it, which is fixed and understood by all the people belonging to the specific linguistic culture. Since the Middle Ages the scientists from various fields of academic knowledge have been studying the questions of colors and their associations, trying to find out the impact of colors on the human psychic and their symbolic meaning.

Colors have quite complex and huge range of symbolic meanings, which can be explained by the fact that symbol is one of the basic meaningful units of culture. This symbol is a kind of manifestation of the mentality and as such it bears a particular significance for the individual and for the society as well, as it is also embodied in a definite lexical unit. Here it is noteworthy to mention that symbol is some socially fixed meaning attributed to a particular thing, event or object which has been accepted by the society and transmitted from generation to generation. The life of human society is full of color symbolism, and literature, being the mirror of the society is perhaps, the best source of knowledge of color perceptions and images associated with colors. Each color has its own strictly fixed symbolism and specificity, some definite features. Paints are used as metaphors have their particular language, sometimes hidden, multilayered or even magical.

The meaning of colors is very nation specific and very often even the differentiations of colors are different in different linguistic cultures. So, consequently, their symbolism is also culture/language based and should be examined within the framework of a specific language community. Color is one of the categories that belong to cognitive function and is one of the key cultural concepts. Linguistic cultures have different cultural concepts, so the perception of color is also very culture specific category. It becomes especially evident in the folk arts of different ethnic groups where colors are associated with different things, sometimes opposite to what they represent in another ethnic group.

Numerous linguistic studies have shown that generally the opposition of light and darkness forms the basis for color differentiations and color associations for the majority of linguistic cultures. For example, the day or light is associated with activities and life, while night or darkness is associated with cold and danger. Thus, we see that black or dark color has negative connotations and white or light color has positive connotations.

The ancient symbolism of colors and their interpretations in various linguistic cultures have been confirmed by the modern theories about the relations of colors and emotional states not only of the individual but also in the groups of people. The correlation of the language and the dominating psychological state was studied by many scientists, academicians and researchers, including Swiss psychotherapist Max Luscher, who invented the famous psychological test based on color preferences. Russian psychologists V. Petrenko and V. Kucherenko have made research that confirmed the existing correlations between emotional state of a person and his or her color preferences. In particular situations the choice of colors was influenced by the emotional state of a person. For example, in the state of joy and happiness the preference was given to bright colors saturated with energy i.e. red and yellow while the colors of peace and relaxations i.e. blue and brown were rejected as well as the color of non-existence i.e. black. On the contrary, in the cases when the person feels guilty for some deeds, the choice is given to grey and blue while energy saturated red and yellow are rejected. So, we see that the study has found out an interesting feature of blue color which is associated with carefree peace and relaxation but when combined with grey it creates the feeling of passiveness and suppression.

In poetry colors are used to express emotions and the palette that the poet prefers can tell much about the poet. However, not every poet chooses coloration and color language in the poems as some poets can employ abstractions and absence of lights and colors to create the emotional impact on the reader. Sergey Yesenin

stands out in the row of Russian poets as it was Yesenin who brought the amazing simplicity of colors of Russian nature to the reading audience. His poems are like pictures of multicolored Russian landscapes. The color symbolism plays the important role in creation of poetical images and expression of emotional nuances of his poems. Very often the colors in his works are related to nature phenomena, rural life and traditional Russian motifs, which enhances the national flavor of his poems. The poet uses many colors, the most often of them are blue, sky blue, white, golden, green.

The blue and light blue are perhaps the most widely used by Yesenin as they are associated with the colors of the Russian landscapes and the light blue high sky above them. His poems often depict the traditional nature with vast fields, white stemmed birch trees, green valleys, golden rye fields, blue lakes and rivers. As nature changes its seasons, the colors change subsequently. Russia has four completely different seasons with gradual change in color shades. So, the white stemmed birch tree looks totally covered with snow and white in winter, bright green with new foliage in spring, green in summer, yellow with faded leaves in autumn. Thus, the colors denote the physical changes in nature, and at the same time in poetry these changes are shown as reflections of the change in mood, emotions, psychological and mental state of the lyrical characters. For example, in the poem *Oh, my dear maple, frozen stiff and bare* the maple tree is compared with the lyrical character who remembers the time when he also used to be green, that is young and carefree.

