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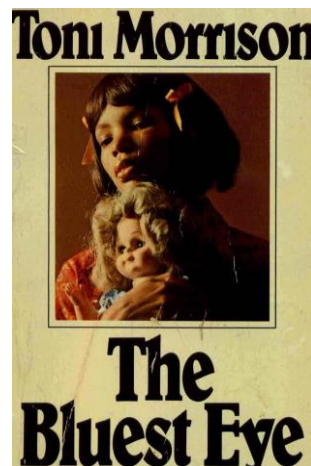
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Non-Verbal Communication: The Use of Chromatics in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is an indispensable element of human behaviour. Chromatics or the use of colours is a vital aspect of nonverbal communication which is used as a predominant technique in Morrison's fictions. Language is a set of words/phrases and nonverbal cues with meaning behind them, and literature is the manipulation and use of those words or phrases and nonverbal cues. In literature, language is meticulously crafted. This paper analyses how language skills are harnessed to understand and interpret a work of literature. It co-relates nonverbal communication (most particularly chromatics) and literature, with special reference to Morrison's novels.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, chromatics, symbolism.

Rubric of Nonverbal Communication

Words normally express ideas, whereas nonverbal expressions convey attitudes and emotions. A message is reinforced when the verbal and nonverbal parts of the message complement each other and send the same message. Nonverbal communication is an indispensable and all-pervasive element of human behaviour and may be broadly classified into the following categories:

- Kinesis
- Proxemics
- Oculesics
- Haptics
- Paralanguage
- Olfactics
- Chronemics
- Personal appearance
- Chromatics

Chromatics and Arts

Chromatics is a powerful means of communication. From time immemorial humans have been using colours to convey messages. Different colours are associated with different behaviour patterns, attitudes and cultural backgrounds. Colours have psychological effect and are associated with various moods and feelings. They are used for identification and classification. Teams, regiments and countries have their combination of colours on their flag. Even the cosmetics industry uses colour for soaps and shampoos.

Artists and interior decorators believe that different colours project different meanings. Every society uses chromatics, but they are culture-specific. For example, in the United States it is common to wear black when one is in mourning, while in some locations (like in Odisha) people wear white when they are in mourning. Communication is inseparable from culture. We must always consider cultural differences while sending or receiving nonverbal messages. A message that has a particular meaning in one society can have a completely different meaning in another society.

Chromatics as a Literary Device

Writers use quite a lot of literary devices to append meaning or significance to their works. One way they do this is via symbolism. Symbolism is when writers use colours, animals, things, places, or any other element to represent ideas.

When we understand the symbol being used, we connect its meaning to the narrative we are reading and understand the story on a deeper level. Writers use symbolic colours in their works in various ways.

Sometimes colour is used to describe clothing of characters or in the setting of a story. Verbal language is filled with metaphors for colour that translate well to visual language. Feeling blue, seeing red and green with envy are common expressions. Colour has cultural significance - different colours mean different things in different places. Colours elicit both cultural and psychological associations that are representative of ideas, concepts and feelings. Context plays a

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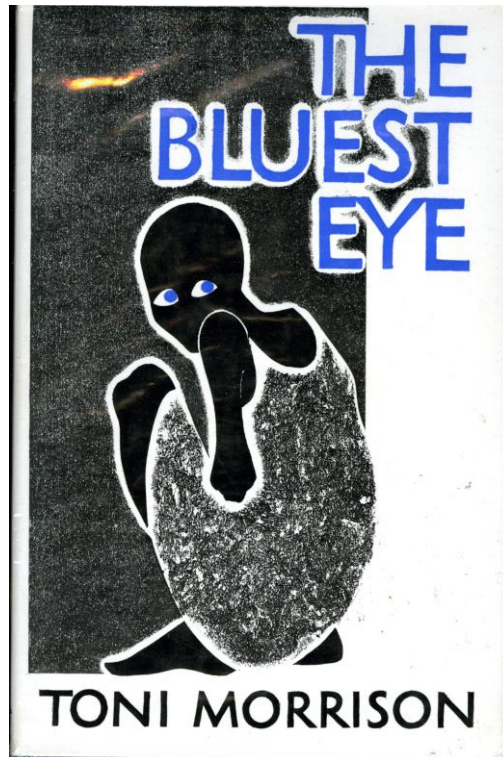
part in colour symbolism, meaning that one colour can have positive or negative connotations, depending on the larger framework. For example, although blue is often associated with strength and optimism in Western cultures, in another context it can be associated with despair and frustration.

