

# COLOR SYMBOLISM IN SCENERY DESCRIPTIONS OF RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA'S STORIES AND NOVELLAS

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## ABSTRACT

The article deals with color symbolism in landscape descriptions in the works of a well-known Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke. The landscape can signify the place of an action, create some emotional atmosphere or it can be a significant component of characters psychological characteristic. In his famous story "Spinning Gears" the author points out some colors that are annoying for him. For example, black color resembles him the sinners' souls of Dante's Hell. Akutagawa's color perception is painful enough as a result of his mental disease. In his novella "At the seaside" landscape colors are used to depict the inner state of the main characters and their mood. White color of a lotus flower in the novella "The Death of a Holy Man", "The Spider's Thread" is a symbol of peacefulness, beauty, happiness and purity. Red color in the short story "Three Men" gains negative characteristics and meaning as it is associated with blood and death.

**Keywords:** R. Akutagawa, color description, symbolism, landscape, image, psychological function, characters inner state.

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The scenery in literature – is a description of human's nature surroundings and the image of any open space (Literary Encyclopedia of terms and definitions 2001: 732). We cannot find scenery descriptions in some works of literature but in the case of their appearance, as a rule, they have really significant functions. The first and the simplest function is to denote a place of an action, i.e. to serve as a background for this action. Landscape description can also involve some psychological function. It was stated long ago that certain states of nature or weather conditions correlate with different human feelings and thoughts in some way. Therefore beginning with the earliest periods of literature development the landscape details are used successfully for creation of a certain human emotional atmosphere in the compositions and as the form of indirect psychological representation when a character's inside feelings are not depicted directly but they are transferred to the surrounding nature. Sometimes the landscape can be used for a specific symbol meaning.

Landscape symbolism should be treated properly with a scenery as a mental institution. We agree with the statement that "...the words as symbols involve a sense that points to the referent, but in this case the symbolic meanings of words do not exude from the material entity, a symbolic dimension of the landscape itself" (Symbolic Landscapes 2009: 6).

Colorless landscape in literature is impossible. Landscape descriptions tend to be used with various tones, tints and shapes and, in this way, they arise some feelings and sentiments. Nagai Kafu states that sometimes some describing fails to convey to the reader a proper sense as it is lacking a color. Everything in nature environment has its color: the hours of the day and night, the places. According to the author "... A sea has its own color, a mountain has its own color, and a river has its own color. Some passages, depicting a sea, do not at all produce the feeling of a sea; others, depicting a lake, give the impression of an ocean. This is because the writer has failed to reveal the color sufficiency" (Ueda 1976: 47).

Let us scrutinize the landscape descriptions in the novellas of the father of the Japanese short story Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The landscape in the stories of this well-known writer plays a significant part and reflecting the structure and patterns of his poetics, differs with its originality. It creates a certain kind of the mood - a specific emotional atmosphere, it serves as a background and, moreover, the important component in the psychological characteristics of his characters. The landscape or some of its parts often get symbolic meaning. Laconic landscape sketches in the works of Akutagawa have a significant idea artistic capacity. In most cases, this charge is carried with the help of a color and its tints. Usually the events in the novellas of the Japanese writer take place on the background of city surroundings. Such short landscape sketches are represented in dull and gloomy tones. Nevertheless, the

landscape functions in his works are not limited only by the plot composition or thematic ideas when nature descriptions are treated as exposition or background for any event. The landscape serves for realization of the author's idea conception. It should be mentioned that the landscape descriptions of the writer are seldom given as themselves.

Basically the landscape is the means of psychological characteristics and the man's inner side is revealed with its help. Sometimes a character and nature are closely connected with each other in a way to form a unified entity. The landscape tends to inosculate with depiction of the events and internal processes of the characters in the stories. It is connected tightly by Akutagawa with the human inner world, with his thoughts and experiences. Color enhances this connection.

