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# Metaphorical meanings of color symbols in literature

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**Abstract:** In literature, color words serve as important carriers for writers to convey their emotions. In this paper, color words in literary works written by over 30 famous writers from different countries and regions in world literature are selected as the research object. According to the frequency of their use in the selected literary works, our analysis divides the different color symbols into two types: high-frequency and low-frequency. Among the various color symbols, red, blue, white, black, and yellow are classified as high-frequency color symbols. Purple, gray, green, and brown belong to low-frequency color symbols. Comparatively speaking, the metaphorical meanings of high-frequency color symbols are richer and more diverse, while the symbolic meanings of low-frequency color symbols are relatively simple. Through the analysis of the color symbols in the literary works, we find that there is a benign interaction between color symbols and literary works. On the one hand, writers convey their pursuit of art and aesthetics through color symbols. Color symbols become a perfect medium for them to express ideas, show themes, and construct characters. On the other hand, literary works also expand and enrich the metaphorical meaning of color symbols.

**Keywords:** aesthetics; art; high-frequency; low-frequency; world literature

## 1 Introduction

Color words, also known as color codes, widely exist in our daily life. They serve as an important aesthetic carrier to convey our sense of beauty. In fact, color itself is not a symbol. However, when people use color words to express their thoughts and feelings, they are endowed with diversified metaphorical meanings. “Color itself cannot be a symbolic form alone and produce meaning. Just as language symbols need a pronunciation organ as the main carrier, color symbols also need a carrier”

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(Chen 2004: 23–24). Therefore, color words become symbols through their connection with other things.

Semioticians have different divisions for the classification of signs. Among them, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce's divisions are the most influential. Saussure divided signs into *signifier* and *signified* from the perspective of linguistics. In his classification, “the sound image is referred to as the ‘signifier’ and the concept as the ‘signified’” (Reda 2016: 91). “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (Saussure 1966: 67). Peirce defined a symbol as “a sign which is determined by its dynamic object only in the sense that it will be so interpreted” (Peirce 1988: 335). Based on this definition, he has divided signs into three categories, namely icon, index, and symbol. For Peirce, “an icon represents through likeness, through recognizable shared qualities, as when a drawing or caricature resembles its subject” (Peirce 1955: 401). “In the case of the index, the sign vehicle evinces an existential connection with its object. There is a relationship of cause and effect, or a temporal, local or physical link between the sign and its object” (Nöth 2001: 2–3). A symbol, according to Peirce, “is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas” (Peirce 1992: 249). Being the simplest of his many classifications of signs, it is by far “the most important of them all, for it contains the essence of even the most complicated of them without sharing their repetitive and unwieldy character” (Burks 1949: 673).

Despite their differences, both Saussure and Peirce believed that social convention is essential for things to become symbols. A color must be attached to a specific carrier to form a symbol and produce symbolic meanings under social conventions. Apart from the unified convention of society, color is just a kind of individual sensory physiological impression. Color words have a strong rhetorical role. They can provide some abstract meanings beyond their original semantics. “As important objects of semiotic research, symbols and metaphors are often linked together” (Zhao 2023: 136). In order to understand more clearly the relationship between symbol and metaphor, it is necessary for us to clarify the concept of semiosphere.

Semiosphere is a core concept in Lotman's cultural semiotic theory. Lotman describes it as “the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist” (Lotman 2005: 205). In other words, it is the abstract space in which sign processes function. In his view, “it has now taken on a global character, and includes within itself the call signs of satellites, the verse of poets and the cry of animals. The interdependence of these elements of the semiosphere is not metaphorical, but a reality” (Lotman 2005: 219). Based on the above concept, Lotman regarded metaphors as “semiospheres representing mental images by means of verbal signs” (Nöth 2006: 250).

The metaphorical meanings of color symbols are formed when objects or concepts are recognized and understood through color words. Metaphor is a powerful tool for us to understand and explain new situations and an important way for us to recognize the external world and nature. Different countries and regions exhibit both similarities and differences in their understanding of the metaphorical meanings of color symbols. Each ethnic group has a significantly different psychological perception and classification of colors. Their likes and dislikes of certain colors are often derived from their mythological stories or religious beliefs. As a part of the semiosphere, color symbols are valuable in the composition of literary images. They have infinitely complex meanings when emerging with the literary world. Literature is an art with language as the medium. To make use of color symbols in literature, writers must rely on the color words in language. Therefore, the potential of color words can be fully developed and extended only in the process of creative use of language in literature. “In literature, color words are often used by writers to construct metaphors” (Zhao 2022: 84). They play a positive role in setting the atmosphere, expressing emotion, reflecting psychology, revealing characteristics, and highlighting themes.

In social life, the metaphorical meaning of color symbols is closely related to culture. “The realization of culture through cultural practices and cultural artifacts is invariably a specific instantiation, that is, a contingent, situational, and emergent process or end-product. On the other hand, culture presupposes the existence of society, or grouping, for it is realized through modeling” (Yu 2023: 179). During the process of cultural practices, many excellent writers break through the restrictions of regions during their use of color words, which also makes the metaphorical meanings of color symbols in literary works show the characteristics of diversification. Through the language medium of color symbols, writers transform abstract words into visual experiences. This helps to enhance the vividness of language and generate strong emotional resonance in the hearts of readers. Since color symbols play a very important role in understanding literary works, they provide a perfect chance for the fusion of semiotics study and literary criticism.

