

A Study on the Healing Mechanism of Color Imagery in *Beloved* from the Perspective of Narrative Therapy

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Abstract:

Based on narrative therapy, this paper analyzes the narrative function and healing mechanism of color imagery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Through close reading of the text, it explores how colors such as red, white, and black encode traumatic memories, participate in the narrative of trauma, and undergo meaning transformation as characters' psychological recovery progresses. The study finds that colors are not only visual symbols of trauma but also visual paths for characters to reconstruct their selves and move towards healing.

Keywords:

Beloved, Narrative Therapy, Color Imagery, Healing Mechanism

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is an important work in American literature. The novel tells the story of Sethe, a black woman, after the end of slavery, and how she copes with the trauma of having killed her own daughter. This story is not only about personal suffering but also about the impact of a heavy history on several generations. In Morrison's writing, various vivid colors frequently appear. They are not merely simple descriptions but rather like a silent language in the story, conveying emotions and memories that words find hard to express [5].

There have been many studies on this novel. Scholars often discuss the psychological traumas of the characters in the book, such as Sethe's guilt and *Beloved*'s resentment. Many studies have also noted the symbolic meanings of colors in the book, such as red often representing blood and violence, and white evoking the oppression of slave owners. These discussions have helped readers better understand the novel. However, a perspective that can be further explored is that colors in the novel are not static symbols but rather a dynamic narrative language [1]. Currently, there are few studies that specifically examine how colors concretely represent trauma and how their meanings and appearances change as the characters' minds slowly recover. This gap in research leaves room for the exploration in this paper.

Therefore, this paper intends to start from the use of colors in the novel and, with the aid of some basic theoretical viewpoints on narrative therapy, to examine the role of colors in the book. This paper aims to explore how colors like red, white, and black initially function like imprints, recording the characters' painful memories; and then, as the story progresses, how the meanings and appearances of these colors gradually change, reflecting whether the characters' inner selves are beginning to process trauma and seek relief. Through close reading of the text and theoretical references, this study hopes to offer a relatively systematic interpretation of the relationship between colors and the theme of trauma in *Beloved*.

2. Trauma Encoding through Color Imagery in *Beloved*

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison employs color imagery to represent the deep-seated trauma of the characters. This chapter will analyze how the three main colors—red, white, and black—carry specific traumatic memories and explore the auxiliary role of other colors in the novel.

2.1. Red: Memories of Violence and Emotional Closure

Red in the novel is directly associated with violent trauma [7]. The most prominent scene is Sethe's act of killing her own daughter during her escape. When the slave owner was about to catch up, Sethe chose to end her young daughter's life to prevent her from suffering the tragic fate of slavery again. This act brought Sethe an inescapable psychological trauma. The novel describes that when Sethe carried out this act, her milk mixed with her daughter's blood. This image juxtaposes maternal nurturing with extreme violence, highlighting the tragedy of how motherly love was distorted under slavery. Red here represents Sethe's indelible traumatic memory, a psychological burden she carries throughout her life.

Red is also carried forward through the character of *Beloved*. When *Beloved* reappears in Sethe's life as a young girl, she is often described as wearing red or surrounded by a red glow. This red imagery suggests that the past trauma has not vanished but continues to affect the present in new forms. *Beloved*'s return itself is a reenactment of trauma, and the red on her symbolizes that this history still has an impact in the present.

Furthermore, red is also manifested in Paul D's emotional experience. Paul D compares his emotional trauma to a rusty tobacco tin that he buries in his heart, calling it his "red heart." This "red heart" does not refer to his actual heart but is a symbol of his emotional closure and avoidance of pain. Paul D uses this method to cope with the various traumas he has experienced, and the red "heart" here represents the emotional barrier he has built to protect himself.

2.2. White: A Symbol of Institutional Oppression

White in the novel represents slavery and the systemic oppression it brings [3]. This oppression is not only manifested in violent acts but also permeates every aspect of daily life.

The character of "Schoolteacher" epitomizes the oppressive nature of white. As a slave owner, his white identity itself represents power and domination. But what is even more oppressive is his seemingly scientific and rational method of enslavement. He meticulously records the physical features and behaviors of the black people, attempting to objectify them as research subjects. The white milk he drinks and the

white paper he uses all become components of this institutional oppression. White here is not merely a color but represents a system that dehumanizes people.

