Reading Artistic Prose through Colour Terms
(*"The Great Gatsby" by F.Scott Fitzgerald*)

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The question of colour terms and their functioning in English literature has long been the center of scholarly attention, and especially in the last few decades colour terms have been studied in terms of their lexical, phraseological and linguocultural values. The present article focuses on the significance of colour terms as all-important 'elements' of philological reading, something the study of which might make the process of reading an enjoyable and rewarding one.

We proceed from the assumption that the philologically oriented reader should penetrate into the author's artistic design as deeply as possible and in doing so create visual images of his own provided every aspect of the linguistic expression that the text can offer is taken into account. In this respect the use of colour terms proves especially important since it can be viewed as one of the basic means of encoding the author's purport in the text. As the previous research shows[1], whenever an author introduces a colour term into his or her text, it is always done for a particular purpose.

Our analysis is based on the text of *The Great Gatsby* by F.Scott Fitzgerald, the well-known American author of the Jazz Age. In the novel colour seems to play an increasingly important role. It introduces 'polyphony' in the text - the polyphony of colour and meaning which almost acquires a symbolic significance. Of special interest here is the beginning of the novel, where the writer introduces Daisy, his main heroine, to the reader, as if setting her in a painting of an interior, dressed all in white:

> *The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out at the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it, as wind does on the sea.*
> *The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon.*

They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.

The visual image of the room is very vivid because it is based on contrasting of colours: the white of the curtains, ceiling and dresses against the red of the wine-coloured carpet. Interestingly enough, only a few pages later the white colour emerges again, this time in Daisy's speech when she is telling Nick how she came to know Jordan Baker: "*Our white girlhood was passed together there (in Louisville). Our beautiful white* - " . Daisy breaks off in the middle of the sentence and, as a result, the word 'white' is left, as it were, 'hanging in the air', with a very long pause following it.

The reader is thus left to his own devices, so to speak. The decision he may take in interpreting this unfinished sentence with a long pause to follow and an abrupt digression is entirely his own. Therefore, the reader may, however tentatively, conclude that the sentence is deliberately unfinished, and, moreover, "white girlhood" is not merely a phrase, but a convenient cliché which refers to the early period of the woman's life. The author also makes a hint that this girlhood might not have been quite so innocently 'white' as is inherently implied in the phrase.

In retrospect, then, the "frosted wedding-cake" in the setting of the first scene acquires a greater significance. The white colour no longer seems to be a symbol of purity and innocence, nor of some fashionable style proper to a particular social milieu of a particular period. On the contrary, it tends to stand for something artificial, false and deceptive, for something we cannot totally believe or rely upon that which, in the long run, brought Gatsby to his tragic end.

A colour similar to that of the carpet is mentioned in the novel three times –at the beginning, when Nick joins Daisy and Tom for dinner for the first time; in the middle of the novel, when Gatsby and Nick come to the Buchanans for luncheon; and finally, at the end of the story, when Gatsby is killed. This is how the second episode is described:

The room, shadowed well with awnings, was dark and cool. Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans.
"We can't move," they said together.
Jordan's fingers, powdered white over their tan, rested for a moment in mine.
"And Mr. Thomas Buchanan, the athlete?" I inquired.
Simultaneously I heard his voice, gruff, muffled, husky, at the hall telephone.
Gatsby stood in the centre of the crimson carpet and gazed around with fascinated eyes. Daisy watched him and laughed, her sweet, exciting laugh: a tiny gust of powder rose from her bosom into the air.

Interestingly enough, this extract brings us back to the episode discussed above, when Nick comes to Daisy for dinner at the beginning of the book. Not only the setting,

but also the colours are practically the same – the "wine-coloured" (or "crimson") carpet in contrast with the white background. Here, too, the white background is further accentuated by the introduction of another shade of white - 'silver' (the "silver idols"). Echoing the image of "frosted wedding-cake" mentioned in the first passage, 'idols' are in the same line of associations. The silver idols look just as artificial and 'frosted' as the festive arrangement of white and pink icing on the wedding-cake.

In a kind of tragic circle, Fitzgerald returns to the symbolic use of 'red' at the end of the novel, when Gatsby is shot and his body is in the water of the pond:

The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it (his body) slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water.

The red colour, therefore, seems to acquire special significance in the novel. It functions as a sign of warning of some hidden danger or threat, and is somehow associated with the premonition of disaster. In the first episode, it gives the reader a general warning of a future tragedy, largely setting the overall 'atmosphere' of the whole novel. In the second case, the passage containing the word precedes the description of a most dramatic trip to New York when Gatsby is going to tell Tom about his feeling towards Daisy and hers towards him, and about her decision to leave her husband. The crimson colour of the carpet in this scene prompts the reader to expect some impending tragedy in the episode that is to follow. Indeed, after that Daisy and Gatsby go back home and Daisy knocks down Myrtle Wilson who is trying to stop their car. And, finally, as we have already mentioned, in the third case, red is the colour of blood in the final scene of the murder.