"Language of colors" in literature is widely used by a huge amount of prominent writers but this language is not always clear to a reader. "Color is a language game because what we choose to say about a color - its hue, value, saturation, texture, lightness and darkness - varies by the conditions under which two or more people look at it, the associations they have with it, the effect it has on them, and the ends they believe it is meant to achieve (The Materiality of Color 2012: 3). Indeed, the using of the color descriptions requires some skillfulness and Akutagawa is a master of "Language of colors".

Typically, deep, dark colors and their shades prevail, reflecting to the full where there is apprehension, hopelessness and despair reign in the characters' souls in Akutagawa's landscape descriptions. It is well known that the writer in his late years lived with a burden of falling ill with a hereditary disease, mental diseases whose signs he could feel. Consequently, his color sensation is also getting more and more unfit. In one of the late Akutagawa's writing "Spinning Gears" ("Cogwheels" in another translation) he describes the feelings of the color very exactly (1927). Thus for the author the black trees and their branches in the park are associated with the sinners' souls of Dante's Hell (Akutagawa 1998c: 382). The yellow taxi is a symbol of an accident and he believes the green color to be inauspicious for himself. The pink walling of the café gives hope to him and blue smoke harmonizes with it.

But afterwards the narrator notices that the redwood tables and chairs do not go with the pink and he is getting more and more anxious. The author conjures up annoyance, anxiety and fear by describing the various colors, thus creating a more complex synesthetic picture. Akutagawa uses intentionally dark hues in his descriptions to deepen feelings of cold, shadow, fear and loneliness. The author can use a landscape as an additional means of showing the emotional state of the characters more precisely. For example it can be realized by the way how nature

coincides with the thoughts and feelings of the characters, in the way nature harmonizes or contrasts with the feelings of the characters.

One more example is given by Seiji M. Lippit. The researcher points out that "A Night in Tokyo," reveals an emphasis on the urban landscape as a context for the narrator's descent into madness. "The city through which he wanders is an unbounded, heterogeneous site that is itself structured as text. He inhabits a world literally marked by paranoia-an acute consciousness that everything signifies-in which all objects have become signs. They may be coded, for example, according to color: he is haunted by yellow taxis, the yellow cover of Strindberg's book, the title of the poetry collection "Red Light," the red dress of a Westerner, sepia-colored ink, Black and White whiskey. These colors represent the disintegration of the world and the structures of society into a collection of signs" (Lippit 1999: 39).

As V.S. Grivnin mentions, the novel "At the seaside" (1925) which is called "a landscape sketch" by Japanese observers and treated as a psychological sketch by Russian researchers depicts the mental state of two young men just starting their adult life and without knowing or any thoughts about their future. They have graduated from the university but they have not chosen their career path yet. Their mood is conveyed greatly by the changeable early autumn (Grivnin 1980: 257), "...It had been still raining... We were sitting in a double-room suit in the depths of the hotel, bamboo blinds hanging down into a naked garden. I said that the garden was naked but anyway the seaside was abounding in sparse tall shrubs that were bending over the sand.

When we came, there were no any sights of those panicle grass. Even if there were some ones they were bright green. But now all of them were getting equally brown for a while, and there was a drop of water on each of their tops" (Akutagawa 1998c: 177). It is still warm but seems to be getting colder. Disappearing warm with bright greenness is a symbol of the university they left, their carefree and life full of joy. The naked garden, brown shrubs with drops of rain and cold wind blows reveal the nearest gloomy uneasiness of their future. Cold stormy sea is the unknown things they are to think about. Their future is uncertain. They look at their future life with fear and doubts without knowing what they are waiting for in the stormy life sea full of danger.

It is interesting that sad state of mind of these two young men is opposed to careless joy and cheeriness of young girls they met at the seashore, "...Their game seemed so joyful that it discorded with a bare and filled with late warm seashore. They were more like butterflies in their charming than human beings" (Akutagawa 1998c: 181). Such contrast method used by Akutagawa reveals and depicts the characters inner state of mind which are on their life crossroad. Thus, from the one hand, the

landscape correlates with the mood of the characters and from the other hand, it is the contrast (in the case of young girls).

Some nature phenomena and scenery details in Akutagawa's works get a character of through images and motives, moreover, they become symbols. One of such through image is a lotus flower. As a rule, Akutagawa uses lotus in novellas with some religious content, for example, in his novella "The Death of a saint" (1921) that in its plot close to "Kondzyaku-monogatary". The novel from medieval epos and Akutagawa's short story coincide with each other in their texts. In both these stories a noble rich man wants to go to a Paradise easily and he manages in some way to do it and so when he dies "a white lotus flower grows in his departed mouth" (Akutagawa 1998b: 295) - a clear sign that his soul rests in peace in Paradise.

White lotus is a symbol of a Paradise land, the sign of a holiness and sacredness. The same image we can observe in novella "The Spider's Thread" (1918). "Once Buddha was meandering around Paradise along a lotus-filled pond. The blooming lotus flowers in the pond were each pure white like perks, and the place was filled with the indescribably wondrous fragrance continually emitted from each flower's golden heart in the center (Akutagawa 1998a: 338). "The story ends with such description " Yet the lotus blossom in the lotus ponds of Paradise care nothing about such matters. Their jewel-like white flowers waved about the feet of the Buddha, and each flower's golden center continuously filled the place with their indescribably wondrous fragrance" (Akutagawa 1998a: 341). White lotus flower with its jade-colored leaves is the image of the source of our world, the productive power, being evolution, it stands out as a symbol of revival, beauty, life, happiness, purity and spirituality (Symbols Dictionary 2010: 224).

The image of blue sky is also often used in Akutagawa stories. This image is connected with freedom, native land, motherland as, for example, in the famous novelette " In the Kappa Land" (1927) or it can be a complex philosophical symbol as in the author's early period anti- war work " The Story of a Head That Fell Off " (1918). In the story the wounded Chinese cavalryman Xiao-er sees "deep blue dome of the clear sky. This sky was deeper and bluer than any he had ever seen before...the sky in all its infinite depth, in all its infinite blueness, slowly began to press down upon him where he lay, foot by foot, inch by inch. Faintly sparkling points in the vast blue expanse were surely stars visible in daylight (The Story of a Head That Fell Off 2007: 7).

This description can be compared with the sky of Austerlitz that wounded Andrey Bolkonskiy was staring at.

Sky perception leads to the sphere of transcendence and majesty, everything that is sublime, sacred and divine is connected with the heaven (Symbols Dictionary 2010: 111).

Akutagawa's novella "A Holy Man" (1922) gives one more example of sky (heaven) image. This story is usually treated as a fantasy parable. Akutagawa's work often tended toward the surreal, the grotesque and the fantastic. It should be mentioned that the author used the fantasy elements as a necessary part for revealing of the complex idea purpose rather often in his stories.

In "A Holy Man" the unusual event took place, as the writer says at the beginning of the story, "in the ancient times". One man wanted to get a holy one. So he came to a slave recruitment house and asked the placeman to help him. The official was surprised and brought him to his familiar doctor. But the doctor did not know how to gain holiness and so he could not manage the matter. The wicked doctor's wife interfered and promised him to teach him holy craft if he would accept her terms. He was to work in healer's house during twenty years without any money for free. The former villager Gonzke accepted those terms. This short novella has nearly the same plot as "The Fairytale about the Pope and his Worker Balda" by A.S. Pushkin.

The sly doctor's wife wanted to cheat Gonzke and though Balda did not get his fee in this case it was agreed beforehand that the villager would not take any money but he would be taught to become a holy man in reward. The deceitful woman ordered to climb the highest pine tree growing in the yard of the house and she asked, firstly, to let go his right hand and, finally, to free his left hand. She hoped that the man would not cope with her task and so she would make him serve free of charge more than twenty years. Gonzke loosed his hands and a strange thing happened - Gonzke's figure with a blazon haori separated from the pine tree top, but he did not fall down. He hung still in a marvelous manner among bright clear sky like a puppet in "Joruri" performance. He thanked his former masters for their care that made him holy. "...Saying his words very politely he made a reverence and walked calmly along blue sky, and moving far and far away, at last disappeared into high clouds" (Akutagawa 1998b: 408). Light blue, clear sky is a sign of holiness, innocence and purity.