This article selects the color words in famous literary works written by 30 famous writers (Alice Walker, Cao Xueqin, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Ernest Hemingway, Ernest Marquez, Ernest Thompson Seton, Farley Mowat, Feng Menglong, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Harold Pinter, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Jack London, Jerome David Salinger, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Joseph Conrad, Katherine Mansfield, Margaret Atwood, Milan Kundera, Mo Yan, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Orhan Pamuk, Stendhal, Thomas Hardy, Tonny Morrison, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, William Somerset Maugham, and Wu Chengen) as the research object. These writers are all world-renowned literary writers. They come from different countries and regions, including the USA, Britain, Canada, China,

France, Germany, Czech Republic, Turkey, Russia, and Latin America. This makes our research based on generality. In addition, color symbols appear repeatedly and have rich metaphorical meanings in the selected works written by these writers. Through the analysis of the narrative plots connected with color symbols, the article aims to analyze the multiple symbolic meanings of color symbols in specific texts to understand the significance of color symbols for literature.

## 2 A brief review of the study of color symbols in literature

A survey of previous achievements related to color symbols in literature shows that researchers mainly focus on color symbols in the literary works written by a certain writer, color symbols in a particular literary work, color symbols in the literary works of a specific country or region, and color symbols in a certain kind of literary works.

The analysis of color symbols in a specific writer's literary works occupies the largest proportion in the previous research achievements. George R. Creeger (1952), in his study *Color symbolism in the works of Herman Melville, 1846–1852*, took Herman Melville's seven works published between 1846 and 1852 (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*) and analyzed the symbolic meanings of various color words in these works. Henry David Thoreau, an American transcendentalist writer, used color symbols to convey spiritual and moral matters in nature. In *Thoreau's Color Symbols* (1971), Richard Colyer focuses on five major color words (green, white, blue, yellow, and red) in Thoreau's literary works. After analyzing the symbolic meanings of these color symbols, he comments that "they are especially important because they show the degree of originality and technical refinement he could reach" (Colyer 1971: 999). Using color symbols as a perspective, George McFadden's article (1961) focuses on their symbolic meanings in the poems written by Wallace Stevens. Selecting Milan Kundera's novels as research object, Zhao Qian distinguishes the different meanings of various color words in "Analysis of the metaphorical meaning of color words in Milan Kundera's novels" (Zhao 2022). Eileen Chang is a famous female writer in China. In her novel creations, she is particularly good at using the metaphorical meanings of color symbols. In "The color words in Eileen Chang's novels," Wu Yutong points out that Eileen Chang has "blended different colors in the clothes of her novel's characters and scenes, using different rhetorical devices such as synesthesia, analogy, hyperbole in the narration of psychology of the characters and events description" (Wu 2023: 33). Therefore, it

is very important to study the color symbols in Eileen Chang's novels to understand the connotation of her novels.

The study of color symbols in a particular literary work has also aroused the interests of many researchers. *To the Lighthouse* is a representative work of Virginia Woolf. In the novel, color symbols serve as an important medium of the author's stream-of-consciousness creation technique. In "Color in *To the Lighthouse*," Jack F. Stewart analyzes the color symbols appearing in the classic work. *The Great Gatsby* is the most famous novel written by American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel contains rich color symbols, including green, white, red, yellow, blue, and gray. After analyzing the symbolic meanings of these color words, Zhang Haibing concludes that "Colors used in the novel play an important effect in shaping the characters, developing the plot, and deepening the theme of the novel" (Zhang 2015: 38). Edgar Allan Poe is a controversial poet in the history of American literature. Nevertheless, he is still a hot writer in the academic circle. Through the analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Sarah Yoon drew the interesting conclusion that "the color symbolisms can also be associated with the symptoms of epidemic diseases throughout nineteenth-century Europe and America" (Yoon 2021: 21).

The study of color symbols in literary works of a certain country or region has constituted an important perspective for some researchers. In "Color symbolism in Hausa literature," Pauline Ryan examines "the notion of color and color symbolism in Hausa literature" (Ryan 1976: 141). A highlight of the article is that the author has divided colors into two groups: primary and secondary. Focusing on African American literature, Spillers analyzes certain color symbols appearing in the literary works of this region in her book *Black, white, and in color: Essays on American literature and culture* (Hortense Spillers 2003). In "The color brown in Old Norse-Icelandic literature," Kirsten Wolf focuses on literature of the Old Norse-Iceland region. The author tries to "determine through linguistic categorization the objects about which brown is used and to determine on the basis of its frequency whether for Old Norse-Icelandic brown should be placed in the earlier stages of the evolution of color terms or if it should be assigned to the later stages" (Wolf 2017: 22).

A few researchers have analyzed the color symbols in literary works according to the types of literary works. In "Symbolic effects of colors in mystical literature," Leila Amini Lari and Sed Mahdi Kheirandish chose mystical literature as their research object. The paper "is library-based and draws upon the psychology of colors, it investigates the colors of soul, emotions, feelings and traits, and also light colors and colors of seven subtle bodies in mystical literature" (Amini Lari and Kheirandish 2013: 7). From the perspective of Uzbek folklore, Mohichehra Yoqubovna Ro'ziyeva analyzes the symbolism of colors in ritual songs. After careful analysis, she concludes that "genesis of color symbolism in ritual songs is connected with magic of color" (Ro'ziyeva 2020: 277).

It should be added that a few researchers take the study of color symbols in literary works of a certain historical period as the perspective. In “Symbolic color in the literature of the English Renaissance” (Allen 1936), Don Allen focuses on the metaphorical meanings of color symbols in the English Renaissance. After a brief analysis of some ballads in early Spanish history, Herbert A. Kenyon draws the conclusion that “the hero wears different colors at different times to express his emotions” (Kenyon 1915: 327). A few researchers have compared color symbols in the literature of different countries. In “Cross-cultural interpretation of symbols in English and Uzbek literature,” Zoya Sarsenbaeva compares the meanings of symbols in English and Uzbek literature, “aiming to identify both commonalities and disparities in the understanding of shared symbols” (Sarsenbaeva 2023: 146). Literary semiotics has a very broad development prospect.