Impact of Colour Symbolism

Literary works are often rich in multiple levels of meaning and demand that the reader is actively involved in teasing out the unstated implications. Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning American author, uses colour symbolism as a major device in thematic and character development. She uses colour in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987) repeatedly, but in different ways. For example, rebirth is represented by the colour green. Each spring, trees that had been bare and lifeless through the winter months suddenly renew themselves with green buds that promise a beautiful future.

The Colours in the *The Bluest Eye*

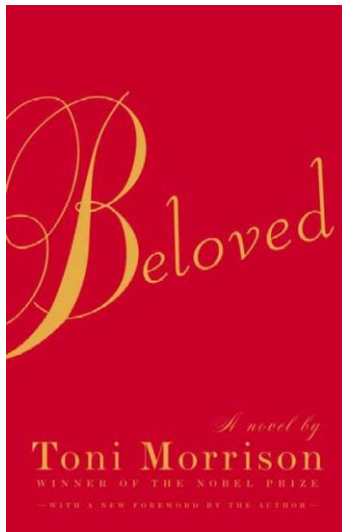
In the *The Bluest Eye*, whiteness is associated with beauty and cleanliness (according to Geraldine and Mrs. Breedlove), and also with sterility. In this work of fiction, the colour white symbolizes several things - superiority, power, wealth, and the ideals of society. Blue eyes symbolize the cultural beauty and cachet attributed to whiteness in America. The rainbow colours are linked with happiness - the yellow, green, and purple memories Pauline Breedlove sees when making love with Cholly. To Pecola, blue eyes signify the beauty and happiness that she associates with the white, middle-class world. Claudia and Frieda associate marigolds (orange) with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. They believe that if the marigolds they have planted grow, then Pecola's baby will be all right.



Pecola's Worldview

Pecola feels she can overcome the battle of self-hatred by obtaining blue eyes. The recurring allusion to Pecola's longing for blue eyes is symbolic of her hatred for being black. The pervasiveness of the colour blue in the novel is in direct opposition with black. Blue offers an escape and promotes the idea of success and beauty, while black is a constant reminder of failure. When Pecola drops the blueberry pie, the colour blue cascades all over the white kitchen and obscures her blackness momentarily and ultimately exposes it, creating a dissonance within the colour spectrum. The colour blue betrays her physically and emotionally, illustrating the impossibility of Pecola's existence in this blue and white world that she dreams about. "All Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it" (Bloom: 7).

Colours in *Beloved*



Colours are also used in *Beloved* as an escape from the black world, but instead of being a point of contention, they reassure and offer comfort. Baby Suggs reflects on colour before her death for the reason that she did not have the time to ponder or enjoy during her life. She goes through a mosaic of colours before she dies - blue, yellow, green and she was in the middle of pink when she died. The reality that she never reached red is symbolic of a good death, since Morrison equates evil and destruction with red.

Toward the closing stages of the novel, Sethe, Denver and Beloved decorate themselves with so much colour that they look like a carnival act. The colours are bright and sassy, only small bits of black lace are incorporated. The absence of black is symbolic of denial of oneself and the need for a distraction.

There are two instances where white and red are coupled in this novel. The first time is when Amy, who is white, is in search of red velvet, although she refers to it as carmine. The second pairing of these two colors occurs after Sethe is stained with Beloved's blood and goes to nurse Denver, and Denver receives both the red blood and the white milk. The reverberation of this coupling suggests a powerful relationship between the colours that denotes life as well as death.