Two other colour terms - 'pink' and 'rose-coloured' (both is actually designating pale red), also seem to play an important part in the context of the novel, being invariably associated with Gatsby. In the opening scene analysed above, pink is not introduced openly as a colour term. Nevertheless, it is intuitively present in the reader's mind as a kind of colour association:

A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out at the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward ***the frosted wedding-cake*** *of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it, as wind does on the sea.*

The metaphor 'frosted wedding-cake' deserves a more detailed comment: the fact is that in this metaphor both 'white' and 'pink' are implied. An interesting example from Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture can be useful to support this idea - *'a wedding-cake with pink and white icing'*. Appropriately enough, it serves as an illustration to explain the meaning of 'pink'! Thus, although pink as a colour term is not referred to overtly by the author, the very mentioning of the "frosted wedding-cake" in the scene is meant to bring up a special, pink and white coloured picture in our mind's eye when we read the passage. In other words, the pink, or the pale red, against the white of the wedding-cake icing is in tune with the main leitmotif of the novel – the contrast

between the artificiality, pomposity and falsehood of the Buchanans' world and the sincerity, however strongly mixed with vulgarity (hence – pink!), of Gatsby himself.

Some pink 'spots' appear practically every time that Gatsby is mentioned. At the beginning of the novel, pink is played upon when Gatsby's name is first pronounced in Daisy's presence. During Nick's visit to her house, Jordan Baker contemptuously remarks that she knows someone in West Egg.

"I don't know a single – "
"You must know Gatsby."
"Gatsby?" demanded Daisy. "What Gatsby?"
Before I could reply he was my neighbour dinner was announced; wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though we were moving a checker to another square.
Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their lips, the two young women preceded us out on to ***a rosy-coloured porch,*** *open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind.*

Further on in the text of the novel, pink is often introduced as the colour of Gatsby's clothes. In one of the most dramatic episodes, when Gatsby and Nick come to the Buchanans' for luncheon after which they are to go to New York City, Gatsby is wearing a pink suit. Before that, Gatsby invites Daisy and Nick to see his house, shows them around and then takes them to his bedroom and shows them his clothes – *"shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue"*. What strikes the eye here is a very rich array of colours, some of which seem to be too bright for anyone of good taste and high social standing. Among these 'coral' and 'orange' clearly stand out as presenting a jarring contrast with the 'Indian blue' of the monograms. Interestingly, too, both 'coral' and 'orange' belong to the 'warm' (red) section of the colour range.

Thus, what is the role of the pink colour in the imagery of the novel? What is the core of its symbolic significance? A careful study of dictionary entries and literature on colour terms allows us to assume that pink is heavily loaded with various associations and connotations. On the one hand, as the feature article on 'pink' in Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture suggests[2], it is thought of as a pretty, nice and feminine colour, and on the other, 'rose-coloured' has a very specific connotation to it, which is revealed in the set-expression *"to look at/see/view the world through rose-coloured spectacles/glasses"*. Interestingly, too, in the dictionary the phrase is marked off as 'usually derogatory' and is defined as *"to see the world, life etc. as better and more pleasant than they are"*[3]. Hence, we may conclude that this colour is associated with something positive and attractive but, at the same time, ambivalent and deceptive, false and unreal.

Therefore, pink may be thought to perform a dual function in the novel *The Great Gatsby*. It is used as a symbol of Gatsby's dreams and illusions, his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life", his "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic

readiness", for one thing, and as a subtle hint of his tragic fate, for the other. In the latter case, it is more general in sense, and less concrete than the red colour.

This, however, is not all. There is yet another connotation connected with the pink colour, very different from those discussed above but no less important. Illustrative of it is the conversation between Tom, Nick and Jordan, who are en route to New York:

"... I said I'd been making a small investigation of his past."
"And you found he was an Oxford man," said Jordan helpfully.
*"An Oxford man!" He was incredulous. "Like hell he is! **He wears a pink suit.**"*
"Nevertheless he's an Oxford man."
"Oxford, New Mexico," snorted Tom contemptuously, "or something like that."