The analysis of literary works from the perspective of semiotics undoubtedly provides us with a new critical landscape. According to the above overview, no researcher has conducted in-depth studies on the diversified metaphorical meanings of different color symbols from the macro perspective of world literature according to the frequency of color symbols used in literary works. Therefore, this study has a great significance. It comprehensively analyzes the metaphorical meanings of different color symbols in world classic works from a macro perspective.

### **3 The metaphorical meanings of high-frequency color symbols in literature**

An analysis of the frequency of color symbols used in the selected literary works indicates that red, blue, white, black, and yellow appear most frequently. They are classified as high-frequency color symbols in this thesis. Comparatively speaking, the metaphorical meanings of these color symbols are richer and more diverse. Each color symbol in this category has no less than five metaphorical meanings.

#### **3.1 The metaphorical meanings of red symbols in literature**

In the spectrum, red is one of the most visually stimulating colors. The images associated with red symbols tend to be objects and concepts that express strong emotions, such as passion and desire. In many regions, red is a color that can tease emotions. In other words, it can attract people’s attention and produce physiological feelings such as impulse, excitement, and release of inhibitions. This metaphorical meaning of the red symbol appears repeatedly in Milan Kundera’s works. In *Life is*

*Elsewhere*, a painter successfully captures the heart of Jaromil's mother after showing her a painting filled with red flames. The red color in the picture arouses her desire for love. For many years, she lives unhappily with her husband. Because of ethical constraints, she has endured in silence. Under the lure of the red symbol, her sexual desire is completely stimulated. As a result, she abandons family ethics and has a secret affair with an artist in his studio. Attracted by the same color, Jaromil also falls in love with a red-haired clerk at a nearby supermarket. Despite the girl's ugly appearance, the erotic attraction of her red hair fascinates Jaromil. He immediately pursues her with sweet words and soon becomes her lover. Mo Yan, the Chinese Nobel Prize winner in literature, is also very good at integrating the metaphorical meanings of red symbols into his literary creation. In *Red Sorghum*, the red sorghum, which is a metaphor for the most primitive and extensive vitality of human beings, activates the sexual desire of the hero and heroine. Similarly, Mo Yan also uses the metaphorical meaning of the red symbol to express the characters' impulsive sexual desires in *Red Locust*. Among American writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne had a particular interest in the red symbol. In his *The Birthmark*, the heroine has a red birthmark on her face. This makes her more sexually appealing in the eyes of the opposite sex. The attraction of her red birthmark leads her to become the dream girl in many men's hearts. In addition to arousing sexual desire, red is also associated with a woman's shyness (blushing) toward a desired member of the opposite sex. In *Identity* written by Milan Kundera, the heroine's blushing in her first love affair is a metaphor for girlhood shame. For her husband, this blushing caused by shyness is an important memory in their love story. Many years later, he can still vividly recall it, and it makes him feel excited again.

In world literature, the red symbol sometimes represents resistance and revolution. In Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden's greatest wish is to protect the pure children and to help them avoid the dirty things in the world. These wishes are attached to his red hat, which reflects his radical attitude and rebellious character. In William Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, Strickland, the hero with the striking red beard, explores the light of life in red when he paints. For him, red is a sign of freedom, symbolizing resistance to traditional morals and ethics. Because of this, he abandons his family and goes to Tahiti alone to complete his masterpiece. Color symbols not only reflect the physical characteristics of color, but also reflect its social attributes and show the characteristics of a certain period. In China, the People's Liberation Army is called the "Red Army." Therefore, in many literary works on the theme of wars related to Chinese liberation, the red symbol is synonymous with the revolutionary spirit.

Red is often associated with blood in literary works, which gives the symbol a suffocating metaphorical connotation. Since red blood is often connected with violence and death, these metaphorical meanings of the red symbol are also

commonly used in literary works. In *The Call of the Wild* written by Jack London, Buck is bludgeoned until his nose and mouth bleed by a red-clad dog dealer. In this case, red blood reflects the natural law of survival of the fittest, which symbolizes violence. The beating with the stick teaches Buck the cruelty of survival. He slowly adapts to the laws of survival and eventually morphs into the king of a group of wolves. Farley Mowat is one of the most famous contemporary writers in Canadian animal literature. In his *Sea of Slaughter*, human beings kill sea animals to get material benefits. As a result, the blood of the sea animals even turns the sea red. In the novel, red blood obviously symbolizes death caused by the cruel killing of poor animals by human beings. In Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, there are many scenes of riots. In the novel, red blood is also a metaphor for violence, madness, and death. In the shadow of the red symbol, many families are separated and many innocent people are thrown into prison.

Sometimes, the red symbol also has a metaphorical association with trauma. One of the most impressive scenes in *Jane Eyre* is the red room, which leaves a deep traumatic imprint on Jane Eyre's mind. Whenever Jane makes a mistake, her aunt locks her up in the red room. In Jane's memory, red is a symbol of fear and repression. The ubiquity of red objects gives her a sense of oppression. Here, the symbolic meaning of the red symbol is very clear. The author uses it to map the heroine's depressed growth environment, which is a major cause for her inner trauma. In addition, some writers use the red symbol to express negative emotions including jealousy, anger, etc. Taking the previously mentioned love affair between Jaromil and the red-headed girl in Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* as an example, tears come to the jealous mother's eyes when her son asks for a private date space with his girlfriend. Later, to express his dissatisfaction toward his mother, Jaromil takes his anger out on his red-headed girlfriend, slapping her twice across the face.