Oh, my dear maple, frozen stiff and bare,

Why do you stand bending in the blizzard there?

Have you seen a vision? Have you heard a babble?

Just like you are out for an idle ramble.

This poem is a lyrical miniature with the elements of landscape that cause associations with life of the lyrical hero of the poem. It is deeply lyrical and enchanting with all its confessions, sad intonations and sincerity of emotions. It creates the feeling that the lyrical hero shares the most hidden secrets of his soul. The language of this poem, as well as in most of Yesenin poems, is very simple and sometimes colloquial. And as is the case with the majority of Yesenin's poems, the nature is not a simple background, but a metaphor where every natural phenomenon is strongly associated with the image of the lyrical character. Nature makes the poet contemplate the lifepath. So, here we see the complete interconnection of the world of nature and the world of humans. Even when talking to the maple tree, the poet addresses him as if it is a human being. Thus, Yesenin uses personification:

Have you seen a vision? Have you heard a babble?

Just like you are out for an idle ramble.

Like a tipsy warden, walking on the roadside,

You have stuck in snowdrift, hit by burning frost-bite.

And, vice versa, the lyrical hero compares himself with the maple tree, but not bare but full in green. This green maple tree is associated with warm summer and harmony that he lacked in life. The poem can be symbolically divided into two parts. The first one is the address of the lyrical hero to the maple tree and having a conversation with it. The second one is the thoughts of the lyrical hero of himself and his life. The association of the image of a person with the image of tree form the basis of the poem. In this poem, the maple tree is depicted in winter as ice bitten and in spring or summer as green. This color of grass and foliage symbolizes youth and cheerfulness, though at the same time it can imply immaturity and carelessness.

An experienced reader and simply any lover of Yesenin's poetry can notice that the favourite colors of the poet are **blue and light blue**. Exactly these shades reflect the huge unlimited fields of Russia. It is evident if we see such poet's expressions with these colors as "*only blue sucks the eyes*", "*blue mountains*" [*The fields are compressed, the groves are bare*], "*blue backwaters*" [*Inonia*], "*blue Rus*" [*I left my native home*], "*blue gentle country*" [*The cold gold of the moon*], "*blue pond*" [*The golden grove has spoken*], "*blue stream*" [*The day has gone, the line has diminished*], "*blue dust*" [*The moon butts the cloud with its horn*],

"the skies are already blue" [Sunrise], "the valleys have turned blue in the transparent cold" [Blue] etc. Very often the color light blue is used in description of Russia or as an epithet to Russia. This is deeply rooted in the special perception of light blue color in the Russian culture. The psycholinguists have found out that the native Russian speakers differentiate a separate shade among the range of blue color and it has a separate color name which is *голубой* in Russian. It can be translated as light blue in English, though the Russian language has separate words for all the range of blue i.e. dark blue, light blue, sky blue, navy blue etc. and literally *голубой* does not belong to the range of blue but recognized as a separate color. In our opinion, it can be explained but the perception of the endless high light blue (*голубой*) sky over the vast Russian land mirrored in the numerous blue rivers and lakes. Thus, the poems of Yesenin represent the typical Russian landscape i.e. endless green fields, blue water of rivers, white stemmed green birch trees. All these have formed the symbols of Russia.

Blue color and all its shades were not simple average shades that he could use frequently or randomly. For him they were associated with something of the higher realm, something unspoken, sentimental, deeply hidden in the soul and connected to God. It is very symbolic as the abode of God and the higher world are considered to be somewhere above, in the sky which is blue. So, this color of higher purity is sacred. The poet used this color as an epithet for Russia, he said: "*Russia! What a beautiful word! Dew, and strength, and something blue...*"

Many of Yesenin's lines describe Russia with that color epithet:

*I have left my endeared home,
Getting out of my Russia of blue.
Little grove by the pond will warm
My old mothers sorrow anew.*

In many poems where the main motif was separation from the native land, blue becomes the prominent color in Yesenin's palette, inseparable from Russia:

*Little house with light blue shutters,
I will never forget you, no way!
All these years that have gone with the shadows
Seemed so recent and not far away.*

The poetry of Yesenin saturated with blue color reminds of old Russian fresco painting. The shades of blue have become the favorites in his palette.

*Blue is the night, and the moon is glancing,
There was a time, I was young and handsome.
So irretrievable and so persistent
All has gone by...all is past ...and distant...*

The poet uses blue color to create the atmosphere of the lightness and the so-called coziness of a life being, as for example, in such expressions as "blue ringing" [Whisker], "blue happiness", "on a moonlit evening, on a blue evening" [On a blue evening, on a moonlit evening], "blue cloth of heaven" [Marshes and swamps], "pre-dawn, blue, early". Blue or rather light blue or sky blue (the above discussed *голубой* in Russian) also express the feeling of tenderness and love as in "blue-eyed guy", "blue in his eyes" [Blue] etc. Blue is so persistent in Yesenin's poems that even mouths, hands fire and souls are given such epithets, for example, "blue mouths" [In that land where there are yellow nettles], "blue fire" [I have never been to the Bosphorus], "blue soul" [It is not the clouds that wander behind the barn].

In Yesenin's picturesque poems blue is often accompanied by all shades of **green**. The poet was very color conscious and deeply felt the colors of nature and the effects that they made. He used them in his poems in the forms of metaphors and personifications. For example, in one of his poems he describes Russia as the one who wears a green shawl. The poet's usage of green is very traditional, i.e. as the color of renewal, birth of nature and hopes. It is abundant in his poems, as in the following lines: *"the green of the lakes"* [In the land where the yellow nettles grow], *"the freedom of the green fields"* [Hey there, Russia, mother country], *"green water in the grass"* [Yesterday's rain has not yet dried], *"green hillocks"* [A crooked path through the village], *"green canopy"* [Behind the dark strand of the copse], *"green grass"* [Bless every work, good luck!], *"green firs"* [Dream], *"green top"* [Confession of a Hooligan], *"green forest"* [Village], *"green mountains"* [I am a shepherd; my chambers].

Another color which is widely used by the Russian poet is **white**. Traditionally in Russian culture it is associated with purity, innocence and cold. Yesenin follows the tradition and, in his poems, it is also related to purity, especially ritual purity, as, for example in the following lines and poems *"white ringing"* [Trinity morning, morning canon], *"white temple"* [Dream], *"white angel"* [Open for me, guardian from beyond the clouds], *"festive white clothes"* [Good for the autumn freshness]. From all the shades in the palette Yesenin often prefers white which symbolizes peace, silence, purity and concentration. In white he painted the half moon above the house roof, the surface of a river and the moonlight which, according to the poet, looks like *"snow-white feather"* and *"white field"* [Again spread out in a pattern]. White is used in *"white road"* [The road thought about the red evening], *"smoke of white apple trees"* [I do not regret, and I do not shed tears], *"white path"* [The blizzard sweeps away], *"white rose"* [I have only one fun left], *"white snowstorm"* [Oh, my dear maple, frozen stiff and bare], *"white hut"* [The red wings of the sunset are fading]. Special emphasis should be given to one of the most widely used and recognized images in Yesenin's poetry i.e. white stemmed birch tree.

Snow-clad is the plain, and the moon is white

Covered with a shroud is my country side.

Birches dressed in white are crying, as I see.

Who is dead, I wonder? Is it really me?

In traditional folk Russian culture trees have always been venerated and considered sacred. In fact, the most of folk Russian songs are focused on some particular tree or plant which is personified and used metaphorically. The tradition of tree worship and sacred forests goes deep into the ancient pre-Christian times of Russian history. Birch tree is considered sacred in Slavic mythology and it is one of the symbols of Russia. As was already mentioned earlier, Sergey Yesenin was very close to traditional folk Russian culture and a birch tree has become one of his most favourite images. It is described in many of his poems with the epithet white (as it is white stemmed). The image of white birch tree brings about the feeling of happiness, joy, white glowing light, purity and the beginning of a new life. White is often used in the depiction of the trees in winter, so this color is associated with snow, ice and cold as well.

Just below my window

Stands a birch-tree white,

Under snow in winter

Gleaming silver bright.

The shades of **yellow and golden** are another widely used color shades in the poems by Yesenin. Mostly in Russian poetry these colors are associated with autumn, the season when the nature loses its greenery and turns all shades of golden, yellow and sometimes red, as for example in the following lines and poems *"yellow nettle"* [In the land of yellow nettle], *"yellow valleys"* [Beyond the mountains, beyond the yellow valleys], *"golden branches"* [Storm].