It should be pointed out that Akutagawa uses red color as often as blue one to symbolize emotions or states of mind. For example, the author describes a red-light lantern and a woman in a red dress, which is believed imply some fear in his well-known story "Spinning Gears". Landscape sketches have red tones too. Red in nature description and in some scenery details comprises negative meaning. It brings the motive of blood and death. In novella "Three death" from "Three Windows" series about the reid of military ships carrying out their combat mission, we can find an

obvious, repeating during all the narration image of a red moon sickle. This image appears here as a sign of death. It comes out after the death of a young musician from the military band, who was killed by a whizzbang that went into the foundation of the mainmast and after the accidental death of a drowned sailor. The battle took place at midday, but this "sign" was seen only at night by a young Lieutenant K., the narrator of the memories. After the fighting, when everything was calm, the Lieutenant noticed a noncommissioned officer who was punished for a delinquency by carrying some duties on the deck of the battleship. The noncommissioned officer asked to change the punishment to another one as he did not want to be in sight of everyone. The officers did not agree. Here we see the moon image again: "On a battleship a punishment of a noncommissioned officer was not any extraordinary event. Lieutenant K. sat down and began to look at the sea, at the red moon sickle from the left side of the ship from which the stanchions were pulled down (Akutagawa 1998c: 363). Then it became clear that the guilty officer after serving his sentence disappeared. The searching was not a success and only when the battleship arrived in a bay it was discovered that the officer had hanged himself in the ship's pipe and only his skeleton left without any clothing, his skin and flesh were burned to ashes. When Lieutenant K. had found it out he remembered the figure of an unhappy noncommissioned officer carrying his duty and it seemed to him that " the red mood sickle is still hanging somewhere in the sky" (Akutagawa 1998c: 364). The death of these three men is illustrated by a threatening image of "the red moon sickle", but at the end of the story the author changes "moon" to "crescent" and uses "the red crescent sickle". We can treat crescent as a half of the moon and so we assume that in this case we deal with death of a soul which is an integral part of a human being. The man, Lieutenant K. is still alive but some part of his soul has gone after this dreadful reid. And the reader knows that some time ago he wanted to become a writer, a naturalist, a man of art. He was fond of aesthetics itself and could comprehend the beauty but instead of this he became a senseless soldier.

Color description is an enormous expressive means in the compositions of the great Japanese writer, it has a significant idea artistic and emotional role. As we mentioned it before, the use of the color is not incidental and its choice either. Sometimes the coloring is unexpected. From this point of view, the addition of "The Pigmy Words" (1923-1925) is of great interest for our research, as it contains some paradoxical statements about colors. For example, "The most beautiful color of a Chinese carnation has a toad tongue"; "One day when the weather was nice after the snowfall and the twilight deepened, I saw a blue raven on the roof of the neighboring house" (Akutagawa 1998d: 67).

Thus, Akutagawa creates his own vocabulary of colors - it's tints, shades and tones to evoke powerful images. In the works of the Japanese writer the color always

reveals a specific mood, it has a dramatically expressed evaluation and it is full of symbolic meanings. The complexity of color symbolical functions in Akutagawa's novellas is manifested in the connection of his color choice with shades of a real world, from the one hand, and in determination of a symbolic author's world reflecting his points of view on the life, as a whole, and on different circumstances as well, from the other hand. The color in his short stories is pithy and "talking". It plays an important part as an organic element of his poetics. The peculiarity and complication of Akutagawa's color description is in a primary psychological basis that is natural and logical as a result of a thematic and ideology foundation of his works. That is why the predominance of dark colors in his novellas is not accidental. They cause a specific mood. The contextual ambiguity of every color in a palette of his stories is a way to comprehend the originality and uniqueness of the author's creation. The color becomes one of the forms of art perception and idea aesthetic reflection of the reality.



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