

# Cognitive-Semantic Dynamics Of Colour Imagery Symbols In Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea

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**Abstract:** This study examines the cognitive-semantic functions of colour imagery in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, emphasizing the central role of chromatic representation in the construction of meaning. It argues that colour imagery in the novella operates as a primary cognitive and symbolic system rather than a purely descriptive device, shaping readers' perception of endurance, struggle, and human-nature unity. By integrating Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short's stylistic model with Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization, the research demonstrates how recurrent colours such as blue, white, purple, gold, and dark are foregrounded to renew perception and encode abstract philosophical meanings.

**Keywords:** Colour imagery, cognitive semantics, chromatic symbolism, stylistic foregrounding, defamiliarization, Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

**Introduction:** Ernest Hemingway stands as one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century American literature. Although his prose appears simple and restrained on the surface, it is characterized by profound conceptual and symbolic depth. His 1952 novella *The Old Man and the Sea* exemplifies this aesthetic by dramatizing human perseverance, personal dignity, and the enduring conflict between humanity and the natural world. The protagonist, Santiago, is an aging Cuban fisherman who has endured eighty-four days of failure without a single catch. Physically weakened and socially isolated, he nevertheless ventures into the open sea to reaffirm his self-respect and personal worth. His determination gestures toward broader philosophical concerns, including the nature of courage, the ethics of struggle, and the meanings of victory and defeat. While the narrative is structurally straightforward, it invites sustained reflection on existential experience and human resilience.

Central to Hemingway's artistic method is his well-

known "Iceberg Theory," according to which only a small portion of meaning is explicitly stated, while the greater part remains implicit and submerged beneath the surface of the text. This principle accounts for the economy and precision of his language, in which imagery carries a disproportionate share of interpretive weight. Within this framework, colour imagery functions not merely as a descriptive element but as a vehicle for emotional resonance and symbolic signification. Blue, associated with the sea, conveys immensity, mystery, and continuity; white gestures toward purity, transcendence, and revelation; red signifies vitality, sacrifice, and the cost of endurance.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, colours are not neutral perceptual phenomena but conceptual tools that mediate between sensory experience and abstract thought. They are culturally and imaginatively grounded, allowing readers to map visual perception onto moral, emotional, and philosophical domains. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, chromatic references contribute to the mental construction of solitude,

struggle, and hope, shaping the reader's interpretive engagement with the narrative.

This study therefore investigates colour symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* through a cognitive-semantic lens, with the aim of uncovering the emotional and conceptual layers embedded in Hemingway's chromatic choices. It explores how recurrent hues contribute to the thematic articulation of endurance and human-nature harmony. By foregrounding the semantic and stylistic functions of colour, the paper demonstrates how Hemingway's minimalist technique encodes universal patterns of human experience within an apparently simple narrative structure.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an integrative methodological framework that combines stylistic analysis with cognitive and formalist approaches in order to examine the semantic and symbolic roles of colour imagery in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Specifically, it draws on the stylistic model proposed by Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short and the formalist concept of defamiliarization developed by Viktor Shklovsky. This synthesis enables a systematic exploration of how linguistic form interacts with cognitive perception to generate layered meanings.

Leech and Short's (1981) model provides the primary stylistic foundation for the analysis. They conceptualize literary style as a patterned and purposeful selection of linguistic features that contribute to both aesthetic effect and communicative intention. Within this framework, deviation from ordinary language use functions as a mechanism of foregrounding, directing the reader's attention toward salient textual elements and enhancing their emotional and conceptual impact. In the present study, particular emphasis is placed on the frequency, distribution, and contextual deployment of colour terms. Colours such as blue, gold, purple, and red are examined not only in their descriptive capacity but also in their role as carriers of affective and symbolic meaning.

Previous research supports this methodological orientation. Baraika and Ferdjani (2019) demonstrate that Hemingway's seemingly simple diction conceals complex symbolic and cognitive structures. Similarly, Ojedoja (2020) and Hameed (2023) highlight the significance of chromatic motifs in articulating moral

endurance and ethical struggle within the novella. These studies validate the analytical focus on stylistic foregrounding as a means of revealing the multi-layered semantic functions of colour imagery.