Flame, which symbolizes destruction and death, is also commonly associated with the color red. Two novels written by Milan Kundera serve as examples of this. In *The Farewell Waltz*, after murdering Lucina, Jakub drives through a forest of flaming leaves. Here, the flame is also a metaphor for death. Jaromil in *Life is Elsewhere* longs to die in flames with his beloved girl. He writes a poem containing the following lines: "Ah! If you are going to die, let me stand with you, my beloved, and let us become light and heat in the burning fire" (Kundera 2014: 280). For him, this is the only way to prove the immortality of love. Here, the metaphorical meaning of flame is also related to death. In *The art of fiction*, David Lodge points out that "fire is often used as a metaphor for lust. It gives warmth and comfort, but also burns everything" (Lodge 1998: 10). In Ernest Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, the image of a red flame appears several times. It is a reference to the duality of Helen's love to Harry, giving him physical comfort while destroying his spirit. Harry's whole life is entangled in the contradiction of love; he struggles in love, in its entanglement, until the last moment of his life.

In some literary masterpieces, the metaphorical meaning of the red symbol is in a process of dynamic change. In Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, red is a recurring color. It has different symbolic meanings for different people. For Sethe, red symbolizes death. But for her daughter Denver, red is a symbol of hope and a bright future. In the novel, the red symbol symbolizes the interweaving of life and death. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is another example of this. As the plot of the novel develops, the metaphorical meaning of the scarlet letter *A* changes constantly, from "Adultery" at the beginning to "Able," then to "Angel." What is worth mentioning is that the houses of the dignitaries were built with red pillars in China's feudal dynasties. Therefore, in classical Chinese literature, the red symbol symbolizes wealth and honor. For example, in *A Dream in Red Mansions*, one of the so-called "four great classical novels" in ancient China, red is a metaphor for the flourishing Jia family.

### 3.2 The metaphorical meanings of blue symbols in world literature

In literature, the blue symbol is closely linked with the sea, the sky, and eyes. It symbolizes freshness, beauty, and tranquility. In Greek mythology, the blue Aegean Sea brought peacefulness to countless heroes. Looking at the blue sea, Odysseus always misses home and his family. Henry David Thoreau celebrates the blue symbol in his work. For him, the blue sky and blue eyes can bring people a sense of freshness and beauty. Blue helps to make people feel comfortable, thus producing a feeling of love. This metaphorical meaning of the color blue appears repeatedly in his *Walden*. Similarly, the same metaphorical meaning associated with blue is commonly used in Kundera's works. Taking his first novel *The Joke*, for example, Helena wears a blue coat when she dates Ludvik. During their conversation, Ludvik notices her blue eyes several times. It is the blue coat and Helena's blue eyes that attract Ludvik. Stimulated by the blue symbol, he expresses his love for her. Pushed by the environment aroused by the blue symbol, the relationship between the two warms up rapidly.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf uses the color blue to reflect the mood of the characters. For example, when Mrs. Ramsay faces the blue sea, she feels comfortable. The blue scene filled her with pleasure, and she cannot help thinking of it as a fairyland. For her, the blue sea is like a calming agent for her irritable mental world, allowing her to temporarily gain inner peace. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden mentions the blue dress of his little sister several times. Blue gives people the feeling of harmony and tranquility, bringing a touch of spiritual comfort in the noisy world. At the sight of his sister's blue dress, Holden is able to be with her peacefully and

happily. Because of it, he hopes that this uninterrupted time will last forever. Similarly, when Phoebe wears a blue coat and spins on the wooden horse, she feels that ideal and reality have merged together and she has entered a harmonious world without killing and cheating. The untamed beauty of the great blue lake in Maugham's *The Pool* appeals to Lawson as a meeting place of Eastern and Western civilizations. In general, the blue lake presents a broad and inclusive mind, promoting the coexistence of indigenous peoples and Western expatriates.

In Western culture, blue is often associated with melancholy, which is one of the most common symbolic references to the color symbol in literature. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil's mother is plunged into endless depression due to her unhappy marriage. Her heart yearns strongly for romantic love and the warmth of family affection. However, her husband is reticent at home and unwilling to communicate with her. Jaromil once writes a philosophical sentence: "Life is like a weed." Hearing the words, the mother feels deeply touched. For her, the sentence is so sad that it suits her situation well. For this reason, she writes the poem on paper in blue letters, puts it in a frame and hangs it on the wall as a decoration. Xavier, who exists in Jaromil's dreams, meets a beautiful woman in a blue dress who is being held captive in her home by the police. Here, blue not only reflects the melancholy of a beautiful woman, but also the sadness of Jaromil in the real world. Because of this, Xavier, the embodiment of Jaromil's ideal, rushes to her rescue. He takes her out of her cage and wanders with her to live in a remote place. Similarly, In *The Farewell Waltz*, František gives Lucina a light blue nightdress to express his melancholy feeling because of the lover's cold attitude toward him in love. Kundera chooses the color blue to "make use of the relationship between colors and people's emotion to create various environments for his own purposes" (Hu 2002: 323). Unfortunately, greedy for fame and fortune, Ruzena does not care about her boyfriend's good intentions. Her attitude toward love is full of hypocrisy and calculation. František is crazy about love. But for Ruzena, her poor boyfriend's melancholy is nothing but a terrible obstacle in her pursuit of success.

In Milan Kundera's novels, blue is also a metaphor for death, degradation, and nothingness. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas arranges for Tereza to travel to the top of Mount Peter to participate in a life and death experience game. Before she is driven to the place of execution, an assistant offers to blindfold her with a blue cloth ribbon. At first, Tereza is brave enough to face the death game with a relaxed mind. But when she sees the blue ribbon, "Tereza felt her courage slipping away. Her weakness drove her to despair, but she could do nothing to counteract it" (Kundera 1995: 145). Here, the blue ribbon symbolizes death. Similarly, in *The Farewell Waltz*, Jakub's poison is light blue, so it is also a metaphor for death. Eventually, he uses the blue poison to perfectly murder a stranger. In addition, the color blue used by Tamina in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* symbolizes the

void. To her, it represents not only the emptiness of life, but also the impoverishment of her spiritual world.

