

Somewhere Over the Rainbow: The Power of Color in Haiku
by Joan C. Fingon and Lee Hudspeth

When we hear Judy Garland sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”¹ in *The Wizard of Oz*, many images of distinct colors come to mind that are often used in haiku. For example, color words in haiku can describe specific things in nature as well as enrich the description of a person, place, or object in haiku (and senryu). Additionally, color can evoke images or moods without using a color word or evoke different kinds of emotions (both positive and negative) based on different culture groups and hemispheres. In this essay we examine how modern-day haikuists convey a description, theme, or mood by using a particular color word, and poems in which the color is implied.

Primary Color Words

Many poets use primary colors (blue, red, and yellow) in their work to describe an image. In her book *Clara and Mr. Tiffany*,² Vreeland describes how artists design and create Tiffany glass, “Red, blue, and yellow cannot be faked or forced. They are for themselves, of themselves. Variable, like moods, yet always themselves.” In the following three sections we present haiku examples that use primary color words.

Blue

Blue may elicit emotions such as relaxation, calmness, and tranquility, as well as emotions such as sadness, melancholy, coolness, or aloofness. Zimmerman's haiku describes the similarity between the striking color of an iris and a baby's eyes. This poem uses a primary color word in a passionate and evocative way, allowing the color blue to resonate throughout the haiku.

mountain iris
the deep blue
of the baby's gaze

J. Zimmerman³

Theriana's poignant haiku about loss and how we grieve uses the word blue by referring to "bluebell" flowers. This flower is a vibrant shade of blue which is quite memorable. A powerful juxtaposition emerges from the image of the richly colored bluebell in contrast to the grave of a loved one.

bluebells
we sidestep all the way
to mother's grave

Elisa Theriana⁴

Red

The color red can evoke a wide range of emotions across various cultures, for example, power, anger, and aggression (negative), or energy, passion, love, and confidence (positive).

In Billie Dee's light-hearted haiku, most Americans who have ever slurped a popsicle will recognize the color "popsicle red." The image here is one of pure joy and fun expressed by the grandson, as well as love for him by his grandmother.

popsicle red
 a grandson's
 spreading grin

Billie Dee⁵

In McDonald's monoku which follows, the phrase "red light" immediately reveals that the car is at a stand-still. Even when the driver is motionless in his "muscle car" (with red taillights) he's flexing and showing confidence.

red light flexing his muscle car

Tanya McDonald⁶

Yellow

Yellow can elicit positive emotions such as warmth, optimism, cheerfulness, mellowness, as well as negative emotions like caution, illness, or cowardice. Kacian's haiku exemplifies the use of yellow in the context of optimism and warmth, which contrasts with the first line's reference to a cold mist.

through a cold mist
 yellow
 where spring is

Jim Kacian⁷

Gurney's haiku is a clear example of the use of yellow to describe not an object but a state of mind, in this case, equanimity.

yellow
 the lightness of being
 amidst tumult

Jennifer Gurney⁸

Multiple Color Words in a Single Haiku

Some haiku use two or more color words, to either create a contrast (as in Miner’s poem below) or to express the range of colors at a particular moment.

raging river brown...
a lemon-yellow kayak
darts between the swells

Lauren Miner⁹

The first phrase “raging river brown” uses the motion of the river to describe a specific shade of brown. Line two refers to the second color, that of a “lemon-yellow kayak.” By using the verb “darts” in line three, often associated with birds flying, the kayak can be pictured flying between the massive swells of the river, perhaps hinting at the struggle of humans against the forces of nature.

To further stress the point about the descriptiveness of colors, let’s explore what happens to this poem if we remove the exquisite descriptors “raging river” and “lemon.” This leaves only the single-word colors “brown” and “yellow,” and the haiku’s image becomes less powerful and less open to the imagination of the reader.

brown river...
a yellow kayak
darts between the swells

How Specific Colors Affect the Mood of a Poem

Now consider what happens to the following haiku by Habis using the color word “crimson” often associated with sexuality, romantic passion, and the intensity of these emotions.