The oppressive sense of white also exists in the characters' memory spaces. Baby Suggs' memory of the escape route, particularly including a "white house" that terrified her, represents danger and possible capture in her memory. Similar white imagery, such as white gauze and white curtains, often evokes the characters' fear and unease towards the white world. These memories indicate that white has been internalized as a psychological symbol of oppression, capable of triggering anxiety and fear even in the absence of direct threat.

2.3. Black: Suppressed Identity and Psychological State

In the novel, black carries a profound meaning of trauma [8]. This trauma is first manifested in the experience of the characters' bodies being objectified. The body is often regarded by the outside world as a measurable and identifiable object, and its physiological characteristics are recorded and classified, just like treating inanimate objects. The physical scars and marks depicted in the text are the concrete manifestations of this objectification experience. Here, black is not only a visual feature but also becomes a symbol of being objectified and deprived of subjectivity, profoundly influencing the characters' perception of their own identity.

At the same time, black is also used to depict the inner depression and isolation of the characters. Taking House 124 where Sethe lives as an example, after the appearance of the child, this place gradually becomes dark and isolated, like a "dark room". This darkness not only refers to the lack of light, but also symbolizes the confinement of the characters' emotions and their psychological isolation. Sethe is deeply trapped in the guilt of the past, while Paul D is sealing off his emotions, and the family members are all caught in a certain psychological shadow that is difficult to escape. Here, black represents those unspoken and unresolved memories and emotions, becoming the internal symbol of inner trauma.

2.4. Other Colors' Auxiliary Expression

In addition to the three main colors of red, white and black, the novel also uses other colors to enrich the dimensions of trauma expression.

Green is mainly associated with the "clearing" scene. This is the place where Baby Suggs led the black community to gather after gaining freedom, a place where they sought spiritual comfort. Green here symbolizes a brief peace and the possibility of healing. However, this peace is fragile. With the occurrence of Sethe's killing of her daughter, the community's connection gradually disintegrates, and the healing power represented by the "clearing" also disappears. Green thus represents the possibility of healing and its limitations.

Yellow and orange appear as natural images, such as wild sunflowers, etc. These bright colors represent the vitality of nature, suggesting that despite the deep trauma, life continues. These colors usually appear in the description of the natural environment, contrasting with the inner pain of the characters[9]. They represent the complex reality where trauma and vitality coexist, neither complete despair nor simple healing.

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that the color imagery in *Beloved* systematically encodes psychological trauma at different levels. Red mainly

represents violent memories and emotional closure, white represents institutional oppression and internalized fear, and black carries the objectification of the body and psychological depression. Other colors provide a more diverse range of expressions. These colors together form the visual language of the novel's trauma narrative, making the abstract psychological trauma concrete and perceptible, and providing important clues for understanding the inner world of the characters.

3. The Function of Color Imagery in Trauma Narratives

In *Beloved*, color is not merely a simple description; it plays a practical role in telling the trauma story. This chapter will analyze how color helps to express the trauma experience, mainly from three aspects: how color triggers memories, how it reflects inner states, and how it affects the way the story is told.

3.1. As a Medium for Triggering Memories

Color often can suddenly evoke deep-seated memories of characters. In the novel, when characters see a certain color, they will unconsciously recall past painful experiences.

The experience of Sethe clearly illustrates this point. There is such a description in the novel: When Sethe saw brown sugar in the kitchen, she suddenly froze. The color of the brown sugar made her immediately think of blood, especially the blood she saw when she killed her daughter. At that moment, she seemed to be pulled back to that terrifying scene many years ago. Color is like a key, opening the box of memories inadvertently. There are many similar examples in the book, such as certain white objects making Paul D think of slave owners, and certain dark corners making people think of the days of being imprisoned.