In addition to the metaphorical meanings mentioned above, the color blue also has special symbolic meanings for some writers. In his *Theory of colors*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe explores the relationship between blue and human psychology. In his literary creation, the color blue as a symbol guides Goethe to think about the philosophy of life. In many Chinese poems, blue is a metaphor for love as pure as water.

### 3.3 The metaphorical meanings of white symbols in literature

Purity, beauty, and holiness are the most common symbolic meanings of white symbols. These metaphorical meanings appear repeatedly in literary works. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy uses the color white to symbolically represent Tess, who remains pure forever even though she has been spoiled by Alec. At the beginning of the novel, Tess dresses in a white shirt and has white flowers in her left hand. In British culture, white is a symbol of purity and innocence. At that time, Tess is as pure and flawless as the white flowers in her hands. However, the symbol of the white flower has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is beautiful and pure. On the other hand, it is also delicate, fleeting, and short-lived. Therefore, it implies Tess's short love and life. At the end of the novel, Tess, who is as pure and beautiful as a white flower, is executed by hanging, thus ending her miserable life. In the biblical tradition, angels have white wings and white halos around their heads. The Virgin is also often dressed in white and surrounded by white lambs and lilies. Therefore, white has a sacred metaphorical meaning. The metaphorical meaning of this white symbol has attracted some writers. In Kundera's *Slowness*, Vincent goes crazy when a white moon shines on Julie. Because of it, he immediately imagines her as an unapproachable fairy. In *The Festival of Insignificance*, white skin is the unifying perception of angelic imagery. When the guests see a white feather floating down from the ceiling, they regard it as an angel's wing. Similarly, in Chinese fairy novels, fairies are always dressed in white.

In some literary works, white symbolizes death, terror, and misfortune, and these metaphorical meanings are used repeatedly in world literature. In Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, Xavier goes on an outdoor school vacation. He flirts with an older woman, provoking the jealousy of a girl in a white dress. In the end, the girl in white freezes to death in the snow and dies for love. Here, the white symbol is a metaphor for death. In Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, newly dead villagers in the plague year lie in coffins that glow white in the night. Obviously, the white symbol here has a metaphorical meaning of death. In Harold Pinter's literary works, white symbols not only allude to hope, purity, and beauty, but also have the connotation of extreme

terror. For example, Gavin White in his *Party Time* is the leader of the manhunt movement. His last name is “white,” and his first name “Gavin” is a variation of “Gawain.” In old Arthurian legend, Gawain is a dangerous figure known as “the executioner.” In the play, Gavin White uses the party as an opportunity to launch a manhunt. The white terror inflicted by Mr. White makes everyone shudder. Taking Pinter’s play *Moonlight* as another example, moonlight is a carrier of white symbols, symbolizing the light between life and death. The darkest moment before dawn is death, followed by twilight, a symbol of rebirth. This cycle from dying to being born again is the profound philosophy underlying the play. In *Jane Eyre*, white, whether it is white cloud or white storm, is associated with the unfortunate fate of Jane Eyre, so it symbolizes misfortune and suffering. Fortunately, Jane Eyre finally gains happiness after going through many ups and downs. In Chinese literature, white is the color of mourning, symbolizing misfortune. When a loved one dies, relatives wear white clothes and trousers and hang a white tent couplet in their rooms.

Many writers make use of the metaphorical meaning of white symbols to deepen the theme of their works by exploring the derivative meaning of white symbols. Thus, emptiness and nothingness have become another commonly used symbolic meaning of the color white. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses white signs to symbolize the wasteland of emptiness and decadence caused by desire and greed. The name of the heroine Daisy comes from the name of a small white flower. It implies that Daisy’s life after marriage is empty, boring, and lacking in spirit. In addition, the author uses white symbols to signify Daisy’s vanity, ignorance, indifference, selfishness, and cruelty. Gatsby’s mansion is also decorated in white, and he always wears a white suit for his assignations with Daisy. For him, the white symbol is also a metaphor for emptiness. To pursue his unworthy love for Daisy, he boils his whole life. Despite his so-called material success, his spirit is in a deep emptiness. In the end, Gatsby pays a heavy price for his empty love. In world literature, the color white as a symbol is closely connected with the natural image of “snow.” This connection is also apparent in *Snow White*, a household fairy tale. In the story, the color white and snow are linked together. It is not only a metaphor for the pure, kind princess, but also a wise way to persuade people to distinguish virtue from good. So, too, the snow in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* symbolizes purity and whiteness, which is also a purification of Harry’s contradictory life. In the falling snowflakes, the contradictions in Harry’s life are resolved.

Animals are an important carrier to which white symbols are attached, and some writers use white animals to create some unique metaphors. In ancient Chinese literature, white animals are often regarded as gods because of the mysterious, metaphorical meaning of the color white. People use white animals for sacrifice, which also reflects the ambivalent attitude (worship and fear) of Chinese ancestors to nature. In addition, white animals are often a metaphor for purity and justice. The

egret, a bird with white feathers, is mentioned three times in the classic Chinese masterpiece *The Book of Songs*. It is a metaphor for simplicity and purity. *The Legend of the White Snake* is a well-known classic legend in China. The white snake incarnates a human form and marries a man named Xu Xian, making a moving love story between a man and a snake. Although snakes are often blackened by people in many cultures, the white snake in the story is a metaphor for pure goodness. Using the metaphorical meaning of the color white, the author expresses the beautiful hope for a harmonious coexistence between human and animals. Similarly, in *Journey to the West*, one of the great classical novels in Chinese literature, almost all animals are the embodiment of demons. However, white dragon horses are the representatives of loyalty and justice. In addition, in Chinese novels on the theme of ghosts, white foxes often take the form of beautiful women to repay the scholars who saved them before. In such stories, white also symbolizes goodness and beauty.