The second analytical dimension is informed by Shklovsky's (1917) theory of defamiliarization, which posits that the primary function of art is to disrupt habitual perception and render familiar objects and experiences strange, thereby renewing the reader's sensory and cognitive engagement. This concept is particularly relevant to Hemingway's symbolic treatment of natural imagery. For instance, Santiago's eyes are described as sharing the same colour as the sea, a stylistic fusion that blurs the boundary between human subject and natural environment. This strategy reconfigures perception by aligning inner consciousness with external reality, encouraging readers to experience the narrative world through Santiago's embodied perspective.

Scholars such as Honcharuk (2023) and Niazi (2021) argue that Hemingway's symbolic language operates through this process of perceptual estrangement, transforming ordinary details into signs of the interdependence between humanity and nature. Within this interpretive framework, colour imagery serves as a cognitive bridge that integrates sensory input with abstract conceptualization.

By integrating Leech and Short's stylistic model with Shklovsky's formalist theory, the study establishes a comprehensive analytical lens that connects linguistic structure with cognitive response. This combined approach reveals that colour imagery in *The Old Man and the Sea* functions not as ornamental detail but as a central semiotic mechanism. It mediates between perception and interpretation, enabling the text to articulate values such as perseverance, transcendence, and reconciliation with the natural world. The findings are further supported by related studies on symbolism and stylistic devices in Hemingway's work (Belarbi, 2016; Alshareef, 2019; Ramadani, 2022; Immanuel et al., 2020), which collectively underscore the role of colour as both a stylistic strategy and a conceptual framework for meaning-making.

## RESULTS

The analysis of colour imagery in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reveals a complex semiotic

system in which minimalist language and renewed perception converge to produce substantial philosophical meaning. Drawing on the stylistic principles of Leech and Short (1981) and Shklovsky's (1917) concept of defamiliarization, the study demonstrates that Hemingway's chromatic references transcend descriptive function and operate as mechanisms of semantic foregrounding, imbuing the narrative with cognitive and ethical depth.

A quantitative overview of colour term frequency, informed by Vitacolonna's (1989) methodological approach, indicates that the most recurrent hues - dark (35 instances), blue (13), white (12), purple (11), and yellow (10) - constitute the core of the novella's chromatic palette. This patterned repetition establishes a symbolic network through which perceptual cues are transformed into conceptual signifiers. The findings support Rauf's (2023) interpretation of Hemingway's "Iceberg Theory" as a dynamic interplay between explicit textual surface and implicit symbolic depth. The recurring colours parallel Santiago's internal states: blue signifies endurance and calm, purple gestures toward transcendence, yellow connotes vitality and memory, white suggests realization and purification, and dark embodies uncertainty and existential ambiguity.

The deployment of blue emerges as a central stylistic and cognitive strategy. Through Leech and Short's notion of foregrounding, a seemingly simple chromatic reference is elevated into a marker of emotional and philosophical resonance. The description of Santiago's eyes as "cheerful and undefeated, the same colour as the sea" (Hemingway, 1952) functions as a symbolic alignment of human identity with the natural world. As Baraika and Ferdjani (2019) observe, Hemingway's restrained language frequently encodes latent layers of meaning. Within Shklovsky's framework, this chromatic equivalence defamiliarizes the sea, transforming it from a passive setting into an extension of Santiago's consciousness. This blurring of subject and object reflects the interdependence of human will and natural forces, a relationship also emphasized in the analyses of Honcharuk (2023) and Niazi (2021).

The marlin's purple and lavender hues foreground notions of nobility, courage, and transcendence. Descriptions of its "dark purple back" and "light lavender stripes" (Hemingway, 1952) elevate the fish

from a mere object of pursuit to what Belarbi (2016) characterizes as a "spiritual adversary." The chromatic transition from vibrant purple to silver-white marks a semiotic shift from physical vitality to symbolic endurance, reinforcing Hameed's (2023) argument that Hemingway's narrative charts a movement from corporeal struggle to moral victory. The blood-stained sea, "spreading like a cloud," further intensifies this transformation, signifying both mortality and the cyclical continuity of life.

