

Analysis of Color Metaphor in *Dry September*

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Abstract: Color metaphor plays a huge role in setting off the atmosphere, depicting the characters, and revealing the significance of the theme. In *Dry September*, Faulkner used different colors in a metaphorical and symbolic way. The metaphor of different colors implies the abstract human nature. The colors in *Dry September* are closely related to the thematic meanings of “madness, violence, and death.” By analyzing the metaphorical meanings of the colors, it is then possible to have a better understanding about the profound themes expressed in the short story. However, there are several studies on this short story concerning color metaphor. This paper attempts to analyze the metaphorical meanings represented by the colors in detail to better comprehend the evil side of human nature and the tragedy of life that the author wanted to convey in the short story.

Keywords: Metaphor; Color; Human nature; Dry September

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1. Introduction

1.1. Author

William Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 1949. His works are often regarded as the pinnacle of American southern literature in the 20th century and occupy a pivotal position in the literary world.

Tao pointed out in his article, *A Brief Review of Faulkner Studies in China*, that the studies on Faulkner in China excessively emphasized on his novels but overlooked many of his short stories^[1]. In fact, it is true that there are numerous studies on Faulkner’s acclaimed novels at home and abroad, but only a few studies on his short stories. As a matter of fact, Faulkner’s short stories are by no means inferior to his novels. His novels are an extension of his short stories in terms of characterization, scene descriptions, narrative techniques, and diversity of themes. Therefore, a thorough study of Faulkner’s short stories will do good for the fully grasping the development of this great writer’s thoughts and art.

1.2. *Dry September*

Dry September was published in 1931, which included a part of the entire Yoknapatawpha genealogy. The background of this story reflected the social situation in the southern United States after the American civil. There are five parts to this story. Part one, part three, and part five are the main body of the story, focusing on the persecution of the blacks by the white supremacy led by McLendon. Part two and part four are about Miss Cooper, a victim who has been deeply influenced by the myth of southern ladyhood. The description of her experience and the distortion of her mind indirectly highlighted the innocence of the blacks. The theme of racial vendetta is not uncommon in black literature. However, the reason why this short story is highly praised is inseparable from the successful use of metaphor in this short story. This paper attempts to

analyze its color metaphor to have a profound insight into the themes expressed in this short story.

2. Literature review

Faulkner wrote a series of southern tragic short stories, such as *A Rose for Emily*, *Dry September*, and *Martyrdom*. The fictional Yoknapatawpha county created by these works is full of sorrow, death, and decay, revealing the tragic fate of southerners who stick to the old traditions. Studies on *Dry September* can be generally divided into three categories.

2.1. Racial issue

Most studies tried to reflect the brutal social reality by exposing racial discrimination and racial violence that lead to tragedies. In *Faulkner and Racial Myth* ^[2], Arthur F. Kenney pointed out that *Dry September* is one of the most impressive short stories among Faulkner's works that reflect racial myth and ethnic violence. Edward L. Volpe commented in *Dry September: Metaphor for Despair* that *Dry September* is a magnificent poem written in a narrative form, in which it reflects race, society, and culture; in addition, it shows God's abandonment of human beings in the south of America ^[3].

2.2. Myth of southern ladyhood

Some articles are devoted to analyzing the tragedy of the myth of southern ladyhood from the perspective of southern women in America. In *On Miss Minnie Cooper's Madness in Faulkner's Dry September*, Jin mentioned that the fictitious place – Yoknapatawpha county was a microcosm of society of the American southern plantation during the economic slumps period, in which women often became the victims of the myth of southern ladyhood ^[4]. Miss Minnie Cooper was one of them who ended up depraved, psychopathic, or in an insane way.

2.3. Metaphor

There have been many studies on the metaphors in *Dry September*, and the most representative paper is Liang's *Frenzy, Violence and Death: On the Ruling Metaphors in Faulkner's "Dry September"* ^[5]. It focuses on typical metaphors, such as "dry September," "gossip," "bloody twilight," and "dust," and puts them into the context of history, deification, and religion to understand their connotations and functions from the aspects of semantics, pragmatics, and aesthetics. For instance, "dry September" is the embodiment of autumn, which implies the archetypal image of tragedy; "gossip" is a sin declared in the Bible; "bloody twilight" symbolizes violence and madness; "dust" symbolizes crime and punishment as well as death. Different from previous studies on the story's metaphors, this paper emphasizes on color metaphor and tries to reveal the traits of characters and the inevitability of a tragic ending in the short story.

3. Color metaphor and *Dry September*

3.1. The metaphorical cognition of color

Human cognition of color is an important part of cognition of the external world. American anthropologist, Ray thinks that each color system aims to arrange the perceptual world in an orderly way, which makes human perception and behavioral responses, especially verbal and communicative responses, more effective ^[6]. Shu, a linguist, pointed out that if the concept of language expression is metaphorical, it is the same with the concept of visual expression; the metaphorical production and thinking processes in language reflect the way of understanding the world in human brains ^[7]. Therefore, color metaphor is a powerful tool for people to explore, describe, understand, and explain new situations. Due to repeated use over a long

period of time, these color metaphors have become routine and embedded in language, making people's cognition of things more vivid.

3.2. Colors in *Dry September*

Color metaphors are abundant in *Dry September*. Red is used many times in the story to reveal the bloodiness of murder. Pink indicates Miss Minnie Cooper's desire for sex ^[8]. Green and white reflect McLendon's hypocrisy.