Obviously, pink becomes a point of sarcastic discussion. Tom remarks (however snobbishly, as Jordan says) that a real 'Oxford man' would never dress like that. Oxford education presupposes a fairly high social status and a position in society, which one either has or does not have. It does not matter how prosperous a person is, if he does not have this background, he does not share a certain set of values, ideas and attitudes which are proper to this social milieu. Jay Gatsby (or James Gatz, which is his real name) does not belong to the same social circle as Daisy and Tom Buchanan, however rich and successful he may have become. Daisy used to be "the king's daughter, the golden girl" for him when he was very young and very poor, and she still remains unattainable for him, even when he has made his dream of prosperity and success come true. In contrast, Daisy and Tom have very much in common as members of the same social class, despite all the conflicts, and they remain together after the tragic events with Myrtle Wilson and Gatsby, as if nothing has happened.

There is still another passage in the novel where Gatsby's pink suit is mentioned, but where the author's attitude is completely different. The episode is placed at the end of the book, and portrays Nick's meeting with Gatsby. Immediately after Myrtle Wilson's death and after having spent the morning at Gatsby's house, Nick leaves for work.

Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around.
"They're a rotten crowd," I shouted across the lawn. "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."
*I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on the fact all the time. **His gorgeous pink rag of a suit** made **a bright spot of colour** against the white steps, and I thought of the night when I first came to his ancestral home, three months before. The lawn and drive had been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption - and he had stood at those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them good-bye.*

This revives the association of the pink colour with Gatsby's dream. It is also the pink colour that supports the contrast between him and Daisy, Tom and their 'rotten'

world. Of special interest here is the way the colour term *'pink'* is included as a homogeneous attribute in the polymember attributive sequence "gorgeous pink" (*"his gorgeous pink rag of a suit"*). There are two points that could be specially commented upon here. One is that the word 'pink' is preceded by a very special kind of adjective – 'gorgeous', the meaning of which is inherently connotative. If we look it up in the monolingual dictionary[4], we shall find that 'gorgeous' is 1. extremely beautiful or attractive: *a gorgeous blond, gorgeous silks,* 2. extremely pleasant or enjoyable: *What a gorgeous afternoon! (= warm and sunny)"*

Obviously, preceded by such an adjective, the word 'pink' is bound to produce a similar kind of association in the reader's mind.

Interestingly, too, it is the second time the word 'gorgeous' is used in the novel. The first case is in the episode when Nick, the narrator, mentions Gatsby for the first time at the very beginning of the novel,as one who "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn". Nick remarks:

> *"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away".*

Thus, 'pink' goes together with 'gorgeous', both words implying vulgarity from a particular social point.

The episode when Nick talks to Gatsby for the last time, and the beginning of the novel form a kind of circle of Gatsby's life story. At the beginning the pink colour is just a premonition of future dramatic events - it is introduced when Nick comes to Tom and Daisy's house in answer to their invitation:

> *We walked through a high hallway into* ***a bright rosy-coloured space,*** *fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house...*

These are the opening lines of the passage we have discussed above, where the main colour contrast has been shown to be between the "wine-coloured rug" and everything else in the room which is white. Then why should the passage begin with "a bright rosy-coloured space"? Could it be explained by the simple fact that the crimson colour of the carpet throws a kind of pinkish glow on all the white surfaces in the room? In that case the author would have to be very observant indeed and very sensitive to all the details of the optical illusion that might take place in reality. However, we are still tempted to believe that there is much more in it than that. There is every reason to suggest that this is the first hint of the on-coming tragedy which the author gives to the reader with the help of this particular colour. At the end of the novel we come across the same colour, and here its role is much more obvious, because it occurs immediately before Gatsby's murder.

Thus, we may conclude that colour terms form an integral part of the verbal imagery in the artistic text. There can be little doubt that philological reading proper implies, among other things, reading into the colours - i.e. subjecting the colour terms to minute analysis from lexical, linguostylistic, sociolinguistic and cultural-historical points of view. The choice and arrangement of colour terms in a text of verbal art is yet another 'aid' to help the reader penetrate into the author's artistic design.

References:

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Գեղարվեստական արձակի ընթերցումը գունային պատկերավորման տեսանկյունից (Ֆ.Սկոթ Ֆիցջերալդի « Սեծն Գեթսբի» վեպի հիման վրա)

Հոդվածում քննվում է գունային պատկերաշարի ստեղծման հնարավորությունը գեղարվեստական արձակում, ինչպես նաև կարևորվում է գունանունների բառային, դարձվածաբանական և լեզվամշակութաբանական արժեքի վերհանումը բանասիրական ընթերցման տեսանկյունից:

Ն. Սկոթ Ֆիցջերալդի վեպի նյութի հիման վրա ցույց է տրվում, որ առանձին գույներ (կարմիր, սպիտակ, վարդագույն և այլն) խորհրդանշական արժեք են ձեռք բերում երկի համատեքստում դառնալով նաև կերպարաշարի ստեղծման միջոց: