
The Black Monk by Chekhov: What Does Color Palette Really Mean

Written in 1893, Anton Chekhov's short story "The Black Monk" is one of the most potent and revealing works of the writer. It reflects the profound philosophy of the author, as well as the feelings of worry and anxiety which, according to the memoirs of his contemporaries, pursued Anton Chekhov at that time.

The author himself described his work as follows: "This is a medical story, historical morbi" (Carter). Indeed, Chekhov draws attention to what kind of disease his hero Kovrin is suffering; this disease is megalomania, a disease many Russian people of the nineteenth century had suffered from. Apparently, the main theme of the story is to show how a person's life could be broken by this sizzling passion and all the artistic means used are strengthening the understanding of the topic. Chekhov is one of the greatest masters of the written word, and of sensory details in Russian literature. But in this work he showed himself as a great master of painting, for color, for every mention of color in this story is loaded with meaning.

The action of the narrative is connected with a garden, which itself should speak of the variety of colors. At the beginning of the story we really read: "such a wealth of flowers, in fact, Kovrin had never seen anywhere as at Pesotsky's" (Chekhov). But, oddly enough, Chekhov does not describe any of these "various colors," and indicates a clear distinction: "all possible shades, from glistening white to sooty black" (Chekhov). Underlining these unusual colors for the garden, Chekhov shows their symbolic meaning.

The symbolism of white and black colors goes back to the ballads. Maybe this is what is Chekhov meant when he wrote that Kovrin "found in some book" a legend or "heard it somewhere." And indeed the legend that struck Kovrin has the character of a ballad about the monk who for his sins had to wander the universe forever, and always at night when pale moon appears in the sky. It is the combination of the black appearance of a monk and the pale moon or dawn, or combination of black robes and white face ("pale, terribly pale face!" - as described by the author) explicitly directs the reader to the connection with a traditional romantic ballad. And what do these colors mean in a ballad? White - the color of youth, life and goodness. Black is always a symbol of death.

If the contrast between black and white is looked into even deeper, it can be seen that it goes back to the Bible, or, more precisely, to the Apocalypse. In "The Black Monk," the date of appearance of the black monk is exactly specified - a thousand years ago. In the Apocalypse,

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the thousand years is the time of the devil's confinement. It is quite possible that the black monk is a devil, the one whose presence goes beyond the earth for a thousand years (the universe in the romantic tradition is often identified with the abyss). Chekhov thus opens another facet of color symbolism: the white color symbolizes God's chosen one. A man worthy of wearing white clothes is a man sinless, blameless. At the beginning of the story Kovrin calms himself: "I will not do evil; So, in my hallucinations there is nothing wrong," but the monk who visits him is dressed up in black.

White in the story appears only once more, at the very end. Kovrin breaks Tania's letter and throws the scraps on the floor, but they turn white and give him no rest. The easiest solution would be to link in this episode symbolism of white with an image of Tanya, but such an interpretation would not be entirely accurate. Kovrin picks up the scraps of the letter and throws them out of the window, but wind blowing from the sea scatters the pieces on the windowsill. A few minutes later a black monk appears to take Kovrin's life. The dying Kovrin is on the floor defeated, and above him is the unfortunate letter, which he needs right now most of all. It seems that the white color - the color of life, which is in the garden, and a field of rye, and youth, and courage, joy - represents all that Kovrin had sacrificed in the name of his idea of chosenness.

To finish the color palette of the work, it is necessary to mention one more important detail. Color adjectives are presented mealy and monotonously throughout the story. And only in the end of the work are there two wonderful descriptions of the Crimean Bay: the blue-green water, moonlight, "a lot of blue, dark blue, turquoise and fiery eyes." Just before his death Kovrin saw the real beauty of the world. So uselessly has his life been lived!

With full confidence, the reader can say that Chekhov in the short story "The Black Monk" presents himself as a true artist of the world. The author is able to raise the color scheme of the work to the level of symbolism, and to show what opposes Kovrin's delusions by contrasting black and white colors.

References:

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