This memory triggering not only occurs in the mind but also manifests physically [2]. The book describes that when Sethe sees colors related to trauma, she often feels dizzy, nauseous, and even short of breath. Paul D also has similar reactions in certain situations. These physical discomforts indicate that trauma memories have become closely linked to specific colors. Color is no longer just something seen; it is a signal that can trigger a series of physical and mental reactions. Through such descriptions, readers can more vividly feel the continuous impact of trauma on the characters.

3.2. As a Way to Present Inner Worlds

When characters cannot express their inner pain through words, color expresses these feelings in a special way.

The characters in the novel often have dreams with colors. For example, the favorite once dreamed of a blue light, which made her feel calm and sad. From a psychological perspective, this blue might represent the unfinished emotional process of her - the regret for her brief life, the longing for maternal love, and the sadness over unfair treatment. Blue is not as direct and intense as red, but expresses those unclear emotions in a more subtle way. Through the colors in these dreams, readers can glimpse the parts of the characters' inner world that are difficult to express.

Trauma also changes the way characters view the world, and this change is often expressed through the abnormality of colors. Sethe sometimes feels that the surrounding area is shrouded in red fog, but this fog is not real; it is a reflection of her mental state. Other characters may also "see" and "see" non-existent white shadows

or black shapes. At these moments, colors are detached from reality and become an external manifestation of inner feelings. Trauma causes the characters' perception to change, making them see colors that are different from the ordinary. This abnormality of colors actually transforms inner pain into perceptible visual images.

3.3. As a Regulating Means for Storytelling

The way colors appear in the novel also affects the progress of the story and the expression of emotions.

Some colors in the book appear repeatedly, but the feeling each time may be slightly different. Red is a good example. In the first half of the story, red mainly associates with violence, blood, and death, creating a tense and terrifying atmosphere. As the story progresses, the meaning of red gradually becomes more complex. In the second half of the story, red is still related to trauma, but it also begins to include other meanings. For example, Paul D finally decides to confront his emotions, and the book uses "opening a red heart" to describe this process. Here, although red still represents trauma, it also implies the possibility of acceptance and change. This change in color actually reflects the transformation of the character's attitude towards trauma - from avoidance to confrontation, from being controlled to attempting to deal with it.

Sometimes, the novel intentionally reduces the description of colors. At the most painful and difficult-to-express moments, the book often does not provide excessive descriptions of colors. This approach is not the author's negligence but is intentional. It implies that some traumatic experiences exceed the expressiveness of language and the range of color representation. When the character experiences extreme pain, they may feel that everything around them has lost its color; or the pain is so intense that any description of color seems insufficient. This lack of color precisely emphasizes the inexpressibility of trauma. It makes readers feel that some experiences are so profound that they cannot be fully conveyed through color or any other means.

Overall, color plays multiple roles in the trauma narrative of *Beloved*. It can trigger the character's memories, bringing past pain to the present; it can reveal the character's inner world, making those unspeakable feelings visible; it also affects the narrative style of the story, regulating the narrative rhythm through repetition, variation, and absence. These functions work together to make color an important tool for expressing trauma. By analyzing these functions of color, we can better understand Morrison's way of telling this story about historical trauma and how she explores the expression of trauma through literary techniques.

4. From Color to Healing: The Visual Pathway of Psychological Recovery

In *Beloved*, as the story progresses, the meanings represented by colors also change. Such changes often accompany the inner recovery process of the characters. This chapter will analyze how characters confront trauma through a re-understanding of colors, and how colors in collective activities provide psychological support.

4.1. Personal Level Changes: Reinterpreting Colors

The psychological recovery of characters often manifests as a change in their attitude towards certain colors. This change is not sudden but gradually occurs in daily life [4].

Paul D's experience exemplifies this change. For most of the story, he closed his emotions, comparing them to a "red heart" - a rusty tobacco tin. Red represented the hidden pain and vulnerability for him. But towards the end of the story, Paul D began to try to open this "red heart". When he was able to say "You are mine" to Sethe, it indicated that he no longer feared expressing emotions. At this time, although red was still related to the past pain, it also began to represent the courage to love and care. He did not forget the trauma but learned to coexist with it.