Interestingly, if we used, for example, “cerulean” instead of “crimson,” the mood would shift dramatically to a more uplifting feeling.

the colors I add
to your intentions...
crimson twilight

Fatma Zohra Habis¹⁰

In Root-Bernstein's haiku below, "indigo" suggests a feeling of introspective calmness, which is also underscored by the elegant simplicity of this four-word poem.

midnight
the indigo
within

Michele Root-Bernstein¹¹

As a thought experiment, were we to change "indigo" to "scarlet," the ambience would shift to one of impending doom, scarlet being the shade of red closest to the color of human blood.

Expressing a Color by Implication

In the following haiku, Brooks does not include an explicit color word, rather, the poem represents the shade of yellow of deli mustard.

food truck
fancy hotdog mustard
matches his shirt

Randy Brooks¹²

Feingold's monoku creates a mood without explicitly naming any color words. The two nouns in the phrase "squash and tomatoes" suggest red and yellow, perhaps some green. The phrase "sizzle of her sauté" can imply sensuality here, without using a color reference.

squash and tomatoes the sizzle of her sauté

Bruce H. Feingold¹³

Whitehead's haiku below does not refer to a specific color either but rather the essence of the many colors seen in autumn. The poet not explicitly naming the color of wine makes this poem more engaging for the reader.

homemade wine
she bottles all the colours
of autumn

Lucy Whitehead¹⁴

Color Words and Parts of Speech

Adjective Examples

The most common use of a color word is an adjective. In this example, Bennett's poem uses two different and contrasting color descriptors, blue and green. Line three can be interpreted as the green croquet ball (grass) connecting with the blue ball (associated with the summer sky).

summer days
the green croquet ball ticks
against the blue

Brad Bennett¹⁵

Wilson's nostalgic poem exemplifies the use of "yellow" with the additional descriptor "sunlit" that further sets the scene for the reader. Not only is the page yellow, but it is also illuminated by the sun, thereby intensifying the impact the moment had on the poet's younger self.

five years old
 on a sunlit yellow page
 my first poem

Kathabela Wilson¹⁶

Noun Examples

This haiku by Kolodji puts a color word to work as a noun. In line one, the em dash creates a pause between the background of purple and the daydreams that follow. Or, in another interpretation, the reader may view the poet's daydreams as purple while those daydreams follow a hyacinth which is floating on a body of calm water.

floating purple—
 my daydreams follow
 the water hyacinth

Deborah P Kolodji¹⁷

Strange's poem below gives equal weight to "dandelion" and "yellow" in the beginning and at the end of the monoku. By separating the two words, i.e., instead of writing "yellow dandelions," the poet emphasizes the yellowness of the entire experience. Here, "yellow"—as a primary color and as a property—is equally as important as the flower's color and the mood it represents.

dandelions the multiplication factor of yellow

Debbie Strange¹⁸

Color Words As Verbs

The technique “verbing” can be defined as “to use (a word and especially a noun) as a verb: to make (a word) into a verb.”

Nicely’s haiku is a good example of the verbing technique. In this instance, the noun “purple” is transformed into the verb “purples.”

broken bale
dusk purples
the hay field

Elliot Nicely¹⁹

So Many Color Names!

