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The Color of the Rose - Symbolism of a Mixed Color

There are clear definitions of symbolic meanings of pure colors as red, blue, black and white etc. This is not so with mixed colors and tints as brown, orange, pink and others.

I have chosen to write this paper on the fundamentally sexual symbolism of pink in our culture partly because of the gap in research mentioned above, and because of the unbelievable dominance of this color in everyday life schemed by television programs and commercials from animated cartoons to cosmetics, but mainly because I have told my notions on this topic in an interview for a television serial made about colors, the editor however, from plain Victorian conviction, cut them out.

For the color of the rose in English the most common word is *pink*. Anglo-Americans use adjectives derived from the noun rose only in compounds like *rose-colored*, *rose-tinted*, *rosy cheeks* or, in a more sophisticated form like *roseate*. The fact in itself that the color of the best known and most popular flower is named after another flower seems to me rather meaningful. In other words the usage of *pink* instead of *rose*, *rosy* may indicate discomfort the reason of which can be that either its propagators had no doubt about the shameful symbolic meaning of the rose or, at least they unconsciously felt it. Therefore they might choose pink as an euphemism. Further on we shall see, even with it they were unlucky. In other European languages the words used for pink without exception formed from the name of the rose. See Greek *ροδιος*, Latin *roseus*, Italian *rosa*, *roseo*, Spanish *rosa*, French *rose*, *rose*, German *rosa*, *rosig*, Russian *розовый*. Of course sometimes they are as sophisticated as their English counterpart, like Greek *ροδοχρως*, Italian *rosaceo*, German *rosenrot*, *Rosenfarbe*, Hungarian *rózsaszín*.

More interesting that even the word *red* may have the same root as *rose* has. See Italian *rosso*, French *rouge*, German *rot*, Russian *рыжий*, Hungarian *rőt*. And I think that on this opulent linguistic rosebush many words of similar sound and related in meanings grow in every European language. Among others the Latin *ruber*, *rubus* and *rufus* from which the English *ruby* originates. (*Rubus* is the Latin name of groups of related brambles of the rose-family and of their edible red,

purple or black fruit. See raspberry, blackberry.) Or, there is the word *rust*; *robigo* in Latin, *rouille* in French, *rozda* in Hungarian, *рѣдѣ* in Bulgarian. Then ore means *руда* in Russian — important iron ores as hematite, siderite have red, reddish brown color — , and the Hungarian name of the red copper is *réz*. Even perhaps the Hungarian name of the fox, *róka* can be attributed to the animal's *ruddy* fur. Partly because of their similar sounding with *rózsa*, words as *rocska* (English bucket), *rokka* (spinning wheel) could have also got the same sexual meaning.¹

The original denominator is the five-petalled whitish flower of the thorny wild rose or sweetbrier tinted with pale red. It didn't only give its name but also its rich symbolism to the color all around Europe. The rose is universally accepted as the flower and red as the color of love; of carnal or earthly love at first, and of spiritual or heavenly love later, in Christianity. The rose was sacred to Venus in antiquity and is her attribute in art. According to one tradition, it was originally a white flower, but, as the myth states, while Venus was hastening to help her dying lover, Adonis, a thorn pierced her foot and the drops of blood fell on the white petals staining them red. The metaphor can also be interpreted in a way that the white flower symbolizes virginity (or simply, cleanness), the red stain on the petals as the sign of defloration (or, impurity, i. e. menses). The literal meaning of defloration in this context is especially notable.

It's worth mentioning that copper whose Hungarian name, *réz* may derive from the same root as rose was the metal of the Rose-goddess, and its name (Latin *cuprum*, *cyprium*) was given after Cyprus, the mythological birthplace of Venus, since the island was famous of its copper mines. Astrological relationship between the planet Venus (the Morning Star, the Star of the blushing sky of dawn) and copper can also be found in fairy-tales, and with sexual meanings associated to the latter in current phrases.² Similar conclusion can be drawn of the fox as a venereal animal spirit in Hungarian lore. (E.g. the 'fox-bride' or the 'matchmaker fox' in tales, the fox as genital symbol in folksong:

“Kis kertemben uborka,/ Reákapott a róka...”

(In my garden cucumber / Is taken by the fox...)

As for the rose attributed to the Morning Star, see the sexual connotations of the Latin words *ros*, 'dew' and *aurora*, 'dawn'. On the basis of certain connections —

commonplaces as 'dew on rosepetals' or 'rosy dawn' — I daresay that all the three words: *rosa*, *ros*, *aurora* should derive from the same root. (See in tales too.)

Some functions and attributes of the Love-goddess was inherited by the Virgin Mary, thus, among other things the Morning Star and the rose. Because of her sinlessness the Blessed Virgin was the 'Rose without thorns' in prayers and preachings.