White and Black

In *Beloved*, white colour does not conflict with black, like it does in *The Bluest Eye*. It is merely a sweet and colourful anecdote to their monochromatic lives. It symbolizes peace or festivity and there is an absence of any real threat to their existence as black people. Whatever the meaning behind colour in these novels it cannot be ignored, the colour enhances the meaning of the characters and the racial discourse within the novel. Morrison uses the colour red in multiple ways in her novel *Beloved*. On the one hand red is a symbol of vibrancy and life, often revealing life in unexpected places. It also symbolizes pain and death. Red symbolizes action, courage, vitality. For Amy Denver, the velvet red signifies her ambitions for a calm and peaceful life, while 'the red heart' of Paul D stands for his deep emotions.

Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk, think, it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for colour. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool-the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild - like life in the raw. Sethe looked at her hands, her bottle-green sleeves, and thought how little color there was in the house and how strange that she had not missed it the way Baby did. Deliberate, she thought, it must be deliberate, because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as colour conscious as a hen. Every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup, meat and all the rest. And she could not remember remembering a molly apple or a yellow squash. Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked on its colour. There was something wrong with that; it was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it.

(*Beloved*: 38-39)

Colour and the African Americans

Colour has made every difference in the world to the black American. *Beloved* is full of colours: gravestones, vegetables, walls, quilts, clothing, flowers, houses, emotions, bodies. Baby Suggs goes to bed to think about colour because "she never had time to see, let alone enjoy it before." Colour is life, and Sethe is trying to restore life. With heaps of brightly coloured clothing on the floor around her, Sethe lies "under a quilt of merry colors." In *Beloved* the significance colours play in the novel contains a great depth of meaning.

Describing Colour without Colour Words

Slavery wipes all the colour out of life - the colour of skin determines freedom. Sometimes in her works Morrison describes colour without using colour words. When she describes Halle smearing "creamy butter" on his face, we can see the yellow tones of it. We can see the harsh grey of the "iron bit" in Paul D's, the rich black of blackberries, the pure white of the falling snow, and the vivid orange of the fire licking Sixo's skin. We can visualize all the images because of the fine painting Morrison does with her words. Red is the most significant and most common colour. Instead of representing love, red represents pain, death, oppression, and suffering. Morrison gives us so much evidence to support the painful use of red: the baby's blood, the rooster's red comb, the red light occupying 124, the carmine velvet, Paul D's red heart, the chokecherry tree, the blood red bird *Beloved* observes, the red ribbon Stamp Paid finds, red gums of the "savage blacks" in the white jungle.

Colours are the rays of hope that brighten Baby Suggs's last days. She particularly craves for lavender and the orange squares that lessen the forbidding neutrality of the keeping room. Colours from the red part of the spectrum (including orange and pink) recur throughout *Beloved*, although the meaning of these red objects varies. Amy Denver's red velvet, for example, is an image of hope and a brighter future, while Paul D's "red heart" represents feeling and emotion. Overall, red seems to connote vitality and the visceral nature of human existence.

Yet, in *Beloved*, vitality often goes hand in hand with mortality, and red images simultaneously refer to life and death, to presence and absence. For example, the red roses that line the road to the carnival serve to herald the carnival's arrival in town and announce the beginning of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D's new life together; yet they also stink of death. The red rooster signifies manhood to Paul D, but it is a manhood that Paul D himself has been denied. The story of Amy's search for carmine velvet seems especially poignant, because we sense the futility of her dream. Sethe's memory is awash with the red of her daughter's blood and the pink mineral of her gravestone, both of which have been bought dearly.

Toni Morrison thinks in colour. Colour is an innate visual language that can be a tremendously functional tool in conveying information. It is a powerful and important communication tool, and is tied to religious, cultural, political and social interpretations.

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