3.2.1. Red

In western countries, the conception of "red" came from bullfighting. As the sun and fire share the color red, they did not attract westerners much ^[9]. When it comes to "red," negative words such as "violence," "bloodiness," and "killing" swarm people's minds.

The color red appeared numerous times in this short story. "Through the bloody September twilight, aftermath of sixty-two rainless days, it had gone like a fire in dry grass – the rumor, the story, whatever it was ^[10]." At the beginning of *Dry September*, a scene full of red light cropped up. It seems that "twilight in red" is beautiful from the perspective of most people. However, in Faulkner's script, he chose "bloody" instead of "red" or "vermilion" to modify "twilight," thus setting the tone of murder. In addition, Xia found that words such as "blood" are sinister connotations ^[11]. Therefore, the description of the time and climate with the color red reflects the author's intention to set an evil and bloody atmosphere at the beginning of the story.

The third part is the climax of the murder. "Below the east the wan hemorrhage of the moon increased ^[10]." Although this sentence is short, it creates a strong sense of tableau. The moon is supposed to be bright and clear, impartially lighting up every part of the world. However, the collocation of hemorrhage and moon dissipates the impartiality, which reflects the society's indifference to racism. "Hemorrhage" indicates the initiation of murder.

"Presently McLendon turned into a narrow road. It led back to an abandoned brick kiln – a series of reddish mounds and weed – and vine-choked vats without bottom ^[10]." "Reddish mound" implies that the "narrow road" is the way leading to Will's death: some black people might have died there before, and their blood is mixed with brick dust, thus turning the mound nearby reddish.

3.2.2. Pink

"That's the one: see? The one in pink in the middle.' 'Is that her? What did they do with the nigger? Did they - -?' ^[10]." Minnie Cooper was wearing a pink voile dress and walking in the crowd. In her favorite pink, we can feel that Minnie was eager to manifest her feminine charm.

According to Wikipedia, pink is sometimes associated with extravagance and a wish to be noticed, and it is quite evidently the color of seduction ^[11]. The portraits of Emma, Lady Hamilton, the future mistress of Admiral Horatio Nelson, painted by George Romney, manifest the metaphorical meaning of pink. Minnie Cooper was not young anymore, but she insisted on holding a heart of a young girl. Under the sharp contrast of riding upon the crest of the town's social life, the lady tried her best to catch gentlemen's eyes by wearing a pink voile dress on the streets and accusing a black man of raping her. This pink dress reflects the release of Minnie Cooper's sexual repression and the oppression of women by the standards of the myth of southern ladyhood which completely neglects or even opposes female sexual desire in the southern society.

Besides, pink is relevant to illusion. For instance, "pink elephant" refers to intoxicated hallucinations ^[12]. This also suggests that the rape case concerning Will was just her sexual fantasy, which did not exist at

all, revealing the woe of black and white women under the oppression of slavery and southern belle criteria. Faulkner showed sympathy for women in *Dry September*, and at the same time, he showed respect to female's self-awareness as well as compassion to female tragedy. Faulkner implied the inequality imposed on women and that it is natural where there is oppression, there is resistance ^[13].

3.2.3. Green and white

McLendon, the self-styled patron saint of southern ladies, lived in a green-and-white house ^[10].

Before the mid-20th century, women, especially white women were seen as the embodiment of virtues, such as chastity, piety, and self-sacrifice, and they were on behalf of the family honor and social prestige to some extent ^[14]. In that male-centered society, men were polite to women only on the surface and always played the role of female patron saint. In fact, women were not respected and had no identity, rights, or ego.

(1) Green: jealousy

In the west, green is often used to indicate "jealousy" ^[15], such as "green-eyed," "green with envy," and "green-eyed monster," which all imply jealousy ^[12]. Beneath McLendon's ferocity, there is a repressed soul. He once had his glorious moment like Miss Minnie. He had commanded troops at the front in France and had been decorated for valor. However, in the peace years after the war, he seemed to have no use. The memory of his glorious youthful moments incarnated his jealousy towards young people. In order to vent the "fire" in his heart, Will Mayes became his victim with his high-minded reason: the fight for white women.

(2) White: morality and indifference

In the Bible, white is the symbol of virtue, and angels are always seen to have a pair of white wings with a silvery white halo ^[16]. McLendon had worked hard to mold himself into a great female protector. In his subconscious, he considered himself as a guard who defended the moral standards. In addition, white is associated with indifference ^[17]. In real life, McLendon did not actually respect women at all. This so called "patron saint" was cruel to his own wife. Coming home late at night and seeing his wife sitting in a chair, he would scold and beat her. Several sentences in the story clearly revealed that his wife, who was pale, tired, and nervous, had been living in the pain of fear for a long time, which exposed the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of McLendon.

4. Conclusion

In *Dry September*, Faulkner expressed his criticism of southern racism and the myth of southern ladyhood in detail. These colors clearly demonstrated the character traits, absorbing readers into a colorful literary world through the changes of the characters' psychology and external environment. By means of color metaphor, the readers can feel the brutality of murder, the lewdness of the cashier, the insanity of Miss Minnie, and the hypocrisy of McLendon. All these colors implied the decline of the old south: the murder of black people in the southern society and a distorted social reality oppressed by racial discrimination and the myth of southern belle.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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