

# The Use of Colors in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis Poem from Pragmatic Perspective

Wa'ed Qatatsheh

Dept. of English Language and Literature, Mu'tah University, P.O Box: 7  
Mu'tah, Al Karak, Jordan

## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the use of colors in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis poem pragmatically. The data of this qualitative study were collected from the literary work of Shakespeare. The findings of this research indicate that the use of purple color in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis is permanently negative. Also, the results show that red color can be interpreted both negatively and positively. Whilst, white color is permanently associated with positive connotations. Black is employed to evoke negative connotations in this poem. Green and blue are also highly related to positive connotations.

## 1. Introduction

Language is argued simply to be "a mean of communication" (Hamawandy, 2015:242). It is clearly described as a mean of communication that leads to the assumption that it can be divided into three types; "written, oral and nonverbal communication" (Mallett-Hamer, 2005:4). Mujezinovic (2011) suggests that nonverbal communication is simply to express things without words. That is, to use nonlinguistic means to express certain idea, thought or emotion that associate with specific context. Colors, obviously is a way to convey meaning and communicate ideas wordlessly. An obvious example of this is the association of a particular color with a particular concept in real world. Red, for instance, is usually related to danger (Mohammad, 2013). Duhan (2015) states that literature is the production of real life. It is the real life which inspires writers and poets to create their works, and it is the real life which supplies them with the basic ingredients of their works. Due to such claim, the presence of colors in literature is not surprising since colors can be found in each part of daily life (Kanetkar, 2010). The poetry of Emily Dickinson is a good example of the use of colors in poetry. Due to the fact that Dickinson used to live in a very colorful environment, surrounded by meadows and florid gardens, her frequent use of colors seem reasonable (Hassan, 2013).

Colors are very meaningful that can be used everywhere to collocate with a particular situation. As they are the first thing to see in the morning, they easily control our mood and emotions. Historically, colors were a subject of consideration for a very long time. The first to be probably considered were earth pigments which were extracted from hard rocks and then used to paint surfaces (Kanetkar, 2010). According to Hasan (2011) each culture has its own set of color terms. However, she argues that color terms can not be interpreted apart from the cognitive environment in which the color takes place. In real life, colors, of course, are not used arbitrarily. They are related to mental and emotional states and can deeply affect them (Yu, 2014). According to previous claims, poetry is the production of real life. It is reasonable to assume that colors in poetry are not used arbitrarily and obviously used to convey a meaning nonlinguistically expressing real life situations. In Milton's Paradise Lost, for instance, the phrase 'Black fire' is used to evoke the negative meaning of hell. However, the description of fire as black creates a paradox since fire is usually related to light. To deal with this issue, it is assumed that "indirectly black color connects with the concept of hell, the eternal prison of shadowy realm of the underworld" (Inciuraite, 2013: 3).

## 2. Literature Review

This section of the research provides a brief discussion on related review of literature and past studies due to their significance and relevance to the aspect of this study. In her paper, Hasan (2011) investigated the use of color terms in Arabic and English languages. It was found that the meaning of colors is totally a cognitive process. That is, every person can interpret color's meanings in his / her own way due to his / her own experience. As a result of the analysis of color terms in Arabic and English languages, the study concluded that there are many similarities rather than differences in the connotative meaning of colors within the two cultures. Al Adailah (2012) examined the use of colors and their connotations in standard Arabic in general and Jordanian Arabic in particular. The findings of his research showed that black, red, blue and yellow are mostly used negatively, whilst white is used positively most of the times and green is related positively to nature. In another study, Hassan (2013) investigated the symbolism of purple in Emily Dickinson's poetry. He argues that Dickinson used purple in different ways very frequently. In her poem, Wait till the Majesty of Death, Dickinson relates the use of purple to evoke sense of royalty and dignity. She also connected purple to spirituality. To express death, as a royal situation, Dickinson referred to purple to evoke the sense of majesty she needed. Also, Çakirtas (2014) published a paper to investigate the way in which Virginia Woolf in her the lighthouse

represents life. Çakirtas concludes that the value of life and the social relationships are represented by the use of colors in her work. Similarly, Fakhri (2015) conducted a comparative study of the meanings of color terms in Akhavan Sales's poems. Colors in Akhavan Sales's poems are assumed to refer to social aspects. Black and yellow are argued to have the negative meaning of depression. Red, however, creates the positive meaning of victory. Consequently, the researcher believes that none of the previous research investigated the use of colors in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis Poem from a pragmatic point of view and felt there is a necessity for investigating the use of colors in Shakespeare's poetry.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