Over there beyond fields of yellow

There are villages stretching ahead.

There's a wood and the sunset of mellow

And a fence with a nettle thread.

In some poems yellow is also related to the decay of the lost soul or to the path to nowhere, as in the following poem:

The winding yellow road will go

Across the sunlit field of flowers,

The girl whose name I cherish so

Will turn me out of her house.

In many poems yellow has negative connotations related to sin, decay, sadness, despair, betrayal, sickness, death as in 'yellow sadness' [*They're drinking here again, fighting and crying*], 'yellow decay' [*I feel sad looking at you*], 'yellow bone' [*Don't torment me with coldness*].

Don't torment me with coldness and stiffness

And don't ask me my age and so on.

I have serious falling sickness

With my soul like a yellow bone.

Golden color is often used in describing the landscape, trees and natural phenomena as in "golden Rus" [*Oh, I believe, I believe, happiness exists*], "golden cloud" [*Night and field, and the crow of roosters*], "golden stars" [*Song of the dog*], "golden distant distances" [*I have only one amusement left*], "golden grove" [*The golden grove has spoken*], "golden icons" [*Whisker*], "golden land" [*Jordanian dove*], "golden caps of the mountains" [*Inonia*], "golden ray" [*To I.D. Rudinsky*]. The most popular poem where golden color is associated with the change of the season when summer turns into autumn and then gradually to winter is perhaps, the Golden Grove.

*The golden grove is no longer laughing
And all birch trees stay silent, gray, and sad,
And flying by, the cranes care of nothing;
They go far and they do not regret.*

As well as nature turns golden before it is finally frozen and cold, a person's life is also associated with this color, thus highlighting its finality. This can be seen in the following lines:

*I do not regret, and I do not shed tears,
All, like haze off apple-trees, must pass.
Turning gold, I'm fading, it appears,
I will not be young again, alas.*

As can be seen from the above lines, the nature in Yesenin's poem is not an inanimate background, on the contrary it is alive, acts like a human being and reacts to what is happening in the person's life or to the historical events referring to the whole country. In fact, nature is Yesenin's favourite lyrical character that is why it is inseparable from the person's mood, his thoughts and feelings.

Psychologists have found out that the preference of yellow and golden shades can speak of the desire for freedom, getting rid of tensions and independence.

Ring, golden Russia, carry on,

Oh, blow you wind, so unabated!

Blessed is the one who celebrated

Your shepherd's sadness, hope forlorn.

Ring, golden Russia, carry on!

Along with yellow and golden, **red** color is also used in description of autumn nature. Mostly it is red that makes the dull landscapes brighter as this color is associated with richness, abundance and beauty. Yesenin uses this color for things and contexts that conventionally are depicted in other colors. For example, even the evening is described as red: "red evening" [*The road thought about the red evening*], "red dawn" [*Sunrise*], "red wings of sunset" [*The red wings of sunset go out*], "red fire" [*Black, then smelling of howling!*], "red gates" [*Transfiguration*], "the glow of red lightning" [*Cantata*], "red drops burn cities" [*Poland*], "the red hem of the evening" [*Snow, like honey porous...*].

Along with red, in some poems we can find another color of the close spectrum, that is **scarlet**. Especially often it is used in the early poems of Sergey Yesenin. Scarlet is very bright and vibrant shade, so no wonder that it symbolizes joy, love, beauty and abundance of life. It is seen in the following lines:

Scarlet light of sunset shows up on the lake.

Grouses are crying in the wood, awake.

Hidden in hollow, cries an oriole.

I don't feel like crying, brightness in my soul.

Here it should be noted that in translation the color can be named differently, as in the example below, where the original "scarlet berry" is replaced with "berry"

You were tender beautiful and fair,

Berry juice upon your skin, so light.

You resembled rosy sunset glare,

And, like snow, you were lustrous, fair and bright.

In Yesenin's poems we can also find **pink**, often translated into English as **rosy**. It is almost always used not in its direct meaning, but rather as an epithet which shows the poet's mood. This color is usually associated with something tender, fragile and light. For example, in the following lines the "rose ambitions" mean some dreams that did not come true:

Rosy ambitions of those days —

Does it matter if they've not come true!

If devils roosted in my soul

It means that angels lived there too.