In Western literature, white animals are a metaphor for humans' reverence for nature, thus highlighting an ecological theme. This is evident in *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's masterpiece about the sea. The main character of the novel is a white whale called Moby Dick, which symbolizes the greatness and wonder of nature. Captain Ahab tries all kinds of methods to chase and kill the white whale. Finally, he dies together with Moby Dick. In the novel, the whale represents nature, while Ahab is a metaphor for humans who ignore the forces of nature. The tragic ending of the story is full of ecological implications. It warns people to abandon the false view of anthropocentrism. Only by revering nature and living in peace with animals can human beings have a bright future. The color white is also significant in Lobo, the King of Currumpaw, one of the most famous stories in Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Know*. In the story, Lobo is resourceful and has repeatedly escaped from human plans to kill him. However, the hunters discover a romantic relationship between him and the white she-wolf. Then, the despicable men make use of the white she-wolf to seduce Lobo. In the end, hunters succeed in killing the Wolf King. In the story, the white she-wolf is both a symbol of the pure and only love in Lobo's heart and a metaphor for his inevitable death.

According to bioethicist Schweizer, "goodness is to maintain life, promote it, and enable developable life to achieve its highest value. Evil is to destroy life, hurt it, and suppress its development. This is an inevitable, universal, and absolute ethical principle" (Schweizer 1996: 9). Since ancient times, animals and human beings have lived together on the earth. Animals provide rich nutrition and food materials to human beings. Using the metaphorical meaning of white animals, writers express their ecological view of caring for animals and respecting nature. In addition, driven by the bold imagination of some writers, "some phrases that contain colored words have exceeded their original meanings" (Majeed 2019: 892), such as Hemingway's use

of the white elephant in *Hills Like White Elephants* as a metaphor for a woman's growing body as a result of her pregnancy.

### 3.4 The metaphorical meanings of black symbols in world literature

In our daily lives, “there are some colors which are disagreeable or even intensely painful” (Everts 1919: 124). Black is one of them. “Philo, the first-century Hellenistic-Jewish philosopher, allegorizes the blackness of the Ethiopians as evil. In a passage dealing with Kush and his son Nimrod, who rebelled against God, Philo says that Nimrod's evil nature is hinted in his father's blackness” (Goldenberg 2009: 92). In literature, black often symbolizes darkness, evil, and death. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Young Goodman Brown*, black symbols and related words are used many times, such as gloom, gloomiest, dark, sable, etc. In the story, black is used to create an atmosphere of evil, terror, and despair. In particular, the black staff carried by the man who leads Brown to the meeting appears 14 times. The staff is a walking stick that resembles a black snake. In the Bible, the devil Satan, in the form of a serpent, entices Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Succumbing to the seduction of the snake, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. In Western culture, snakes are the embodiment of evil, and the color black reinforces the sense of guilt. Seduced by the black staff, Brown finally sets foot on the path leading to the black forest, where he witnesses the deep sin in everyone's heart and the faith in his heart is completely consumed by the black. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the rigid social hierarchy is reflected in the colors of the uniforms. Therefore, color symbols become the carrier of symbolic semantics construction. Among them, the commander in charge of life and death is wearing black clothes, holding a black umbrella, and riding in a black car. In the novel, death is the most prominent metaphorical meaning of the black symbol. In some literary works, writers use black symbols to describe the depressing environment.

This metaphor of black often appears in novels focusing on the theme of the Chinese War of liberation. In some cases, “black is related to the hidden, the secretive and the unknown, and as a result it creates an air of mystery” (Idder 2019: 27) This metaphorical meaning of black is often found in Gothic fiction. It is worth mentioning that in many literary works, black symbols are an important part of trauma narratives. For example, in Kundera's *The Joke*, Lucie always wears a pair of black high heels when she goes out with Ludvik. Ludvik thinks it has something to do with his girlfriend's aesthetic taste. After reading the whole novel, it is not difficult for readers to find that Lucie's preference for black stems from her traumatic experience. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a black bowler hat Sabina

treasures has rich metaphorical meanings. The memory of her father is one of the most important metaphors of the black hat, which also reflects the deep trauma in her heart. In literature, the metaphor of black symbols is not all negative. In some novels, social convention dictates that gentlemen wear a black suit at a grand party. For this occasion, the metaphorical meaning of the color black as a symbol is mystery and solemnity.

The binary opposition between black and white exists widely in nature and literature, whether as a kind of reality or a kind of metaphor. In Dmitry Merezhkovsky's *Christ and Antichrist* trilogy, the opposition between white and black is used by writers to show the "good and evil" in the protagonists. Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, "Black and white have the usual connotations of evil and good" (Zhao 2011: 28). In Turkish novelist Ferit Orhan Pamuk's *White Castle*, the "White Castle" is a metaphor for the mystery and uncertainty of fate. The "Black Stain" is a contrasting image to the "White Castle." It is a heavy mechanical cannon made of steel. In the novel, the "Black Stain" is a metaphor for the grim nature of the Ottoman war. The battle for the "White Castle" in the story alludes to a catastrophe in the history of the Turkish war, known as the "Siege of Vienna." The war is a black stain on Turkish memory. The war cost a lot of money, and thus dragged down the country's economy. When the whole country is shrouded in the "black stain" of war, the world is like a purgatory under the rule of Satan, and people's lives are full of suffering and despair. It is difficult to heal the black wound brought by war to a nation, and the black memory of that period of history is also unforgettable. The opposition between white and black symbolizes the author's hesitation and wandering between Eastern and Western identities. It is inevitable for the two civilizations to collide in their communication, but they can understand the noble conflict and reconcile with each other to achieve a mutually beneficial coexistence. In the historical context and modern writing of Middle Eastern civilization and European civilization, Pamuk is eager to cause readers to re-examine and think about the relationship between them through his novel to cross the barrier between Eastern and Western civilization.