The use of colors in literature is a rich and interesting area of research (Inciuraitė, 2013). It is recognized that there is a vast body of research that deals with colors and their connotative meanings in literature, particularly poetry, but none of them considered Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis poem use of colors. As a result, the researcher felt that there is a need for investigating the use of color terms in Shakespeare's literary work. That is, the use of color terms in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis is difficult to understand by readers and can not be easily interpreted. That is, readers of poetry may face difficulties understanding and interpreting the connotation of colors when they are used in poetry, particularly, Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

The present study intends to achieve the following objective:

- i. To investigate the pragmatic use of colors in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis.

### 5. Research Questions

In order to achieve the objective of this study, this research addresses the following question:

- Q1.** What is the pragmatic use of colors in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis?

### 6. Research Methods

The data for this study were collected from the literary work of Shakespeare. The adoption of textual analysis as qualitative research technique is the only method that was adopted by the researcher to analyze elicited data. Furthermore, answers of the research question were provided from the analysis of the poem. The selection of the poem was based on the researcher's experience and the use of color terms in Shakespeare's literary work. The data was collected from the website.

### 7. Discussion and Findings

This section provides a discussion on the findings of this study and the use of colors in Shakespeare's poetry.

#### a). Purple

Based on the analysis of the study, purple color is used in the poem in three occasions. In comparison, purple in Alic Walker's as investigated by Diwakar (2014) is used to refer to uncommon occurrence in nature which creates its distinction and uniqueness. As the mix of the two colours blue and red, purple mirrors "the aggressive of red and the calmness of blue". Due to this claim, the opening of Shakespeare's venous and Adonis, using purple to describe the sun, seems reasonable as stated in the stanza; "EVEN as the sun with purple-colour'd face". Blue, as a component of purple, is used negatively most of the time. It may reflect the feelings of calmness and depression. Red, however, is predominantly positive denoting love and passion (Zammito, 2009: 4). The description of the sun as purple-colour'd face combines the concepts of both red and blue. It may represent the atmosphere of depression (blue) caused by love (red) in the poem as stated by Ellrodt (2007) is the sorrow of love. In another occasion, Shakespeare employed purple as an adjective to describe the tears of Adonis wounds (blood) as stated in the stanza; "With purple tears, that his wound wept, was drench'd". Again, using purple to reflect sorrow that covers the atmosphere of Adonis's death evokes the cold, depression and calmness of death side by side with the sorrow of love that Venus lived with. In a third occasion, again, purple is used to describe a flower which bloomed from the melting of Adonis's body as stated in the stanza; "A purple flower sprung up, chequer'd with white". On more time, the occurrence of purple is highly related to death and sorrow of love.

#### b). Red

Red, however, is very frequently used in Shakespeare's Venous and Adonis. This can be related to the fact that love is the main theme of this work (Ellrodt, 2007) which associated universally with red color (Yu, 2014). In many context, red symbolizes life (Yu, 2014). In one occasion in this poem, red is employed to provide a description for Adonis by the lover Venous as stated in the stanza; "More white and red than doves or roses are". Adonis in this stanza is argued to be more red than the roses. Red is used skillfully in this occasion to refer to the young and full life of Adonis. That is, Adonis was vibrant and young just like roses. In this occasion, red is used to describe the effect of the Ten kisses on Adonis's lips as stated in the stanza; "Making them red and pale with fresh variety". In such context, it can be argued that red refers to the blood which flows to Adonis's lips to