And in the poem *I do not regret, and I do not shed tears* the fast speed of life is described metaphorically as follows:

Presently I do not feel a yearning,

Oh, my life! Have I been sleeping fast?

Well, it feels like early in the morning

On a rosy horse I've galloped past.

Black is the color that historically has its own well-known symbolism. Absence of color means negation, darkness and the evil. Usually it is used as an opposition of white which means light and the good. The contrast of these two colors was characteristic to the Old Russian literature, where black traditionally represented the dark forces and was associated with something negative. Black was the deep cave or the intense shadow that both could hide something dangerous. This becomes especially evident in Yesenin's

poem *A Black Man*, where all frightening, cruel and ruthless attitude towards the inner world of a person is embodied in a black human like devilish man. Of course, in some of the poems this color was used in its direct meaning of just a color, without any metaphorical context or negative connotations. For example, in the poems that were written during the period of 1910–1916: *"black curls"* [*Imitation of a song*], *"black braids"* [*The reeds rustled over the backwater*], *"black wood grouse"* [*The flood of smoke*], *"black blanket"* [*Dream*]. But during the following years 1917-1925 the Russian poet started using black with straight negative meaning, highlighting the crucial connotations of death, depression and even absence of life, as in the following lines: *"black horror"* [*Hooligan*], *"black death"* [*Mysterious world, my ancient world*], *"black fate"* [*Fluffy ringing and cursing*], *"black man"* [*Black man*].

In the poem *Hooligan* Yesenin gives the epithet *"black"* to the negative frightening situation that he feels is happening:

*Black horror walks the hills,
Stirring a thief's anger into our garden.
Except I'm a lout and a bandit myself
With the blood of a steppe horse thief.*

Yesenin's colors are not simply expressive means of some general abstract associations but a powerful tool to convey emotional state of a lyrical character of the poem, usually through personification of nature and various metaphors. The Russian poet creates vivid images that are alive and bright. The words painted with appropriate colors were the best poet's choice to convey the subtlest emotional movements of the soul and to reflect its most delicate nuances.

In fact, as it was already mentioned earlier, the palette that Yesenin chooses can tell us much about the poet himself, his mood and emotional state in different periods of his life.

Thus, on the basis of our analysis of color symbolism in Yesenin's poems it has become evident that colors play a significant role in expression of feelings and emotions. Even the poet's perception of the world can be characterized on the basis of the palette that he prefers. In case with Yesenin's poems it is more complex because the poet was a great artist who used different shades and painted words in different colors to achieve the unmatched level of expression. And it is not only about the colors as his palette was very traditional. It is the combination of simple vocabulary and appropriate color shade to convey the deepest feelings and emotions that makes an unparallel effect on the reader. Sergey Yesenin's poetry is a brilliant example of the complexity of color images. His poems show that color images are based not simply on color associations but can be complex phenomena which include both thoughts and emotions.

The suitable words which correlate with the chosen color shades are precisely and accurately used to express the subtle emotional nuances. Yesenin's palette is quite simple and traditional, though with it the poet not only managed to convey the various moods of the lyrical character but succeeded in creation of solid picturesque images of Russia that has become symbolic. Sergey Yesenin is the greatest artist who has been known for his eternal love for Russia that is described in many of his poems with the wide range of the colors of blue, light blue, green, golden, yellow, white, pink, scarlet, red and black.

Thus, on the basis of the above mentioned, it has become evident that the color symbolism has been a significant characteristic of Yesenin's poetry.

Works cited and consulted

Barsamian A. I., Popova A.A. Psychology of color. Scientific research and developments of students. Cheboksary, 2018. Pp. 41-43

Bazyma B.A. Psychology of color: Theory and practice. Rech, 2005

Bunham R.W., Hanes R.M., Bartleson C.J. Color: A guide to basic facts and concepts. N.Y.,1963.

Kravkov S.V. Color vision. Moscow, 1951.

Luscher M. Personality signals. Voronezh, 1993.

Petrenko V.F., Kucherenko V.V. The relationship between emotions and color. Moscow University Publication. Ser. 14. No. 3, 1985.

Poems of Sergey Yesenin in English <https://ruverses.com/sergey-esenin/the-golden-grove/4711/>

<https://dtg.adminu.ru/2013/12/poems-esenin/>