In American black literature, the opposition between black and white also symbolizes the conflict and contradiction between black and white "races." On this point, we can find much evidence in Toni Morrison's works. In addition to being contrasted with white, black is also associated with red in some novels, with Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* as a perfect example. In the novel, the color red refers to the red uniform of Napoleon's army, which symbolizes the power of bourgeois revolution. The color black refers to the black Taoist robe during the restoration of the dynasty, representing feudal power. The colors red and black symbolize the contradiction and conflict between the two opposing camps.

### 3.5 The metaphorical meanings of yellow symbols in world literature

In different literary works, yellow has different symbolic meanings. Because of this, the metaphorical meanings of yellow symbols in literature also show the characteristics of diversification. In Germany, “yellow symbolizes sunshine and joy” (Huang 2010: 36). Goethe believed that yellow can bring people a feeling of warmth and ease, and the metaphorical meaning of this color appears many times in his literary works. On the other hand, yellow has also been conventionally associated with betrayal and deceit in some Western countries, perhaps because it is associated with danger in nature (e.g., certain poisonous plants, fungi, wasps). As a result, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus of Nazareth to the authorities when he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, is often represented in religious art dressed in yellow. This metaphorical meaning of yellow is also reflected in a number of literary works. Sometimes, a yellow dog is used in literature to refer to a mean person. In *Yellow Dog* written by Martin Amis, the yellow dog is a metaphor for a group of people whose spiritual ecology is extremely unbalanced. They are despicable and like to slander others behind their backs.

Yellow is often associated with gold in American literature. Therefore, it symbolizes money, wealth, and status. In *The Great Gatsby*, indicated by a yellow symbol, almost everyone pursues fame and fortune. Because of material desire, symbolized by the color yellow, the heroine Daisy does not hesitate to give up her boyfriend. Gatsby, who is desperately in love, is deeply affected. He tries his best to make money, hoping to redeem his lost love with wealth. On the other hand, in the aesthetic cultural psychology of Latin Americans, yellow represents decay and misfortune, which is vividly expressed in Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the novel, yellow flowers, yellow butterflies, and yellow bananas are metaphors for the characters’ misfortunes, which echo the theme of loneliness. The color yellow, as an important image throughout the plot, symbolizes the disasters in Macondo. For example, after Ursula’s death, small yellow flowers sprout through cracks in the cement. The family’s decline follows soon after.

Gold is a variation of the yellow symbol. Goldilocks is a sign of sensuous excitement and accompanying disturbance in Milan Kundera’s novels. For instance, in *The Joke*, Ludvik goes to a bar to drink with his workmates and meets a blonde girl there. This arouses a spark of passion in his heart. However, in order to attract the girl’s attention, Ludvik gets into a physical altercation with a group of artillerymen and narrowly escaped being beaten. Similarly, in *The Farewell Waltz*, Klima has a one-night stand with Lucina (a girl with golden hair) after a musical performance. After this affair, Klima tries to forget this experience. However, he receives a phone

call from Lucina a month later, who tells him that she is unexpectedly pregnant after the night of passion. This news causes Klima to fall into endless difficulty. Lucina uses the unborn child as a bargaining chip and constantly threatens Klima, bringing great trouble to his life. In some literary works, gold also has the symbolic meaning of happiness. In the opening chapter of Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss: and Other Stories*, a ray of golden sunlight in the evening reflects the happy mood of the heroine Botha.

In China's feudal dynasties, yellow was the symbol of imperial power and dignity. In literary works, the dragon robe worn by the emperor is mainly yellow in color. However, yellow has also been associated with depravity and pornography in modern society. Because of this, some novels containing sexually explicit and obscene acts are called "yellow novels." When the rice in the paddies ripens, it appears as a scene of yellow. Therefore, yellow is a metaphor for harvest. This metaphorical meaning of the yellow symbol appears repeatedly in novels about rural life in China.

## 4 The metaphorical meanings of some low-frequency color symbols in literature

According to the frequency of color symbols and the richness of their metaphorical meanings, this paper classifies purple, gray, green, and brown as low-frequency color symbols. These color symbols appear less frequently in the selected literary works. At the same time, they have relatively fewer symbolic meanings, usually no more than five metaphorical meanings.

The metaphorical meanings of purple are similar in Chinese and Western literature. It mainly symbolizes nobility, dignity, and happiness. When Jane Eyre enters Thornfield for the first time, she finds that many objects in the manor are purple. The color purple makes her feel happy. This not only symbolizes the noble status of the owner of the manor, but also implies that Jane Eyre has finally shaken off the shadow of her early life and is about to start a new life. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, purple is by far the most important color symbol throughout the plot. The symbol appears several times during the heroine's efforts to break through the social discrimination against black people. Its metaphorical meaning is closely associated with respect and happiness.

In Kundera's *Immortality*, Paul has a love affair with a 40-year-old woman at the age of 25. At that time, Paul could go to the woman's apartment whenever he wanted. Throughout the relationship, Paul is relaxed and happy. In the presence of a woman fifteen years older than him, he can forget the troubles of the world. When Paul gets

married, the older woman gives him her sincere blessing and completely disappears from his life, never causing him any trouble. This stress-free love experience leaves an unforgettable memory in Paul's mind. In the novel, Kundera uses purple crystal to symbolize older women. Here, purple is a metaphor for women who bring happiness to men without bothering their lives.