Gold and yellow operate as mnemonic and affective codes within Santiago's cognitive landscape. The recurring dream of "golden lions" on the African shore evokes memories of youth, strength, and unbroken spirit, functioning as a psychological reservoir of resilience. Ojedoja (2020) identifies this motif as emblematic of Hemingway's "moral durability of the human spirit." Conversely, the "yellow catlike eyes" of the sharks invert the positive connotations of gold, recasting brightness as a sign of predation and decay (Alshareef, 2019). This semantic duality underscores the emotional tension generated through chromatic ambiguity.

White and silver imagery gestures toward religious and existential dimensions of the narrative. Santiago's wounded hands and his laborious ascent with the mast evoke imagery of redemptive suffering, a parallel noted by Sa-ngiamwibool (2016) in comparative studies of spiritual symbolism. The "friendly piles of white clouds" and the luminous sea foam signify purification and harmony, offering moments of perceptual clarity. The marlin's stripped, white skeleton embodies the paradox of mortality and transcendence, wherein physical dissolution gives rise to symbolic permanence. Vitacolonna (1989) observes that such chromatic reduction mirrors Hemingway's stylistic economy, as visual simplicity coincides with heightened conceptual significance.

The interplay between darkness and light constitutes a key cognitive dimension of the text. Recurrent references to darkness cultivate an atmosphere of solitude, uncertainty, and the unknown. Santiago's reliance on tactile and intuitive perception in the dark signifies a movement from sensory data to cognitive insight, aligning with the premise that authentic understanding emerges when habitual modes of perception are disrupted. Conversely, the painful

brilliance of the sun – “the sun hurt his eyes” - reconfigures light as a metaphor for truth, implying that illumination entails both revelation and suffering. This chromatic dialectic frames knowledge as an ethical trial grounded in endurance.

Semantic ambivalence is further evident in the depiction of the purple jellyfish (*agua mala*), whose aesthetic appeal masks latent danger. Here, colour ceases to signify stable beauty and instead indexes potential threat, reinforcing the polysemous nature of Hemingway’s stylistic choices. Similarly, Santiago’s dream images of “white peaks” and “legendary islands” contrast sharply with the “blood-red” reality of the sea, juxtaposing imaginative transcendence with corporeal struggle (Ramadani, 2022).

In sum, the integration of stylistic and cognitive perspectives reveals that Hemingway’s color imagery constitutes an organized semiotic system through which consciousness negotiates reality. As Immanuel et al. (2020) assert, Santiago’s chromatic perception embodies the author’s conviction that “a man can be destroyed but not defeated.” Through the patterned recurrence and contextual modulation of color terms, Hemingway transforms linguistic minimalism into a vehicle for metaphysical inquiry, bridging sensory experience and philosophical reflection.

## DISCUSSION

This study contends that Hemingway’s chromatic choices in *The Old Man and the Sea* function not as ornamental detail but as a coherent cognitive-semantic framework that endows his minimalist prose with philosophical and ontological significance. Colour operates as a linguistic interface through which perception, consciousness, and ethical meaning intersect.

From the stylistic perspective articulated by Leech and Short (1981), Hemingway’s use of everyday color terms - blue, white, purple, and gold - constitutes a deliberate strategy of foregrounding. Their patterned recurrence functions as a semantic refrain, intensifying narrative rhythm and emotional resonance. This observation aligns with Ojedoja’s (2020) notion of an “ethical economy of expression,” in which brevity amplifies moral and conceptual import. The present study extends this insight by demonstrating how both the frequency and positional distribution of chromatic

references act as semantic triggers for what Hameed (2023) describes as “spiritual endurance.”

The findings further substantiate Shklovsky’s (1917) theory of defamiliarization, according to which art revitalizes perception by estranging the familiar. In Hemingway’s novella, this process is frequently mediated through hue. Santiago’s blue eyes, mirroring the color of the sea, invite a reconceptualization of identity as continuous with, rather than separate from, the natural world. The sea thus emerges not as a passive backdrop but as an active interlocutor in an existential dialogue. Honcharuk (2023) similarly observes that Hemingway’s symbolic language collapses the human–nature divide, positioning the environment as a participant in moral and cognitive exchange.