indicate that Venus's kisses were strong enough to make such an effect. Similarly, to refer to the flow of the blood, red is used to describe Venus's cheeks and the effect of the clapping on them as stated in the stanza; "Claps her pale cheek, till clapping makes it red". In two different occasions, red is used to describe the lips, not of Adonis, but those of Venous as stated in the stanza; "Though mine be not so fair, yet are they red— set thy seal-manual on my wax-red lips". The expression red lips is used by some poets to refer to beauty such as Andrew Marvell in his *The Gallery*. Remembering his lover, his mind evokes the beautiful and good features of her. The description of Venus's lips as red may also symbolize beauty. Red is also used to refer to blood in the description of Adonis's death and the scene of the pork whose mouth is covered with Adonis's blood as stated in the stanza; "Whose frothy mouth, bepainted all with red". In other contexts, however, red may express excitement, desire and anger (Zammito, 2009) as stated in the stanza; " She is red and hot as coals of glowing fire, He is red for shame, but frosty in desire" .

The first red in this stanza is used to describe the burning desire of the lover Venous. Using red, however, referring to Adonis, was to relate to the red color which covered his face because of shame. Such connotation of red is used in another occasion associated with anger in this poem describing, again, the shame, shyness and anger of Adonis as stated in the stanza; " Being red, she loves him best; and being white".

Anger is again symbolized by red in describing the great grief of Venous because of Adonis's death. Red related to fire evokes a strong picture of burning anger as stated in the stanza; " Heavy heart's lead, melt at mine eyes' red fire!". Anger is also symbolized by red in an occasion in which the anger of Venus of the coldness and apathy of Adonis is clear as stated in the stanza; "Red cheeks and fiery eyes blaze forth he wrong". The expression red cheeks in such context refers to the great anger of Venus. Red is also used with a sexual hint describing the battle between Venus's desire and Adonis's purity and innocence of Adonis as stated in the stanza; "How white and red each other did destroy!". In one context, red is used to describe morn as stated in the stanza; " Like a red morn, that ever yet betoken'd". From a forecast point of view, red morning is a sign of a bad weather in the bible (Matthew, Ch. 16 v. 2). It seems reasonable that when red color is related to morn in Venus and Adonis as a symbol of bad weather since the following verses, it describes the consequences of a bad weather. Red can be used in different manners to symbolize blood and danger related to wars and fights (Zammito, 2009) as stated in the stanza; "Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red". In this particular context, describing the God of war's ensign as red creates an immediate reference to blood and danger. In another occasion and in a very beautiful way, Shakespeare employed the expression red-rose to describe the chain with which Venous controlled and jailed the God of war, not to symbolize life and youth, but to denote love and passion as stated in the stanza; " Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain". Red is also used to refer to ripeness. The expression ripe-red cherries is employed to denote that the fruit is ready to be picked as stated in the stanza; "Would bring him mulberries and ripe-red cherries".

### c). White

White has a very long history associated with purity and virginity (Yu, 2014). White is used frequently in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* to describe the young, immature and reckless Adonis. In one occasion, Adonis is argued to be more white than doves. Doves, just like white, are highly related to purity and peace. Together, the use of white as an adjective to describe doves (compared to Adonis) evokes a very rich symbolism of purity and virginity as stated in the stanza; "More white and red than doves or roses are".

In another occasion, white is used similarly to describe the high purity and innocence of Adonis which is the best thing that Venus loves as stated in the stanza; "Being red, she loves him best; and being white". White is employed, again, to describe the battle between Adonis's purity and Venus's desire as stated in the stanza; "How white and red each other did destroy!". Describing Venus holding Adonis's hand, white is used twice as stated in the stanza; "So white a friend engirts so white a foe". The first use of white seems to be a description for Adonis, rather than Venus, due to the sequence that lily presion'd (white) refer to Adonis and goal of snow (white) refers to Venus's hand. Similarly, ivory (white) refers to Adonis and alabaster band (white) to Venus. The first white, describing Adonis, due to the previous claim of Adonis's youth and immaturity, represents his purity and virginity. The second white, however, which refers to Venus, is hardly symbolizing the purity of the full desire of Venus. It may have a very physical description of the color of her skin. White skin is assumed to be an important sign of beauty of some cultures (Franklin, 2013). The white skin and its association with physical beauty is used again wondering how such beautiful naked body, which teaches the white sheets a new concept of whiteness, can be rejected, and, in another occasion, to wonder how Adonis resisted the temptation of such a white face and preferred a hunting trip! as stated in the stanza; " Teaching the sheets a whiter hue than white", and " Didst thou not mark my face? was it not white?". Near to the end of the poem, and to describe the death of Adonis, white associated with lily is used to describe Adonis's soft flank. White in such a context may be interpreted with both suggested concepts of white. It can be argued that it refers to the purity and innocence of Adonis since it is made obvious throughout the whole text, or it can be simply a physical description of the color of his soft flank as a sign of beauty as stated in the stanza; "In his soft flank; whose wonted lily white". Due to the previous analysis of purple, and back to the assumption that the purple flower