In painting, skillful painters often mix various colors together to create new ones. Purple is one of the most difficult colors for them to modulate. So, the purple symbol is sometimes a metaphor for aloofness and pride in literature. Evidence can be found in many Chinese martial arts novels. In martial arts novels, women in purple tend to be loners. They are fairy-like in looks and do not want to socialize with ordinary citizens. As a result, they are often regarded as inaccessible. But when they eventually meet their beloved, they are willing to do everything to pursue happiness.

In literary works, the symbolic meaning of gray is relatively simple. It is mainly a metaphor for discordant interpersonal relations. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay feels comfortable at the sight of the blue sea while walking along the seashore. However, when she remembers that her husband also loved the sea, everything suddenly turns gray. Here, gray obviously reflects the discordant relationship between the couple. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil carries all his mother's expectations for the future. Excessive maternal love makes him become a "mother-attached boy," for which he is excluded by his classmates, and he becomes a stranger in their eyes. Jaromil is unhappy with his mother's rough control over everything in life. He hates the gray clothes his mother forces him to wear. For him, the color gray symbolizes her malformed maternal love. It also reflects the unharmonious relationship between mother and son. In Gothic fiction, gray is a metaphor for repression and terror. In William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, Emily kills Homer Barron and sleeps next to the corpse for years to preserve her dignity as a fallen aristocrat. At the end of the story, next to the black, decomposing body of her former suitor, people find a long strand of iron-gray hair. Here, the gray hair not only reflects Emily's deep depression over the years, but also creates an atmosphere of terror.

Metaphorical meanings of green in Eastern and Western literature are quite similar. It is mainly associated with spring, symbolizing vitality, youth, and hope. For example, a green light appears three times in *The Great Gatsby*. It symbolizes youth and hope, as well as Gatsby's yearning for his dream and happiness. In *Song of Solomon*, the color green deeply symbolizes the meaning of "life and hope" that Toni Morrison wants to convey to her readers. In Chinese literature, green symbolizes vitality and youth. However, when green is combined with a hat, a new metaphorical meaning is created. In some erotic novels, if a man is cuckolded, as symbolized by the green hat, it means that his wife is having an illicit relationship with another man.

In literary works, brown is an uncommon color symbol. Its metaphorical meaning is relatively simple: individuality and independence. In *The Unbearable*

*Lightness of Being*, Tereza has a brown birthmark on her body. Because of her unhappy marriage, Tereza's mother regards Tereza as the bad seed that destroyed her happy life. She "never stopped reminding her that being a mother meant sacrificing everything. Her words had the ring of truth, backed as they were by the experience of a woman who had lost everything because of her child" (Kundera 1995: 41). Under the influence of her mother, Tereza also regards her body as an ordinary one among millions of female bodies. While she is living with her lover, Tomas, his repeated betrayals also make her doubt her own uniqueness. However, when she is in a relationship with a male engineer, she unconsciously notices her brown birthmark. From that time, she is concerned with the singularity and uniqueness of her body. Because of this, her sense of independence gradually increases. She stops thinking of herself as subordinate to Tomas anymore.

In ancient Rome, brown was a dominant color of the dresses for the lower classes. For this reason, it is a sign of humility and poverty. This symbolism of brown symbol also appears in some ancient Greek and Roman mythologies.

## 5 Conclusions

"Nature is wonderfully rich in colors. From the beginning of life of mankind, the blue sky has smiled above him; the earth at his feet has decked herself every spring afresh in living green; the summer has brought the yellow of ripened harvests; and winter has covered everything with a charitable mantle of white" (Evarts 1919: 124). The multiple metaphorical meanings of diversified color symbols have become important carriers for writers to express and evoke emotions in literary creations. Literary works originate from life. Since color symbols exist everywhere in life, they become an indispensable part of literary works. In the classical works of world literature, the recurring color symbols are a very important aesthetic field.

Based on the above analysis, we can draw the following conclusion. Among the classical works of world literature selected in this paper, red, blue, white, black, and yellow appear frequently. These color symbols have rich and diversified metaphorical meanings. Even within the same work, their symbolic meanings are constantly changing. In contrast, purple, gray, green, and brown appear less frequently. The symbolic meanings of these color symbols are relatively simple. In addition, there is a benign interaction between color symbols and literary works. On the one hand, writers convey their pursuit of art and aesthetics through color symbols. Color symbols become a perfect medium for writers to express ideas, show themes, and construct characters. On the other hand, literary works also expand and enrich the metaphorical meaning of color symbols. Driven by the imagination of writers, the metaphorical meanings of color symbols become more and more

diversified. Through the language medium of color symbols, writers transform abstract words into visual experiences to enhance the vividness of language. In addition, many writers constantly break through the restrictions of regions to diversify the metaphorical meanings of color symbols in literary works.

Interdisciplinary research has become a mainstream trend in academic circle. Against this background, semiotic studies are undergoing profound changes. The integration of interdisciplinary research has expanded the perspective of semiotics and led semiotic research into a new era of diversification. There are many rationalities for the combination of literature and semiotics. On the one hand, there are many symbolic metaphors in literary works, which provide research objects for semiotic studies. On the other hand, semiotic theories provide new perspectives for literary research. Therefore, the rise of literary semiotics is inevitable. As one of the most common important symbols, color symbols are a key to the understanding of literature. The study of the iconographic implication of color words in literary works can not only deepen our understanding of the metaphorical meaning of color symbols, but also provide a new perspective for literary criticism.

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