Of course the sacred love is associated with the Holy Mother of Jesus and the profane with Venus, though the latter as the personification of love was double-natured in this sense according to the renaissance humanists. In fact, this idea of twin Venuses who represents two kinds of love was formulated in the antiquity by Plato in the dialogue on the double nature of Eros in his Symposium (180 ff.).

Considering the trend of the progress of thought we can be sure of that the rose had been originally the symbol of Venus Vulgaris, and only later became the ethereal flower of the goddess of homosexuals: Venus Coelestis. The secondary meaning of the ancient Greek name of the rose proves this. *Ρόδον* means female genitals that sounds much too reasonable, one can easily visualize it. "The rose with its petals nestling to one another - says Bernáth - had been made the metaphor of the outer female genitals because of its similarity in form and color to the labia. From this the rose became symbol of the young girl, of the mistress." (édes rózsám', 'my sweet rose' in Hungarian.³ See feminine names as Rosalie, Rosalind, Rosamund, Rosemund, Rosemary, Rosie, Rosita.)

Through the centuries the flower also kept its original meaning. Both profane and religious poetry and art show the endurance of the metaphor. The best-known example perhaps is the medieval French didactic poem, the *Roman de la Rose* written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung in the XIIIth century. The subject of the poem is an allegory of the courtly love in the form of a quest of the "Rose" profanely modeling on the legendary Quest of the Holy Grail. To find the rose in the poem is identical with the consummation of love, and certainly needless to say what the rose in question stands for.

Similar, if somewhat more symbolic quests of roses can be found in Hungarian fairy-tales. E.g. the young hero descends to the Underworld for his abducted sweetheart, who is usually called Rose, Rosalie or other name formed of the rose. Even the name of the hero may point to the flower and its goddess (see Rose, Dawn, Morning Blush etc.). Sometimes the hero is led to his "Rose" by a red, golden or black rose thrown into the wind or by a walking wildrose-bush in flame.

Apart from the fact that roses of the tales personified or not also symbolizes the sun just like the rosette, the rose-window, the Christmas-rose and the five flowery wounds of Jesus Christ, the hidden meaning consciously held on in them is clear. Certain representations of the Nativity show the Child Jesus emerging from a rose, as e.g. on a German woodcut with New Year's greetings from 1520, or as the baroque Tree of Jesse altar in the village Gyöngyöspata, Northern Hungary, which tree is actually a rosebush (without thorn) on top branch of which the Virgin Mary with the Child on her lap are sitting in the cup of the uppermost flower, or as an altarpiece of Aix-en-Provence painted in 1476 that shows the Madonna and the Child emerging from Moses' burning bush. This type of representations of rose in religious art, has the same function as the mandorla (vesica piscis) and the latter has the same sexual meanings inasmuch as it symbolizes the genitals of the Heavenly Mother, i.e. the gap of the Milky Way from which the sun god appears to come into the world at winter-solstice.⁴

The birth in a rose-bush is frequently used motif in Hungarian folksongs⁵:

“Rózsabokorban jöttem a világra..”

(In a rose-bush I came into the world..)

“Édesanyám rózsafája / Engem nyitott utoljára.”

(On the rose-bush of my Mother / I am the latest flower.)

“Nem anyától lettél, / Rózsafán termettél..”

(Not a woman bore you, / On a rose-bush you grew..)

In many Hungarian folksongs there are more erotic hints:

“Rózsás asszony bokrétája / Kigyöngyözött az utcára.”

(Beady posy of Lady Rosie / Glistened all over the road.)

“Fölmegy a legény a fára, / A meggyfa tetejére,

Lerázza a meggyet, / Te meg babám szedjed

Rózsás kötényedbe.”

(The lad climbs upon the treetop, / Where are plenty
of cherry./ He shakes down the berry,

And you, pluck them, baby / In your rosy apron,)

Here is an allusion to the color itself:

“Rózsaszínű csík a tutyim kötője,
 Legény legyen, aki aztat megkösse.”
 (Rose-colored ribbon is my buckskins' strap,
 Be a man, if you want to tie that up.)

The same notion also appears in prose. E.g. in English ‘to pluck a rose’ means ‘to take virginity’⁶, in Hungarian a generation ago “rózsabimbó” (*rose-bud*) could mean a girl’s genitals. The Transylvanian grandmother of a friend of mine still used it.

The quotations may explain why the pink and its shades are considered all but exclusively women’s colors. The few exceptions in men’s case are either the sign of dubious taste, the consequence of the contemporary unisex style in fashion or, that of the confusion of sex-roles. The matter is complicated by that pink is the regular color of little girls’ belonging. Obviously I don’t deny the necessity of learning of the sex-roles in the formative years, on the contrary, but whenever I see rosy-cheeked cute little girls in TV-commercials from top to bottom in fluffy pinks as soft and sweet as cotton candy, hear their cooing and bubbling, I have the weird sensation as if dwarf sex-symbols of pedophils were toddling around. I don’t think I’m exaggerating or I’m the only one feeling like that. Let’s look this topic inversely. Lovers call their sweethearts rather childishly Sweetie, Sugar, Honey, Babe, Baby; dolls of little girls have sexy female figures like the “rosiest” of superdolls: Barbie. Cute female characters in cartoons are simultaneously childish and sexy like Betty Boop, the animated Yankee heroine of the thirties, or “the late” Little Annie Fanny of the Playboy Magazine. The same can be said of the pink animal-heroes: see Miss Piggy of The Sesame Street, Gummibears, My Little Pony. Even among the greatest movie stars the most popular are baby-faced like Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe were. Wide, wondering eyes, full, protruding lips; smooth, rosy skin, roundish shape are baby-characteristics, but also the sexiest appeals for men: according to human etiologists these marks urge us, males just by their childishness to protect the women. “Lencsi baba”, (*Lensie Baby*) is an apt expression in Hungarian for women who has gifts like these; the “lens” refers to the round, wide eyes.

In this connection the rose color has the function to increase the desirable effect. The blush of face — so to say — beautifies. The make-up (lipstick, rouge) takes its origin from the perception of this. Reddening and swelling of lips can be

the visible signal of sexual arousal, readiness for love-making. The averted, pink lips — declares Desmond Morris — imitate the pink labia, and “the role of the female lips as labial-mimics has often been emphasized by advertisements employing phallic-shaped objects approaching the open mouth or by the use of gently parted lips, moistened and reddened in erotic or sexually teasing photographs.”⁷

The importance of the pink (or rose) color in this connection is undeniable and it can hardly be considered but the result of social advance. Indeed in nature we meet similar phenomena everywhere, on every stage of the evolution. E.g. the rump of female apes and monkeys reddens and swells, when they are ovulating. The female “use” coloring as part of the sexual display, as signal, that she is “on heat” (“tüzel” in Hungarian), gets the color of the fire, which literally means reddening. Similarly in rutting season many species of birds as fowls, members of the pheasant and grouse family, e.g. the turkey and capercaillie cock produce bright-red or pinkish skin-swelling on conspicuous parts of their body, i. e. on the head or neck in display. The male frigatebird inflates its throat-pouch in display. Finishing it, the huge bright-pink balloon shrinks and becomes just a small red patch. To show an example from the world of the fishes, there is the salmon with its bright-red skin when spawns, even its roe has similar color: pinkish orange. Then there are the plants with their many colored flowers, the greater part of which are “flesh-colored”, not by chance some tint of purple, red or pink, and the function of which is the very same as stated above: displaying themselves to the insects to attract them to get fruitful.

Hence we have arrived to the beginning, and — returned to our starting point. The symbolism of the color of the rose comes from the flower itself, more properly, from the procreative function of it. There is, however, one contradictory point in this interpretation. Namely, the original product of nature, the simple five-petalled whitish flower of the wild rose resembles the female sex organ much the less than the variations improved by gardeners, from which I conclude, that the rose-gardeners consciously improved the double red, purple and pink varieties in order to increase the resemblance between the genuine thing and its symbol.

And now, let's return to the pink. The derivation of the word is questionable. Earlier it was used in compounds as *pinkeye* which meant literally “little eye”, a translation of the French *œillet*. In first sense pink is the name of any of a number of related plants with five-petalled pale-red flowers. And since sexual allusions can

be associated to every species of flower, and the same can be said on eye, the examination of both naming results in similar conclusion.

Pannonia Film Studios, Budapest

Notes

1. Bernáth Béla, "A magyar népköltés szerelmi szimbolikája", in *Előtanulmányok a magyarság néprajzához*. Budapest: MTA Néprajzi Kutatócsoport, 1981, pp. 19, 45.
2. See Bernáth's identical interpretation of the Hungarian phrase: "kivágja a rezet", 'cut out the copper'. Bernáth Béla, *A szerelem titkos nyelvén*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1986, pp. 231-239.
3. Op. cit., p. 8.
4. Jankovics Marcell, *A fa mitológiája*. Debrecen: Csokonai Kiadó, 1991, pp. 83, 217.
5. Bernáth, 1981, 40 ff.; Jankovics, pp. 115, 160.
6. Bernáth, 1981, p. 39.
7. Desmond Morris, *Manwatching - A Field Guide to Human Behavior*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1987, pp. 239, 241.