Sethe's attitude towards white also underwent a similar transformation. White had always been a color that frightened her, representing the slave owner "school teacher" and the entire slave system. In the first half of the story, anything related to white made her feel uneasy. But as time went by, especially after she constantly told her story, this fear lessened. She still remembered the past pain, but was no longer completely controlled by white. For example, she could recall things related to white without immediately falling into panic, which indicates that she became stronger psychologically.

4.2. Colors in Collective Activities

In addition to individual recovery, colors also play a role in collective activities, helping people to jointly face trauma.

The scene of "The Forest Clearing" particularly illustrates this. Here, Baby Suggs leads community members to engage in activities. Unlike other parts of the book, this scene is filled with various colors: green trees, brown land, different-colored wildflowers, and golden sunlight. These rich colors create a warm and inclusive atmosphere [10]. Here, people temporarily put aside their daily hardships and gain strength through collective singing and prayer. Although life remains difficult after leaving this place, this collective activity provides important emotional support. The coexistence of multiple colors symbolizes that people can jointly bear their own pain and find comfort in sharing.

The ending of the novel also conveys a message of hope through colors. When the Beloved finally disappears, Sethe and Paul D begin to try a new life. The book describes that the sky appears with "pink clouds" at this time. Pink is a soft and warm color that rarely appears in the book. Its appearance coincides with the departure of the Beloved, suggesting that the most painful period may have passed. Pink does not represent the complete resolution of problems or the forgetting of the past, but indicates that the memory of trauma has become slightly softer. Life is still not easy, but the characters have been able to move forward.

4.3. The Relationship Between Color Changes and the Recovery Process

Overall, the changes in colors in the book reflect the changes in the psychological state of the characters.

During the most severe period of trauma, colors are often bright and single: red only represents violence, and white only represents fear. These colors, like the characters' psychological states, are separate and fragmented. As the story progresses, colors begin to appear in more complex ways. For example, in the "Forest Clearing", multiple colors exist simultaneously; at the end, there is a soft pink. This change reflects the change in the characters' psychological state - from being completely controlled by trauma to being able to embrace more complex emotions.

This change in colors also helps characters re-understand their experiences. When Paul D no longer regarded the red in “Red Heart” merely as pain but also as a possibility of love, he was actually reinterpreting his life. When Sethe was able to face the white without collapsing, she was integrating her traumatic experiences into a more complete life story. Color became a visible sign of this psychological change.

“Betrayal” portrays the process of psychological recovery through the changes in characters’ attitudes towards color. On an individual level, characters gradually learn to view colors related to trauma in new ways, marking their beginning to confront the past and continue living. On a collective level, the rich colors in community activities provided emotional support, helping people share the burden of history together. From the overall perspective of the story, the colors gradually changed from being sharp and intense to being soft and complex, reflecting the changes in the characters’ psychological states. Color is not only a recorder of pain but also a witness to the recovery process. By focusing on these changes in color, we can better understand Morrison’s portrayal of life after trauma and how people search for the possibility of moving forward in the heavy history.

5. Conclusions

Through the analysis of color usage in *Beloved*, this study reveals that color in this novel not only serves as a material carrier of traumatic memories, but also constitutes a visual narrative thread for the psychological recovery of the characters. Key colors such as red, white, and black in the text both concretize the mental pain left over from slavery and gradually reflect the psychological transformation of the characters in facing the past and moving towards a new beginning as the narrative progresses. Morrison uses the symbolism and transformation of colors to convert the inexpressible traumatic experiences into perceptible literary images, thereby exploring the multi-dimensional possibilities of literature in representing complex psychological realities.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it reveals how color serves as an important aesthetic means for connecting historical traumas, individual memories, and narrative restoration. Morrison’s creative practice demonstrates that visual elements can deepen the emotional layers of the text and provide new paths for the expression of trauma literature. Through this perspective of color, we not only gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic process of trauma and recovery in *Beloved*, but also provide an analytical framework that focuses on sensory experience for interpreting other literary works involving history and psychological trauma.

Future research could further expand to comparisons of color-trauma narratives in Morrison’s other works or those of different authors. It could also incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives such as visual culture and psychology to deeply explore the psychological healing mechanisms of color symbols in literature and their role in the construction of cultural memory. Such explorations will help to more comprehensively understand the unique functions of literature in healing and reflection.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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