There is an almost infinite set of color names to use in haiku, such as fuchsia, tangerine, mackerel, raspberry red, pomegranate, ginger, watermelon, copper, cerulean, vermilion, and cinnamon. In Fink’s poem, a tank top is described as the color of a persimmon, which is an autumn kigo. The opening line “autumn heat” implies the colors yellow, orange, and red. A persimmon is typically a reddish orange color and has a soft, warm feeling. Fink’s use of an unusual color name enhances the seasonality of the poem.

autumn heat
her tank top

the color of persimmons

Barbara Fink²⁰

St. Claire's poem paints a lovely image of a lavender colored sky. This color implies peacefulness and calmness; the rain's arrival changes the mood, and the poem gently describes that moment of transformation.

sudden rain
the lavender sky
gives up the ghost

Joshua St. Claire²¹

Now let's consider how a color descriptor—either primary or otherwise—impacts a haiku, as demonstrated by Lyles' poem.

reaching for green pears—
the pull
of an old scar

Peggy Willis Lyles²²

In this poem, "green" hints at something more than just a color. A green pear is usually an unripe pear. Perhaps the poet has an old scar which might be painfully pulling as she stretches to reach the tree's fruit; in the same way one reaches to achieve a new goal or to recall a traumatic experience. These experiences may be out of reach, and in the attempt to connect with them, she re-experiences an unhealed emotional injury.

Synesthesia and Exploring the Senses

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines synesthesia as “a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of vision) other than the one (as of hearing) being stimulated.”²³ Color words can refer to synesthesia as a transformational process. Rogers’ poem below refers to the color of a tomato (“orange”)—and by implication the sunlight which caused the tomatoes to grow—taking on the sense of taste (“the taste of sunlight”).

orange tomatoes
fresh from her mother’s garden
the taste of sunlight

Susan Rogers²⁴

In Laurila’s poem, yellow represents the bright refreshing color of forsythias in spring and the announcement of transition from winter to spring (warmth, with new life). In Line two, the word “yellow” refers to a particular sound; the generic term used in the poem is “noise” and connotes a blending of sounds. Hence, the yellow color of a forsythia is perceived as a sound.

awakening
the yellow noise
of forsythia

Jim Laurila²⁵

Smith’s haiku uses synesthesia to transform the sweet smell of something seen (sunshine) into something touched (skin touched by the sun’s warmth).

watermelon afternoon
breathing in the sweet smell
of sunshine

Thomas Smith²⁶

In Watts' poem below, the synesthesia occurs between the pervasive smell of coal dust and the colors black and blue, both of which can be associated with a coal miner's environment. By using the phrase "black and blue" the poet might also be suggesting the physical and painful toil of being a coal worker.

our old coal house
the scent
of black and blue

Lew Watts²⁷

In the next example by Pappas, "blues" refers to the artist Vincent van Gogh's fascination with various shades of blue. Some excellent synesthesia is going on here. The color blue is cool to the touch (as are shades of blue), thus transitioning vision (colors) and touch (feeling the temperature of a heat wave on the skin).

heat wave
ducking into the cool
of van gogh's blues

John Pappas²⁸

Color Itself as the Subject of a Poem

Michael Dylan Welch's renga "True Colours" explores the various meanings in which the concept of color can be incorporated into a poem. In verse one, the double meaning of the expression "true colours" contrasts between an abstract painting's use of color and the monetization of a creative work. In verse two, the colloquialism "off-colour" appears, here meaning

socially inappropriate, adding to the light humor. The poem's various roles and perspectives (the psychiatrist, teacher, realtor, district attorney, and photographer) demonstrate differences in the meanings of the word "color" in the English language.

True Colours

true colours—
the abstract painting
overpriced

an off-colour joke
from the psychiatrist

colouring
outside the lines
the kindergarten teacher

the realtor
talking too much
about local colour

hardly colourblind
the district attorney

technicolour sunset—
the photographer loads
another memory card

Michael Dylan Welch²⁹

Summary

Color is a versatile and powerful tool in the haiku toolbox. Color can add power and subtlety to a haiku, evoke a wide range of moods and emotions (both positive and negative), involve senses other than sight, and be used to embellish, soften, or sharpen an image. Color is so much more than an adjective, noun, or decorative element in a poem. Exploring the use of color in poetry—like the colors of a rainbow—can strengthen our

own deep visions and emotions and help us expand our poetic horizons.

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