symbolizes the sorrow of love and passion, the white which appeared mingled with that purple seems to denote, again, the purity and virginity of the dead Adonis and relate that to the sorrow of love which is evoked by the use of purple as stated in the stanza; "A purple flower sprung up, chequer'd with white".

**d). Black**

In Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, black is used four times in different symbolisms. The owl and the disappearance of sheep and birds, which denote that dark is coming, together with the coal-black clouds indicate bad and rainy weather, were the ways with which Venus was trying to convince Adonis to stay as stated in the stanza; "And coal-black clouds that shadow heaven's light." In another occasion, the expression black-faced night is used to describe the full of lust night, which was rejected by Adonis. Black in such context refers to the sin and shame of lust as stated in the stanza; "For, by this black-faced night, desire's foul nurse". In a third occasion, the use of black to describe the flap-mouth'd mourner, evokes the sense of sadness and mourning as stated in the stanza; "Another flap-mouth'd mourner, black and grim". The black wounded dog, associated with the word mourner, stands as a symbolism of sadness and mourning in the part which describes Adonis's death. In his poem, Shakespeare employed the expression black chaos as a sign of the failure of love. It was argued that the Earth witnessed a terrible fight between Eros and Chaos which ended by the defeat of Chaos (Hayles, 1990). By the failure and death of her love, Venus predicts another age of black chaos for the Earth. Black in this context is used negatively to refer to evil as stated in the stanza; "And, beauty dead, black chaos comes again".

**e). Green**

Green is employed four times in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis. Green is used to express immaturity and youth of Adonis. In a situation where Venus tries to tempt Adonis and tells him what can she do for him, she describes herself as a fairy which goes in a trip to the green that refers to the young and immature body of Adonis as stated in the stanza; "Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green". Trying to convince Venus that he is not ready to be involved in a sexual affair due to his immaturity and youth, Adonis argued that even a tree will protest against the early fall of the green sticks. "The mellow plum doth fall, the green sticks fast".

In another occasion, green is similarly employed to describe the lack of experience and immaturity of Adonis. Trying to justify his rejection of Venus by explaining the difference between real love and lust, and to end his speech and go to his hunting trip. He claimed that talking about love and lust needs a very experienced rather than immature speaker as stated in the stanza; "The text is old, the orator too green".

Green in the last occasion refers, again, to the young and inexperienced Adonis since it describes the same flower which is previously argued to refer to him as stated in the stanza; "Green dropping sap, which she compares to tears". The green sap which drops out of the purple flower indicates, one more time, how young and immature Adonis was.

**f). Blue**

Blue in Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis is used in two different occasions. It is employed firstly to enhance the meaning of calmness. Reassuring Adonis that blue-vein'd violets are not garrulous and will never understand what they are talking about, blue in this context symbolizes the calmness of these violets as stated in the stanza; "These blue-vein'd violets whereon we lean". In another context, blue color which is related to eyes, is interpreted differently. It was argued that blue eyes, together with white skin and blond hair were for along time the standard of beauty in the west (Shasha, 2009). The appearance of blue to describe her two blue windows in a stanza in which the beauty of Venus is the main theme, it is reasonable to assume that blue when related to eyes symbolizes beauty as stated in the stanza; "Her two blue windows faintly she up-heaveth".

**g). Gray**

The expression gray eyes in the Elizabethan English is used to refer to the blue eyes (Gifford and Seidman, 2008). So, again, in stanza which describes the extreme beauty of Venus, one may assume that when gray color is related to eyes, it refers to symbolize the physical beauty reasonably.

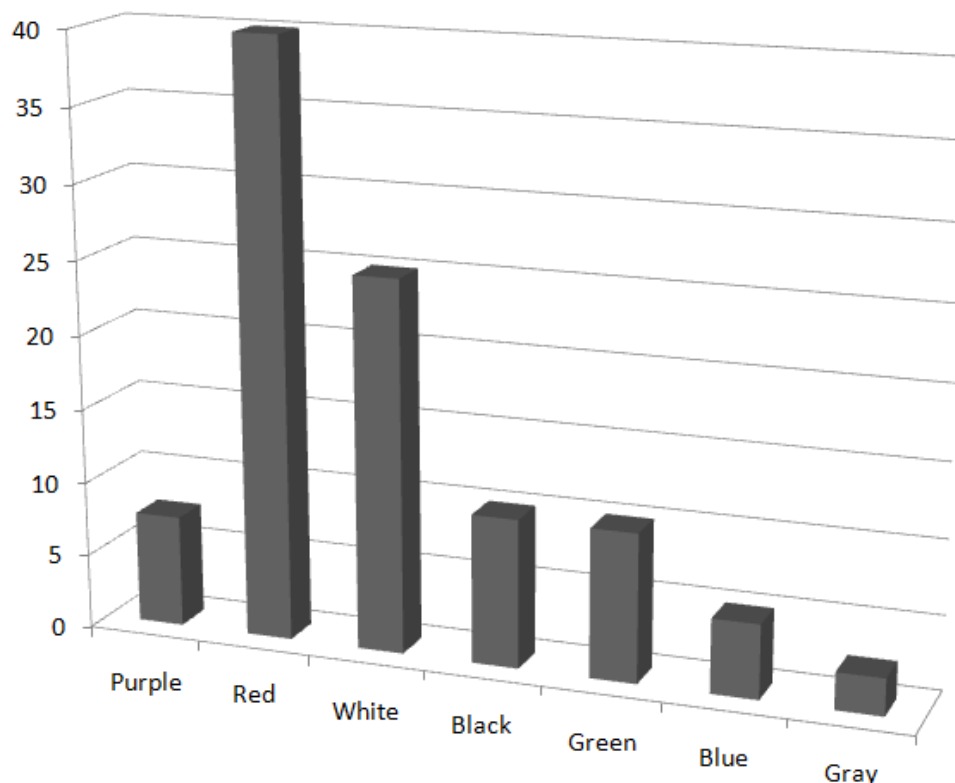
In conclusion, Table (1) below displays the use of colors in Shakespeare's Poem Venus and Adonis Poem.

**Table (1): The Use of Colors in Shakespeare's Poem Venus and Adonis Poem**

<b>Purple</b>	Sorrow (-)
<b>Red</b>	Life (+), Love (+), Passion (+), Sexual desire (+), beauty (lips) (+) Anger (-), Wars (-), Shame (-), Bad weather (morn) (-), Ripeness (cherries) (+)
<b>White</b>	Purity (+), Virginity (+), Beauty (the color of skin) (+)
<b>Black</b>	Bad weather (clouds) (-), Shame (-), Mourning (-), Evil (-)
<b>Green</b>	Immaturity, Youth
<b>Blue</b>	Calmness (+), Beauty (+)

As indicated in Table (1) above the use of colors in Shakespeare's poetry work varies according to different occasions and events. This is to conclude that the varieties of colors used in Shakespeare's work such as purple, red, white, black, green and blue were found of different meanings and connotation compared to other

literary work, particularly poetry. Similarly, Figure (1) in the next section displays the percentages of the use of colors in Shakespeare's work.



Briefly, the percentage of the use of red color in Shakespeare's poem recorded the highest amongst the rest of the colors making about 39% of the overall use of colors in his work. The use of red color in Shakespeare's work indicates both negative and positive meaning such as Life (+), Love (+), Passion (+), Sexual desire (+), beauty (lips) (+) Anger (-), Wars (-), Shame (-), Bad weather (morn) (-), Ripeness (cherries) (+) where the sign (+) stands for positive and (-) for negative meaning. White color, however, recorded the second highest frequency amongst the use of colors in Shakespeare's work making about 26%, then green color recording 9%, black making about 8%, purple 7%, blue recording about 4,5% and finally gray as the least used color making about 3,5%.

## 8. Conclusion

The use of purple in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is permanently negative. Purple is used to convey the great sorrow that is caused by love. Also, it was found that red in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is used to symbolize different concepts. It symbolizes positively life, love and passion, sexual desire and beauty (related to lips). Red, also, is a negative symbol of anger, shame and wars. White, however, is permanently associated with the positive connotations of purity, virginity and beauty (related to the color of the skin). Black is employed to evoke negative connotations in this poem. It refers to bad weather (related to clouds), shame, mourning, and evil. Green, also, is highly related to positive connotations. Green within the poem refers to the immaturity and youth of *Adonis*. Blue is used positively two times to indicate calmness and beauty (related to eyes).

## References

- Al Adaileh, Bilal A (2012). The Connotations of Arabic Colour terms. Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, Jordan.
- Baghi, Leili, Fakhri, Kamran & Fatemeh, Parvaneh (2015). Comparison of the Symbolic Meaning of some Colors in the Poems of Akhavan Sales. *Journal of Language Sciences & Linguistics*. Vol., 3(6), 111-114, 2015.
- ÇAKIRTAŞ, Önder (2014). To The Lighthouse: Woolf's Search For The Meaning of Life Through Colors.
- Diwakar, Sunitha (2014). Symbolism of the colour 'purple' in the novels of Alice Walker's the color purple and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's purple Hibiscus. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*. Volume II, Issue IV, August 2014.
- Duhan, Roshni (2015). The Relationship between Literature and Society.
- Ellrod, Robert (2007). Shakespeare's Progress from the Narrative Poems to the Sonnets.

- Franklin, Imani (2013). *Living in a Barbie World: Skin Bleaching and the Preference for Fair Skin in India, Nigeria, and Thailand*. Stanford University.
- Gifford, Don & Seidman, Robert J. (1997). University of California Press. Second Edition: 87.
- Giuffré, Gary (2005). Foreword: The Popes and the Dove.  
[http://www.realnews247.com/The\\_Popes\\_and\\_The\\_Dove.pdf](http://www.realnews247.com/The_Popes_and_The_Dove.pdf) (not sure about the citation).
- Hamawandy, Azad. (2015). Prefix (hu) as a Cognate Morpheme in Old English and Avestan. University of Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.
- Hasan ,Amna A ,Nabiha.S.Mehdi ,Al-Sammerai & Fakhrul Adabi ,Bin Abdul Kadir (2011) .(How Colours are Semantically Construed in the Arabic and English Culture: A Comparative study .
- Hassan, Hazha (2013). *Symbolism of Purple in Emily Dickinson's Poetry*.
- Hayles, N. Katherine (1990). *Chaos Bound*. Cornell University Press.
- Inčuraitė, Lina (2013). *The Semantics of Colors in John Milton's Poem Paradise Lost*.
- Kanetkar, Vinod R (2010). *Colours: History and Advancement*.
- Mallett-Hamer, Beverly (2005). *Communication within the Workplace*. University of Wisconsin-Stout.
- Mohammad, Saif (2013). *Colourful Language: Measuring Word-Colour Associations*. Institute for Information Technology. National Research Council, Canada.
- Mujezinovic, Nina (2011). *The Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Business*. Tomas Bata University.
- Shasha, Xu (2009). *The Hurt of Internalized Racism*.
- Yu, Hui-Chih (2014). A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Symbolic Meanings of Color. *Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 7:1 (April 2014), 49-74.
- Zammito, Veronica L. (2005). *The Expressions of Colors*.