A notable semantic transition occurs in the marlin’s chromatic progression from purple vitality to white skeletal stillness, a sequence Vitacolonna (1989) interprets as a semiotic metamorphosis. As color recedes, conceptual significance intensifies, marking a shift from physical confrontation to moral transcendence. Belarbi (2016) reads this progression as emblematic of the novella’s central paradox: material loss accompanied by spiritual affirmation. The movement from gold to shadow encapsulates this dialectic of defeat and dignity, which anchors Hemingway’s narrative philosophy.

From a cognitive-semantic standpoint, the analysis resonates with Niazi’s (2021) ecocritical perspective, which views the novella as an ongoing negotiation between cultural consciousness and the natural environment. Santiago’s chromatic dreams of blue seas and golden lions function as mental schemas that sustain resilience through symbolic recall. Color, in this sense, externalizes interior states, rendering thought and emotion perceptible within the textual landscape.

The alternation between darkness and illumination further supports Ramadani’s (2022) claim that Hemingway’s symbolism enacts a dialectic of destruction and endurance. Darkness is not merely the absence of light but a condition that fosters cognitive depth, framing the movement from sensory perception to intuitive understanding. Conversely, the painful radiance of sunlight serves as a metaphor for the cost of truth, suggesting that knowledge is attained through

suffering and moral clarity.

By synthesizing stylistic and formalist perspectives, this study situates color imagery at the core of Hemingway's cognitive-aesthetic project - what Immanuel et al. (2020) describe as the "dialectic of flesh and spirit." Each hue functions simultaneously as a sensory stimulus and a symbolic proposition: blue signifies endurance and equilibrium; purple marks the dignity of struggle; gold evokes memory and cyclical vitality; white gestures toward transcendence; and dark intimates existential uncertainty. Collectively, these chromatic elements map Santiago's psychological trajectory and structure the novella's metaphysical architecture.

## CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that color imagery in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* constitutes a systematic cognitive-semantic framework that underpins the novella's philosophical and aesthetic coherence. Rather than serving a purely descriptive function, chromatic references operate as symbolic mediators between sensory perception and moral, emotional, and spiritual interpretation. Each recurrent hue functions as a semiotic node that transforms concrete imagery into abstract conceptual meaning.

Through stylistic foregrounding and the defamiliarization of familiar perceptual cues, Hemingway compels readers to engage with the narrative world in cognitively and emotionally renewed ways. The persistent recurrence of blue, purple, gold, white, and dark establishes a symbolic continuum through which Santiago's physical struggle with the marlin is reframed as a process of moral and spiritual development. These colours encode values such as perseverance, dignity, vitality, transcendence, and existential awareness, thereby linking an individual act of endurance to universal human experience.

The symbolic resonance of blue in Santiago's eyes, the purple vitality of the marlin, the golden imagery of memory, and the purifying implications of white exemplify Hemingway's capacity to embed profound meaning within linguistic simplicity. This strategy accords with his Iceberg Theory, whereby the surface economy of expression conceals a deeper conceptual architecture. Colour thus becomes a covert

communicative system through which themes of endurance, harmony, and the human-nature relationship are articulated.

The findings further highlight the dialogic role of color as an interface between Santiago's internal consciousness and the external world of the sea. Chromatic imagery bridges sensory input and cognitive reflection, contributing to broader discussions in stylistics and cognitive poetics by demonstrating how minimalistic language can sustain complex philosophical inquiry. While the novella's surface may appear austere, its chromatic structure reveals an intricate network of meanings that intertwine fragility and strength, defeat and affirmation, and mortality and transcendence.

Ultimately, Hemingway's chromatic symbolism affirms that the essence of human existence lies not in material victory but in moral endurance and perceptual insight. Through the repeated and contextually modulated use of color, the novella articulates a paradoxical vision in which vulnerability coexists with dignity, and loss is counterbalanced by spiritual triumph. In this way, color imagery emerges as a central medium through which the sensory world is transformed into a map of human consciousness and ethical being.

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